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citation for published version (APA)

Bisschop, W. T. C. (2021). *The Epistemology of Textual Interpretation: A Study in Analytical Hermeneutics*. s.n.

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VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

The Epistemology of Textual Interpretation

A Study in Analytical Hermeneutics

Academisch proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor
aan de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof. dr. V. Subramaniam,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie
van de Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen
op dinsdag 15 juni 2021 om 11.45 uur
in de aula van de universiteit,
De Boelelaan 1105

door

Wouter Teunis Christoforus Bisschop
geboren te Veenendaal

Promotoren: Prof. dr. R. van Woudenberg

Prof. dr. G. van den Brink

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Voor mijn ouders

Dankwoord

In het kader van mijn werk aan deze dissertatie ben ik veel mensen tegengekomen die ik dankbaar ben voor hun gezelschap en hulp, veel meer mensen dan ik hier zal noemen, en met veel groter dankbaarheid dan zegbaar is.

In de eerste plaats dank ik René van Woudenberg, de eerste promotor bij mijn project, en degene die het meest intensief met mij optrok. Hij is een voorbeeld in zijn vroomheid, vriendschap en eruditie. Daarnaast is hij een filosoof van grote klasse, een toegewijd en toegankelijk docent en collega, en een voortreffelijk leider van onze onderzoeksgroep—ik had me geen betere begeleider kunnen wensen.

Ik dank in dit verband ook Gijsbert van den Brink, als tweede promotor betrokken bij mijn proefschrift, voor zijn aanmoedigende attitude en zijn buitengewoon zorgvuldige lezing en becommentaariëring van mijn teksten.

Het departement Filosofie aan de Vrije Universiteit is dankzij mijn collega's een heel fijne onderzoeksgemeenschap geweest. Sommige zag ik vrijwel dagelijks, en ik vond in hen niet enkel kantoorgenoten maar ook medewandelaars, zoals Tamarinde, Irma, en later ook Thirza, Dorien, Elise en Nina. Ik ben allen zeer dankbaar, en noem hier in het bijzonder, in alfabetische volgorde, Elisas Anttila, Valentin Arts, Lieke Asma, Nina van Egmond, Hans van Eyghen, Eefje de Gelder, Nina de Groot, Tamarinde Haven, Linda Holland, Geertjan Holtrop, Naomi Kloosterboer, Thirza Lagewaard, Elisa Matse, Judith van Ooijen, Rik Peels, Jeroen de Ridder, Dorien van der Schot, Merel Talbi, Jojanneke van der Veen, Ruben Verhagen, Irma Verlaan en Jan Willem Wieland. De glans van hun vriendelijkheid en vrolijkheid deed mij de ontluisterende grauwheid van het VU-gebouw vergeten.

Ook tijdens buitenlandse reizen en verblijven ontmoette ik mensen wie ik dankbaar ben. Ten aanzien van mijn verblijf aan de University of Notre Dame noem ik hier Vittorio Hösle en Gustav Melichar. Ten aanzien van mijn verblijf in St Andrews, als gast van het geweldige Logos Institute, denk ik hierbij onder meer aan Andrew Torrance, Tim Pawls en Matthew Josh. Tijdens conferenties in Zürich en Fribourg had ik mooie en boeiende ontmoetingen met onder anderen Andreas Mauz en Niels Klenner.

Een woord van bijzondere dank richt ik aan de voortreffelijke bibliotheekmedewerkers van de Vrije Universiteit, de University of Notre Dame en de University of St Andrews, voor de soepele organisatie van mijn toegang tot de vele literatuur.

Financieel werd dit project mede mogelijk gemaakt door de Templeton World Charity Foundation, via het Abraham Kuyper Center in Amsterdam, samen met de Vrije Universiteit, die daarin namens de Nederlandse belastingbetaler handelde. Ik heb het altijd als een groot voorrecht en zeker niet als een vanzelfsprekendheid ervaren dat ik deze onderzoeksfunctie kon bekleden, en ben deze instellingen dankbaar dat zij dit mogelijk maakten.

Mathanja Berger ging minutieus door mijn tekst heen en filterde er taal-, stijl- en referentiefouten en lelijkheden uit. Voor dit voortreffelijke werk heb ik heel veel waardering. Ook het opmaakwerk van Steven van der Gaauw zij hier met dank en ere genoemd.

Ik ben de vrienden en nabije en verdere familieleden in mijn privékring heel dankbaar voor alles wat zij voor mij betekenen. Van mijn goede vrienden noem ik hier slechts mijn paranimfen, Jan van den Brink en Geertjan Holtrop. Het is mij een genoegen deze dissertatie op te kunnen dragen aan mijn ouders.

Aan de Vrije Universiteit is het gebruikelijk een ceremonie als het verdedigen van een proefschrift te beginnen met een votum: 'Onze hulp zij in de naam des HEREN, die hemel en aarde gemaakt heeft.' Die instelling stamt uit de begintijd van de VU, maar de woorden zijn millennia oud en komen uit de Psalmen (Ps. 124:8). Het is een belijdenis van afhankelijkheid en bede om Gods hulp ineen. In mij vindt dit, ook ten aanzien van dit project, diepe weerklank. Ik sluit

me daarom ook van harte aan bij de lofverheffing waarmee de vu-
ceremoniën, ongeacht uitkomsten, plachten te eindigen: 'De naam
des HEREN zij geprezen, van nu aan tot in eeuwigheid' (Ps. 113:2).

Introduction

1 – Topic

Readers frequently find themselves wondering what a piece of text means and making attempts to solve that question. We may wonder, for example, why Raskolnikov, in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (part 4, chapter 4), asked Sonia to read the Gospel story of the resurrection of Lazarus. Or whether Giovanni Boccaccio ([1375] 2009) was right to interpret Dante's phrase about people who lived without praise and without disgrace (*Inferno*, canto 3,36) as referring to madmen or lunatics. Or what exactly the numbers in front of the sections and phrases in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* mean. What "he has put eternity into man's heart" means in Ecclesiastes 3:11 (English Standard Version). Whether Jesus used a metaphor when, at the Last Supper, he said, "This is my body" (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19). Whether the Second Amendment to the US Constitution was meant to protect a private right of citizens to bear arms or a right of the people of the several states to maintain a militia organization (or neither). Or what, in the Treaty on European Union (1993, I.A), the meaning is of the phrase "the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen." These are examples of interpretive questions about texts.

Textual interpretation is key to such disciplines as law, literary studies, history, philosophy, and theology. But its significance is not confined to the humanities. Qualitative researchers interpret responses to questionnaires, and texts in the natural sciences—e.g., biology, physics, and chemistry—raise interpretive questions, and not just to students in introductory classes. Interpretive questions are also crucial outside of academia. In ordinary life, we want to understand laws, holy writings, political declarations, letters, poems, and so on.

Many disputes in academia and society at large hinge on such interpretive questions. How are we to decide on them? Can they actually be decided? Are interpretive statements correct or incorrect, and if so, in virtue of what? Can interpretive beliefs amount to knowledge, or are matters of interpretation always subjective, never factual? Can we, as readers, do justice to an author in our attempt to describe the author's communicative aims? Is it actually possible to understand a text written thousands of years ago by an unknown scribe, in a culture and language foreign to us? Such questions concern the theory of textual interpretation. More specifically, they are questions about the epistemology (theory of knowledge) of textual interpretation. The epistemology of textual interpretation is the topic of this book.

2 – The Discipline of Hermeneutics

Questions on the theory of textual interpretation used to be addressed in the discipline of hermeneutics. Johann Conrad Dannhauer's *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum* (1654) has, apparently, the first recorded use of *hermeneutics* in its title. Earlier authors are retrospectively regarded as hermeneutical theorists. For such authors as Philo, Origen, Augustine, Hugh of Saint Victor, and Matthias Flacius Illyricus, biblical interpretation was one of the strongest motives for reflection on textual interpretation. Other incentives came from the interpretation of Roman law and the classical texts of Homer. Thus, reflection labelled *hermeneutical* traditionally arose in the context of actual practices of textual interpretation (especially of the Bible and Roman law), and this process continued in such works as Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670), John Owen's *Causes, Ways and Means of Understanding the Mind of God* (1678), Christian Wolff's *Philosophia rationalis sive logica* (1732), and Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten's *Unterricht von Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift* (1742). Parallel to this genre-tied reflection we find a cluster of literature whose authors explicitly claimed a general scope for their

hermeneutical theories. Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutik und Kritik* (1838), often mentioned as the first or foremost in propounding a general take on hermeneutics, complemented his indeed general introduction with discussions of aspects of New Testament interpretation. Earlier authors with something like a general hermeneutics in view include Johann Conrad Dannhauer, with his *Idea boni interpretis et malitiosi calumniatoris* (1642), Christian Thomasius, with his *Ausübung der Vernunftlehre* (1691), Johann Martin Chladenius, with his *Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünftiger Reden und Schriften* ([1742] 1976), and Georg Friedrich Meier, with his *Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst* ([1757] 1996).

A radical break with this tradition of hermeneutical literature reflecting on, mainly, textual interpretation was brought about by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer (cf. Gadamer 1975, xvi). For them, *hermeneutics* does not refer to a discipline, such as epistemology, logic, or the philosophy of language, but to a series of ideas that constitute a particular approach to human thinking and relating to the world. What exactly *hermeneutics* refers to in this “new” sense can perhaps best be described by pointing at a cluster of ideas that gained prominence in the literature classified under this rubric. This cluster includes the ideas (a) that interpretation is not limited to attempts to understand texts or other objects but is constitutive for all of human experience and existence—hermeneutics “is the theory that everything is a matter of interpretation” (Caputo 2018, 4; cf. Gadamer 1975, xviii); (b) that understanding—resulting from interpretation—is not an epistemic state of a subject but our mode of being or *Dasein*, as Gadamer puts it (1975, xviii; cf. xix), which is why the break with traditional hermeneutics is also known as the ontological turn; and (c) that this ubiquitous interpretation never starts from a *tabula rasa*, as if the mind grasps reality directly—rather, in perception and thought, the experience of the world is “filtered” through, or constructed by, the ideas, views, experiences, desires, and questions one already has as a particular person in a particular historical condition.

It seems that (a)–(c) begin to sketch the contours of the notion of

hermeneutics that gained prominence after the ontological turn, but more detailed pictures differ in many ways. Much use has been made of the word *hermeneutics*, and the term has not become any more precise for it (cf. Luther and Zimmermann 2014, 24, 36; Detel 2011, 9; Vattimo 1997, ix). The “inflation,” if we may call it that, of the term *hermeneutics* is witnessed by the wide variety of genitive phrases with which we find it paired: there is a hermeneutics of race, of media, of nursing, of hell, of leadership, of place, of education, of the subject, of Genesis 1, of oppression, of liberation, of breastfeeding, of medicine, of failure, and so on. It is no accident that the infamous Sokal hoax, a fake manuscript that got accepted by the journal *Social Text* in 1996, featured “a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity.” The conceptual confusion not only pertains to the term *hermeneutics*. The turn in hermeneutics came with radical, though often implicit, redefinitions of its key terms: *hermeneutics*, *interpretation*, *understanding*, but also *truth*, *text*, and *author*. No wonder the complexity and conceptual unclarity of hermeneutical literature is notorious.¹

Whatever we think of this turn in hermeneutics, the resulting discipline (set of ideas, philosophical approach) is less focussed on texts than traditional hermeneutics was. Traditional hermeneutics is not simply included in or surpassed by it. Indeed, some maintain that contemporary hermeneutics is useless for actual problems in the theory of textual interpretation (Ricoeur 1974, 10; cf. Seebohm 2004, 1; Detel 2011, 161–168; Mueller-Vollmer 1983, 83). Theoretical reflection on textual interpretation is currently mostly discipline-

1. Grondin (2003, 281), referring to Gadamer’s *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, related: “To describe his proverbial vagueness, Gadamer’s colleagues at Marburg had playfully devised a new measure of unnecessary complexity called a ‘Gad.’” Thus Gadamer writes in a 1956 letter (quoted in Grondin 2003, 281): “What is lacking in me is the capacity to simplify and constructively unify. I still can’t rid myself of the load of Gads, however sincerely I agonize over it.” See the concerns and complaints about conceptual confusion as a cause of problems in theories about text interpretation in, for example, Stegmüller (1973); Rothbard (1989); Searle (1994); Schmidt (2000); Höslé (2018, 13).

specific and pursued by lawyers, theologians, literary scholars, and so on, and the accompanying philosophers of law, theology, literature, and so forth.² While that is often sensible, it is also important not to lose sight of the generality of the scope of many of their questions, problems, concepts, and debates. Given the enduring significance of theoretical questions about textual interpretation, and given that much twentieth-century literature under the title of hermeneutics has other interests, hermeneutics as the reflection on (textual) interpretation remains an important project.

Perhaps the most influential book on hermeneutics in the twentieth century, Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*,³ took its starting point in the experience of art. Gadamer's scope was much wider—indeed, he defended the universality of hermeneutics—but it seems plausible that one's paradigm cases affect the results. The focus of my book is on epistemology-related questions about and problems of textual interpretation in general. That the book focusses on texts is not to deny that paintings, pieces of music, persons, historical events, archaeological findings, and no doubt many other things can, in one sense or another, be objects of interpretation as well. But it is not at all obvious that in interpreting a text we are involved in a practice similar in aims and standards to the practice of interpreting, say, a piece of music or an historical event. Unless indicated otherwise, by *interpretation* I mean to refer to the interpretation of texts. *Hermeneutics*, therefore, will here usually mean *textual hermeneutics*. (Whether textual hermeneutics is a species of the genus *hermeneutics*, and how this genus should be described, are not questions I seek to answer here.)

My interest, then, is in the hermeneutics of textual interpreta-

2. There are exceptions, of course—e.g., Höhle (2018). See also the handbooks and overview works that try to bring the various strains in hermeneutics together, without quite developing a single or integrated theory—e.g., Diemer (1977); Jollivet and Thouard (2015); Malpas and Gander (2015); Keane and Lawn (2016).

3. *Wahrheit und Methode* was first published in 1960. I use the fourth edition of 1975, which is a reprint of the extended third edition.

tion. There are two main projects to be distinguished here. My project is concerned with the epistemic aims of textual interpretation—knowledge and understanding—and may thus be called *epistemic hermeneutics*. These epistemic aims are different from other aims with which hermeneutics is often associated, such as the application, evaluation, reception, critical analysis, and use of a text as a source of information. We may call the latter projects *practical hermeneutics*, as these are concerned with practical aims or actual effects. Practical hermeneutics reflects on the various ways of doing something with the interpretive statements about a text, or it is concerned with the actual effects of a text on a person.⁴

The questions addressed in epistemic hermeneutics can be subdivided in methodological and epistemological questions.⁵ The following questions are examples of *methodological* questions: How do we go about interpreting a text? Is the methodology of textual interpretation similar to that of, say, the sciences? Should we adopt the principle of charity when we interpret a text—that is, should we assume that its author was a rational, well-meaning person trying to speak the truth? And here are some examples of *epistemological* questions: Can interpretive statements have truth-value? Can interpretive beliefs amount to knowledge? What is the maximum epis-

4. The distinction between epistemic hermeneutics and practical hermeneutics hinges on a particular definition of textual interpretation, which is the topic of chapter 1. This chapter also addresses the widespread view that interpretation involves application, that is, that one's interpretation of a text involves one's use of that text. My view differs from the one developed by such influential theorists in hermeneutics as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. They think application or appropriation is somehow part of interpretation, and much of their interest is in practical hermeneutics, as we distinguish it here. See Tepe (2011) for a brief description of his distinction between “cognitive hermeneutics” and “appropriative hermeneutics.” This distinction seems formally to have much in common with our distinction between epistemic hermeneutics and practical hermeneutics, but it differs materially.

5. And perhaps meta-epistemological questions too; the transcendental project of Gadamer (1975) may be an example here.

temic status that interpretive beliefs can have? Is this epistemic status radically different from that of beliefs resulting from other truth-aiming practices, such as found in the sciences? This book is mainly concerned with epistemological questions, and with methodological questions only insofar as they have epistemological significance. In any case, we distinguish hermeneutics as a *theory about interpretation* from actual *practices of interpretation*, however important these practices may be for theorizing about interpretation. That is, we distinguish between hermeneutics and exegesis.

In practical hermeneutics, we reflect on the application, reception, and evaluation of texts, as well as on other ways of engaging with and using texts. Having interpreted a text, we may evaluate whether what it says is true or, if it states an imperative, whether it applies to the present reader. A judge must not only come up with a good interpretation of the law but also apply it correctly to legal cases. And when people come across a sign prohibiting to take a vehicle into the public park, they must interpret and apply it. It probably forbids automobiles, but what about bicycles, roller skates, and toy automobiles?⁶ In practical hermeneutics, we are concerned not just with the interpretation of the text but with its application to specific circumstances. The same goes for other academic disciplines. A preacher not only explains the Bible but also makes claims as to what the implications of a particular interpretation are for us. A theologian reflects on the bearing of a biblical interpretation on theology: Does the text state a truth, and if so, what truth? Is its imperative still valid? A literary critic will not only teach students how to solve interpretive problems in reading a poem but may also try to convey something about the text's significance—for the history of poetry, or for the reader's own life. A customer not only insists on his interpretation of a contract but also draws implications from it as to what a trader owes him. A politician will not only study reports, legal texts, agreements, and so on but also develop a view as to what these texts mean for a particular political cause. In short, we engage with texts not only to acquire a correct understanding of or

6. This is a famous example in Hart (1958, 607).

knowledge about them but also to “use” them properly. This is what practical hermeneutics is about.

This book, however, foregoes questions on practical hermeneutics, thereby significantly limiting its scope and aims. Although practical-hermeneutical questions are often of great importance and certainly deserve renewed attention, my focus here is on epistemic hermeneutics, for the following reasons. First of all, correct or epistemically justified interpretations (the topic of epistemic hermeneutics) are typically a necessary condition for their proper or adequate use (the topic of practical hermeneutics). In that sense, epistemic hermeneutics serves as a preliminary to practical hermeneutics. Second, as we shall see, reflection on textual interpretation raises questions that are important and interesting in their own right. Textual interpretation and further ways of engaging with texts differ in terms of aims, problems, types of data, and, perhaps, standards. In short, epistemic hermeneutics is a project different from practical hermeneutics, even if interpretation in fact often goes hand in hand with other ways of engaging with texts.

3 – Research Questions

This is a book on the epistemology of textual interpretation. Its main question is whether our textual interpretive beliefs can acquire a high epistemic status. In other words, can our textual interpretations amount to knowledge or factual understanding? For two reasons, this is a useful question to address if we are interested in the epistemology of textual interpretation. First, it is relevant to some of the most central theoretical debates about interpretation, and it is consequential to our approach to (debates about) interpretive practices. For example, it matters to such questions as whether matters of interpretation are merely subjective affairs, whether interpretive statements can be correct or incorrect, and whether it is, in principle, possible for us to understand what the author is trying to convey without imposing ourselves, our theories, our ideas, desires, and so forth, on the text. The question is, therefore, interesting in its

own right. Secondly, the question is relevant because interpretation theorists have propounded multiple but controversial reasons for answering the question negatively. For instance, we will see in the following chapters that there is much disagreement (and often also confusion) about the nature of interpretation and meaning, about the status and relevance of authorial intentions, about the epistemic aims of textual interpretation, about whether interpretive statements can be true or false, and so on. Addressing the main question helps us to gain a systematic overview of central issues in the epistemology of textual interpretation. I will explore the question in six chapters, each addressing one or more subquestions and related problems.

First, what is textual interpretation? There is a wide variety of often unclear uses of the term, and one may worry that a project seeking to answer my main question is doomed to fail for lack of a unified concept of textual interpretation. In chapter 1, I explain my focus on texts and the nature of texts, examine various ways of defining textual interpretation, and defend my choice of defining it as the attempt to solve difficulties in coming to understand or acquiring knowledge about a particular text.

Textual interpretation, on this definition, has epistemic aims, viz., knowledge and understanding. The nature of knowledge has been extensively discussed in the epistemological literature; textual understanding has not. So, what is the nature of the understanding involved in our understanding of texts? Chapter 2 analyses cases of textual understanding. It argues that a subject *S* understands a proposition (or set of propositions) *p* about a text *T* to a degree *D* iff the following three conditions are all met. First, *S* knows *p* (with *p* being about linguistic properties of *T* and their relations). Second, *S* correctly constructed the relations between *T*'s linguistic properties. And third, *D* increases with the number of textual properties that are being correctly taken into account and the number of relations that have been adequately constructed between *T*'s linguistic properties. For example, to understand a poem, we not only need to know all sorts of things about the relations between the poem's properties (its words, grammatical features, semantic properties,

referents, stylistic features, and so on) but also need to be able to come to know these relations in virtue of the textual properties. Moreover, the more textual properties and relations we know, the more (or, the better) we understand a text.

Truth is essential to the epistemic aims of knowledge and understanding, but it is controversial whether interpretive statements have truth-value at all—that is, whether they can be true or false—and what notion of truth would be involved in true interpretive statements. Chapter 3 addresses both questions and defends a correspondence theory of truth as the best candidate for characterizing the nature of truth for interpretive statements.

The epistemic status of an interpretive belief depends on, or is manifested by, its justification or support. What does justification in interpretive practices look like? Is it, for example, significantly different from justification as found in, say, the sciences? Chapter 4 argues that an interpretive practice can be described as an evidence-based quest for truth in which we try to arrive at an inference to the best interpretation of some text by developing arguments that are subject to the ordinary standards of logic and argumentation. It does not, in that sense, differ from other truth-aiming practices.

One form of reasoning (or type of argument, or phenomenon) often considered typical of interpretive practices is hermeneutical circularity. Chapter 5 distinguishes multiple uses of this term and evaluates their epistemic import. It turns out that most hermeneutical circles are insufficiently specific for us to decide whether their epistemic import is positive or negative.

Throughout the dissertation, a range of objections to and concerns about the possibility of interpretative knowledge and textual understanding are addressed. Chapter 6 analyses one more objection, viz., the view that it is impossible for our interpretive beliefs to acquire a high epistemic status because all cognitive endeavours depend on the subject's perspective, cognitive outlook, presumptions, and so forth. I argue that the maximal epistemic status of interpretive statements can, in principle, be high and that it is not very different from that of beliefs produced in other truth-aiming practices. Moreover, it is argued that textual interpretation is a source of

knowledge—a non-basic source, to be sure, but a knowledge source nevertheless.

4 – Philosophical Approach

The method, or approach, employed in this book aligns with the analytic tradition in philosophy, which is typically contrasted with the continental tradition. As it goes, traditions or schools in philosophy often do not converge on one or more unique features; rather, they are united through sharing, at some point in time, a dominant language, a mix of characteristic methodological approaches, philosophical interests and aims, and a sort of canon of authors whose style, ideas, themes, and vocabulary have become paradigmatic for the tradition. Regarding methodology, analytic philosophers often self-identify as caring—more than their continental colleagues—about conceptual clarity, the univocal use of language, explicit argumentation, and detailed evaluation of arguments. They usually do not identify as a philosophical school, as if they were united by a set of philosophical doctrines.

Such a description of a philosophical methodology or style may be found wanting if we use it as a checklist for the classification of philosophers, but that does not make the gap between certain types of philosophy and philosophical literature imaginary. Analytic philosophers often do write in English and spend less time with pre-twentieth-century authors than continental philosophers do. Most analytic journals hardly ever publish non-English papers, often do not even accept non-English quotations, and seldom publish reviews of non-English books. In practice, the analytic-continental divide is quite real.

But a clear focus can nourish narrow-minded thinkers. It can easily lead to contentment with monolingual communication in academia, to excusing poor scholarship by clothing it with the eminence of a “philosophical style,” and to passing by as a stumbling block what could have been a whetstone. Given the limitations of using the analytic-continental divide, there is a sense in which my project

both fits and fails the stereotypes of analytic philosophy. It fails the stereotype in its topic and partly in the literature with which it engages. For what it's worth, there is little work that goes by the name of *analytical hermeneutics* (exceptions are Künne 1981; Howard 1982; Olafson 1986). Analytic philosophers in fact more or less ignored the topic of interpretation (see, e.g., Apel 1981; Margolis 1995, ix; Ruben 2009, 312). They spent much time on the philosophy of language, but their focus was more on how words and sentences have meaning than on how we may understand a poem or an ancient text. The famous thought experiments of radical translation (Quine) and interpretation (Davidson) have some bearing on hermeneutical issues, but only to a rather limited extent (see especially my chapters 3 and 4). Furthermore, analytic epistemology has been modelled mainly on perceptual and inferential knowledge; its interest in understanding is relatively recent.⁷ The current surge of interest in understanding chiefly has in view empirical phenomena, theories, and people. When it comes to language, little attention has been paid in analytic philosophy to the understanding of everyday utterances (so also Leclerc 2012, 722), and even less to the understanding of longer, older, and more complicated texts, such as laws, poems, and ancient literature.

For analytically minded philosophers interested in hermeneutical questions, much of the literature is found in (German) literature from continental hermeneutics, aesthetics, philosophy of literature, philosophy of law, and theology. The writers of these works are among the authors with whom I engage in this book, even though the extensiveness of these sources make it impossible to discuss all the relevant literature here. Whereas analytic philosophers can thus benefit from the existing hermeneutical literature, the stereotypical features of analytic-philosophical methods seem particularly called for in current debates on hermeneutics, and it is in its method (plus, of course, its being written in English) that this book fits the paradigm of analytic philosophy. There is much in the theory of textual

7. A common observation; see, for instance, Grimm (2012, 103); Baumberger (2014, 67).

interpretation that calls for conceptual clarification—for example, the notions of interpretation, understanding, and hermeneutical circularity. Clarity is also needed for identifying the differences between various truth theories and their relation to interpretation. Furthermore, analytic epistemology and philosophy of science care about argumentation and the reflection on data, an important but under-explored topic in current interpretation theory (see chapter 4 for relevant literature). Analytic philosophy of science offers a useful window on science, allowing for relevant engagements with another serious, and much better explored, epistemic practice.

5 – Relevance

The topic and methodological approach of this project are directly relevant to reflection on practices of textual interpretation and on the place and value of the humanities in academia. But reflection on the topic of textual interpretation may also be particularly pertinent in the analytic-philosophical context. It may contribute to filling a number of gaps, as I will now explain.

First, the recent interest in understanding focusses mainly on scientific understanding, less on the linguistic understanding of relatively simple utterances, and still less on the understanding of literature or other complex texts. There is a lacuna to be filled here. Second, testimony as a source of knowledge has become an important topic in epistemology in the past decades, but it seems to depend on other sources of knowledge for its transmission. The quality of testimony as a knowledge source seems to depend on the quality of the ways in which testimony is acquired—listening, reading, and also, arguably, interpretation. Third, analytic epistemologists study sources of knowledge, such as perception, memory, reason, introspection, and testimony. But if textual interpretation is a knowledge source as well, it may merit specific attention. Fourth, applying an analytic-philosophical approach to topics mainly addressed in continental philosophy and relevant subdisciplines may well be worth the effort and help bridge the often-perceived gap between the ana-

lytic and continental traditions. Fifth, the methodological style of reflection in analytic philosophy inspired a similar approach to theological topics, leading to an analytic theology. Theology rooted in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam needs to reflect on how to interpret the Tanakh, Bible, and Qur'an, respectively. It would be a breach in philosophical style for analytic theology to simply import the hermeneutics of the continental textbooks.

In sum, in addition to the significance of an analytic approach for the reflection on the epistemic status and value of interpretive practices in general and in academia in particular, such an approach is particularly useful for the study of hermeneutical questions, while the latter may contribute to debates in current analytic philosophy.

1 – The Nature of Textual Interpretation

1 – Introduction

Judges, preachers, historians, politicians, linguists, philosophers, literary critics, and many others interpret texts, such as laws, holy scriptures, reports, novels, poems, and so on. In doing so, are they involved in the same practice, or at least in similar practices? What is it to interpret a text?

Answers to this question vary widely. For example, in one sense, an interpretation is just one of many possible takes on something *x*, all of equal value. In another common use of the term, to interpret something *x* is to ascribe meaning to *x* in some sense of *meaning*—text’s meaning, author’s meaning, metaphorical meaning, hidden meaning, etc. Related to this is the view that to interpret something *x* is to take something that is relatively immediately given or obvious as an indicator of something less directly given; for example, we interpret a set of data points as supporting or refuting a particular hypothesis. These three uses (or senses) of *interpretation* are markedly different from a fourth sense of the term; on this fourth use, to interpret something *x* is a name for performing *x* in a particular way—when, for example, an organist gives an interpretation of a piece of music. These are just four out of many ways in which the term *interpretation* can be used.¹

1. For various types of (mainly textual) interpretation, see, e.g., Steinthal ([1878] 1970); Danto (1981); Hermerén (1983); Bühler (1999, 2008); Carls- hamre and Pettersson (2003). Cf. Hume (2010, 357–358), who identifies five different types of analysis to be involved in the recovery of a text’s historical meaning. The variety of objects and uses of the word *interpretation* notwithstanding, it seems relatively uncontroversial to note that *interpretation* is ambiguous in that it can refer to the act of interpreting as well as to

Clarity about the concept of textual interpretation and its use will contribute to the prevention and resolution of such unsubstantial interpretive disagreements as are merely due to different uses of the term. Moreover, conceptual clarity fosters reflection on theoretical questions about interpretation. For example, an interpretative statement must be evaluated by relevant standards, and the relevance of a particular standard is likely to depend (partly) on the concept of interpretation involved.²

This chapter proposes and defends a unified notion of textual interpretation, and distinguishes it from a number of activities that are sometimes also categorised as interpretations. Section 2 describes and defends my focus on texts as objects of interpretation, and it explains why I do not use the distinction—common in some circles—between *text* and *work*. In section 3 I survey multiple ways of engaging with texts in order to address, in the next section, the question which of these ways are best considered to be interpretations of texts and what definition of textual interpretation this suggests. Section 5 evaluates a number of objections against the idea—assumed in sections 3 and 4—that authorial intentions matter for textual interpretation, and I argue for the viability of a particular sense of intentionalist interpretation. Section 6 explains why a number of ways of engaging with texts sometimes called interpretation must be distinguished from the sort of activities referred to by my definition of textual interpretation. Special attention is given here to aesthetic appreciation and, in section 7, to the application of texts.

The thrust of this chapter is that there is indeed a sense in which

its result (so also, e.g., Dennerlein, Köppe, and Werner 2008, 4). One can be engaged in the interpretation of a text—an act—and this may result in an interpretation of a text—a particular statement or set of statements. Context, in most cases, will sufficiently specify my use of the term, but generally I will refer to the result with such terms as *interpretive statement* and *interpretive belief* and to the act with a form of the verb *to interpret*.

2. For the idea that standards for evaluation can differ between different concepts of interpretation, see also, e.g., Hermerén (1983); Carlshamre (2003); Bühler (2008).

judges, preachers, historians, literary critics, and others engage in the same kind of activity whenever they interpret a text, however different the texts they interpret may be.

2 – Texts

Anyone reflecting on the use of the term *interpretation* would do well to specify the domain of its objects and the activity it describes. As to its object, some book titles promise (studies of) interpretations of cultures,³ quantum mechanics,⁴ the English revolution of the seventeenth century,⁵ religion,⁶ schizophrenia,⁷ or legal texts.⁸ These are no extraordinary examples, and any big library will offer many additions to this list. Of all possible objects of interpretation, I focus in this book on the interpretation of *texts*. For better or worse, textual interpretation historically served as a paradigm case for the interpretation of other objects.⁹ To decide whether *to interpret* refers to a significantly similar activity in phrases like “S interprets a text,” “S interprets a painting,” “S interprets a culture,” “S interprets quantum mechanics,” and so on, we need to have an idea of what it is to interpret these various purported objects of interpre-

3. E.g., *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Geertz 1993).

4. E.g., *The Cellular Automaton Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics* (’t Hooft 2016).

5. E.g., *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (Hill 1958).

6. E.g., *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Hick 1989).

7. E.g., *Interpretation of Schizophrenia* (Silvano 1974).

8. E.g., *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts* (Scalia and Garner 2012).

9. Carlshamre (2003, 119) notes that “it seems to me that the interpretation of linguistic signs or utterances is often taken as a sort of paradigm of what interpretation is.” He raises the concern that “maybe this leads us in the wrong direction,” noting how people, actions, events, and so on differ from words or symbols in a narrow sense.

tation, including texts. That makes textual interpretation a topic in its own right. Since there is, moreover, no quick way to determine whether or not the term *interpretation* is used univocally in relation to all these different objects, we here restrict ourselves to the interpretation of texts. Henceforth, I use *interpretation* to refer to *textual interpretation*, unless the context indicates otherwise.

Some may believe that focussing on texts will be of little help in delineating my topic here, since some theorists employ a remarkably broad notion of text: “Ultimately, anything can be viewed as a text, anything can be interpreted” (Mailloux 1995, 122). Yet, although interpretation certainly can have other objects than texts (in the sense in which we will use *text* here), this does not warrant a textual imperialism that turns every object into a text and all engagement with these objects into reading or interpretation. Whether we can take texts as paradigms for the interpretation of other objects (so, e.g., Ricoeur 1973, 91ff.) is a question I leave open.

So, what is a text? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *text* as “the wording of anything written or printed; the structure formed by the words in their order; the very words, phrases, and sentences as written.”¹⁰ I will adopt a slightly different definition that helps to bring some peculiar features of texts to the fore.¹¹ On this defini-

10. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “text (*n.1.a*),” accessed April 23, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/200002?rskey=MyovN7&result=1#contentWrapper>.

11. The notion of text has received particular attention from a number of theorists since the 1960s. Their theories on texts often seem to address matters that are different from what we are concerned with here. For some references to this literature, see Wilson (2012). Examples are characterizations of *text* as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable hearths of culture” (Barthes [1968] 1984, 65: “un tissu de citations, issues des mille foyers de la culture”). Or the idea of a text as “a device conceived in order to produce its model reader” (Eco 1992, 64). Or Troxel’s definition (2016, 621): “‘Text’ is written discourse gestated through recursive conceptualization, externalization, and revision that arises from and addresses particular social settings, and is recognized as doing so by a community of readers who embrace and reproduce it.” Or Bevir’s analysis (2002, 494): “The only vi-

tion, a text is an ordered set of signs with a linguistic function in a particular language L. The ordered set of signs constitutes (what we may call) words, sentences, paragraphs, and longer textual units. A sign is a figure, or an otherwise perceptible object, which in L has an x-stands-for-y structure—that is, in language L, the perceptible (visible, or tangible, as in Braille) properties represent (stand for, can be taken as, signify, or something along those lines) other properties. These represented properties usually constitute a complex system. For example, they are phonetical, semantical, and syntactical properties, and they signify or partially constitute stylistic and structural properties, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, properties of genre, reference potential, mood, and so on. A text, then, has properties that, in a particular language L, represent other properties.

The phrase “in a particular language L” is important. A text has properties that represent other properties in virtue of being a text in a particular language. Morphologically the same sequence of signs may function differently in multiple languages. For example, *beef*, *keel*, and *pad* are different words in Dutch and English. (*Beef* is in Dutch the imperative of the verb “to shiver” or “to tremble,” *keel* is Dutch for “pharynx” or “throat,” and *pad* is Dutch for “path” and for “toad.”) Whole sentences, by contrast, have representational properties almost always in only one particular language. In short, textual properties are relative to a particular language.

For an ordered set of signs to be a text, it must have a linguistic function in a particular language L. For example, on my definition, “Bereshit bara elohim et hashamayim we’et ha’arets” is not a text in the English language. It consists of an ordered set of signs but lacks

able analysis of a text ... will be that of an object that acts as the site of various works: the text is an object to which various individuals have attached (probably different) meanings.” Or Wilson’s claim that, among other things, the attribute of being a text does not inhere in any object but is assigned to such an object by the reader (Wilson 2012, 346). Such definitions call for so much explanation, also in their philosophical contexts, that it is difficult to compare them and relate them to my definition.

a linguistic function in English. But what about “Quixotic nought cusp whenever stamina onus ooze opaque had”? You will find each of these words in an English dictionary, but as a “sentence,” this set of words has no meaning in the English language. On my definition, then, each of the individual words counts as a piece of text in English (however short), but the “sentence” does not.

Our notion of a text focusses on perceptible signs. Most texts are signs on a surface, like a paper or a screen, but one could argue that knowing a poem by heart or listening to a lecture or conversation also involves texts, as these activities involve the same linguistic signs and structures, albeit not in written form. That seems right to me, and if it is, then texts need not consist of signs on a surface, and the theses to be defended here about textual interpretation will also hold for the interpretation of lectures we attend, conversations we overhear, and so forth.

One might be concerned that my category of texts is itself too broad to allow for a sensible answer to the question of what it means to interpret a text. After all, a law text is quite different from a novel, and a science paper is in many respects unlike poetry, although precisely demarcating these categories can actually be quite difficult. There is perhaps no real problem here, however, for the relevant distinctions will come out in the wash. We may assume that the specific properties or aspects of a text will evoke and characterize the identification of more specific concepts of interpretation (e.g., literary interpretation and legal interpretation).

Texts can usually be individuated along intuitive lines. The resolutions of the United Nations Security Council from 1970 till 2018 are perhaps best described as a *body of texts*, whereas Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* is a *text*. Smaller units, such as sections, paragraphs, sentences, and words, are usually individuated as *pieces of text*. When, in the rest of this book, we speak of texts, I mean to include these various textual units. For the individuation of texts, it makes sense to distinguish types of texts from tokens of texts. A text type is an abstract and unique object. A text token is a concrete, physical, and particular instantiation of that type. So, if Charles holds six identical copies of *A Tale of Two Cities*, he holds six text tokens of one text type.

Some authors, especially in aesthetics and literary theory, distinguish between a text and a work (e.g., Currie 1991; Lamarque 2000; Gaskin 2013). Richard Gaskin (2013, 29) describes the distinction as follows. Both texts and works are abstract objects. A text consists of sentences and words and exists independent of its realization. A work is a text with the property of having been realized or produced at a particular place and time in a particular historical and cultural context. On this view, before anyone wrote the United States Declaration of Independence, it existed already as a text, but not as a work. However, even texts have spatial and temporal constraints: the Declaration of Independence was written in English, and as such it belonged to an empirical language and did not exist before the historical emergence of English (see Gaskin 2013, 29). Works have more spatio-temporal constraints, pertaining to the specifics of the contexts in which they were produced. Gaskin seems to think of the relation between text and work as a type-token relation. He says, for example: “The author’s creativity consists not in dreaming up a text that did not exist before, but in having the ingenuity to token a particular abstract type, a type that (at least usually) will not have been tokened before” (Gaskin 2013, 30). The type-token relation we just identified between the copies of *A Tale of Two Cities* coincided with the relation between abstract and concrete objects, but this coincidence does not apply to Gaskin’s characterization of the relation between text and work as a type-token relation. For him, the tokened type is itself an abstract object, even if it is realized at a particular point in time and space. Works are not to be identified with letters on a piece of paper—the letters are the tokens of the work.¹²

It may sound a little odd, such talk about pre-existing texts, not to be written up by an author but to be tokened in a particular abstract type (cf. Gaskin 2013, 30). Moreover, if the language of a text emerged gradually, when did the text come into existence? Did the

12. Whether it is common for authors employing the text-work distinction to think of it as coinciding with the type-token distinction has not become sufficiently clear to me.

Declaration of Independence come into existence as a text once the words and syntactical structures it is made up of had been introduced in the English language? Or perhaps once their specific uses had become common? How are we to imagine the genesis of these abstract objects? These questions call for further explanation of the idea. Although answers to these questions may be found, and although one might find the text-work distinction useful in explicating whether one is referring to text types or to text tokens, I will not adopt this terminology here. A minor point is that it might as well disguise the type-token relation between texts and works. It is in fact relatively rare to find discussions of this distinction that use different words for the types and its tokens. More importantly, the text-work distinction suggests more clarity than warranted. It is actually quite a complicated distinction, and not just because it inherits the theoretical questions about the nature of *type* and *token*. One difficulty is that it is hard to specify which properties are properties of texts and which are properties of works. Presumably, the text, on this distinction, is something with particular semantic and syntactic properties, and the work has these properties in virtue of being a token of that type (so also Currie 1991, 325). But the specific semantic properties of words and sentences are tightly connected to their context. How do we know they belong to the texts, and not to the works? We might as well think of a text—whether type or token—as having the property of being written at time *t*, by person *P*, at place *L*. If two texts happen to be completely identical except for these properties *t*, *P*, and *L*, we simply have texts that are very much alike, except for these properties.

Another difficulty of the text-work distinction is the ascription of aesthetic properties to works, as is common among proponents of the text-work distinction. For example, Gaskin (2013, 29) maintains that “distinct literary works that share a text will normally differ in their aesthetic properties.” But what makes an aesthetic property a property of a work, and not of a text? Suppose we think of unity, balance, integration, serenity, solemnity, and vividness as aesthetic properties (cf. Sibley 1959). If these are properties of text types or text tokens at all, as opposed to properties of the experi-

ence of the text's reader, what makes them properties of the tokens rather than the types? Or suppose we think of aesthetic properties of a text as those properties—such as the turn of the plot and alliteration—in virtue of which the text is a work of art and in virtue of which it is a good or a bad one. Aren't these the properties of text types rather than of text tokens? Who is to tell?

This is no argument for the division of textual properties into text types and text tokens in one way or another. Nor is this to deny that it can be useful to distinguish between text types and text tokens. The point is just that it is not easy to see what division of property ascription with regard to text types and text tokens is to be preferred, and that a clear and well-argued delineation seems required if we are to use the pair *text* and *work*. Just using *text* leaves open how the relevant properties are divided among its types and tokens and agrees with the normal application of type-token distinctions.

3 – Ways of Engaging with Texts

So far for the *object* of textual interpretation. Now for the *activity* involved in it. One could have many aims in engaging with texts, and it is useful for our inquiry to have some of the central ones in view.

We may start off at the physical signs and do whatever it takes to understand the text. This could involve (1) deciphering the individual letters of a difficult handwriting, or (2) parsing the words of texts written in *scriptio continua* (as in, e.g., classical Greek and Latin manuscripts). Sometimes we need (3) to emend pieces of texts that have faded away, and in some cases, we feel a little lost and need (4) to orient ourselves: Is this the conclusion of the paragraph or the beginning of a new section? Or we may be concerned with (5) identifying the correct pronunciation of the words in a text—e.g., the original pronunciation of Shakespeare's English or of old Aramaic sentences. And so on. Along the way, we get a sense of the text's linguistic potential by (6) identifying the grammar and (7) semantics of words and their (8) referential potential in relation to the (9) syntax of the sentences, and various (10) stylistic features.

At this point we may face ambiguities, identify an idiosyncratic use of words, consider a text unclear or incomplete, or see that a text contains a typo. Sentences may have communicative functions in ways that go beyond their conventional meaning. In such cases we refer to the text's author, to his or her (presumed) likeliest intentions, to guide us as we (11) try to identify illocutionary acts and (12) illocutionary intentions, (13) perlocutionary acts and (14) perlocutionary intentions, (15) conversational implicatures, (16) metaphors and their function, and so forth. Reference to authorial intentions is sometimes also needed (17) to determine a text's genre—e.g., to determine if it's a satirical text or fantasy—though sometimes the form of a text suffices to identify its genre. A fourteen-line poem with three quatrains and a concluding couplet makes a Shakespearean sonnet, for example.

Having gone through all this, we may get a view of other aspects of the text, (18) determining the message or moral of a story, (19) the structure of (sometimes implicit) arguments, (20) narrative patterns, and (21) the way various parts of the text are interconnected. Maybe we also (22) identify ambiguities or contradictions in a text's message. This exercise, if successful, provides us with knowledge about and/or understanding of a text—or at least we may come to assume as much.¹³

But this is often not enough for us. We may have further aims beyond these epistemic aims of acquiring knowledge about and understanding of the text. There are many more ways to engage with texts and with the interpretive statements we formed about texts. Through understanding the text, we may (23) acquire testimonial knowledge and/or understanding *from* the text—e.g., we read a biography of Napoleon or a monograph on general relativity or Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* and come to know facts about Napoleon's life, acquire some understanding of general relativity, or gain in-

13. Knowledge and understanding of a text can come apart, as will be argued in chapter 2. In the rest of this chapter, *understanding* is taken as a shorthand for “knowledge about and/or understanding of a text”—unless emphasis is deemed useful.

sight in an ancient theory of rhetoric, respectively. Combined with critical scrutiny, this is also how texts can be used (24) as historical sources or, maybe, as sources of information about what was going on in an author's mind when writing the text. Understanding from a text can also be used (25) to engage in textual "archaeology": Which versions of a text depend on each other, and what stage of development is represented by the particular text we are looking at? How reliable was the transmission of the text? Or we can take our acquired understanding as a starting point for (26) identifying indicators or symptoms of one thing or another—indicators of class structures in nineteenth-century Britain, or (along Freudian lines) of someone's subconscious desires, or of power relations between the characters in a novel, and so on.

We may use our understanding of a particular text (27) to apply its rules or principles to particular cases or situations—as in law. In some allegorical approaches, texts can have (28) a "hidden meaning," either through ascribing meaning not only to the words and sentences of the text but also to the things they refer to, or otherwise. One may use the acquired understanding of a text (29) to evaluate it by the standards of beauty, truth, or goodness, or any other standard. Or one indulges in (30) an appreciation of a text's aesthetic qualities. One may develop a (31) creative response to a text—e.g., when judges develop law by giving provisions not grounded in the text of the law. Texts can be (32) "performed" in a certain way; for instance, when a poem is read out loud or a theatre play is performed. And so on.

4 – Defining *Textual Interpretation*

Which of these ways of engaging with texts are cases of textual interpretation? And if, as some would suggest, they are all cases of textual interpretation, how many different notions of textual interpretation do we need in order to identify the relevant differences between them?

One could object here and claim that there is something wrong

with this question. It assumes that *textual interpretation* or *interpretation* are terms with sensible definitions or at least with prospects of a bright future in which they are employed with great conceptual clarity. But *interpretation*, or so it seems, is a term that, rather than clarifying, always clouds arguments and thoughts with vagueness and loose use of language. Would we not do better to give up the term altogether? Think of it: such diverse activities as (1)–(32), and even more, are sometimes all lumped together under the title of interpretation. And, as said, the term is used for an even greater variety of objects. *Interpretation*, one could argue, is like *meaning*—a confused term used in so many different ways that there is little hope of clarity; we’d better stop using it¹⁴ and just say what we actually want to say whenever we feel we want to use the word *interpretation*.

True, one’s use of *interpretation* is often followed by someone else’s question as to what one means by the word. But substituting the term with an alternative may raise similar questions for clarification, in which case there is little gained from giving up the word and employing some other idiosyncratically used term.

Moreover, there may still be a sensible way to provide clear definitions and make proper distinctions. Generally speaking, terminological distinctions serve to help us think and speak about different concepts *as* different concepts (or objects, or events, etc.). Anyone may use words in any way they like, but this does not erase the differences between types of objects and concepts. One may use the word *interpretation* to refer to each of the 32 ways of engaging with texts that we listed in the previous section. In that case, the term is used to refer to a wide variety of practices, and the question will arise as to how these uses of the term are related to each other. Maybe the term is like *bank*—one word with multiple, unrelated meanings. Or perhaps it is like *game*, allegedly a word with multiple meanings that exhibit *Familienähnlichkeiten* (family resemblances),

14. As suggested by Schmidt (2000, 630). Weimar (1996, 114) thinks it would be preferable—though unlikely—if we stopped using the term. For a similar case with respect to *meaning*, see Stout (1982).

as they are related by series of overlapping similarities (Wittgenstein 1953, e.g., § 67). In any case, the multiplicity of uses of one single word should not, as such, prevent us from distinguishing its different meanings or referents. If there are relevant conceptual distinctions between them, then it is inconvenient, at least, to think of all 32 ways (and perhaps even more) of engaging with texts as interpretations. And even if we decided to use *interpretation* to cover this variety of activities, the request for a definition or informative description would remain.

It seems to me a caesura naturally suggests itself between cases (1)–(22) and (23)–(32). The first 22 cases all have particular epistemic aims: they seek to acquire knowledge about and/or understanding of the text or what it is an author is saying by means of the text. Some of the cases (23)–(32) also have epistemic aims, but they differ in their object. They all go beyond cases (1)–(22), but (assumed) knowledge or understanding of at least a few of the aspects listed in (1)–(22) is typically a necessary condition for (23)–(32). This distinction between the cases suggests we restrict *interpretation* to those activities that aim for knowledge about and/or understanding of the text or what it is an author is saying by means of it.

Note that interpretation is not the only activity aiming for what is described by (1)–(22). Reading and listening may serve many of the same aims.¹⁵ Some think of all cases of linguistic understanding as resulting from some sort of interpretation (e.g., Davidson 1984, 125; Zander 2015, 124–125). Others call all reading “interpretation” (cf. Schleiermacher 1838, “Einleitung,” § 1.2). But it seems useful to distinguish between reading (and listening), on the one hand, and interpretation on the other. We can imagine the two as extremes on a continuum. Reading a text gives us a relatively immediate sense of understanding (be it correct or incorrect). The process has a high degree of immediacy and smoothness. In reading, we usually are not aware of reasons supporting our understanding of what the text says. Interpretation (as we shall use the term) is different in these respects: instead of having an immediate sense of understanding,

15. On reading, see Van Woudenberg (2018).

we face a question or difficulty. It is not a smooth process, and we are typically actively searching for support for the various interpretation options. In short, reading is an experience that is different from trying to understand a text when we stumble on a difficulty or question.

On this distinction, to interpret a text *T* is to try to solve difficulties in understanding (or acquiring knowledge about) the linguistic properties of *T*. The phenomenal experience involved in reading differs from the experience of the activities we engage in when addressing textual difficulties in our attempt to understand a text. Reading poses different problems, requires different solutions, and differs with respect to the standards of its epistemic justification. Given these differences, it is at least useful to be able to distinguish linguistically between reading and interpretation. Moreover, we do not lose anything if we distinguish the two in this way. We would lose something if this distinction veiled problems of interpretation by classifying them as cases of reading. But this is not the case: whenever one raises a question about a text, it is a matter of interpretation.

The nature of the difficulties with which we are concerned in textual interpretation could be very diverse. They could be actual difficulties or questions we have due to, for example, (i) ambiguity, (ii) vagueness, (iii) actual complexity of the text, (iv) the interpreter's ignorance, (v) inattentiveness, (vi) hostility toward the author, (vii) expectation of complexity and depth, (viii) inquisitiveness as to the functions of the various elements of a narrative, and so on. But such questions or difficulties could also be potential or anticipated by a commentator. Thus, we could think of an interpretive statement as an answer to an actual or potential question. Importantly, any claim to know or understand something *x* about a text is, in that sense, an interpretive statement. Since it can be envisioned as an answer to an actual or potential question about a text, we may call a statement *x* an interpretive statement even if it merely expresses a knowledge or understanding claim resulting from a casual reading of a text.

The above definition is a definition of interpretation in terms of its epistemic aims. It is not unlike some historical definitions of in-

terpretation. An interpretation, so Chladenius ([1742] 1976, § 179; cf. §§ 148, 169, 171), “can only take place if the reader or listener cannot understand one or more passages” (Mueller-Vollmer 1985, 60). That interpretation is only called for when we encounter a difficulty in understanding the text seems to be the traditional view.¹⁶

It is perhaps worth pointing out a difference between my definition of textual interpretation and a now very common use of the term *interpretation*. On that use, interpretation is characteristic of all our cognitive processes (including seeing, reading, and listening) in the sense that the interpreter or cognitive agent approaches reality with a set of beliefs, values, experiences, and so on that affect his cognitive processes and their results. We often hear such expressions as that we perceive the world through glasses, in a coloured way, from a personal perspective. In that sense, “everything is a matter of interpretation” (Caputo 2018, 4; cf. Mailloux 1995, 122). Call this the *perspectivist* notion of interpretation. It is a notion of interpretation that is quite different from the one I’m developing

16. Here are a number of authors describing interpretation as something only required if the text is obscure or otherwise difficult. Christian Thomasius, for example, says of the related German term *Auslegung* that “die Auslegung solle erklären, was ein anderer habe verstehen wollen, denn man ist hier nicht so wohl besorget, die Wahrheit von eines anderen seiner Meynung, als nur die Meynung an und vor sich selbst zu erklären, sie mag nun wahr seyn oder nicht” (Thomasius 1691, 3, § 31; cf. § 32). Dilthey (1973, 225): “Die Auslegung wäre unmöglich, wenn die Lebensäußerungen gänzlich fremd wären. Sie wäre unnötig, wenn in ihnen nichts fremd wäre. Zwischen diesen beiden äußersten Gegensätzen liegt sie also. Sie wird überall erfordert, wo etwas fremd ist, das die Kunst des Verstehens zu eigen machen soll.” Lamarque (2000, 97, 99): “Interpretation arises only when meaning is unclear or not obvious, when there is a need to ‘make sense’ of something” and “interpretation begins only at the level where genuine alternative hypotheses about meaning present themselves.” See also Chladenius ([1742] 1976, § 166, § 180); Crockett (1959); Barnes (1988, 26); Diemer (1977, 20); Pettersson (2003, 46). Cf. Fuhrmann (1970, 87–91). The idea is a common principle in law traditions maintaining that *interpretatio cessat in claris* and *in claris non fit interpretatio*.

here. My interest is in characterizing the activities and aims listed in (1)–(22). It is not clear how the perspectivist notion is a proper characterization of such processes. Mine is, perhaps, a more technical or practical notion of interpretation.¹⁷ Anyhow, the two are compatible; that is to say, it is possible that in reading, thinking, perceiving, and interpreting, this perspectivist interpretation is at work. Chapter 6 discusses the perspectivist notion and its epistemic implications. Whatever one thinks of this notion, it seems reasonable to say that cases (1)–(22) can best be characterized as attempts to solve difficulties in understanding (or acquiring knowledge about) text T.

One may find this definition in terms of the epistemic aims of interpretation unsatisfying or incomplete because it does not briefly and neatly describe what it actually is that we may come to know or understand about a text. Perhaps we could be a little more specific about the nature of that which we try to understand. What is it that we seek to gain understanding of in cases (1)–(22) but not in cases (23)–(32)?

One could argue that textual interpretation is concerned with the text and not with, for instance, the author. Restricting interpretation to the aim of understanding a text according to linguistic conventions, however, leaves out cases (11)–(17), which make reference to authorial intentions.

Alternatively, one could argue that in textual interpretation, it's actually the author's intentions we're after. That a text has meaning apart from what its author intends to convey by it is witnessed by the possibility of *meaningful misunderstanding*. Shakespeare's Hamlet makes a point of this in a conversation with Polonius, the counsellor to the king, who asks (*Hamlet*, 2.2.191–195):

POLONIUS. What do you read, my lord?

HAMLET. Words, words, words.

POLONIUS. What is the matter, my lord?

17. Cf. Spree (1995, 44–48), who distinguishes between an epistemological notion of interpretation (my perspectivist notion of interpretation) and a technical notion of interpretation, which he considers to be a rule-governed activity.

HAMLET. Between who?

POLONIUS. I mean the matter you read, my lord.

Hamlet understands Polonius's utterance in a way that, though meaningful, does not correspond with Polonius's intentions. In any case, intentionalist accounts—according to which we are to determine what the author tried to convey by the text when we interpret it—leave cases out as well. An intentionalist may count (6)–(10) as cases of interpretation because they are necessary stepping stones for understanding what the author said. But the intentionalist will not consider cases (19)–(22), if they are not intended by the author, to be cases of interpretation, although they may in fact provide aspects of a text that we may understand.

The definition of texts can be used to elaborate on my definition of textual interpretation. We defined *text* as a set of signs in a particular order with a linguistic function in a particular language L, and we said of *signs* that they involve an x-stands-for-y relation in a particular language L. If x is a word, y may comprise its referents or non-referential linguistic functions (such as in the case of *the* or *however*). Moreover, if x is a sentence, then y may be taken to be, for example, the illocutionary meaning of the sentence. We argued that reading and interpretation are on a continuum and that the difference between these two extremes is mainly due to the difficulty clause that applies to interpretation. To interpret a text T, then, is to try to describe the represented properties by analysing the presented properties (i.e., the ordered signs) when we encounter a difficulty in acquiring knowledge about or understanding of T.¹⁸

18. Texts have many properties that are not constitutive of them: there is a possible world in which exactly the same text exists as in the actual world but in which the text has not been printed, or in which it hasn't earned its author a million euros, and so on. Textual understanding, we may assume, is concerned with the properties that are essential to a text (the text has these properties in all possible worlds) and that, had they been different, would have constituted a different text. There is some room for variety here—does, for instance, a corrected typo constitute a new text?—but these details seem not to make much of a difference for the rest of our discussion.

I propose, then, to define *textual interpretation* in terms of the epistemic aims of interpretation: to interpret a text T is to try to solve difficulties in understanding (or acquiring knowledge about) T. Specifying the nature of the object of textual interpretation, we can say that to interpret a text T is to try, in the case of difficulties, to come to know or understand T's properties.

Textual interpretation, on my use of the term, is different from a number of other activities listed in section 3, viz., cases (23)–(32). Sections 6 and 7 offer a review of some of these—on my terms—non-interpretive ways of engaging with texts, in particular those that have been emphatically called interpretation by some. Before we discuss why so many ways of engaging with texts should be excluded from the concept of interpretation described here, we may pause to consider another pertinent issue: we have been talking about authorial intentions, but isn't intentionalism passé? And what do we mean exactly by *intentionalist interpretation*?

5 – Intentionalist and Anti-intentionalist Views

Philo claimed that his allegorical reading of the Torah corresponded to what Moses—and, through him, God—meant to say. The patristic and medieval view that the Bible has a three- or fourfold sense maintained that at least one, but perhaps all, of them corresponded to the intentions of the divine author. Many, if not all, seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century thinkers on textual interpretation considered the description of an author's intentions the chief aim of interpretation. Whenever analytic philosophers such as J. L. Austin, Paul Grice, and Donald Davidson reflected on the working and functions of language, they maintained the view that language serves communication and that therefore at least one meaning of an utterance is only understood when the utterer's intentions in uttering it are understood. We may call such views on the meaning of texts *intentionalist views* or forms of *intentionalism*.

The past century has seen strong denunciations of the idea that authorial intentions matter in textual interpretation. Such views may

be called *anti-intentionalist*. Some authors have come to think that the problem of authorial intentions is fundamental to hermeneutics (e.g., Höhle 2018, 237). It matters, of course, what exactly one is objecting to when objecting to intentionalism. There seem to be at least two views we should distinguish here: (a) intentionalist interpretation seeks to describe the actual psychological event of the author's thinking *p*, taking texts to be expressions of the author's mind (or soul, personality, etc.); and (b) intentionalist interpretation seeks to describe what the author said or wanted to communicate.

Option (a) is usually ascribed to Romanticist hermeneuticists.¹⁹ We may call it *psychological intentionalism*. It is a view rejected not only by T. S. Eliot (1932), C. S. Lewis (in Tillyard and Lewis 1939), and W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley (1946) but also by Gadamer (1975, e.g., 276).

According to option (b), interpretation is concerned with what the author tried to express in writing; understanding a text is taken here as understanding *from* a text what the author aimed to convey. We may call this view *communicative intentionalism*.²⁰ Option (b)

19. For instance, Schleiermacher (1838), who maintained that (textual) understanding unites two moments, namely, grammatical understanding and psychological understanding. The former is concerned with what is common and shared about a particular language. The process of understanding that aspect of a text can be a mechanical one, a matter of calculus (1838, § 7). The individuality or singularity of speech and thought is understood through psychological explanation, which could be conceived of in terms of view (a). For Schleiermacher and others, the act of understanding (*Verstehen*) is the reverse of the act of speaking or thinking (see, e.g., also Dilthey 1973, 214).

20. In addition to authors who defend something like this notion of communicative intentionalism, authors who distinguish between various types of interpretation often mention this sense of interpretation as one variety: so, e.g., Danto (1981); Hermerén (1983); Bühler (1999). It also is the default notion of interpretation in the debate on radical interpretation (Quine, Davidson), has a prominent place in the philosophy of language (e.g., Grice), and arguably is identical to the approach of historical or literal interpretation that is among the fourfold interpretation of Scripture.

can easily mislead us, though. What is the function of the author's intention in relation to the meaning of a text? One could think of this meaning as depending on the author's intention, as if intentions constitute the meaning of a word. This view is expressed in the oft-cited statement of Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." Perhaps some intentionalists can be read this way (e.g., Hirsch 1969). Alternatively, we could take (b) to say that the author uses a particular text as a meaningful text in a particular language L in order to convey what the author aims to convey. In that case, authorial intentions do not constitute meanings; rather, authors have communicative aims and pursue these by using a text that has a meaning in virtue of being a text in a particular language—hence, in virtue of linguistic conventions. I endorse intentionalism in this latter sense.

On this idea of communicative intentionalism, there are multiple aspects, or dimensions, or forms, of authorial intention. In discussions about intentionalism, the sorts of things that authorial intentions are concerned with is, surprisingly, often left vague. Perhaps it is useful to briefly unpack a few of them for illustrative purposes. Here are seven examples of what intentionalist interpretation may aim at:

- (i) *A characterization of an author's locutionary act presented by a text.* What signs did the author aim to produce in communicating his message? For example, I might have written *sings* in the previous sentence where *signs* was intended.
- (ii) *The explanation of a metaphor as intended by the author*—e.g., the meaning of the phrase "Man is a wolf."
- (iii) *A characterization of the communicated content of T*—e.g., the message of a parable as intended by its author.
- (iv) *A description of implied (and intended) assumptions*, or, as Paul Grice called it, *conversational implicatures*. When someone says, "The door is open," they may not mean to convey their observation that the door is open but rather, for example, the instruction "Close the door!"

- (v) *A description of an author's perlocutionary intention*—i.e., characterizing the effect an author intended his text to have. For example, “The new law is just meant by the government to gain popularity among the urban electorate,” or “She meant to prevent her readers from giving in to greed.”
- (vi) *A description of a particular text's intended referents in a particular context*—e.g., the referents of the people Dante met even before he entered hell, those who lived “*sanza 'nfamia e sanza lodo*” (*Inferno*, canto 3,36), without praise and without disgrace, and who are received neither by heaven nor by hell.
- (vii) *A description of intended narrative features of T*. This could involve, for example, describing the text's narrative or identifying a flashback or an anticlimax.

To count such aspects among the ones we aim at in textual interpretation seems hardly objectionable, so what would the problem be?

Some texts in particular are often considered to have shown that interpretation is not, or should not be, concerned with authorial intentions. One such text is Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1946) paper “The Intentional Fallacy.” This paper has been widely misinterpreted as a rejection of communicative intentionalism, as noted by Hirsch (1967, 11–12) and Olsen (1987, 28). Although Wimsatt and Beardsley do not quite tell us what exactly the intentional fallacy is, they claim that Romanticist literary scholars are committing it (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, 471), apparently in virtue of these scholars' interest in the psychological history they believe to see expressed in the text (typically a poem). The “passwords” of the Romanticist literary scholars are *sincerity, fidelity, spontaneity, authenticity, genuineness*, and *originality*, rather than such terms of analysis as *integrity, relevance, unity*, and *function* (*ibid.*, 476), and they take particular interest in “private” evidence about the author—journals, letters, reported conversations—over and beyond the text itself. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, “there is criticism of poetry and there is ... author psychology” (477). This is not to deny—and they do not deny—that biographical information about an author could help determine the meaning of the author's words

(478), a view that is in line with communicative intentionalism. Thus, the authors rejected psychological intentionalism, as well as the apparently related idea that a critic must judge whether an author succeeded in realizing the “design or plan in the author’s mind” (472; cf. 469). If anything, the intentional fallacy was at least intended to be the fallacy of confusing psychological intentionalism with communicative intentionalism or preferring the first over the latter.

Another standard reference is to Roland Barthes’s “La mort de l’auteur” (“The Death of the Author”).²¹ Barthes declares that writing is the “destruction of all voice, of all origin”²² and elaborates on a rigorous separation between author and text in the rest of his essay. Although he seems to start with a focus on fiction, he considers what he says about the nature of texts and authors to have further implications: refusing to ascribe to the text an ultimate sense “is, eventually, denying God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law.”²³

According to Barthes, authors are born at the same time as their texts—they do not precede their texts. An author is not a subject of which the book is a predicate (Barthes [1968] 1984, 64). We may be mistaken or naive—from Barthes’s point of view—to wonder what exactly Barthes intended to say by that, but his words are puzzling nevertheless. Writing is not the representation of an idea but an act of “performance,” he says with a reference—obviously unconstrained by authorial intentions—to the speech act theory of the

21. Barthes (1967) is a translation of the French text “La mort de l’auteur” published a year later (Barthes [1968] 1984). The English translation has various defects, so I refer to the later, though apparently original, French version. All English translations of the French text are my own.

22. Barthes ([1968] 1984, 61): “L’écriture est destruction de toute voix, de toute origine.”

23. “Par là même, la littérature (il vaudrait mieux dire désormais l’écriture), en refusant d’assigner au texte (et au monde comme texte) un ‘secret’, c’est-à-dire un sens ultime, libère une activité que l’on pourrait appeler contre-théologique, proprement révolutionnaire, car refuser d’arrêter le sens, c’est finalement refuser Dieu et ses hypostases, la raison, la science, la loi” (Barthes [1968] 1984, 66).

Oxford school. According to Barthes, texts, “we now know,” are not words with a message but a “space of multiple dimensions,” consisting of a “web of citations.”²⁴ A text is composed of many texts from various (cultural) backgrounds that encounter each other through dialogue, or parody, or contradiction. And unlike what has been long assumed, the place where this multiplicity unites is not the author, but the reader (Barthes [1968] 1984, 66). Thus, “the birth of the reader is the death of the author.”²⁵

Surely talk of the death of the author is metaphorical language. But what was Barthes trying to say by it? What exactly is the position to which Barthes objects? Barthes is typically understood to deny that the author has any authority on the meaning of his texts.²⁶ If a text is unclear, there is no reason to think that its author would be able to help out. Once a text is written, its meaning does not depend on anything the author may have intended to communicate by it. Perhaps, then, Barthes means to say that as a matter of fact, it is the reader who determines the meaning of a text, since there is no authoritative position about a text’s meaning.

It is hard to see what motivates such a view, and the position as such seems quite untenable—if only because we are trying to understand what the author Barthes meant by his text which, allegedly, claims that an author doesn’t mean anything or that if he does, his authorial intention is just one view among multiple alternative

24. “Nous savons maintenant qu’un texte n’est pas fait d’une ligne de mots, dégageant un sens unique, en quelque sorte théologique (qui serait le ‘message’ de l’Auteur-Dieu), mais un espace à dimensions multiples, où se marient et se contestent des écritures variées, dont aucune n’est originelle: le texte est un tissu de citations, issues des mille foyers de la culture” (Barthes [1968] 1984, 65).

25. “La naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l’Auteur” (Barthes [1968] 1984, 67).

26. Interestingly, early in the essay he could perhaps be read as mainly rejecting the psychological notion of intentionalism (our sense [a]), objecting to the view that “l’*explication* de l’oeuvre est toujours cherchée du côté de celui qui l’a produite” (Barthes [1968] 1984, 62)—although that formulation is, admittedly, ambiguous.

views, all of equal value.²⁷ Barthes's view on the matter seems self-referentially incoherent.

Whether anti-intentionalism really is a position people would sincerely wish to defend seems questionable. But, scattered throughout the literature, we do find objections, hints of objections, or considerations that could amount to objections to communicative intentionalism. As it happens, the clearest objections to intentionalism are often provided by its proponents, which should make us wary of taking a straw-man position for a real-life position. But even if this is merely a theoretical exercise, it may be worth it to briefly consider a number of these objections.

(1) The text is different from its author; critics should be concerned with the text, not with the author. *Reply*: First, we may ask who is to decide whether critics should be concerned with texts rather than authors. Aren't different interests compatible with each other? Second, the sharp contrast between texts and authors is not warranted. We noted that linguistic interpretation faces many ambiguities. To disambiguate them, reference to the communicative intentions of the authors is useful and not at all diverting from the texts.

(2) The meaning of words depends on public rules of syntax and semantics; authorial intentions do not make a difference here. *Reply*: This seems mainly correct to me: the author's meaning and the text's meaning are often the same, and authorial intentions do not constitute the meaning of a piece of text. But the second clause does not follow from the first, because words and (to a lesser extent) syntactic structures leave room for ambiguities. These textual ambiguities can often be solved by reference to what the author (probably) wanted to say.²⁸ The same goes for the referents of words: linguistic conventions alone may not suffice to specify the referents of "those

27. Burke (1992) offers an extensive presentation and evaluation of the views of Barthes, among others. See, in this context, also Wolterstorff's (1995) refutation of Paul Ricoeur's and Jacques Derrida's anti-intentionalism.

28. Here it seems to me that Gaskin's identification of the meaning of the text with the intention of the author is too strong (Gaskin 2013, 217–

who lived without praise and without disgrace.”

(3) Intentions can fail; an author may have tried to convey *x* and ended up saying *y* rather than *x*. *Reply*: In that case, interpreters are likely to misunderstand the author. That may happen, but it is no reason to think authorial intentions do not matter in general.

(4) An artist or author may not have fixed intentions; the work of art may be a result of largely unintentional actions (cf. Stevenson 1963, 328–329; Gadamer 1975, 280). *Reply*: Perhaps this is correct, even in literature or law. An author may write a text that turns out to have a larger linguistic potential or to have more messages, or more implications, than the author was aware of. But to endorse intentionalism is not to maintain that there is no textual meaning except intended meaning.

(5) The author’s meaning is inaccessible; whatever the author meant by his text cannot be determined anymore by the reader. An often-heard variant of this objection is this: since we don’t know who the author was of *x* (*x* being, for example, *Genesis* or the *Iliad*), his or her intentions are unavailable to us. *Reply*: This is an epistemic consideration; if it holds any water, its implication is only that intentionalism has aims it cannot attain. But we may doubt that the claim holds. In everyday communication, intentions do matter, we often seem to identify them correctly, and we quite frequently are corrected in one way or another when we fail to do so. In the case of textual interpretation, the texts are our most important data, also about the author’s intentions. If we combine this with a general sense of the author’s historical and cultural context, it seems often possible to reach the interpretive aims exemplified by (i)–(vii). In fact, we do not know most of the authors whose texts we read, and yet we are not structurally at a loss as to their intentions.

(6) Authors often do not know what they mean.²⁹ *Reply*: That

219), even though my notion of intentionalist interpretation agrees with his “constructive intentionalism”; see Gaskin (2013, 219ff.).

29. Discussed by Hirsch (1967, 19–23), who, in this context, discusses the views of those who claim that an interpreter might understand an author better than the author understands himself.

seems untypical of authors. True, an author may not succeed in expressing everything he or she meant to say—but that is a different matter. In such a case, either a reader may understand an author in spite of the author’s failure to express himself fully or the reader is prevented from understanding the author correctly.

(7) Some texts are the result of group work—for example, law-making processes. In such cases, there is not just one single author; rather, multiple persons contribute to different parts of the texts, and they may do so with different motives and different communicative intentions. At least in such cases, then, we cannot endorse intentionalism. *Reply*: First, members of work groups typically acknowledge each other’s relevant intentions; that is, they acknowledge what others tried to convey with their words, and they may start using these words in the same sense. Intentionalist interpretations are so common—and, in many everyday cases, not particularly problematic—that groups quite naturally act this way. Second, someone can have hidden motives—e.g., lawmakers can invent clever ways to reach their ultimate goals. Whereas this does matter for discerning one’s ultimate perlocutionary intentions, it does not matter for the identification of linguistically relevant intentions.³⁰

In sum, then, none of this provides a good reason to think that the search for communicative intentions has no function in textual interpretation. We did note that a rejection of intentionalism easily ends up as self-referentially incoherent. Understanding someone else, even if he is an ancient author, seems a marvellous but sensible aim.³¹

30. On intentions in the context of law, see Ekins (2012, 2014).

31. Much of the current debate on intentionalism is not on its possibility or feasibility but on its precise nature. *Actual intentionalism*, for example, maintains that the relevant intentions are the intentions the author actually had. It comes in various forms: *extreme actual intentionalism* (see, e.g., Hirsch 1967; Irwin 2015; Stock 2017) and *modest actual intentionalism* (e.g., Carroll 1992, 2009; cf. Höhle 2018). *Hypothetical intentionalism* holds that intentionalist interpretation is concerned with the intentions of a hypothetical author (Nehamas 1981; Levinson 1996). Both theories are spelled out in multiple ways. Cf. Irvin (2006) and Spoerhase (2007) for some overviews and discussion.

6 – Non-interpretive Ways of Engaging with Texts

The aim of our discussion so far has not been to find the one and only “real” notion of interpretation; rather, we’ve tried to discern real and significant similarities between the various ways of engaging with texts and defined *textual interpretation* accordingly as the attempt to solve difficulties in coming to understand or acquiring knowledge about a particular text. This section focusses on the differences between textual interpretation and the other ways of engaging with texts that we mentioned. Below, the line of argument is illustrated in some detail with regard to case (30), aesthetic appreciation. The other ways of engaging with texts can then be considered more briefly, except for the view that all interpretation is application. This view is examined separately in the next section, because it is quite prominent in current hermeneutical literature.

Quite a few authors maintain that the interpretation of literary texts differs in aim from the interpretation of, say, legal codices, chemistry textbooks, and newspaper articles.³² Rather than (primarily) aiming to understand the meaning of a work, literary interpretation seeks “to reveal those features which make the work a good literary work” (Olsen 1987, 51) or “to maximize the value of artistic works” (Goldman 1990, 207; see also Lamarque 2002). On this “appreciation view,” the aim, or at least the primary aim, specific to literary interpretation is to arrive at an aesthetic appreciation of the relevant work of art.

Aesthetic appreciation—or literary appreciation (e.g., Lamarque 2009, 172)—is concerned with aesthetic properties. The notion *aesthetic property* can be characterized in the following general way: the aesthetic properties of something x are the properties in virtue of which x is a work of art and in virtue of which it is a good or a bad one. This is obviously not a very informative definition, and it raises the difficult questions of what counts as a work of art and whether such properties are dependent on the eye of the beholder or not.

32. Much of this part on aesthetic appreciation is identical to parts of my paper on interpretation and aesthetic appreciation (Bisschop 2020).

However, it is informative enough for my purposes. Some examples of aesthetic properties in literary works are the metre of a text, the similarities in sound, the development of a fictional character, and a particular turn of a plot—all to the extent that *x* is a (bad or good) work of art in virtue of these properties.

Theoretically, there are at least two approaches to the idea that the aim of literary interpretation is aesthetic appreciation.

On the first approach, the aim of the literary interpretive practice is just to arrive at correct, or justified, or plausible, interpretive statements, and aesthetic appreciation is the reason or motivation to engage in this interpretive practice (e.g., Carroll 2009). We interpret in order to appreciate, just like I buy food in order to have a meal: the two activities are significantly different, but success in the first is necessary for success in the second. The *primary aim* of the literary interpretive practice is to interpret; its *further* or *ultimate aim* is to arrive at an aesthetic appreciation—i.e., an appreciative judgment or experience. On this account, the job of literary scholars isn't done when they have formulated an interpretative statement: they should try to reach aesthetic appreciation.

On the second approach, aesthetic appreciation is the aim of the interpretive practice. A successful literary interpretation results in an expression of aesthetic appreciation. To interpret a text literarily is (at least) to appreciate it aesthetically. Aesthetic appreciation, in other words, is a constitutive element of literary interpretation. “An interpretation,” according to Stein Olsen (1987, 51; cf. 61–62), “is an apprehension of the features of a work which make it, as a work of art, worthy of a reader's attention. It is an appreciation of its literary aesthetic features, an attempt to get out of the work the pay-off which a reader has learnt to expect from literary works.”

It is often useful to align differences between referents with differences in terminology. An important criterion for deciding between the two approaches is, therefore, the extent to which they agree with the relevant differences between (a) experiencing or judging the aesthetic properties of something and (b) coming to understand a text's meaning, narrative structure, stylistic properties,

and so forth. The items listed under (a) are usually not necessary or sufficient for those listed under (b), though whether this holds true vice versa is less clear. This difference warrants a distinction between the terms we employ to refer to these two sets of items. That is, understanding something is different from having appreciative judgments or experiences with regard to it, and interpretation is different from forming such appreciative judgments or appreciative experiences. This conceptual distinction is grounded in differences between the activities or events to which the respective terms refer; it would be uneconomical and inconvenient not to uphold it. Since we do not want to think of narrative structure and the semantic properties of texts as aesthetic properties as such (independent of considerations about their aesthetic value), it is useful and conceptually more economical to be able to refer to the one without referring to the other. We should therefore distinguish aesthetic appreciation from textual interpretation.

The argument for the distinction between textual interpretation (on my definition) and other ways of engaging with texts proceeds along lines similar to that of the argument for the distinction between textual interpretation and aesthetic appreciation. The activity of (29) evaluating a text, and the notions of interpretation as (32) the performance of a text and (31) the development of a creative response to a text, quite obviously differ in aim from my notion of interpretation, and they are thus conceptually distinct from it.

Moreover, understanding a text is different from (23) acquiring testimonial knowledge and/or understanding *from* the text, though both have epistemic aims. We can acquire knowledge about and understanding of, but not from, a list of falsehoods. This may be an obvious difference, but it is important to make the distinction. Part of the current hermeneutical literature is interested not so much in the above-mentioned types of interpretive statements as in that which the text is about. Gadamer, for example, sometimes suggests that the main concern in interpreting a text is *Einverständnis in der Sache*, that is, understanding, or grasping, and perhaps even agreeing with, the truth expressed by the author in the text (Gadamer

1975, 276–278; cf. 253).³³ This aim differs from the epistemic aim of trying to understand the linguistic properties of a text, and it is crucial to keep the two apart.

The reason to distinguish between gaining understanding *of* a text and gaining understanding *from* a text also applies to (24) using texts as sources of information about historical events (including about what was going on in an author's mind when writing the text—our notion of psychological intentionalism), (25) engaging in textual archaeology, and (26) identifying indicators or symptoms of one thing or another, to be explained by, for instance, political,

33. Gadamer (1975, 276): “Das Ziel aller Verständigung und alles Verstehens ist das Einverständnis in der Sache.” And: “Auch hier bewährt sich, daß Verstehen primär heißt: sich in der Sache verstehen, und erst sekundär: die Meinung des anderen als solche abheben und verstehen” (ibid., 278). Cf. page 253. This he relates to the idea of an assumption of “a full unity of sense”—“eine vollkommene Einheit von Sinn” (278) and “Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit” (277–278)—with which we are to approach a text and which upholds “not just the formal aspect that a text explicates its meaning fully but also that what the text says is the full truth” (“Das Vorurteil der Vollkommenheit enthält also nicht nur das Formale, daß ein Text seine Meinung vollkommen aussprechen soll, sondern auch, daß das, was er sagt, die vollkommene Wahrheit ist” [278]). By way of positive example he mentions Augustine, who, on Gadamer's reading, through allegorizing the stories of the Old Testament tried to bring them—or expected them to be—in agreement with the Christian faith. Up to Friedrich Ast, so Gadamer, hermeneutics has had the task to restore the agreement between the traditions of antiquity and of Christianity. To support his claim that the aim of understanding is agreement, Gadamer provides the example of reading a letter. “So wie der Empfänger eines Briefes die Nachrichten versteht, die er enthält, und zunächst die Dinge mit den Augen des Briefschreibers sieht, d.h. für wahr hält, was dieser schreibt—und nicht etwa die sonderbaren Meinungen des Briefschreibers als solche zu verstehen sucht, so verstehen wir auch überlieferte Texte auf Grund von Sinnerwartungen, die aus unserem eigenen vorgängigen Sachverhältnis geschöpft sind” (278). Note that Gadamer's hermeneutic reflections are complex; not at every point in his book is the concern of hermeneutics with the *Sache*—sometimes, the interest is in what is covered by my notion of interpretation.

psychological, psychoanalytical, or economic theories. As to (26), a “hermeneutics of suspicion” is required to reveal “the illusions and lies of consciousness” (Ricoeur 1970, 32; cf. 32–36). We cannot trust the expressions of an author’s mind as presented in a text, but we must look beyond them for what they disguise—or that is the idea. Standard examples of theories for the translation or critical interpretation of such symptoms, in relation to the interpretation of literature, are psychoanalysis, Marxism, and feminism. What I defined as *textual interpretation* is on these accounts considered to be a text’s “surface meaning” that masks its hidden “deep meaning” (e.g., Ricoeur 1974, 16; 1976, 87; cf. Danto 1981).

There is a long tradition of (28) allegorical interpretation. In medieval times, it was characterized as the ascription of meaning to the things referred to in the text (e.g., Hugh of Saint Victor, *Didascalion*, book 5, chapter 3; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.1.10; cf. Ohly 1958). In more recent times, *allegory* is used to refer to any sort of interpretation searching for a hidden or deep meaning in a text. When Susan Sontag (1966), for example, wrote “Against Interpretation,” she had in mind the deep meaning of Marxist, psychoanalytical, and allegorical interpretation, not the sort of interpretation defined by me. Allegory is a form of interpretation in the sense that it describes some sort of x-stands-for-y structure, but it is concerned more with the *interpretans* than with the *interpretandum* (the *interpretans* is often rather loosely connected to the *interpretandum*). Hence, it is to be distinguished from my notion of interpretation.

In the hermeneutical literature of the twentieth century, the idea became dominant that what we called the (27) application of a text to specific circumstances is in fact also an interpretation, or an essential part of it. This idea has been influential: Gadamer developed it, Ricoeur basically agreed with it (e.g., Ricoeur 1976, “Conclusion”; 1981, chapter 7), and many philosophers, theologians, literary scholars, and scholars of law adopted it. Given the prominence of this rather vague idea, the next section examines this view in some detail, focussing on its locus classicus—i.e., Gadamer’s presentation of it.

7 – Interpretation and Application

According to Gadamer, in the “forgotten history of hermeneutics,” it was self-evident that the hermeneuticists had the task to apply the sense of a text to a concrete situation.³⁴ The “evidence” he provides is anecdotal in kind. The translator of the divine oracle, judges, preachers—they all went beyond historical understanding to draw the text’s implications for specific situations (Gadamer 1975, 292). Rejecting the dissociation of interpretation and application, Gadamer believes “that application is as much an integrated part of the hermeneutical procedure as is understanding or explanation.”³⁵ According to him, “understanding is here [i.e., in the context of understanding laws or religious messages] always already application.”³⁶ That raises the question of the conceptual relation between understanding—as a result of interpretation—and application.

In order to address this question, we need to get clear about the logical options that model the relation between interpretation (with its resulting understanding) and application, and it may be useful to have them here before us.

- (1) Application is a sufficient condition for interpretation.
- (2) Application is a necessary condition for interpretation.
- (3) Application is based on an interpretation.

34. Early on in his discussion, he points to previous considerations that have “zu der Einsicht geführt, daß im Verstehen immer so etwas wie eine Anwendung des zu verstehenden Textes auf die gegenwärtige Situation des Interpreteten stattfindet” (Gadamer 1975, 291). He probably refers to the parts on the hermeneutical circle and the “fusion of horizons,” but he does not give a specific reference.

35. Translated from Gadamer (1975, 291): “Daß Anwendung ein ebenso integrierender Bestandteil des hermeneutischen Vorgangs ist wie Verstehen und Auslegen.”

36. Translated from Gadamer (1975, 292): “Verstehen ist hier [i.e., in the context of understanding laws or religious salvific messages] immer schon Anwenden.”

- (4) Interpretation in actual practice always goes together with application.
- (5) Interpretation ought to go together with application.

Conceptually, (2) and (3) are mirrored in the following two options:

- (6) Interpretation is a necessary condition for application.
- (7) Interpretation is based on an application.

Note, by the way, the difference between (2) and (6) on the one hand, and (3) and (7) on the other. In (2) and (6), one of the concepts (*viz.*, interpretation or application) is a necessary condition for another concept to apply, in the same way as “p is true” is usually considered to be a necessary condition for “S knows p” to apply. In (3) and (7), the idea is that one of the terms can only be realized if the other term is realized first, in the same way as the existence of oxygen is a possibility condition for the existence of dogs.

What exactly is Gadamer’s view, and why does he think it correct? The argumentation is rather complex.³⁷ According to Gadamer, it is often thought that there is a gap between the application-focussed juridical hermeneutics and *geisteswissenschaftlichen* hermeneutics, by which he means primarily (or exclusively?) the hermeneutics involved in historiographical research. Gadamer sets out to correct that view—maintained by, for instance, Emilio Betti—and claims that not only lawyers but also historians of law are con-

37. We will ignore here two parts of the text where Gadamer propounds his argument (1975, part 2, 2.2). Part of his defence of the claim that all interpretation is, or involves, application is a criticism of the way Emilio Betti distinguishes various types of explication (Gadamer 1975, 293). It certainly is not the strongest way of making his case. Even if one would be convinced by Gadamer’s criticism, showing the inadequacy of Betti’s—indeed questionable—distinctions does not yet constitute an argument for the claim that there is no distinction between interpretation and application. Second, Gadamer (1975, 295) has a subsection on recovering the fundamental hermeneutical problem, but it does not seem to add any arguments to Gadamer’s view of the relation between interpretation and application.

cerned with the application of the law, because they are concerned with the development of the law during its course in history (Gadamer 1975, 308; cf. xx–xxi). Moreover, a legal historian should look not only at the original application of the law text but also at the history of its application (*ibid.*, 308).

That would certainly be a legitimate project for a (legal) historian, but it is less clear why such an interest would be unavoidable or why it should be obligatory. If we want to understand the text of the Code of Hammurabi or of a part of Roman law, do we really need to consider how it actually functioned in the respective societies? Witnesses to the function of a text only provide us with information about how the text was applied in these societies. If, for instance, some small city, far from the influence and immediate reach of the centre of power, gave its own twist to the “interpretation” of the Hammurabi Code—for example, for reasons of personal benefit—then this would not change the meaning of the Code. The actual historian of law might be only interested in what the lawmakers intended to say by the law, and had he succeeded, he would have acquired some understanding of that law. Had he gained an understanding of the history of interpretation or actual application of that law, he would have gained just that—and not necessarily an understanding of the text of the law. In the rest of Gadamer’s exposition, no new arguments are found for his view.³⁸ But because he envisions this application task for the historian, he claims that “the case of legal hermeneutics is truly not exceptional, but it is apt to return to historical hermeneutics its full scope of the problem and to restore in that way the old unity of the hermeneutic problem in which the legal scholar and the theologian engage with the philologist.”³⁹

38. The case is presented on pages 307–312. The historian “muß die gleiche Reflexion leisten, die auch den Juristen leistet” and “muß nicht nur historisch, sondern auch juristisch denken können.” Cf. 312–315.

39. Translated from Gadamer (1975, 311; italics removed): “Der Fall der juristischen Hermeneutik ist also in Wahrheit kein Sonderfall, sondern er ist geeignet, der historischen Hermeneutik ihre volle Problemweite wieder-

At some point, Gadamer explicitly raises a question similar to the one I address here: “But does the application belong essentially and necessarily to understanding?”⁴⁰ Modern science says no, he thinks, and he refers to historical criticism of the Bible as an example. Suppose we take historical criticism to be engaged with reconstructing (a) the genesis of a text (its sources, author, etc.) and (b) how the text was understood in its original context. It is entirely legitimate to claim there are further ways to engage with such a text and to believe that a religious text requires an application to our lives if it is to function as a religious text. But to claim, for example, that the application of a particular text is essential in one’s engagement with it is not to claim that application is an essential condition for understanding that text. The two claims differ in their success conditions—a successful interpretation is not yet a successful application.

Gadamer takes the example of a commandment. To understand it, he says, we need to apply it. That is, we need to know what it takes to be obedient to it, and that, so Gadamer, is what it takes to apply the commandment to a concrete situation. Now, if a historian finds such a commandment in a historical text, he must do the same as the original addressee in order to understand it: he must know what it takes to be obedient to it.⁴¹

That much seems right: to (partially) understand an imperative, one needs to understand what it takes to follow its instruction. But the case of imperatives is peculiar. Its equivalent for assertions (indicative and declarative sentences) is to say that to understand the sentence is to understand what it takes for that sentence to be true.

zugeben und damit die alte Einheit des hermeneutischen Problems wiederherzustellen, in der sich der Jurist und der Theologe mit dem Philologen begegnet.”

40. Translated from Gadamer (1975, 316): “Aber gehört die Applikation wesentlich und notwendig zum Verstehen?”

41. Gadamer (1975, 316–323). Gadamer elaborates extensively on the differences between the philologist and the historian and maintains that both are involved in application of the interpretandum.

This does not involve application. Even if understanding an imperative requires understanding what it takes to follow its instruction, this is still different from Gadamer's paradigm cases of preachers applying the text of Scripture in their sermons and magistrates applying the law. Perhaps, to understand the imperative "Close the door!" is to understand what must be done to comply with it. But what does it take to understand the commandment "Love your neighbour as yourself"? We may understand every word of it and also understand the sentence as a whole, and yet we may still wonder what the application of this commandment would be in some particular situation. If Peter is asking me for money and I know he will use it to support his alcohol addiction, what does the commandment to love him as myself require me to do? Suppose I do not know the answer to that question; then what is it about the commandment that I do not understand? Clearly, there is much about it that I *do* understand—the meaning of its words, the meaning of the whole sentence, the intended referent of *neighbour*, and so on. If that understanding results from an interpretive practice, I can probably give various true interpretive statements about the commandment. What I lack, however, is knowledge about or insight into the application of that rule in this particular situation. Suppose that the best application of the commandment in this case is to give Peter the money. Does gaining that insight make me understand the rule better? Probably not. It seems that this insight, combined, perhaps, with some insight into Peter's situation (who he is, what his behavioural patterns are, which consequences either of my actions would have, etc.), is what I need in order to determine how to apply the love commandment in this case. Spelled out this way, then, the interpretation and application of the commandment come apart.

Gadamer summarizes his discussion of the topic as follows: "Application is not a subsequent use of some given generality, which is first understood in itself and then applied to a concrete situation. Rather, it is the actual understanding of the generality itself, which is the given text for us."⁴² Hence, application doesn't come after interpretation—application is essential to understanding and, hence,

to interpretation. Thus, Gadamer claims at least the truth of (2), even if not the stronger claim (1). But his arguments, as we have seen, only support, at best, option (4): interpretation in actual practice always goes together with application.

One could argue that we are asking the wrong questions. Maybe Gadamer's way of making his case is phenomenological in nature rather than analytical and discursive, more concerned with how the world appears to him than with conceptual analysis and argumentation.⁴³ That may be true. In any case, if we were looking for an argument for the claim that application is a necessary condition for interpretation, we would not find it with Gadamer.

Perhaps, one could say, the point of the claim that all interpretation is application is different. Perhaps the point is that in all our interpretive practices, we are not purely objective interpreters who have truths written on the tabula rasa of our minds. Rather, our interests are important: Why do we try to interpret this particular text? What are our purposes, what are our assumptions, expectations, values, and so on? The questions we ask are partially responsible for the answers we find. If we read Aristotle in order to criticize twentieth-century capitalism, for example, we will come up with different interpretive claims than when we study him to compare his views with Plato's. If interpreting a text with this use in mind is called application, we may say that all interpretation is, or involves, application.

This does not mean that application is a necessary condition for interpretation (option [2]), let alone a sufficient one (option [1]); it is at best an argument for (4). Moreover, the correct or persuasive or

42. Translated from Gadamer (1975, 323): "Applikation ist keine nachträgliche Anwendung von etwas gegebenem Allgemeinen, das zunächst in sich verstanden würde, auf einen konkreten Fall, sondern ist erst das wirkliche Verständnis des Allgemeinen selbst, das der gegebene Text für uns ist."

43. However, Gadamer's hermeneutic approach is not to be identified with phenomenological approaches—see the five differences between the two listed in Piercey's article on Ricoeur (Piercey 2016, 413–414). Cf. the essay on phenomenology and hermeneutics in Ricoeur (1981).

just application of a rule or other type of text is served by an interpretation that does not depend on, nor is determined by, an applicative aim. The distinction between interpretation and application is important. Interpretive statements—i.e., statements with epistemic aims—are to be evaluated by standards different from those for applicative statements.

Keeping interpretation and application apart may also be relevant for another reason. On the one hand, Gadamer emphasizes the prominence of application and appropriation in processes of understanding. It is the dialogical encounter with texts that connects us with the tradition and may lead to a “fusion of horizons.” We are not merely trying to understand an ancient author, such as Aristotle, but we are “appropriating” what he has to say, thus, in a sense, treating the text as a matter of importance. Yet on the other hand, Gadamer’s model of understanding does not seem to support the possibility of understanding what the author actually said. Employing Husserl’s notion of horizons, or *Lebenswelte*, Gadamer develops the idea that the horizons of interpreter and text “melt.” One may find this imagery unfortunate—for what is it we are to imagine here?—but a more serious problem is its ambiguity about the possibility of understanding what the ancient author said. Can we actually understand the author by interpreting his text, or is what we take to be the author’s view necessarily coloured by our pre-understanding and our applicative concerns? This is not to suggest that Gadamer considers it impossible to understand a text, but to point out that the function he ascribes to application in attempts to gain understanding may in fact hinder understanding instead of enabling it.

We may indeed have little reason to expect a convincing argument for the identification of interpretation and application. The caesura between (1)–(22) and (23)–(32) seems quite sharp: the activities involved in (1)–(22) are different in aims from the rest of the cases. Even if it is difficult in a particular case to distinguish acts of interpretation from other ways of engaging with texts, this does not imply that these activities are not distinct.

In his work “What Is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with

True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?,” Kierkegaard tells the following story.

Imagine a country. A royal decree is issued to all public officials, subordinates—in short, to the whole population. What happens? A remarkable change takes place in everyone. Everybody turns into an interpreter, public officials become authors, and every blessed day an interpretation is published, one more learned, more penetrating, more elegant, more profound, more ingenious, more wonderful, more beautiful, more wonderfully beautiful than the other. ... Everything is interpretation—but no one read the decree in such a way that he complied with it. And not only this, that everything became interpretation—no, they also shifted the view of what earnestness is and made busyness with interpretations into real earnestness. (Kierkegaard 1990, 33–34)

Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the population’s derision of the decree due to their fervour of interpretation seems right to me. We often should not—and in fact do not—read texts merely to understand them. Many theologians agree: mere knowledge of a text’s meaning is not a *lectio salutaris*.⁴⁴ Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), a Dutch pietist theologian, writes that, although one must make a serious effort to understand the text of the Bible, one should not rest content with merely studying its letters, as do the “letter slaves” (*letterknechten*). Rather, one must, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, “pierce through to the kernel, to the inner nature of the matter itself” (Brakel 1736, 61). Here we move from the text to the *Sache*, as some hermeneuticists would have it (see case [23] above). The distinction between understanding a text’s linguistic properties and a text’s *Sache* applies to all texts. One may read, for example, a text about the theory of quantum mechanics and understand all the text’s linguistic properties without understanding the text’s *Sache*—the theory of quantum mechanics. Hence, good or valuable ways

44. A common emphasis among the early modern Protestant theologians studied by, e.g., Sdzuj (1997).

of reading a text are likely to include more than understanding its linguistic properties.⁴⁵

There can be a feedback loop between our interpretation and our further uses of the text, as is the case in the application of the principle of charity.⁴⁶ We apply that principle when, for example, we reconsider our interpretation of a text if it interprets the text as saying something we evaluate as false or irrational or wrong. But this does not eliminate the distinction between interpretation and application. In fact, it affirms it: in order to make the point that a good or valuable or *salutaris* reading is likely to include, but goes beyond, mere understanding of the text, a distinction between the two is required. An interpretation's success conditions are different from those of an application, or an evaluation, or an appreciation, or any other of the possible uses of a text. Hermeneutical or theoretical reflection about interpretation gets confused if interpretation and application are conceptually mingled; and indeed, some of the confusion we find in twentieth-century hermeneutical literature seems traceable to that conflation.

8 – Conclusion

There is a sense in which judges, preachers, historians, literary critics, and so on are involved in the same activity whenever they inter-

45. Cf. Lewis's emphasis on the "passive" reading of literature (e.g., 1961, 2, 19, 31–32, 88–89). Note, by the way, that in the Renaissance, the term *application* was used as a synonym for *allegory*, at least in Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poetry*: "The application most divinely true but the discourse itself feigned" ([1595] 1890, 25).

46. The principle of charity is old. Augustine formulates something like it in *De doctrina christiana*, and he employs it too (see, for example, his use of it in *De civitate Dei* 14.8). For another example, see Meier's idea of *hermeneutische Billigkeit* (Meier [1757] 1996, § 39). Cf. Scholz (1999, part 2); Petraschka (2014). The principle became prominent in analytic philosophy via Wilson (1959) by Quine ([1960] 2013, 59, 69) and Davidson (1984, xvii, 27, 137), in relation to radical translation and interpretation. See my chapter 3.

pret a text. There are many ways to engage with texts, and sometimes they are all labelled *textual interpretation*. Since the utility of a conceptual distinction increases with the degree to which it is economical in making relevant and practical distinctions, an important criterion in describing something as an interpretation is the extent to which the distinction aligns with the genuine differences between the phenomena referred to. I've argued that the process of textual interpretation can be best defined as the attempt to solve difficulties in coming to understand or acquiring knowledge about a particular text. Specifying the nature of the object of textual interpretation, we can say that to interpret a text T is to try, in the case of difficulties in understanding a text, to describe T's represented properties by analysing the perceptible properties. As such, interpretation is to be distinguished from such non-interpretive activities as appreciating the text from an aesthetic point of view, acquiring testimonial knowledge or understanding *from* the text, identifying indicators or symptoms of one thing or another, and allegorical interpretation. Gadamer's apparent claim that application is a necessary condition for interpretation is to be rejected. Moreover, contrary to what some theorists of interpretation believe, the reasons and texts considered above failed to provide us with good arguments for the claim that communicative authorial intentions have no function in textual interpretation.

2 – The Epistemic Aims of Textual Interpretation

1 – Introduction

We read and interpret texts for many reasons: to obtain information, to delight in their aesthetic qualities, to imagine a particular fictional world, to become a better person, to engage in communication with others, and so on. Such aims typically implicate the epistemic aims of acquiring knowledge about and understanding of these texts. The previous chapter argued that these epistemic aims are essential to the concept of textual interpretation. Successful interpretation results in knowledge or understanding. If these are our aims, what exactly are we aiming for? What is the nature of these aims?

Knowledge has been the topic of extensive reflection by (analytic) philosophers of the previous and current centuries, and this chapter makes no attempt to contribute to its analysis. We have no reason to assume that the general analysis of knowledge differs for knowledge acquired in interpretive practices. For understanding, however, this is different. The surge of research by analytic philosophers into its nature and aims is only quite recent.¹ Unlike knowledge, the nature of understanding is often treated as dependent on the nature of its objects, to the effect that the understanding of empirical phenomena and scientific theories is distinguished from the understanding of persons and from the understanding of language.² This could be correct; but we cannot tell unless we

1. Among the observers of a neglect of the epistemology of understanding are Hunter (1998, 560); Riggs (2003, 217); Zagzebski (2001, 236–237); and Gordon (2012, 181). The surge of interest is noted by Grimm (2012, 103) and Baumberger (2014, 67).

2. For explicit distinctions between scientific and linguistic understanding, see, e.g., Salmon (1998); Baumberger (2014, 70); and Baumberger, Beis-

compare the analyses of what it is to understand these different objects.

This chapter develops an account of the understanding of texts in order to facilitate—and make a brief foray into—a comparison with knowledge and with other accounts of understanding. Its discussion engages with the broader field of hermeneutics (traditionally the discipline concerned with all matters interpretive), with current literature on understanding in epistemology and philosophy of science, and with philosophical work on linguistic understanding. The latter debate is closest to our topic of textual understanding, but it typically takes short and spoken utterances as its paradigm cases and ignores aspects and layers of meaning we ascribe to longer and more complex texts of different genres.

Thus, my question is this: What is the nature of the understanding involved in textual understanding? In this chapter, the following analysis is defended:

A subject *S* understands a proposition (or set of propositions) *p* about a text *T* to a degree *D* iff

- (i) *S* knows *p*, with *p* being about linguistic properties of *T* and their relations; and
- (ii) *S* correctly constructed the relations between the linguistic properties of *T*; and
- (iii) *D* increases with the number of textual properties that are being correctly taken into account and relations that have adequately been constructed between the linguistic properties of *T*.

The next section introduces a description of the kind of cases of understanding that I have in mind here. The subsequent section presents an extensive discussion of the various aspects of my analysis.

bart, and Brun (2017, 5–6). On differences between understanding people and understanding the natural world, see, e.g., Grimm (2016). One exception to distinguishing notions of understanding by reference to their objects is Zagzebski (2001, see especially 242–243).

Section 4 discusses the relation between the proposed account and knowledge. Section 5 compares this account to a number of other analyses of understanding and argues that the prospects of a unified account of understanding are bright.

2 – Cases of Understanding Texts

The phenomenon I have in view in this chapter is the understanding of texts. The aim of this section is to sketch the extension of the relevant cases. The extension goes beyond the understanding of the short sentences typically studied in the recent literature on linguistic understanding, such as “Dams are built by beavers” (Pietroski 2003, 228), “Joan will buy a car but Laxmi won’t” (Elugardo and Stainton 2003, 271), “Snow is white” (a favourite one—Schiffer 2003, 307; cf. Longworth 2008, 58), “No bomb is too small to ban” (Longworth 2008, 55), and “*Krankenschwester* means ‘nurse’” (Pettit 2002, 519). My account should apply not only to the understanding of such short sentences but also to longer and richer texts in various genres, such as law texts, poems, scientific articles, answers to questionnaires, ancient texts, sacred writings, and letters. It should account for the many aspects that may be understood about texts—for example, implicatures, stylistic features, structure, and metaphors.³

Listing all relevant types of cases of textual understanding is hard and tedious work: some of them may easily be overlooked, and an exhaustive list of descriptions and examples takes up much space. Therefore, I will list several representative examples that serve to illustrate the range of cases of textual understanding to be accounted for by the analysis in this chapter, but I do not claim completeness.

The cases of understanding considered here all share the same

3. Künne (1981) and Scholz (1999) list a number of cases of textual understanding. Both authors distinguish a hierarchy of “levels” of understanding, whereas we are concerned with the various aspects of the texts that are the object of understanding.

type of object, namely, texts.⁴ The previous chapter defined *text* as an ordered set of signs with a linguistic function in a particular language L. These signs in L constitute words, sentences, paragraphs, and longer textual units. A reader's attempt to understand a text is aimed at understanding the x-stands-for-y structure that signs have in language L. That is, in trying to understand a text, one aims at understanding the relations between the perceptible properties and the complex system of phonetical, semantical, and syntactical properties they represent or stand for. Here are some examples of textual understanding.

- (1) *Understanding the stylistic features of T.* For example, the first two stanzas of Emily Dickinson's poem "It was not Death, for I stood up" have the stylistic feature of anaphora (i.e., repetition of a word or words at the beginning of successive phrases) (my italics):

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down—
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos—crawl—
Nor Fire—for just my Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool—

- (2) *Understanding the genre of T.* This involves elementary cases, such as knowing that one is reading a newspaper article or a law text, but also the identification of a fake news story or a spam email as such. Moreover, it includes the identification of liter-

4. The term *object of textual understanding* is used in various ways, but in this chapter, it refers to the *intelligendum*, that which is understood (or that which one tries to understand)—in other words, that toward which our mind can be directed in our effort to understand it, such as a book, a person, an event, or a theory.

ary genres, such as the identification of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as satire or allegory, even though it can be read as fictional travel writing. An author writes in a particular genre, but not all books need to be read in (exclusively) the intended genre. The biblical book Song of Songs, for instance, was fairly early on read as an allegorical text, but it is not easy to justify the claim that it was intended as such.

- (3) *Understanding the referential potential of a word in a particular language*; for example, understanding that *bar* has, in language L, the referential potential of a place where (alcoholic) drinks can be bought and drunk, or a piece of music notation, or a piece of metal, wood, or chocolate.
- (4) *Understanding that a particular expression has the property of being a particular metaphor or has a symbolic function with a particular meaning M*. As an example, consider the symbolic use of words and objects in this stanza from W.H. Auden's "Funeral Blues," about a beloved one who died:

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

- (5) *Understanding that utterance u is S's performance of intended illocutionary speech act A*; e.g., understanding "It's cold in here" to be a declarative sentence stating that it is cold in some place (viz., here).
- (6) *Understanding that utterance u is S's performance of intended perlocutionary speech act P*; e.g., understanding a shopkeeper's uttering "That makes 175 euros in total" as intended to make me pay him 175 euros.
- (7) *Understanding a text as propounding argument R*; for example, the argument for the existence of God that Descartes developed in his third *Meditatio*.
- (8) *Understanding T to have truth conditions C that must apply if what T expresses is true*; e.g., understanding what must be the

case if a single sentence like “The king of France is bald” is true, or more extensive sets of statements, such as Johan Huizinga’s description of late medieval Burgundian court culture in *Herfsttij der middeleeuwen* (*The Waning of the Middle Ages*). In the case of fictional texts, it involves understanding what is the case in the fictional world described in the text and plausible explanations for the fictional character’s behaviour.

Moreover, we can adjust this for imperatives, as follows: *understanding what must be the case if the imperative, expressed by the author, is to be followed or obeyed*. Consider, for instance, a sign at the beach of a university town that reads, “Students stop! Absolutely NO post-exam duckings on the beach! Environmental damage will lead to disciplinary action.” How are we to understand this sign? Does the imperative extend to pre-exam duckings, or to duckings by people who do not have to take exams? And what about post-exam duckings that do not cause environmental damage?

- (9) *Understanding that text T has the property of propounding a message M; e.g., understanding that a message of the parable of the good Samaritan is that one ought to help those in need.*

Again, it is easy to make this list much longer, but the hope is that it provides us with a representative sample of types of cases of textual understanding.

Not all that others have considered to be a case of textual understanding is to be included—and that matters to our analysis of what it is to understand a text. Which cases we accept as cases of textual understanding affects the conditions something *x* must meet in order to be a case of textual understanding, and vice versa. This is known as the problem of the criterion (cf. Chisholm 1973). Some differences in descriptions of the nature of understanding can perhaps be traced to differences in the selection of cases they seek to cover.

To illustrate this point, we will discuss one such example more extensively. Consider the following case of understanding: *understanding the actual psychological event going on in the author’s mind*

while writing text *T*. This is the psychological intentionalism that we identified but did not endorse in chapter 1. But maybe we should have endorsed it and should now include it in our extension of cases of textual understanding. How would that affect our analysis of what it is to understand a text?

Perhaps the following helps to make the question more concrete. Suppose there is a Dante-pill. If you take it and read *Divina commedia*, you'll have the experiences Dante had while writing the text. Should you take the pill if your aim is to understand the text? No doubt it would be quite an experience, but would it lead you to understand the *text*?

We do not know what to expect when taking that pill, but it may be a set of experiences more mundane than the text suggests. Words need to be sought, the sound of sentences tested, and writing them down may parallel a constant stream of adaptations and suggestions in the mind. Pens need to be sharpened, groceries done, knocks on doors answered, fires kindled. Eyes may hurt, backs may ache, hands may feel cold, and so on and so forth. A process of composition can be messy and full of distractions. And even though the text is a fruit of that process, it is also distinct from it. The text can be read out loud in very different circumstances, it can be copied, understood, and translated with no other relations to the composition process than having resulted from it.

The first thing to observe is that understanding a text differs from understanding a composition process. If one is interested in the latter, one should take the pill; if one seeks the former, one should not. For that reason, I maintain that cases described by psychological intentionalism do not belong to the extension of textual understanding. If I thought it *should* be included, this would have significant implications for my analysis of textual understanding. Proponents of psychological intentionalism maintain that the relevant kind of textual understanding is only gained from a divination or simulation of the author's psychological state at the moment of writing. The nine examples of textual understanding listed above do not require this. If my analysis of textual understanding were to cover cases described by psychological intentionalism as well, there

would be two options. Either divination (or something like that) is not necessary for textual understanding (perhaps it is only one of several heuristic tools for gaining textual understanding), or divination (or something like that) is a necessary condition for textual understanding. Since divination is not necessary (or sufficient) for understanding in cases (1)–(9), we would have to distinguish between two different notions of textual understanding. This example thus illustrates that the conditions we give for textual understanding depend on the exemplary cases we select. Since I reject the psychological-intentionalist cases of textual understanding, my conditions should not cover them.

3 – Discussion

In this section, I defend the various aspects of the analysis proposed in the introduction. First, I discuss the nature of the content involved in understanding texts, that is, the proposition (or set of propositions) *p*, with *p* being about *T*'s linguistic properties and their relations. Second, I discuss condition (i), the knowledge condition: *S* knows *p*. My starting point is the traditional account according to which knowledge is a justified true belief plus a condition preventing luckily justified true beliefs from counting as knowledge. These conditions are discussed in sections 3.2–3.4. Although proponents of a knowledge-first account of knowledge may agree that knowledge entails the conditions we discuss, they would deny that these conditions entail knowledge and perhaps want to adjust for the notion of knowledge employed here. Section 3.5 discusses condition (ii), the condition that for *S* to understand a text *T*, *S* must have correctly constructed the relations between the relevant textual properties. Section 3.6 explores the idea that understanding comes in degrees, and section 3.7 briefly considers both the necessity and sufficiency of conditions (i)–(iii).

3.1 – *The Content of Understanding*

One may wonder whether textual understanding actually involves propositions. A complicating factor in answering this question is the difficulty of distinguishing between the nature of the content of understanding, on the one hand, and how the content gets expressed, on the other. It is conceivable that the content of understanding consists of a non-propositional model—for example, a neutrino model or a financial-system model—whereas its expression is always propositional in nature. It is practically difficult to draw a sharp line between the nature of understanding and the nature of its expression.⁵ For our purposes, we may leave this open and ask the following question: Does the understanding of texts involve propositions, either in its content or in the expression of its content or both? I give three reasons for answering this question affirmatively, but, as we will see in section 3.5, this does not imply that understanding is fully reducible to propositions or to a propositional attitude.

First, it is noteworthy that several of the nine cases listed above can be put in terms of understanding-that clauses, where *that* introduces a proposition. This does not hold for some of the other types of understanding identified in the literature, such as cases of understanding-how. Here is a random selection for illustrative purposes. We may understand

- *that* “Man is a wolf” is meant metaphorically, referring to the predatory nature of man in particular situations
- *that* Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is a satirical text
- *that* a message of the parable of the good Samaritan is that one ought to help those in need

5. Zagzebski, for example, proposes that understanding has a non-propositional object. For instance, she says that “understanding involves seeing how the parts of that body of knowledge fit together, where the fitting together is not itself propositional in form” (2001, 244). This seems incompatible with the content of understanding being propositional, but compatible with its expression being propositional.

One could object that such expressions of understanding as that-clauses sound a little awkward, and that it is not clear at all how the original expressions should be reformulated. We may find ourselves unable to fully explicate our understanding of a particular text in a mere list of that-clauses. Even so, this may just tell us something about linguistic conventions; in any case, it does not at all imply that understanding lacks propositions. Perhaps, expressions of understanding involve not only a proposition but something else as well. Whether we take understanding to be concerned with answers to wh-questions (why?, when?, where?, etc.) or employ a notion of objectual understanding (e.g., understanding a paragraph, a book, an author), understanding—or its expression—is likely to involve propositions.⁶

Second, what would be examples of cases in which we can rightly say, “S understands text T,” without this understanding involving some propositional content? Even if someone, without understanding much of it, is deeply moved by, say, T. S. Eliot’s poem *Four Quartets*, some propositional attitude seems to be involved: perhaps this person’s response was triggered by some understanding of stylistic elements or of an individual phrase, and such kinds of understanding are in principle propositionally expressible. It is not clear that there is an intuitively plausible example of a case of textual understanding that does not involve propositional content.

The third reason depends on our answer to a question discussed below, namely, the question as to whether understanding is factive. I argue that understanding allows for a distinction very much like, and arguably involving, the distinction between truth and falsehood. Just as with perception and belief, some cases of understanding imply truth and other cases falsehood. We typically call such latter cases *misunderstanding*. Given that propositions are widely

6. For classifications of types of understanding by reference to their grammatical forms (if a that-clause is used, it is propositional; if a wh-clause is used, it is interrogative; if a noun phrase is used, it is objectual; etc.), see Kvanvig (2009); Baumberger (2014); Baumberger, Beisbart, and Brun (2017); and Gordon (2020).

thought to be the only possible carriers of truth-value, it follows that if the content of understanding somehow has truth-value, it is likely to involve propositions.

There is a minor issue worth pointing out here. My analysis of what it is to understand a text parenthetically mentions a *set* of propositions. Many authors who do not (explicitly) consider texts as objects of understanding (but who are concerned with scientific understanding) diverge in one way or another from the idea that the content of understanding could consist of a simple single proposition. This is apparent from descriptions of understanding such as the following two: (i) “Understanding requires the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a large and comprehensive body of information. One can know many unrelated pieces of information, but understanding is achieved only when informational items are pieced together by the subject in question” (Kvanvig 2003, 192); and (ii) “the kind of understanding I have in mind is the appreciation or grasp of order, pattern, and how things ‘hang together’” (Riggs 2003, 217). Even on a propositional account of the content of understanding, understanding probably involves multiple propositions and relations between them, rather than just a single proposition. One could, of course, argue that various propositions describing properties and their relations can be brought together in a conjunction consisting of one single big proposition, thus arguing against my claim that the content of understanding does not consist of a single proposition. The point remains that this would not be a simple proposition, or so it seems.

This could also apply to the understanding of texts. Due to the nature of texts, understanding a text is a case of understanding something *x as y*—for example, understanding signs *as* involving a particular locution, words *as* having a particular sense and specific referents, words *as* having a particular grammatical form, longer bits of text *as* having a particular structure, and a text *as* having a particular message. Understanding (aspects of) a text is likely to involve multiple represented properties that a text has in virtue of its perceptible properties, and this may be more than we usually cap-

ture in a single proposition. But, of course, the parentheses in my analysis of textual understanding only indicate the optionality of the propositions coming in sets.

3.2 – *Belief*

What attitude towards a proposition does an understanding subject have towards the propositional content of understanding? Examples of such attitudes are belief, acceptance, hope, doubt, desire, and imagination. Some of these types of attitudes are obviously irrelevant to understanding, such as hope, doubt, and desire. Mere imagination also doesn't seem to be an instance of understanding, however likely it may be to be involved in our doxastic processes. If I imagine what life was like in pre-revolution Paris, I do not yet understand it in any sense, even though imagination may help me to attain understanding. The remaining candidates, then, are belief and acceptance. In what follows, it will be assumed that belief and acceptance are attitudes with different levels of commitment to a proposition, with belief being the stronger commitment.

In this section, I defend the claim that for a subject *S* to understand *p* about *T*, *S* must believe *p*. Suppose a text *T* means *p*. Then the proposition that *S* believes when *S* understands *T* is “*T* means *p*”—*S* does not need to believe *p*. To understand the metaphorical meaning of “Man is a wolf,” one does not need to believe that men have, in particular situations, a predative nature. It suffices to believe that “Man is a wolf” *metaphorically means* that man has, in particular situations, a predative nature.

Belief clearly is not sufficient for understanding; we may believe that a satirical story is historical and thus misunderstand the story. Is belief a necessary condition in the cases of understanding listed above? Suppose someone *S* understands a text *T* to have property *p*. Must *S* believe *T* to have *p*?

Those who think of understanding—be it scientific understanding or some general notion of understanding—as a species of knowledge typically affirm that understanding involves belief, for knowledge does. We shall see below that there are other reasons

to adopt the belief condition. But a number of authors have argued that “S understands p” is compatible with “S does not believe p.”⁷ To defend this claim, they propose cases that they consider to be cases of understanding without belief. We will consider two representative examples here.

David Hunter argues that states of (linguistic) understanding are not states of belief or knowledge, but states of conscious awareness that can serve as evidence on which to base or ground beliefs (Hunter 1998, 570ff.). He thinks states of understanding belong to the same epistemic category as states of perceptual experience. To defend the claim that understanding does not involve belief, he offers two kinds of cases in which a subject fails to believe that a text or speech act means what he understands it to mean. In the first case, this is due to the subject’s doubts about the reliability or truthfulness of that understanding. Hunter gives the following example (*ibid.*, 572):

Suppose that S is attending Jones’ speech and understands Jones to be saying that Bill Clinton is President but suspects that the crowd noise at that moment is causing auditory interference. In that case, S might not be disposed to judge or assert that Jones is saying that Clinton is President. S may thus not believe that that is what Jones is saying even though that is what S understands Jones to be saying.

7. Hunter (1998); Pettit (2002, 2005); Wilkenfeld (2017). Pettit’s (2002) example seems to me relevantly similar to Hunter’s (1998) example, and so my reply to it would be, *mutatis mutandis*, similar. Wilkenfeld (2017) uses scientific theories as a paradigm case, not texts or linguistic utterances, and his argument for thinking there is understanding without believing has significant structural similarities with the arguments discussed below. Fricker (2003) also argues that belief and understanding come apart, since she believes that what is necessary for understanding is an understanding experience, which can ground a belief about what has been said in a particular utterance. The nature of the quasi-perceptual representation of the content and force of utterances which she deems necessary for utterance understanding remains unclear, but it is something we are particularly interested in here.

In the second case, S fails to believe that a text or speech act means what he understands it to mean because he has overriding evidence that his understanding is false. One of Hunter's examples is this (ibid., 574; cf. Pettit 2002):

Consider again the case in which S is attending Jones' speech, and understands Jones to be saying that Bill Clinton is President but suspects that the crowd noise may have been too loud. And this time, suppose that S is informed by Jones' speech writer that Jones is supposed to say, as part of a joke, that Jimmy Carter is President. In this case, although S's understanding constitutes some evidence that Jones is saying that Clinton is President, the speech writer's testimony is evidence that Jones is not saying that. That testimony might lead S to suspect that the crowd noise had indeed interfered with S's hearing after all. If persuaded by the speech-writer, S may believe that Jones is not saying that Clinton is President, even though that is what S understands Jones to be saying. In this way, a subject may fail to believe that a text o[r] speech act mean[s] what she understands it to mean if she has evidence that that understanding is false.

There are at least two ways to object to these kinds of arguments and claims. First, one could argue that these are simply not cases of understanding but of something else, say, imagination or entertaining an idea. Hunter says the subject in his examples "understands" what is being said, but saying this doesn't make it so. Unless we're given more reasons, the appeal to intuitions can be used to make the opposite case as well. In the first example, Hunter claims that "S may thus not believe that that is what Jones is saying even though that is what S understands Jones to be saying." But what makes this a case of understanding? Isn't it much more appropriate to say that that is what S *thinks* or *believes* Jones to be saying or what S *believes he understands* Jones to be saying? Even if one does not agree that this is the more appropriate reading, it is at least as warranted as Hunter's reading. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for Hunter's second case.

Second, one could argue that we should distinguish between the understanding of two different aspects of texts. Both examples are cases of understanding the semantic potential of particular words in a particular language—and this involves beliefs. In neither case is the speaker's intended communication understood. Therefore, the two cases are concerned with utterance meaning, not with speaker's meaning. They involve beliefs about the former, not about the latter. This also accounts for Hunter's observation that there is a phenomenal difference between encountering a text in a language totally foreign to you and encountering a text in a language that you know (Hunter 1998, 561; cf. Pettit 2005, 70–71). It seems that this phenomenal difference is accounted for by acknowledging that you understand the semantic potential the words have in language L but you don't understand what the speaker or author intended to communicate. Thus, Hunter's cases fail to support the idea that (linguistic) understanding does not imply a belief condition.

In any case, even if these examples were successful, their suggested implication arguably would not apply to the notion of understanding involved in cases (1)–(9). For example, they would be like this:

- S understands that *Gulliver's Travels* was written as a satire rather than as a travel narrative, but S does not believe that *Gulliver's Travels* was written as a satire rather than as a travel narrative.
- S understands that the poem by Dickinson begins with an anaphora but without believing it does.

Intuitively, there is something odd about such construals. We may not be conscious of what we believe or of the fact that we believe something—our beliefs can be dormant, or dispositional—but the denial of belief seems, in these two examples, to contradict the claim of understanding.

So far, we have seen the failure of several arguments for the conclusion that textual understanding does not require a belief condition. In addition, a positive case can be made for the claim that understanding a text necessarily involves belief. There are cases in

which understanding ensues from less or more arduous processes of interpretation. These are cases in which belief is distinguishable from one or more phases of imagining certain candidate contents. Poetry is exemplary here. Suppose we read, for the first time, John Donne's "Holy Sonnet VII":

At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scatter'd bodies go;
All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you whose eyes
Shall behold God and never taste death's woe.
But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,
For if above all these my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace
When we are there; here on this lowly ground
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
As if thou' hadst seal'd my pardon with thy blood.

While reading this poem, we may have associations, be reminded of biblical passages, develop hypotheses about the possible meanings of words and phrases (such as "mourn a space"), make an effort to get the syntax right, see our initial ideas about the words' meanings confirmed (or not), and thus gradually develop our understanding of the poem.

Early on in the process, we imagine or hypothesize what possible illocutionary acts are performed in the text, perhaps accepting certain hypotheses or entertaining several options for the time being. This is the first phase, involving an attitude of imagination and provisional acceptance. Later on in the process, we perhaps believe (and/or are able to express our beliefs) that the syntax is like *x* (e.g., that line 5 has an elliptical construction), that the poem is about the Last Judgment and repentance, that *but* introduces a theme shift, and so forth.

Thus, even in the case of this relatively accessible poem, there could be a clear distinction between our prior and subsequent attitude toward the (candidate) content of our understanding: imagination, hypothesis, and provisional acceptance (the first attitude), on the one hand, and belief (the second attitude), on the other. The first attitude is not yet constitutive of understanding, it seems. At that early stage in the process, we are still trying to understand the text, and imagination, hypothesis, and acceptance may serve us in this search. But as long we have not settled on one of the interpretive options before us, we cannot—and probably will not—claim to understand the text. Understanding, or our sense of understanding the text, comes in only with the attitude of belief.

Apart from the fact that this intuitively appears to me to be correct, it also concurs with the phenomenology commonly ascribed to understanding. Often, our understanding of a text—especially one that is initially unclear to us—is accompanied by a sense of grasping its meaning, sometimes even a strong *Aha-Erlebnis*. This sense of grasping occurs in the second attitude in the interpretive process, which is a reason to think of the latter phase as the one in which we arrive at understanding.

3.3 – *Veridicality*

There are at least two truth issues connected to textual understanding. (1) Is it true that text T has property x? (2) Is that which text T says true? It is the difference between, for example, the truth of my interpretation of the argument in Descartes's third *Meditatio* and the truth of the premises and conclusions of Descartes's argument. This chapter is concerned with (1) the *intelligens*, not with (2) the *intelligendum*. We can, presumably, understand texts that state falsehoods as well as those that state truths. My question is whether, for S to understand T, it is necessary or sufficient that S's understanding of T is true. It is clear that factivity is not sufficient for understanding: a true statement as such is not yet understanding. Is factivity necessary for textual understanding?

Ordinary language suggests contradictory directions (see Franklin

1981, 199ff.; Kvanvig 2003, 190). On the one hand, it seems not uncommon to say: “Joseph understood his brother to say he would get back to him tomorrow, but that’s not what his brother said. Joseph was wrong.” This is an example of using *to understand* in a non-factive sense; although his understanding was false, we may still speak of Joseph’s *understanding*. On the other hand, *to understand* is often used as a success verb: we would not ascribe understanding to someone who gets a text totally wrong. Ordinary language has expressions that are applicable to such situations. We could say that Joseph *misunderstood* his brother, or that Joseph thought he understood his brother but in fact did *not understand* his brother. Perhaps intuitions differ on this, but it seems to me that a non-factive use of the word *understanding* is not as common as the factive use. Arguably, therefore, the term can be used in a factive or non-factive way. My question concerns its use in the context of textual understanding, illustrated by the above-mentioned nine cases of understanding. Which of the following options should we choose?

- (i) Truth is a necessary condition for understanding, and all cases that do not meet this condition are cases of misunderstanding.
- (ii) Truth is not a necessary condition for understanding.
- (iii) There is one notion of understanding that allows for both.

Throughout the history of what came to be called *hermeneutics* up to, say, the early twentieth century, (i) seems to have been the traditional view. Understanding used to be closely tied to knowledge, or at least it was assigned a very high status on the scale from ignorance to knowledge (cf. Apel 1955; Di Cesare 2016; Gjesdal 2016, 96, 100). A truth condition was, at least implicitly, included in the notion of textual understanding. One witness to this is the distinction between understanding and misunderstanding, which was important to such hermeneutical theories as Schleiermacher’s. He noted and propounded a “stricter praxis” in the art of hermeneutics, a praxis that “assumes that misunderstanding is a given and that un-

derstanding at every point needs to be willed and sought.”⁸ Misunderstanding, he thought, is a given—presumably, in the sense of very common, or hard to avoid—and understanding is the aim of hermeneutics. The necessity of a truth condition for understanding is also defended by a number of authors in the current debate on understanding—authors who mainly focus on understanding in a general sense or qualified as scientific understanding (e.g., Kvanvig 2003; Grimm 2006).

Heidegger and, in his wake, Gadamer broke away from this consensus. Their take on understanding was primarily ontological rather than epistemological. One author puts Heidegger’s view like this: “Understanding is the originary mode of Dasein’s actualization, it is that circular movement through which Dasein is there, that is, exists, simply because it understands, in that understanding makes it possible that each being, even Dasein’s own being, comes to be insofar as it is understood” (Di Cesare 2016, 231). This at least suggests that understanding is (primarily) a matter of being, not some epistemic state. Perhaps the following description of this same author is apt: “Understanding is not a grasping, dominating, or controlling, but is rather like breathing, in that one cannot decide to stop breathing” (ibid.). On this view—but not on Schleiermacher’s account—our default situation is one of (presumed) understanding. Rather than interpretation being required for solving the epistemological problem of absence of understanding, understanding is taken to be pre-given.⁹ The so-called ontological turn seems to imply epistemologically that an agent begins with an understanding of sorts and employs it to arrive at a new understanding that is

8. Schleiermacher (1838, “Einleitung,” § 16): “Die strengere Praxis geht davon aus daß sich das Mißverstehen von selbst ergibt und das Verstehen auf jedem Punkt muß gewollt und gesucht werden.”

9. Cf. Betti’s observation (1987, 247n4): “The process of interpretation answers to the epistemological problem of understanding.” He adds: “Martin Heidegger’s thesis, shared by Bultmann and Gadamer, of a preliminary understanding, as a presupposition of interpretive activity, reverses the order of logic.”

presumably better, or deeper, or more developed. For this pre-understanding, no truth—in a traditional sense—is being claimed as a necessary condition. This view of understanding is a dominant strand in what today is called hermeneutics, and it seems to advance a notion of understanding along the lines of (ii), although it should be noted that the truth condition is but one element that accounts for the difference between the traditional and the ontological notion of understanding.

For very different reasons, the idea that understanding is non-factive has its proponents also in the current debate on understanding in the context of science. The propounded arguments typically have the following structure:

- (1) It is possible for us to gain understanding from theories, models, exemplars, or the use of concepts that are, strictly speaking, false or inadequate.
- (2) Therefore, understanding is non-factive.

Typical examples are Newton's theory of gravity and the ideal gas law. Even though we know that they are, strictly speaking, false, they still have some utility.¹⁰

The conclusion does not follow from the premise, however. We may maintain that false or inadequate theories, models, exemplars, or concepts are useful or that they are means of gaining understanding. But this does not entail that understanding itself is not factive and that a description of understanding can or must do without a truth condition. Whether or not the description of understanding should include a truth condition does not depend on the truth or falsity of the means (theories, models, etc.) that we use in gaining understanding. The facticity of understanding is logically compatible with the idea that false theories, inadequate concepts, or ideal-

10. As argued by, e.g., De Regt and Gijsbers (2017), although one could argue that they make a case for the idea that false theories can be useful, rather than providing understanding. See also De Regt (2017, chapter 4); Elgin (2009).

ized models and exemplars may yield understanding of what these theories, models, and so on are about.

In addition to its logical compatibility, this idea arguably also holds in the actual world. A book containing falsehoods as well as truths may provide us with understanding. A cartoon or model may convey some true propositions or insights just by focussing the reader's attention on one particular fact. A theory may fail in some respects but still get something right in another respect. In all such cases, the truth-value of the proposition is not necessarily determined by the imperfection of the means by which understanding is gained. We may have questions about the (degree of) justification one has for beliefs based on theories, models, and so forth that are, strictly speaking, false. But the assumption that understanding or knowledge can be gained from theories, models, or concepts that get something right (though not everything) does not necessarily negatively or positively affect the issue of whether understanding has a truth condition.¹¹ Whatever the allure of the ontological turn in hermeneutics, if we are to adopt (ii), we should not do so for the reasons given by these philosophers of science.

One could also opt for (iii) and use an ambiguous notion of understanding in both a factive and a non-factive sense.¹² Given that

11. Note, by the way, that even if this type of argument (understanding can be acquired via non-factive means; hence, understanding is non-factive) is valid in the context of scientific understanding, it requires argumentation to apply it to cases of understanding texts. Perhaps we could think of situations in which we try to interpret a text in which many words are used in a new or uncommon way. We read the text, ascribing to these particular words the meaning that seems closest to their normal meaning. The result is an account of the text that is at many points mistaken but gives some idea as to its meaning. From such a case, the non-factivity of understanding does not follow either. Or we may read a fictional book about the history of a tribe or person x, all just dreamed up by the author, and it all turns out to accord with actual history: Did we gain understanding about x by reading the book? Again, our answer does not determine whether the analysis of understanding a text should include a truth condition.

both factive and non-factive uses of the term *understanding* occur and that whatever we decide here is unlikely to affect the ordinary uses of language, such double uses of the word will probably stay around. There is no need to adopt (iii), and it would even be unhelpful to do so. It is easy to disambiguate this apparently ambiguous term, and most uses seem unambiguously factive.

Of the two remaining options, we have good reason to think that the notion of understanding in cases (1)–(9) implies truth and, thus, to opt for (i). There is a difference between right and wrong, also in these cases, and the distinction between understanding and misunderstanding captures this difference adequately.

Now suppose we are mistaken in thinking that the cases listed above as such imply a factive notion of understanding, or that we are mistaken in believing them to be cases of textual understanding. Still, it would not follow that they involve a non-factive notion of understanding. It is not clear that they do. If the notion can be taken either way, this merely requires that we stipulate the use we have in mind. We could simply say: “Given that *understanding* is being used in both factive and non-factive ways, when I refer to understanding with respect to cases a, b, and c, I mean a factive notion of understanding.” We could also take the nine cases to involve a non-factive sense, but either way, we would just single out the cases we are interested in. In that case, we could, and here would, just stipulate that we are here concerned with the factive uses of *understanding*.

3.4 – *Justification*

The conditions listed so far are silent on the relevance of how a subject acquires understanding. This silence is warranted if there are cases in which understanding can be gained from (a) a lucky guess, (b) wrong information, (c) false premises, (d) wishful thinking, (e)

12. Hunter (1998, 568): “A better terminological choice would be to treat ‘understand’ in the way ‘belief’ and ‘perception’ and ‘memory’ are treated: as naming states of a certain kind some of which are true (veridical) and others of which are false (non-veridical).”

fallacious reasoning, and so on. If there are no such cases, a description of textual understanding needs a condition that excludes the possibility of understanding by luck. In analyses of knowledge, a justification condition of some sort or other seems necessary but insufficient. The famous Gettier cases, and the subsequent literature, are widely taken to have shown the possibility of luckily justified true beliefs. Not all sorts of luck involved in doxastic processes prevent knowledge. For example, a man overhearing his employer say that he will be fired acquires knowledge, even though it is a matter of luck that the man had access to evidence supporting that belief.¹³ But if it is a matter of luck that someone's belief is true, then that belief does not amount to knowledge. Similarly, if, *for all the agent knows*, it is a matter of luck that a belief is true, the belief seems not amount to knowledge.¹⁴ The correct and full analysis of knowledge is not yet clear, but most epistemologists agree it should include an anti-luck condition, preventing such cases as (a)–(e) from being cases of knowledge. Let us call that condition the *justification+ condition*. Among the desiderata for the definition of justification+ is that it excludes cases of true beliefs gained in ways (a)–(e) from counting as knowledge. Does our analysis of understanding texts require such a condition as well?

Authors who think of understanding as a species of knowledge and of knowledge as involving a justification condition need to maintain that understanding involves a justification condition as well. Moreover, even if one does not believe that understanding is a species of knowledge, it is fairly common to ascribe to the concept of understanding features that resemble a coherentist structure

13. Pritchard (2005, chapter 5) identifies four sorts of luck compatible with knowledge, and the example given here he calls *evidential epistemic luck*. The others are *content epistemic luck* (it is lucky that the proposition is true), *capacity epistemic luck* (it is lucky that the agent is capable of knowledge), and *doxastic epistemic luck* (it is lucky that the agent believes the proposition).

14. Both cases of luck are discussed by Pritchard (2005, chapter 6), who calls them *veritic epistemic luck* and *reflective epistemic luck*, respectively.

(Kvanvig 2003; Riggs 2003) and an epistemically internalist notion of justification (Kvanvig 2003; Zagzebski 2001, 246–247).¹⁵

Most authors in the literature on understanding take justification to be a necessary condition for understanding. Here are some random examples. (i) Understanding something involves understanding how it “fits into and is justified by reference to a more comprehensive understanding that embeds it” (Elgin 2009, 323). (ii) “It is hard to make sense of how an agent could possess understanding and yet lack good reflectively accessible grounds in support of that understanding” (Pritchard 2009, 33). (iii) A “crucial difference between knowledge and understanding” is that “understanding requires, and knowledge does not, an internal understanding or appreciation of how the various elements in a body of information are related to each other in terms of explanatory, logical, probabilistic, and other kinds of relations that coherentists have thought constitutive of justification” (Kvanvig 2003, 192–193). Zagzebski argues that understanding involves properties traditionally ascribed to knowledge and formulates strong requirements: (iv) “Understanding has internalist conditions for success, whereas knowledge does not,” and “it is impossible to understand without understanding that one understands” (Zagzebski 2001, 246).

15. Pettit (2002) claims that justification is unnecessary for acquiring linguistic understanding, and he provides a Gettier case purported to show that, whereas the Gettierization prevents someone from acquiring linguistic knowledge, it does not prevent them from gaining linguistic understanding. His argument depends heavily on the controversial assumption that whether or not one acquires testimonial knowledge depends on the reliability of the testifier. This assumption is questionable on all non-reductive accounts of testimonial knowledge, according to which one can acquire justified testimonial beliefs as long as there are no undefeated defeaters. Even on reductionism, it is unclear that Pettit’s case really prevents the agent from acquiring justified testimonial beliefs, depending on what it takes to have positive reasons for considering the relevant piece of testimony reliable. See, e.g., Lackey (2006) for an entry into this debate on testimony and reductionism. Other claims that understanding cannot be Gettierized, such as Kvanvig’s claim (2003, 2009), depend on intuitions I do not share.

It seems indeed plausible that understanding, including textual understanding, requires a justification+ condition. Suppose two friends, Joseph and Victor, have dinner in a very noisy restaurant. Joseph tells Victor, in a very agitated way, a story about something that has happened to him of late. Victor has bad eyesight (which prevents him from lip-reading) and suffers from hearing impairment. The only thing he gets is that Joseph is gesturing in a very agitated way. They have not met recently, and Victor has no reason to think Joseph is talking about one particular topic rather than another. Is he telling Victor about his recent fishing experiences? Is something going on in his family? Is he about to get fired? Has he recently turned into an avid chess-player, and is he talking about some exciting game? Victor has no clue; he merely guesses that Joseph is talking about some fishing event, and he responds accordingly. Victor happens to have guessed correctly and confidently (i.e., he believes his guess to be correct). Did he understand Joseph? Clearly not, even though his guess was correct and he believed it to be so. He lacks a proper ground for his beliefs. The analysis of understanding is incomplete without a condition excluding lucky true beliefs—i.e., a justification+ condition.

So far, I have only negatively formulated the function of the justification condition: it should prevent cases involving (a)–(e) from counting as cases of understanding. Perhaps this suffices for my purposes here. What exactly this justification condition should consist of is a matter of dispute. For my purpose of analysing the relevant cases of textual understanding, it suffices if there is a notion of justification+ that meets our desideratum of preventing cases involving (a)–(e) from counting as understanding.

3.5 – *Ability*

Would we ascribe understanding to someone who, through testimony, acquires knowledge about relations between linguistic properties but who is unable, in some sense, to construct these relations himself? Some suggest that this marks a distinction between knowledge and understanding.¹⁶ To give a short example, suppose we do

not understand Dutch and hear someone say, “Het komt goed.” A reliable translator tells us that it means, in this context, “It will be all right.” Have we understood the Dutch utterance? We did not understand the relation between the Dutch words and their meaning; we only understand the relation between the English words of the reliable translator and their meaning—and we know, or at least assume, that there is a relation between the Dutch sentence and the English sentence offered as a translation. In that sense, then, we did not understand the Dutch speaker’s words, but we do come to understand that he said, “It will be all right.” Understanding a translation does not make us understand the original text, although it does enable us to understand (some of) the properties of the original text. Whether we seek to understand words in a foreign language, or a poem, or a law text, or any other text T, if we cannot correctly construct the relations between the relevant textual properties of T ourselves, we do not understand T, even though we may understand a particular testimony about T.

This suggests something about the nature of understanding. We may wonder whether understanding, in addition to being a propositional attitude, can also be thought of as a *mental state*, a *disposition*, an *act*, or, perhaps, an *ability*. From what we have seen, understanding seems to be something in the mind of a subject and, in that sense, a mental state. This would, in principle, be compatible with understanding involving a disposition, activity, or ability. It seems plausible that for someone to gain understanding, something like a disposition, activity, or ability is required. Now, this disposition, activity, or ability could function as merely a heuristic tool, one of the practical elements required for arriving at understanding. How we arrive at something does not necessarily tell us much about its nature. To understand a text, one must not only know propositions about relations between textual properties but also be able to construct such a relation oneself.

16. For this view in the context of linguistic understanding, see, e.g., Fricker (2003); in the context of non-linguistic understanding, see, e.g., Baumberger (2014, 72).

3.6 – *Degrees*

It is widely held that understanding comes in degrees: one can understand something x less or more, superficially or deep. One important way to describe this is the following: the more properties and relations (see the above list of nine examples) of a text one understands, the better one understands a text. That seems a natural way to think of degrees of understanding. For instance, if you understand not only the illocutionary action performed by the text but also its pragmatic implications, your understanding is deeper than the understanding of someone who only understands the text's illocutionary action.

This sense of degrees of understanding opens up the possibility that an interpreter may understand an author better than the author understood himself. Readers may understand aspects of a text of which its author was unaware or less aware than his readers, such as the text's structure and various narrative properties.

3.7 – *Necessity and Sufficiency*

The analysis defended so far seems to successfully capture the nine cases listed in section 2. The conditions it states are both sufficient and necessary for them. There could, in principle, be cases of textual understanding that I left unnoticed and that do not meet all the formulated conditions. If such cases are cases of textual understanding, they involve a different notion of understanding than the one considered here. On the other hand, *understanding* is a term we use very often and, arguably, in rather loose ways. We may not expect there to be an "essential" notion of understanding. For that reason, it seems apt to presume that any notion and any analysis will be, to some extent, stipulative. If successful, the discussion in this chapter showed that the above conditions cover central uses of the term, and positioned us to determine sufficient and necessary conditions that must be met if this use of (*textual*) *understanding* is to apply to a particular case. Hence, my analysis involves not just an *if* (sufficient condition) but a biconditional *iff*. In short,

A subject S understands a proposition (or set of propositions) p about a text T to a degree D iff

- (i) S knows p, with p being about linguistic properties of T and their relations; and
- (ii) S correctly constructed the relations between the linguistic properties of T; and
- (iii) D increases with the number of textual properties that are being correctly taken into account and relations that have adequately been constructed between the linguistic properties of T.

4 – Knowledge and Understanding

The proposed account of textual understanding can explain part of the debate on the relation between understanding and knowledge. To some contributors to the literature, understanding and knowledge are two roads heading in the same direction. Understanding may have its specificities, but in the end, it is a species of knowledge (e.g., Føllesdal 1981; Grimm 2006). Especially many philosophers of science endorse this view. According to many epistemologists, however, the two routes have different destinations.¹⁷ Zagzebski argues, for instance (2001, 244): “We can have both understanding and knowledge about the same part of reality. Understanding deepens our cognitive grasp of that which is already known. So a person can know the individual propositions that make up some body of knowledge without understanding them. Understanding involves seeing how the parts of that body of knowledge fit together, where the fitting together is not itself propositional in form.”

Although many authors in the field of hermeneutics also deny

17. For this observation, see Grimm (2006, 515–516) and Baumberger (2014, 68). Defendants of the claim that understanding is not a species of knowledge are, e.g., Elgin (2009); Zagzebski (2001); Kvanvig (2003). With respect to linguistic understanding, Pettit (2002) and Longworth (2008) argue that it differs from knowledge of meaning.

that understanding is a kind of knowledge, they typically do so for other reasons: “The largest aim of hermeneutic theory is ‘understanding.’ That aim is something different than ‘knowing.’ In knowing there is a strong grip on what is known, it is an effort to lay claim to a sense of truth as something stable and secure. Understanding, on the other hand, is a fundamental mode of our being in the world” (Schmidt 2015, 352). In its rejection of the truth condition for understanding, the latter view is rather different from the view developed in this chapter. Moreover, my analysis of understanding does not come close to the conclusion that understanding is a mode of being in the world.

In any case, the concept of understanding described in this chapter involves knowledge, assuming the standard conditions of knowledge are correct. But understanding is not identical to knowledge, for it has an important extra condition, viz., the condition that S correctly constructed the relations between the linguistic properties of T. Not only must one have knowledge of these relations, but one must also identify them in the encounter with a text. Either this extra condition could be thought of as a difference-making property that accounts for why understanding is a species of the genus *knowledge*, or it could be a reason to consider understanding and knowledge to be related otherwise. For now, it is sufficient to note that understanding involves knowledge but is not reducible to it.

5 – Comparison with Some Alternative Accounts of Understanding

One of the reasons for my enquiry into the nature of textual understanding is that, in the current debate, this type of understanding is often distinguished from other types of understanding. Indeed, it is possible for the nature of understanding to depend on its object—in our case, texts. If we wanted to decide whether the nature of understanding depends on its object, we would need to compare definitions or analyses of the understanding of various objects. Though detailed comparisons do not suit the purpose of this chapter, the

above discussion of the nature of textual understanding enables a quick sketch, suggesting that the prospects of such a project are promising.

Pertinent to an adequate comparison of answers to the question as to what understanding amounts to—call it the *nature question*—is this question's distinction from two other types of questions. First, the nature question should be distinguished from the question of how we acquire understanding (the *causation question*, if you like). Possible answers to the causation question are, for example, by uncovering how the various elements depend upon or relate to one another; by information about causal relationships; through explanation; through empathy. These answers do not list conditions for understanding unless one thinks that satisfying such a methodological prescription is constitutive of the nature of understanding. Second, the nature question should also be distinguished from the question of what the effects of understanding are (the *effect question*). Common answers are, for example, the ability to answer why-questions; the ability to draw conclusions about hypothetical changes in the explanatory model without making exact calculations (cf. De Regt 2017, chapter 4); and perhaps, for textual understanding, the ability to summarize the text. Although these might be effects of understanding, they are not themselves constitutive of the nature of understanding. In seeking to compare my account of understanding to other accounts, we need something different than answers to the causation and effect questions.

This significantly narrows the class of potentially interesting comparisons for my account, but at least two notions of understanding worth considering are left. The first type was developed (mainly) in the context of reflection on the nature of explanation, and it is quite unlike my account. According to it, understanding is knowledge of causes.¹⁸ To understand why *x* is the case is to know

18. See, e.g., Salmon's (1998, 87–88) notion of causal-mechanical understanding, which Salmon distinguishes from what he calls cosmological understanding, that is, understanding our place in the world and knowing what kind of world it is (e.g., *ibid.*, 81). Pritchard (2014, 315) calls this the knowledge account of understanding.

the cause(s) of *x*. Although my account implies knowledge conditions as well, the reference to cause(s) is rather different from my concern with textual properties. Perhaps the two notions can be made compatible if we think of causes as relations (of some sort) between properties. But showing the acceptability of this option requires more work.

A second type of notion of understanding—and one that is more obviously congenial with mine—is the idea that understanding consists of “the appreciation or grasp of order, pattern, and how things ‘hang together’” (Riggs 2003, 217; cf. 218) or the grasp of internal, structural relationships between pieces of information (Kvanvig 2009, 100). Naturally, the above account of *textual* understanding makes reference to *textual* properties, but the idea that understanding involves some sort of acquaintance with relations between different pieces of information is importantly similar to the account developed in this chapter. The quoted authors usually have less to say about the nature of the grasp, whereas my proposal relates this grasp to the ability to correctly construct particular relations, in combination with justified+ true beliefs.

In sum, this brief exploration of the relation between the notion of textual understanding developed here and other notions of understanding suggests that my account of textual understanding is in line with at least some significant accounts of (scientific) understanding. This suggests that there is perhaps a way to develop a notion of understanding that is not strongly dependent on particular objects of understanding.

6 – Conclusion

Successful textual interpretation reaches its epistemic aims of knowledge and understanding. Knowledge has been extensively discussed in analytic epistemology, and this chapter does not seek to contribute anything specific to the examination of that epistemic aim. By contrast, textual understanding has received hardly any attention so far. This chapter argued that the nature of the degree of

S's understanding involved in the understanding of texts consists of a combination of (1) S's having knowledge of the proposition (or set of propositions) p about T's linguistic properties and their relations and (2) S's having correctly constructed the relations between these properties. The degree D increases with the number of textual properties that are being correctly taken into account and relations that have adequately been constructed between the linguistic properties of T. Thus, this account of understanding involves knowledge, but it is not reducible to it. Moreover, it differs from causal notions of understanding but is close to more general theories of understanding that emphasize the ability to see relations between relevant properties.

3 – Textual Interpretation and Truth

1 – Introduction

The epistemic aims of knowledge and understanding are essential to the definition of textual interpretation, or so I proposed in the first chapter. Truth is a necessary condition in the analyses of both epistemic aims, as argued in chapter 2. But truth is a controversial topic in the literature on the theory of interpretation.¹ This chapter aims to answer two questions. First, what are we actually saying when we say that interpretive statements are true (or false)? And, second, do interpretive statements have truth-value—that is, can they be true or false?

These questions are important to debates about truth in relation to textual interpretation.² In this project, they are also essential to our understanding of the nature of textual interpretation and its epistemic aims. Moreover, they are fundamental to epistemological concerns about the interpretation of texts, and they touch, for example, on debates about the objectivity of interpretations,³ about whether for each text there is a single right interpretation,⁴ and about whether the meaning of a text depends on its readers.⁵

1. According to some, truth is even among the most controversial or central topics in the theory of interpretation: Descher et al. (2015, 38); Gjesdal (2016, 96).

2. In addition to some authors who assume the idea, a number of authors explicitly defend the idea that interpretive statements have truth-value—e.g., Hirsch (1967); Beardsley (1970, 41); Bühler (1999); Carroll (2009, chapter 3); Dworkin (2011, chapter 7). In literary theory, *interpretation* is sometimes distinguished from *description* (e.g., Reichert 1969; Matthews 1977). Descriptions are considered to be factual and hence to have truth-value. Interpretations are considered to (typically) lack truth-value and to

The next section explains the exact foci of my two questions in greater detail. A number of preliminary objections against and suspicions about the idea that interpretive statements can be true or false are discussed in section 3. In answering the two questions, section 4 develops an account of a realist correspondence theory of truth as the best or most valuable truth theory for textual interpretation, and considers some objections to it.

2 – Truth-Value and Aspects of Interpretive Practices

Something has truth-value if it can be true or false. So the question whether interpretive statements have truth-value is the question whether they can be true or false. It is quite common to think that there is only one kind of thing that has truth-value, namely, propositions. Propositions—which are non-linguistic entities—can be expressed by sentences. Not all sentences express propositions. Interrogatives (“Does Willibrord own a bike?”) and imperatives (“Take Willibrord’s bike!”) are sentences, but they are neither true nor false. The only sentences with truth-value, therefore, are declara-

be only more or less plausible or valid (so also Dutton 1977). See Kindt and Müller (2003, 2015), for an alternative way to distinguish interpretation from description. Shusterman (1978) argues that interpretive statements exhibit a plurality of logical statuses, some having truth-value, others lacking it.

3. Proponents of the idea that objective interpretation, in some sense, is possible are, for example, Hirsch (1960, 1967); McCullagh (1991); Carroll (2009) (for artworks in general). The idea is rejected by, e.g., Gadamer (1975); cf. Wachterhauser (1986, 2002); Fish (1980); Freundlieb (1991); Currie (1993).

4. See, for example, the essays in Krausz (2002).

5. E.g., various reader-response theories, such as Iser (1976); Jauss (1982); Fish (1980). The idea is ascribed to post-structuralists, such as Derrida (1967, 1988) and Barthes (1967). It is also a prominent theme in Gadamer (1975), with his notions of hermeneutical circularity and prejudices in interpretive practices.

tives—whether or not Willibrord owns a bike, the proposition expressed by “Willibrord owns a bike” has truth-value.⁶

For current purposes, it is useful to distinguish the truth-value of the *interpretans* from that of the *interpretandum*. The term *interpretandum* refers to the object of interpretation, that which is interpreted. The term *interpretans* refers to the interpretive statement about the object of interpretation; it is the statement that does the interpreting. The focus of my questions concerns the truth-value of the interpretive statement, so, of the *interpretans*. My question is this: Does the *interpretans* have truth-value in the sense that it states a true or false interpretation of the object of interpretation,

6. Or has it? Not all declarative sentences, it has been argued, have truth-value. Here are four cases of declarative sentences that plausibly lack truth-value.

(1) Suppose the referent of Willibrord does not exist. Is the indicative sentence “Willibrord owns a bike” in that case true, or false, or does it simply lack truth-value? Bertrand Russell considered sentences containing non-referring expressions, such as “The present king of France is bald,” to be false. Peter Strawson argued they lack truth-value (but cf. Swinburne 2007, chapter 2).

(2) Suppose, however, that *Willibrord* does refer to a particular person. Does the sentence “Willibrord will own a bike in ten years” have truth-value? It seems that predictions of future events, such as this one, can also rightly be said to lack truth-value.

(3) Moreover, what about the following sentence: “I never speak the truth”? If the sentence is true, then it is false, and vice versa. Such paradoxes are often thought to lack truth-value altogether.

(4) Finally, some people—such as non-cognitivists in ethics—distinguish between judgments of fact and judgments of value. The former have truth-value, the latter do not. Value judgments are, for instance, ethical or moral judgments (“It’s wrong for Willibrord to steal a bike”) or aesthetic judgments (“That statue is beautiful”). Proponents of this distinction deny that there are moral facts or aesthetic facts; such judgments and statements with truth-value therefore belong to different categories. Now, if someone argues that these declarative sentences lack truth-value, we may still hold that a part of the set—but not the whole set—of declarative sentences consists of sentences with truth-value.

that is, of the interpretandum? Suppose a particular interpretive statement claims that text T means p. The truth-value of the interpretans, then, is given by answering the following question: Is it true that text T means p? For example: Is it true that “The door is open,” said by Jennifer in context C, means “Close the door!”?

Our concern in this chapter is with the truth-value of only one aspect of interpretations, namely, the truth (or falsity) of interpretive statements as interpretations of the interpretandum. It is perhaps helpful to distinguish it explicitly from two other aspects of interpretive practices that are also potentially susceptible to being assigned truth-value.

One such aspect is the interpretandum. Suppose “T means p.” The truth-value of the interpretandum is given by correctly answering the question as to whether p is true. The relevant question here is not whether it is true that T means p. Obviously, the truth-values of interpretive statements and objects of interpretations (texts, in our case) can be unrelated. One might argue that, unlike astronomers, geometricians, and physicians, the poet “nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth,” as Philip Sidney in his *Defense of Poetry* ([1595] 1890) put it. In that case, the interpretans about a poem can have truth-value, even if the interpretandum lacks it. Moreover, one could formulate a true interpretive statement (interpretans) about a lie—that is, about a falsehood (interpretandum)—or a false interpretans about a true interpretandum.

Another aspect of interpretive practices that potentially involves truth-value is the interpretans as such, irrespective of its relation to the interpretandum. For example, the medieval scholar, studying a varied corpus inherited from the ancients, “hardly ever decided that one of the authorities was simply right and the others wrong; never that all were wrong,” says C. S. Lewis (1966, 45).

It was apparently difficult to believe that anything in the books—so costly, fetched from so far, so old, often so lovely to the eye and hand, was just plumb wrong. No; if Seneca and St Paul disagreed with one another, and both with Cicero, and all these with Boethius, there must be some explanation which would harmo-

nize them. What was not true literally might be true in some other sense; what was false *simpliciter* might be true *secundum quid*. And so on, through every possible subtlety and ramification.

This easily leads to a situation in which the interpretans seems only arbitrarily related to the interpretandum (and for that reason fails to be a true interpretans) but may still, in and of itself, state a true proposition.

3 – Suspicions and Objections

Before setting out to address my two questions, we may begin with four types of suspicions about and objections against the idea that interpretive statements have truth-value. One is inspired by the colloquial opposition of interpretations and facts; the second, by a truism that seems to render distinctions between true and false interpretive statements trivial. A third category consists of worries about the indeterminacy of meaning due to the instability of the relation between sign and signifier, and its consequences for the relation between an interpretive statement and its truthmaker. A fourth and related worry is that our interpretive statements are always underdetermined by the evidence. This section addresses these four preliminary issues.

First, then, the suspicion due to the suggestive force of language use. To say of something that it is “a matter of interpretation” often suggests a contrast much akin to Friedrich Nietzsche’s claim that “there are no facts, only interpretations.”⁷ Here, facts are contrast-

7. Translated from Nietzsche (1967–77, 315): “Gegen den Positivismus, welcher bei dem Phänomen stehen bleibt ‘es giebt nur Thatsachen’, würde ich sagen: nein, gerade Thatsachen giebt es nicht, nur Interpretationen. Wir können kein Factum ‘an sich’ feststellen: vielleicht ist es ein Unsinn, so etwas zu wollen. ‘Es ist alles subjektiv’ sagt ihr: aber schon das ist Auslegung, das ‘Subjekt’ ist nichts Gegebenes, sondern etwas Hinzu-Erdichtetes, Dahinter-Gestecktes.—Ist es zuletzt nöthig, den Interpreten noch hinter die

ed with interpretative statements; truth and falsehood are contrasted with ways of looking at, or perspectives on, the world. In common parlance, room for interpretation is due to the absence of known facts, and matters of interpretation are such partly because they are not matters of fact. Someone sympathetic to this distinction may consider the answer to the question of whether interpretive statements have truth-value to be trivially negative. Yet even though this observation about language use is correct, it does not imply that all cases to which the term *interpretation* is applicable are of this kind. In some cases, interpreters perhaps do aim for truth with the interpretive statements they formulate. From this colloquial use of *interpretation*, therefore, it does not follow that interpretive statements lack truth-value.

Second, a *truism with epistemological import* could be suspected to render distinctions between true and false interpretive statements trivial. It tells us that when we read, we perceive the text through glasses, in a way that is coloured by our individual experiences, our world view, our prejudices, our wishes, and so forth. Everything we hold to be true of our object of interpretation is really only true *for us*. This would imply that everything can be interpreted in many different but equally good ways. Such subjectivity and pluralism render the question of truth-value trivial, if only because what is considered true or false may differ among individuals.

In response to this suspicion, we should, first, observe that the epistemic implications of the truism that our interpretation is coloured by our individual circumstances need further exploration. We need to determine whether it is, indeed, true and whether it really implies that everything can be interpreted in different but equally good ways. We will come back to two ways to argue for such a claim: the fourth objection in this section considers an argument from underdetermination, and chapter 6 considers more closely the epis-

Interpretation zu setzen? Schon das ist Dichtung, Hypothese. Soweit überhaupt das Wort 'Erkenntniß' Sinn hat, ist die Welt erkennbar: aber sie ist anders deutbar, sie hat keinen Sinn hinter sich, sondern unzählige Sinne. 'Perspektivismus.'"

temic implications of the view that our cognitive outlook is coloured by personal perspective. But even if the truism holds as it stands, there is little reason to suppose that this affects the answer to the question of whether interpretive statements have truth-value. My question does not concern the epistemic issue of how and why we can or cannot acquire knowledge of a subject-independent truth about interpretive statements. Rather, the question is whether interpretive statements can be true or false to begin with. From the above-mentioned truism, therefore, we cannot simply conclude that interpretive statements lack truth-value.

A third type of suspicion (or objection) concerns the nature of the truthmaker. A truthmaker is that in virtue of which a true statement is true. To give a simple example, “James owns a beehive” is true in virtue of the fact that James owns a beehive. The truthmakers can be states of affairs, events, things, properties, or facts.⁸ What is the truthmaker in textual interpretation? In chapter 1, we discussed the nature of texts. A text is an ordered set of signs with a linguistic function in a particular language L. If there is such a thing as a truthmaker for true interpretive statements, we may think of such truthmakers as facts about the properties of a text. This includes all the 22 aspects listed in chapter 1.

Now, some would claim that meanings (of texts) are indeterminate; that is, they are not fixed and, hence, do not provide interpretive statements with facts to refer to.⁹ Here is one take on this idea. The interpretation of texts often—or even always—involves the interpretation of something x as y: signs are interpreted *as* a particular locution, words *as* having a particular sense, referent, and grammat-

8. Note that a state of affairs is not necessarily a fact. Kirkham (1992, 73): “‘State of affairs’ is not a synonym for ‘fact’ or ‘situation’, because *potential* but nonactual facts are states of affairs as well. ... A *fact*, then, is a state of affairs that obtains in the *actual* world.”

9. This idea is associated with post-structuralism and deconstruction, under reference to authors like Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, and the Yale scholars J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartmann, and Paul de Man.

ical form, longer bits of text *as* having a particular structure, a text *as* having a particular message, and so forth. The problem raised by the idea that meaning is instable is that these *as*-relations are not matters of fact or states of affairs. There is no stable relation between *x* and *y*, so to speak. There is no fact of the matter about how the perceptible properties of a text *T* are to be taken *as* representing other textual properties. It is not, on this view, as if a piece of text *has* a particular meaning. A text only is a set of signs. We could take these signs to mean something, but such a meaning would depend in an arbitrary way on things outside of the text: on the reader, for example, or on the author, or on a history of interpretations. In any case, this relation would be unstable, in one way or another. I will here consider three such ways.

One way could be (1) that linguistic meanings change. The idea would be that a text *T* at time t_1 means M_1 and *T* at t_2 means M_2 . Even if we think this could make sense, there is no reason to think it cannot be captured by a true statement. It would be true to say that *T* means M_1 at t_1 , and M_2 at t_2 . Option (1), then, is not an objection to the idea that interpretive statements can have truth-value.

A second way in which meaning could be instable is (2) that the relation between text *T* and meaning *M* is arbitrary in the sense that *T* could have any *M*; in other words, that there is no reason to think *T* must have M_1 and not M_2 . Some believe, for example, that the meaning or sense of a text is not given with the author's intention and the textual properties but that it is "constituted" in the act of reading.

On (2), if the idea is that there are only arbitrary relations possible between a text *T* and any meaning *M*, then either (a) the text does not provide the interpreter with an object of which the interpretative statement could be true or false, or (b) any interpretation of it is true. In the latter case, *truth* has become a rather useless term, but interpretive statements could still be correctly described as having truth-value. Should (a) be a reason for us to reject the idea that interpretive statements have truth-value?

It is worth noting that the view is rather extreme—and I am not sure anyone is prepared to defend it. If we believed the relation be-

tween a text T and any meaning M to be arbitrary, it would be difficult for us to support our case with evidence: we would have to produce a text without a determined meaning. It seems simply mistaken to deny that words and sentences have a determined meaning, in a particular context. The relations between a text and its meaning are not entirely arbitrary. They are part of a structure that is, via conventions of uses, to a significant degree shared or shareable among language users. For when we speak or write, we use particular words, and not others, and we are extra stimulated to do so because we have experienced an interesting level of success in communication. This success in communication could not be expected if (2) were true.

Maybe (2) is too extreme a position. A weaker claim would be that the relation between T and M is not entirely arbitrary but allows for multiple candidates that are equally acceptable. This third option amounts to (3) a case of underdetermination, which is also the fourth objection to the idea that interpretive statements have truth-value.

The rest of this section addresses this fourth objection, which consists of an argument to the effect that interpretive statements are always underdetermined by the evidence.¹⁰ That is to say, there can be multiple but logically incompatible interpretations that relate equally well to the same text. This is especially so because interpretation is called for when we face difficulties in understanding a text (see chapter 1). So how could only one such interpretation be “true,” and those incompatible with it, “false”? This point has been developed in the context of *radical translation*, a view developed by Willard Van Orman Quine (especially, Quine [1960] 2013), and it is sometimes cast as an argument for *meaning scepticism*.¹¹ Meaning

10. See for underdetermination in science, e.g., Duhem (1906, 1954); Quine (1961, 1975); Laudan (1990). For proponents of the view that literary texts are (often) underdetermined, see, e.g., Matthews (1977); Booth (1981).

11. Donald Davidson’s radical interpretation (Davidson 1984, 125–139) is in relevant respects similar to the point discussed here. Whereas Quine was concerned with the extent to which empirical data determine the meanings

scepticism does not just deny that we are or can be epistemically entitled to knowledge claims about meanings—it claims that there are no facts about meanings (Miller 2006, 91–92).

Quine invites us to imagine a linguist who researches a language entirely unfamiliar to him and who only perceives the bodily behaviour of the speakers and the objects in the local environment. The linguist first tries to come to know their expressions of assent and dissent. Then, upon pointing at a rabbit, the respondent says, “Yo gavagai.” The linguist assumes that the speaker speaks truthfully and rationally—an assumption that has become known as the principle of charity (Quine [1960] 2013, 57–67; Davidson 1984, xvii, 27, 137). He pairs the speaker’s expression with “There is a rabbit,” and the parsing of his utterances provides the linguist with the hypothesis that *gavagai* in that language means “rabbit.”

But here is the problem: “Yo gavagai” has more than one possible meaning. In addition to “There is a rabbit,” it could also mean “There is an undetached rabbit part.” So, what is the linguist supposed to believe? The two are equally adequate as far as facts about stimulus meaning are concerned—and to these two we can add numerous other alternative hypotheses. There are always rival systems of hypotheses, any of which will be as pragmatically successful as the other for the purpose of compiling a workable translation, so Quine. The meaning of the utterance is therefore underdetermined by the data. “Manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another” (Quine [1960] 2013, 27). The two hypothetical translations have different

of sentences of a natural language, Davidson is concerned with a different question. One could know how to translate a phrase without knowing what it means; that is, one could know the synonym for a particular word (Quine’s project of radical translation) without knowing the truth conditions of the sentences of the foreign language (which is what Davidson is after in his project of radical interpretation). The scope of radical interpretation, then, is broader than that of radical translation. When it comes to meaning scepticism, the point can be well made by focussing on Quine’s project.

meanings, but there are, apparently, no facts about the stimuli that can distinguish between them. Therefore, one may argue, there are no facts about meanings; if there were, such facts would discriminate between the meanings (see, e.g., Miller 2006, 95).

If we should conclude from Quine's thought experiment that there are no facts about meaning for interpreters to determine, then the idea that our interpretive beliefs can be true is hopeless: there are no facts of the matter to have true beliefs about. Does the thought experiment indeed warrant that conclusion? Arguably not.

First, to conclude from the thought experiment that there are no facts about meaning would be a non sequitur; it would be drawing ontological conclusions from epistemological problems, which is problematic, since our epistemic inability to decide between competing hypotheses simply does not imply that there is no fact of the matter about their truth or falsity. From the impossibility of coming to know the determinate meaning of words or phrases, it does not follow that these words and phrases have no determinate meaning. Granted, one reason for our epistemic struggle could be the absence of facts about meaning. But it could also be the poverty of our epistemic condition which prevents us from identifying the facts. This does not suffice to claim that meaning is indeterminate—I only make the point that Quine's thought example has not shown that it is indeterminate. In the next chapter, I will say more about deciding between competing hypotheses.

Second, we should note that this radical-translation case isn't an adequate description of real-life situations. Quine actually said as much by excluding everyday translation cases from the scope of his thought experiment. He did not have translations between Frisian and English or Hungarian and English in mind. "The task is one that is not in practice undertaken in its extreme form, since a chain of interpreters of a sort can be recruited of marginal persons across the darkest archipelago." Rather, Quine merely imagines "that all help of interpreters is excluded" (Quine [1960] 2013, 28). Some carry this further and argue that the problem of radical translation also applies to learning one's own language or conversing in it, for in neither case do we have any more evidence to go on than is available

to the field linguist—assuming that bodily behaviour is all we have as data (see, e.g., Davidson 1984, chapter 9, with respect to radical interpretation).

Indeed, Quine's case isn't so much one of interpretation, but one of language learning. That is not to say his thought experiment adequately captures the process of learning a language. In everyday communication, we depend on linguistic knowledge acquired while growing up. Our database is larger than just the stimuli and effects we observe. We have linguistic competence, even though we may not be able to explain how a child acquires it. We may raise doubts about our linguistic knowledge, but that does not mean we cannot have it.

Third, we do quite regularly detect different uses of a term and seem to be able to settle on a shared use. In fact, early on in the thought experiment, Quine makes his linguist determine the expressions of dissent and assent. How is he supposed to do that? He must guess from observation and then see how well his guesses work. He must echo the native speaker's own utterances and see what response he elicits. This generates a working hypothesis to be adjusted to the subsequent experiences. And so, "let us then suppose the linguist has settled on what to treat as native signs of assent and dissent" (Quine [1960] 2013, 30). This is not as radical as it could be, for Quine grants this essential bit of linguistic competence without much ado, even though figuring out the meaning of words was exactly what the linguist set out to do. Why would we presume it is easier to figure out the equivalents of "yes" and "no" than of "rabbit" and "undetached part of a rabbit"? Are these epistemic processes different in a principled, rather than a gradual, way?¹²

12. Quine's thought experiment could have been much more radical than it is, and any meaning scepticism dependent on it could be more radical as well. In addition to granting the ability to identify the expressions of assent and dissent, Quine heavily depends on the principle of charity, assuming that the respondent will speak truthfully and rationally. But what if the respondent applies a rule of etiquette that says one ought to answer foreigners according to what one assumes they would like to hear? Truthful and ra-

If we were to take the radical route a little further, we would face the utter inability even to formulate sensible hypotheses about the meaning of the other's words. Clearly, our actual experiences suggest that learning a (foreign) language is an actual possibility for many people. Are these experiences undermined, or even rebutted, by these theoretical concerns? Probably not. The "data" our life experiences provide show that the reconstruction of language learning in the thought experiment is inadequate. Note that this is not an argument from common sense; rather, my argument takes real-life experiences into account as data that are not defeated or undermined by the thought experiment of radical translation.

Radical conclusions from Quine's not-so-radical thought experiment seem inappropriate. Yet underdetermination of interpretive statements, cases in which the data allow for a plurality of determinate meanings, is a real phenomenon. According to one author, the situation of readers of a literary text is like that of stargazers who see different images in the same constellation: "Two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable" (Iser 1974, 282). Now, that seems too sceptical, even for literary texts: we usually would not agree with any arbitrary proposal about the meaning of a text. Yet texts can be ambiguous or leave too much open to allow for adequate interpretations.

tional communication can in concrete cultural contexts be more complex than can be formulated in a principle. Moreover, Quine seems to assume that the foreign language has one equivalent for our *yes* and one for our *no*. But what if it has 20 equivalents for each, all with slightly different application conditions? Or what if it has none, since the language just "works" in a radically different way? Finally, the thought experiment depends to a significant degree on a referential theory of meaning, according to which the words of a language can be referred to by pointing them out. This may work for *rabbit* and *red*, but what about words like *but*, *what*, *about*, *like*, *nevertheless*, *unpromising*, *constitutional state*, *neat*, *simply*, *magnificent*, and so on? This is just to point out that a real-life case of radical translation could be, at least in theory, much more complex.

Underdetermination of a theory by data is a common topic in the philosophy of science. Usually, it is not taken to lead to outright scepticism about science, even if it sometimes leads to lower the epistemic status of scientific theories to some extent. Nor is it considered to be a sufficient ground for denying that some beliefs can be more justified or plausible than others. Nor should it lead to the conclusion that underdetermined statements lack truth-value, for that simply does not follow. This idea of underdetermination is similar to that of the indeterminacy of translation found in discussions on radical translation and radical interpretation. Perhaps this is a reason to think that whatever consequence this may have for the position of an interpretive statement on the epistemic scale, it shares that position with scientific theories, other things being equal.

4 – A Case for a Realist Correspondence Theory of Interpretive Truth

As indicated, this chapter seeks to address two questions: What are we actually saying when we say that interpretive statements are true (or false), and do interpretive statements have truth-value—that is, can they be true or false? An answer to the first question is necessary in order to address the second. For suppose five different theories of truth could apply to interpretive statements. Saying that an interpretive statement has truth-value could, in that case, have five meanings. Only given a particular theory of truth could we try to determine whether all five meanings apply to interpretive statements, or only a few, or even none.

This section proceeds as follows. I first make a reasoned selection of truth theories in the literature that must be considered if we are to explore potential answers to the first question (§ 4.1). For the three types of truth theories worthy of consideration, we need a criterion to determine which one is right, or most apt, or most sensible, and so on. To this effect, I propose two such criteria (§ 4.2) and apply them to my selection of truth theories (§ 4.3). Not all truth theories are relevant to this project, and I briefly argue for the irrele-

vance, in this respect, of two truth theories often associated with interpretation and hermeneutics (§ 4.4).

The current section should not be thought of as evaluating the philosophical quality of the selected truth theories—that would be misunderstanding its purpose. My aim in section 4.3 is more modest, namely, to apply the two criteria formulated in section 4.2 to the three truth theories selected in section 4.1. All truth theories are disputed, and we will have to defer to the literature on these debates for questions about their viability as philosophical theories.

4.1 – *Selecting Potentially Relevant Truth Theories*

Saying of a statement that it is true can mean many things, since there are many theories of truth. My aim here is not, of course, to consider and evaluate all of them. To navigate our way through the literature on truth, we pay special attention to the questions that the various truth theories seek to answer. For different truth theories seek to answer significantly different questions, and not all of them are relevant to my purpose here. In fact, we may suspect that much of the confusion about truth in interpretation theories is due to a neglect of the different purposes of the various truth theories. Thus, we first need to select from the literature the truth theories that are relevant to my question.

Now, some may object to what this implies, namely, that the relevant truth theory is already developed in the literature (which means I don't have to invent it). Paying my respect to unimaginativeness, I indeed adopt this assumption here. But why bother about the literature, one might further object, if basically all the truth theories it describes are contested? A number of considerations are in place. First, being uncontested is not the most important value in philosophy; being true—whatever that means—could be more important, and it may come apart from being uncontested. In fact, being uncontested does not seem to be an important value at all, since most philosophical claims are contested but need not be without merit. Second, ideas need expression in order for them to be discussed, and an idea can be better than its current expression. Even great ideas may nevertheless be rejected if they are poorly expressed.

Third, imperfect ideas can still be on the right track, or be better than their alternatives. Fourth, it helps to have explicit notions of truth on the table, for they bring out interesting distinctions and ideas. And fifth, some truth theories, though disputed, are live options for many philosophers. The assumption here is that we can find one or more truth theories that are better than others and, perhaps, even fully adequate.

So, which truth theories are relevant to my question as to what it means to say that an interpretive statement is true (or false)? There are various types of truth projects. A helpful classification is offered by Richard L. Kirkham (1992, chapter 1),¹³ who distinguishes three main questions and projects:

- (1) *Metaphysical project*: What is it for a statement (belief, proposition, etc.) to be true?
- (2) *Justification project*: What are the characteristics, possessed by most true statements and not possessed by most false statements, by reference to which the probable truth or falsity of the statement can be judged?
- (3) *Speech act project*: What are the locutionary or illocutionary purposes served by utterances that by their surface grammar appear to ascribe the property of truth to some statement (belief, proposition, etc.)—for example, utterances like “Statement S is true”?

The first and the third of these questions Kirkham subdivides into further questions, and all the questions have received multiple answers in the literature.

Starting my selection here, I note that the aim of my project is not to describe the characteristics of (most) true statements by reference to which the (probable) truth or falsity of a statement can be judged. That would be an epistemic aim, concerning what constitutes knowledge of or justified beliefs about a statement. We are, therefore, not concerned with what Kirkham calls the justification

13. An alternative classification of truth theories can be found in Künne (2003, chapter 1).

project. Nor is it my aim to consider the speech act purposes of statements to which *is true* is ascribed—i.e., the speech act project. My question falls within the scope of the metaphysical project. Its question is this: What is it for a statement (belief, proposition, etc.) to be true? Put more specifically, what are we saying when we say that interpretive statements are true (or false)?

Within the metaphysical project, Kirkham identifies three further subprojects:

- (a) *Extensional project*: What is the extension of the predicate *true*? That is, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for a statement (belief, proposition, etc.) to be a member of the set of true statements? Kirkham's examples here are Tarski's and Kripke's semantic theories.
- (b) *Naturalist project*: What are the conditions that, in any naturally possible world, are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a statement to be true in that world? Kirkham leaves this category empty.
- (c) *Essence project*: What are the conditions that, in any logically possible world, are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a statement to be (at least contingently) true in that world? Kirkham classifies pragmatism, instrumentalism, correspondence theory, coherence theory, and minimal theory as essence projects.

In this chapter, we are interested in a general theory of truth, one that also informs us about the meaning of *true*, *truth*, and *is true*. The extensional projects Kirkham has in mind do not offer us that, and he leaves the category of naturalistic truth theories empty. Within this subdivision, then, we are concerned with the most general theory of truth—the essence project. Its question is this: What are the conditions that, in any logically possible world, are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a statement to be (at least contingently) true in that world?

Locating my question in this classification helps to determine the selection of truth theories that need (not) to be considered here. On

Kirkham's classification, three truth theories should be considered in my inquiry: pragmatist, coherence, and correspondence theories.¹⁴

Summing up, the two questions discussed in this chapter are whether interpretive statements have truth-value and what we are saying when we say that interpretive statements are true (or false). The second question must be answered before the first question can be addressed. My first step in answering these questions was to select the relevant truth theories from the various truth projects and to argue that there are three candidate theories to be considered here: pragmatist, coherence, and correspondence theories. This means that other truth theories do not provide answers to our question (and were not developed to do so).

4.2 – *Criteria for the Best Truth Theory*

The three theories—pragmatist, coherentist, and correspondence theories—still need proper introduction here, but before we turn to

14. As a matter of fact, Kirkham classifies two more (types of) truth theories as essence projects: James's instrumentalism and Horwich's "minimal theory." I will not consider them here, mainly for the following reasons. Kirkham describes instrumentalism as follows: "A belief *b* is true iff (*b* copies a part of reality or *b* is a useful belief to have)." Of this disjunction offered by Kirkham to capture James's notion of truth, the first disjunct (*b* copies a part of reality) turns out to be very similar to the correspondence theory of truth, and the second disjunct (*b* is a useful belief to have) is covered by our discussion of pragmatism. Both theories are discussed below, and little is gained from discussing instrumentalism separately. Note, by the way, that Kirkham classifies instrumentalism both as an essence project and as a justification project but maintains that James's remark offering partial justification for this attribution yields to alternative interpretations (Kirkham 1992, 356n19). As to Paul Horwich's minimal theory, it is not clear to me why this would be an essence project. The theory explicitly refrains from providing necessary and sufficient conditions for the applicability of the truth predicate (see, e.g., Horwich 1998, 36), whereas Kirkham describes the essence project as the project that asks what conditions, in any possible world, are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a statement being (at least contingently) true in that world.

that, we should pause to reflect on how we may decide which one or which ones are correct, or fit interpretive statements best, or should be adopted, or are, in fact, *true* with respect to interpretive statements. What criterion could be used for selecting the best truth theory?

One criterion could perhaps be derived from common sense. Even though *interpretation* is an ambiguous term and used in different ways, we ascribe to some interpretative statements very lofty qualifications, and even that of being *true*. We often have a strong sense of “getting it right” when providing an interpretation of a text. Also, we often have a strong sense of (others) “getting it wrong.” Interpreters providing interpretive statements are likely to denounce accusations of merely defending the cause of their power interests, and not even the most radical relativist regarding interpretations will believe he cannot be misinterpreted. So, the term *interpretation* seems to lack truth-value on some uses of the term, but clearly not on all.

We thus seem to have quite strong intuitions about what is true and what is false. Of course, common sense only gets us so far. But even though common sense can be mistaken, a theory that meets our common-sense intuitions is, perhaps, to be preferred over one that does not (other things being equal). In that sense, it is worth considering whether any or all of the candidate truth theories satisfy our common-sense intuitions about truth.

There may be another criterion for selecting a truth theory. A quest for truth is, at least in part, determined by something we consider worth aiming for, apart from whether we can, in practice, reach that aim. It is essentially a quest for something of value. It concerns what we care about. What do we require of a notion of truth in relation to interpretive statements? What should a truth theory be able to do for us? What makes us care about it?

Here is a proposal of what we may want a truth theory for interpretive statements to do or be able to explain for us. It seems valuable that our interpretive practices try to do justice to the author, the speaker, or the text (if we think the text has meaning independent of its author). Textual interpretation aims at hearing the voice

of the other—if I may use a metaphor—by letting other people or things (in the case of texts) speak for themselves. This is an encompassing notion that at least involves that our interpretation of what someone else says (or what a text conveys) should not be about what we would like to hear but about what he or she wants to say (or what the text says). That is, the interpretive statements about a text should be determined by the text (or its author), and our interpretive statements must do justice to it. The alternative would be a more creative engagement with a text, which is different from the interpretive practices I have in mind here. Even if we could not but let our interpretive statements be determined by our own beliefs, wishes, and desires, the standard for the truth of our statements would still be—or, perhaps, should still be—determined by what is said or written by the other. It is valuable to hear the other's voice; it may even be an ethical requirement that we make the understanding of others the aim of our interpretive practices. There are various ways to spell this out: along the lines of the Jewish and Christian love command, of Kant's categorical imperative, of virtue ethics, of Levinas's Other, and possibly along consequentialist lines as well.

If a truth theory is to be relevant for my purposes, it must be conducive to the aim—or, perhaps, to one possible, legitimate, and important aim—of interpretive practices, viz., to let the other speak for himself. The relation between this requirement and a truth theory could be formulated as follows: a proposed interpretans should not be called *true* if it does not do justice to the text or its author. This implies that, as far as this requirement goes, any truth theory meeting this condition will be of interest to my project. More specifically, if interpretive practices fail to do justice to the author of the text, this should not be warranted by my truth theory. This requirement as such does not constitute, or even contribute to, the definition of a concept of truth; it only states what a truth theory should be like—it should enable us to distinguish between interpretative statements that do and those that do not do justice to the author.

So here is what we need to do: we need to consider whether any of the selected truth theories meet the common-sense criterion and whether they meet the value requirement.

4.3 – *Evaluation of the Options*

This section considers pragmatist, coherentist, and correspondence theories of truth. According to pragmatic theories of truth, truth is a property of the epistemic practices that result in the ascription of truth to a particular proposition.¹⁵ The label *pragmatic* is applied to various theories of truth. Here are three of them.¹⁶

- (a) p is true iff p is not falsified by developed research.
- (b) p is true iff p is what everyone would believe after sufficient research.
- (c) p is true iff it is useful to believe p.

Suppose we take these theories to be theories of truth for interpretive statements. The notion of truth accompanying the first pragmatic theory would be this:

- (a*) An interpretative statement is true iff it is not falsified by developed research.

The idea is that a statement counts as true if it can stand the test of scientific scrutiny.

Perhaps the first thing to note is that this theory fits the natural sciences better than practices of textual interpretation. There usually is a stricter limit to the gathering of relevant evidence in the case of textual interpretation than in the contexts of most of the experimental sciences, since, in the former, one often cannot set up research projects to generate new data—one can only try to collect the existing data. Therefore, this notion of truth may be of limited use in the context of textual interpretation. Something similar holds for the notion accompanying the second pragmatic theory of truth:

15. There is an enormous literature describing and evaluating the three truth theories discussed here. Examples of overview works, other than Kirkham (1992), are Künne (2003) and Burgess and Burgess (2011).

16. In formulating the succinct descriptions of the various truth theories, I mainly depend on Kirkham (1992).

(b*) An interpretive statement is true iff it states what everyone would believe after sufficient research.

But apart from this practical observation, can (a*) and (b*) meet the common-sense criterion and the value requirement formulated above? As to common sense, we may ascribe some value to the fact that a particular interpretation is not falsified by developed research, or that it is what everyone would believe after sufficient research. But it would be more apt to call such an interpretation (to some extent) justified, or well established, or probable, rather than true. The proponent of (a*) and (b*), however, may see this merely as a linguistic dispute and remain unconvinced by this objection.

What about the value requirement? On these pragmatic accounts, one may be able to hear the voice of the other. Yet we might as well, on these theories, count as true something that in fact fails to do justice to the voice of the other. Neither (a*) nor (b*), therefore, state a sufficient condition for a statement being (at least contingently) true. Nor do they state a necessary condition. The results of sufficient research may convince everyone of some interpretive claim, and yet, new data can prove it to be false. In sum, (a*) and (b*) cannot meet the set requirement.

Adjusting the third pragmatic theory of truth to interpretive statements, we get the following notion:

(c*) An interpretive statement is true iff it states what is useful to believe.

Obviously, (c*) also fails to meet the requirements, because even if common sense were to allow for it, (c*) would still subject the voice of the other to the utility any interpretive belief might have for the interpreter.

I conclude, then, that pragmatism, in any of these three variants, is not an adequate theory of truth for interpretive statements.

According to the coherence theory of truth, truth involves a relation between propositions (or sentences, statements, etc.). The proposition of which *is true* is predicated relates in a particular way

to (a set of) other propositions. The theory proposes that a proposition p is true iff p belongs to a coherent system of propositions. The nature of the relation involved has been subject to much debate. Mere logical consistency is not sufficient for coherence, for we can envision two individually consistent but mutually incompatible systems of propositions. The world may end “not with a bang but a whimper” (Eliot, “The Hollow Men”)—and the one is as consistent with a particular set of propositions as the other. Mutual derivability, the idea that the propositions entail each other, is too strong and, hence, not necessary. For example, the propositions “Peter went to the office today” and “Peter left his home early today” have, intuitively, some coherence, but they do not entail each other. This goes to illustrate that it is no trivial feat to give an adequate notion of coherence. To present the coherence theory as strong as possible, we will for now simply assume that there is a satisfying account of the coherence relation.

If we apply the coherence theory to interpretation, the truth-value bearer—that of which *is true* is predicated—is an interpretant, and the truthmaker—that in virtue of which the truth-value bearer is true—consists of (a set of) propositions. Thus:

(d*) An interpretation is true iff it belongs to a coherent system of propositions.

For instance, “in Homer ... Apollo is identified with the Sun” (an example from Heraclitus’s *Homeric Problems* [2005]) is true iff it coheres with all (or perhaps most) other relevant propositions.¹⁷

This notion of interpretive truth may be familiar to us. We often

17. What are the relevant propositions with which our interpretive statements should cohere? Would any coherent set of propositions do? Or must they be propositions about something in particular, such as—in the case of textual interpretation—the text, the text’s meaning, the text’s author, or all of these? This is a well-known problem for coherence theories in general, and applying such a notion to interpretive statements does not avoid it. Again, I will not let my evaluation of the suitability of a coherence theory of truth for interpretive statements depend on this weakness.

say we try to make sense of a text or that we're unable to make sense of a text. In such cases, it often seems that what we mean is that we're (un)able to come up with an interpretive statement that coheres with a set of propositions about the text we already endorse, or something like that. Perhaps, then, the coherence theory of truth for interpretive statements aligns with our common-sense ideas about true interpretive statements. There is a caveat, however; for such attempts at making sense of a text are usually not related to our common-sense truth talk. They usually function as a criterion in the *evaluation* or *justification* of interpretive statements. And while an interpretans that fails to make sense of a text is probably false, this makes coherence at best a necessary but not sufficient condition for truth.¹⁸

The coherence theory of truth has, historically speaking, its background in idealism, which denies the reality of anything independent of the mind. If the other's existence is merely a modification of one's mind, such idealism could be a problem for hearing the other. Yet, there is no principled reason why a coherentist about truth should deny the existence of other minds independent of his own mind.

Now, suppose an interpretive statement about some text could be found that fully coheres with the relevant set of propositions (whatever set that might be). Would that suffice to hear the other's voice? Arguably not. The set of relevant propositions may consist largely of beliefs that are unrelated to whatever the other actually says, and may thus allow for interpretive statements that cohere with our own beliefs and prejudices rather than with those of the other person. Interpretive statements incoherent with our prior beliefs and prejudices will be deemed false, thus preventing us from genuinely hearing the other's voice.

In short, then, a coherence account does not meet our value requirement and is therefore not an adequate truth theory for interpretive statements.

18. On the function of coherence in interpretive practices, see, e.g., Charolles (1983); Scholz (2015). For caution, see, e.g., Skinner (1969) and Føllesdal (1979, 327).

The correspondence theory of truth is considered to be classical, traditional, and common sense, and it has had adherents ever since Plato and Aristotle. It describes a relation between truth-value bearers and truthmakers. The truth-value bearers can be beliefs, judgments, statements, thoughts, ideas, utterances, assertions, sentences, or propositions. Today, the option most commonly chosen is propositions, and they are also the truth-value bearers referred to here.¹⁹ The truthmakers can be states of affairs, events, things, properties, or facts. Facts seem a commonly chosen option, and I too will use facts as truthmakers in what follows. The theory proposes that a proposition *p* is true if and only if *p* corresponds to a fact. The nature of the relation of correspondence has been the subject of much debate, and it is described in various ways. Several authors claim that the theory can be stated without using the term *correspondence*, which could, for example, be substituted by *means that* if the truth bearers are sentences or statements.²⁰ William P. Alston's formulation nicely avoids the contentious notion of correspondence while maintaining the gist of the idea. According to his description, a proposition *p* is true iff what *p* states to be the case actually is the case (Alston 1996, e.g., 5).

Suppose we apply this to the case of interpretive statements. The truth-value bearer would be the interpretans or interpretive statement. The truthmaker—assuming that it consists of facts—would be the interpretandum. In the case of textual interpretation, these facts pertain not only to the text but also to the properties that a text has in virtue of being part of a language. Hence, on a correspondence theory of truth, we get the following notion:

- (e) An interpretative statement is true iff what it states to be the case with respect to the interpretandum actually is the case.

19. See Kirkham (1992, 58) for a list of suggested candidates for the title of *truth bearer* in this context (and pages 55–58 for descriptions thereof). Cf. §§ 2.4–2.5.

20. See Kirkham (1992, 135) on why *correspondence* is a misleading term.

“‘The door is open,’ said by Jennifer in context C, means ‘Close the door!’” is true iff it actually is the case that “‘The door is open,’ said by Jennifer in context C, means “Close the door!”” A true interpretive statement states what is the case regarding its object of interpretation.

Understanding the notion of truth for true interpretive statements along the lines of the correspondence theory of truth seems to align with our common-sense ideas about true interpretive statements. The interpretive statement “In Homer, Apollo is identified with the Sun” is justified iff it is the case that in Homer, Apollo is identified with the Sun. And so on.

How does the correspondence theory fare with respect to our value requirement? On this theory, it is possible to hear the other’s voice, which is the interpretandum to which the interpretans must correspond if it is to be true. For suppose the correspondence theory holds. In that case, as far as the truth theory is concerned, our interpretation of what someone says should not be about what we ourselves would like to hear but about what he or she wants to say. When we interpret what someone tells us, the standard of truth for our interpretive statement lies in what the other says rather than in our own wishes and beliefs. There could be *epistemic* problems preventing us from hearing the other’s voice, but that is not an argument against the truth theory.

As with all truth theories, objections have been levelled against the correspondence theory of truth. Most of them concern the nature of the correspondence relation. As we have seen, however, the correspondence theory can be stated without the use of the contentious notion of correspondence. Given our two criteria, the correspondence theory turns out to be the best specification of what it means to say that a particular interpretive statement is true (or false).

A number of objections can be raised against my defence of a realist correspondence theory of truth for interpretive statements. Some objections are in fact beside the point: they target issues inessential to the correspondence theory. This is, for example, the case when it is argued that this theory of truth fails for one or more

of the following reasons: (i) it does not take into account that what is called *truth* emerges through the finite and historical aspects of the interpreter; (ii) it assumes that objects exist externally from the mind of an interpreter and independently from the conditions under which they manifest themselves; (iii) it would imply that a subject must be purified from the contingencies of personal characteristics and circumstances to guarantee that the apprehension of the relation of correspondence is not contaminated.²¹ It seems a misrepresentation of the correspondence theory of truth to suggest that it entails any of this, however. A correspondence theory of truth does not imply anything about how one comes to form beliefs, let alone true beliefs. It merely states that a proposition *p* is true iff *p* is actually the case. The three objections seem to address matters pertinent to the justification project, and they are, therefore, not relevant to truth concepts developed in the metaphysical project. My first question—what are we saying when we say that interpretive statements are true (or false)?—is a question in the metaphysical project. That is not to say that the questions of the justification project are uninteresting—they just are different questions. If a truth theory falls wholly in the metaphysical project, it is a category mistake to criticize it for not presenting an account of truth as it is understood in the justification project.

Now, what about my first question? Do interpretive statements have truth-value if we take the notion of truth to be specified by the correspondence theory? This question appears to have been answered along the way. It is possible to describe what it takes for an interpretive statement to be true (or false) on the correspondence theory. Objections to the idea that interpretive statements have truth-value were found wanting. Moreover, the theory helps us to specify when an interpretive practice is successful. With this notion of truth in mind, we know what it means for an interpretive statement to be true or false: an interpretive statement *p* is true iff the properties *p* ascribes to the text (such as what the author meant to

21. Inspired by Kiefer (2013), describing Heidegger's and Gadamer's objections to the correspondence theory of truth.

say by it, what genre it belongs to, or what its terms refer to) are in fact properties of the text, and false if they are not.

4.4 – *Truth Theories That Do Not Answer My Question*

Some of the suspicions about the idea of true interpretive statements are due to the notion of truth itself—they question the idea of true interpretive statements because they question the truth theory that is (assumed to be) involved. I consider two types of truth theories that could be thought of as alternatives to pragmatism, coherentism, and correspondence theories, and I argue that, whatever their value in other contexts, they are not relevant to the question addressed here.

Though not discussed by Kirkham, a notion of truth developed by Heidegger and Gadamer is prominent in the literature on interpretation and hermeneutics. In his *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer does not elaborate very much on the notion of truth, nor does he provide, there or in his other writings, an explicit truth theory.²² But his notion of truth is usually held to be closely related to, if not identical to, Heidegger's notion of truth as the "unconcealment of beings," a disclosing of the world, or an opening of the world, through the disclosure of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world (cf. Guignon 2002).²³ Heidegger's and Gadamer's writings on truth touch on many apparently distinct issues. I bring some elements to the fore that could be taken to represent (parts of) their truth theories, and I consider their relevance to the question of what we are saying when we say that interpretive statements are true (or false).

22. Kiefer (2013, 55n2) lists a number of authors who made this observation. Note, by the way, that this title was not Gadamer's initial choice. According to Grondin (2003, 281–282), the title of the manuscript that would become *Wahrheit und Methode* was "Foundations of a Philosophical Hermeneutics," but his publisher did not like it. The title "Verstehen und Geschehen" was rejected too, before Gadamer settled on the current title.

23. On the relation between Gadamer's and Heidegger's truth concepts, see Kiefer (2013). He lists several authors who downplay the differences between Gadamer and Heidegger on the topic of truth (Kiefer 2013, 54–55n1), whereas Kiefer himself emphasizes these differences.

If it was the aim of Heidegger and Gadamer to elucidate the possibility conditions of a correspondence relation between a subject's proposition and the external world, then it would seem that they addressed a question that is different from ours (e.g., Heidegger [1943] 1961, §§ 1–2; cf. Kiefer 2013, 45–46). The question of what we are saying when we say that interpretive statements are true (or false) is different from the question as to what makes truth (taken in a particular sense *x*) possible, and it seems implausible that an answer to the latter question could be an answer to the former as well.

Gadamer maintains that truth is found not only in the sciences but also in art, and that the notions of knowledge and truth involved in art differ from these notions involved in the sciences (Gadamer 1975, 93; cf. 38–39). If the interest of Gadamer (and Heidegger) was in a notion of truth as involved in the experience of art, and if this is a notion of truth different from that involved in knowledge of a proposition, then this, again, seems to address a question that is different from ours. Even if about art, interpretive statements are *statements*, and the truth theories we considered imply that truth is a property of propositions, statements, beliefs, and so forth, and not, or not necessarily, a property of cups and cows, of paintings and performances. To take the experience of art as the reference point or touchstone for our enquiry into the nature of truth would be misguided: there is little warrant for the presupposition that the experience of art is representative of, or gives insight into, the nature of truth as involved in propositions. These elements of Gadamer's and Heidegger's truth theories seem, then, to concern issues other than the ones raised by my questions, and they are thus irrelevant to any project that seeks to answer the two questions discussed in this chapter.

Another suspicion about the notion of truth is that *truth* is only predicated of statements that serve the interests of powerful people. To say of an interpretation that it has truth-value is, on this account, to say that it can be used in “power discourses,” serving political aims. Whenever someone *S* says “*p* is true,” the perlocutionary purpose served by this claim is determined by *S*'s political aims. *Herrschaft* is what drives us in our explanations of the world, ac-

cording to Nietzsche.²⁴ Those who are suspicious of the powerful will therefore also be suspicious of anything with truth-value. Again, this seems to be a different project from the essence project we are interested in here. Perhaps it falls in the speech act project, if we believe this project to include the attempt to describe the perlocutionary purposes served by utterances that by their surface grammar appear to ascribe the property of truth to some statement.

5 – Conclusion

This chapter addressed two questions fundamental to epistemological concerns about textual interpretation. My first question was this: What are we actually saying when we say that interpretive statements are true (or false)? I argued that a realist correspondence theory of truth is the best candidate for specifying the notion of truth in relation to interpretive statements. Given this notion of truth, my second question—do interpretive statements have truth-value; that is, can they be true or false?—can be answered affirmatively.

24. Nietzsche (1967–77, 315): “Unsre Bedürfnisse sind es, die die Welt auslegen: unsre Triebe und deren Für und Wider. Jeder Trieb ist eine Art Herrschsucht, jeder hat seine Perspektive, welche er als Norm allen übrigen Trieben aufzwingen möchte.” For a political and rhetorical notion of interpretation, see also Mailloux (1995).

4 – Interpretive Practices as Justificatory Practices

1 – Introduction

An interpretive practice can be described as an evidence-based quest for truth in which we try to arrive at an inference to the best interpretation of the object of interpretation, such as a text, by developing arguments that are subject to the ordinary standards of logic and argumentation. In that sense, such practices do not differ from other truth-aiming inquiries, such as solving a murder, tracing a virus to its source, or improving a model for weather prediction.

Although this seems a simple and straightforward idea vital to the rationality and epistemic status of interpretive practices and their results, it is historically controversial and marred with questions, problems, and objections. It is easy to give multiple samples of textual interpretations in which we can detect little argumentation, so why think that interpretation is or can be argumentative in nature? And what are the criteria for selecting the relevant data or evidence for textual interpretation? What arguments or methods would suit the interpretation of texts? Are they, as “monists” claim, the same as the methods we employ in the sciences, or do interpretive practices have a method of their own, as “dualists” maintain? I will discuss this cluster of questions in sections 2–5 and uphold the claim made in this section’s first sentence.

A few preliminary considerations may serve to bring our topic into focus. The interest is in practices, that is, activities in which one aims for a result by employing particular means. The practices that concern us here aim at solving interpretive problems or answering questions about a particular text. For example, did Jesus really instruct his disciples, just before his arrest, to sell their cloaks and to buy swords (Luke 22:35–38)? And what does it mean that the French man-of-war’s ensign in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* “drooped

limp like a rag”? (2017, 14).¹ The practices we are interested in here also include the many interpretive questions discussed in judicial courts, such as the following question: “Does the term ‘spouse’ in Article 2(2)(a) ... include the same-sex spouse, from a State which is not a Member State of the European Union, of a citizen of the European Union to whom that citizen is lawfully married in accordance with the law of a Member State other than the host Member State?”² In interpretive practices, we seek to answer interpretive questions like these.

My concern is with the *process* of justifying interpretive statements, not with their *status* of (not) being epistemically justified. *Process justification* is concerned with accounting for, arguing for, making a case for, showing the plausibility of, or defending interpretive statements or beliefs. It is concerned with how someone justifies a particular belief. *Status justification* is about whether a particular proposition or belief is epistemically justified. It is concerned with someone’s being justified in believing that p. The two can come apart. One could have an argument for proposition p (process justification) which is insufficient to render someone epistemically justified in believing p (status justification). Or one could fail to have an argument for p (process justification) but be epistemically justified in believing p (status justification), for example, on externalist accounts of epistemic justification.

The next section addresses the question of why one would argue for interpretations at all. Section 3 introduces the notions *data* and *evidence* and examines how they apply to interpretive practices. Moreover, it presents a solution to the epistemological problem of

1. I use the 2017 Norton critical edition, edited by Paul Armstrong. This edition comes with information on the manuscript, extracts from background sources, and a collection of literary critical responses.

2. Relu Adrian Coman, Robert Clabourn Hamilton, Asociația Accept v Inspectoratul General pentru Imigrări, Ministerul Afacerilor Interne, Consiliul Național pentru Combaterea Discriminării, Case C 673/16 (2018), <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=interpretation-&docid=198383&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=req&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=5937462#ctx1>.

data selection. Section 4 discusses argumentative structures that can be employed in interpretive practices. Section 5 addresses the relation between interpretation and scientific methodology. Data and justificatory practices, it is argued, are not significantly different for interpretive practices than for scientific practices. The next chapter is devoted to a type of argument (or phenomenon—that is actually unclear) often associated with interpretive practices, viz., hermeneutical circularity.

2 – Why Argue for Interpretations?

Hermeneutics has of old been concerned with rules and methods of providing and justifying interpretations of texts, and such concerns are found in literary theory and (philosophy of) law as well. In some circles, the attention paid to justifying and arguing for interpretive statements is perceived to have waned in the twentieth century.³ Indeed, recent theoretical reflections on practices of justifying interpretive statements seem scarce—though not absent.⁴

3. Cf. the observations by Booth (1981), Schmidt (2000), Winko (2015), and Descher and Petraschka (2019, 6), regarding literary theory. Introductions to hermeneutics also have little to say about the justification of interpretive statements. But Vittorio Hösle considers Rorty's (1979) contrast between hermeneutics and argumentative inferential philosophy to be "abwegig. ... Nur jemand, der die frühere Geschichte der Hermeneutik so vollständig ignorierte wie Rorty, konnte auf diesen Gedanken verfallen" (Hösle 2018, 36).

4. One cluster of texts concerned with the justification of textual interpretation is found in mainly German literature since the 1970s that compared scientific practices of justification with practices common in (German) literary studies. Göttner (1973), for example, argues that literary studies employ the same method as described by the "general empirical methodology" (Göttner 1973, 60; see chapter 1). Schmidt (1975), Kindt and Schmidt (1976), and von Savigny (1976), for instance, maintain that literary studies are or should be argumentative in nature, and these authors employ various argumentation models in their approach to literature and literary

There can actually be excellent reasons for not arguing explicitly for an interpretive statement. One such reason, if applicable, is superfluity. In some cases, the interpreter's audience is rightly assumed to share sufficient background ideas to be able to see why a particular interpretive statement is correct or highly credible. Often, a brief reminder of the meaning of a word, a mere focussing of the audience's attention on some stylistic feature, a suggestion of a solution to a syntactical ambiguity, and so forth, suffice to make an audience see the credibility of the offered interpretive statement. Another reason not to give explicit arguments for an interpretive claim is that it is not feasible to defend all statements we endorse—we would be going on ad infinitum if we were to argue for the premises of our premises. Both reasons are not peculiar to interpretive statements but hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for any other claim as well.

But if there is any reason to believe an interpretive statement, it can be useful to make this reason explicit, that is, to argue for that statement. Arguments can serve the justification of claims and assist in persuading others by providing plausible premises and inferring valid conclusions from them. Arguments can also have heuristic functions and offer insight into a text or idea through the explication of premises and assumptions and by bringing their relations to the fore. Arguments can, thirdly, have a didactic function by offering an accessibly structured explanation of an interpretive statement and by bringing to light features of a text which otherwise would go unnoticed.

There are contexts in which such functions of arguments are par-

theory. See also Strube (1988); Fricke (1992). Several authors argued that the hypothetico-deductive method can be applied to textual interpretation as well (e.g., Føllesdal 1979; Philipse 2007, 181; Mantzavinos 2014). See for some discussion Danneberg and Albrecht (2016); Folde (2016). The hypothetico-deductive method is not discussed in this chapter, because it has its standard problems that make it unattractive, also in current philosophy of science, and because Føllesdal (1979), the locus classicus of this view, can be taken to develop an inference-to-the-best-explanation approach—which we will consider later on in this chapter.

ticularly desirable or necessary. Academic disputes, for example, naturally involve arguments for their justificatory function, and so do courtroom debates and attempts at substantiating a controversial historical claim by reference to texts, providing a particular interpretation of a philosophical text, and developing a theological doctrine in relation to Scripture. If interpretive practices are indeed rational practices, it should be possible for them to involve reasoning, argumentation, or justification.

Given that interpretive statements do not always come with explicit or extensive justification, we may need to construct arguments for them if we are to consider their epistemic value. Although it is often impossible to reconstruct an interpreter's actual argument or reasoning process for lack of access to that information, our evaluation of an interpretive claim should reconstruct as strong an argument as can be given for it. Even then, there may be too much vagueness in a text to allow for a sensible reconstruction of its argument.

Thus, even though many interpretive claims come without explicit defence (and for good reasons), there are contexts in which we are required to account for them or in which we want to reconstruct the arguments that can be given in support of someone's interpretive claim. For such contexts, we need a framework to develop and assess interpretive arguments. Such a framework should address at least two issues: the data and evidence for interpretive statements, and the argumentation involved in accounting for them. The next section addresses the issue of data and evidence. Section 4 discusses the relevant types of arguments.

3 – Data and Evidence

First, I introduce the definitions of the terms *data* and *evidence* with which we will work here. Next, an inventory is provided of the types of data and evidence that are (potentially) available in interpretive practices. It will become apparent that data and evidence are *selected* rather than “just there” or given. Section 3.3 discusses how to solve the problem of data and evidence selection.

3.1 – Definitions of Data and Evidence

Interpretation, just like any other truth-aiming inquiry, works with data and evidence. *Data* and *evidence* are not synonyms.⁵ *Data*, we may say, is that which one needs to account for when evaluating a proposition *p*, because data have the potential to show that a proposition *p* is true (or false) or (im)probable, or to affect whether a subject *S* believes proposition *p*. Taken in this sense, data consist of all objects, events, facts, and so forth one should take into account, assuming one seeks to give a justified verdict on *p*. If we want to decide whether something *x* belongs to the relevant data for proposition *p*, we need to answer the question of whether *x* has the potential to show that the interpretive claim is true or probable, or to affect whether *S* believes *p*. If it does, the piece of information is relevant to *p* and counts as data.

Data relevant to *p* need not actually support or undermine *p* and are, in this regard, significantly different from evidence. *Evidence* is whatever supports, undermines, or rebuts a proposition *p*. Thus, the criterion by which we decide if something *x* is evidence for a proposition *p* is not whether it *potentially* affects the truth-value, probability, or credibility of *p*, but whether it does so *actually*. All evidence is data, but not all data are evidence.

Here is an example to illustrate this difference between data and evidence. Suppose that, after a long day of hiking, you and your friend park your bikes at the foot of some trees and decide to camp in that place. In the middle of the night, your friend wakes you up to tell you he thinks someone is stealing your bikes. In great darkness, you listen attentively, and you hear series of faint noises, sometimes interrupted and then continued again, fairly close by but hard to localize exactly. Your friend decides to take a torch and briskly pulls the canvas aside, only to find no one there and the bikes still at the

5. Although my definitions seek to capture an uncontroversial distinction between the two terms, there is variety. See, for example, the literature discussed by Conee and Feldman (2008), who define a person's evidence as "the information or data the person has to go on in forming beliefs," pointing out that it may be difficult to specify what that is exactly (2008, 83). Cf. Kelly (2016).

foot of the trees. The next morning, you find mouse droppings around your tent and signs of mice having gnawed away bits of the tent's canvas. The two of you conclude that your friend was probably awakened by mice (who didn't come for your bikes).

We may distinguish three phases of data collection and evaluation in this case. In the first phase, you only have the data of the faint noises with their particular properties. This is data you have to take into account, but in this phase, these data are insufficient to support, undermine, or rebut a particular view. So, these data do not form evidence. In the second phase, your friend collects new data by taking a look. The data he obtains function as evidence for refuting the claim that someone is stealing your bikes. In the third phase, the traces of mice are data that serve as evidence for the claim that your friend was awakened by mice. They do not form evidence for the claim that someone tried to steal the bikes.

Unlike data, evidence must be truth-conducive or increase the probability or credibility of p —although for some coherentists about justification, this may amount to the same thing. Evidence, then, is data actually supporting, undermining, or rebutting a proposition p .

3.2 – *Four Types of Data and Evidence in Interpreting Texts*

3.2.1 – Texts

The primary datum in textual interpretation is the text as it is “carried by” a physical object: manuscripts, copies of manuscripts, books, and so on.⁶ This sort of data may appear to be straightforwardly available, but this appearance often only veils the choice of a particular version or edition of a text. For example, editors will need to decide which version(s) of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* they take as the reference text for their edition. The text was written between mid-December 1898 and early February 1899, published in three parts in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* from February through April 1899, and published in *Youth: A Narrative and Two*

6. See chapter 1 for my notion of a text.

Other Stories in 1902, along with two other stories.⁷ These three “carriers” contain three slightly different texts. Moreover, there were typescripts (some of them still existing) and proof sheets made in the process of preparing the texts for publication. It is not always clear whether the textual varieties and emendations are to be ascribed to the author or to copyeditors and printers. If *Heart of Darkness* is our object of interpretation, what exactly is our text? This question is pertinent to other interpretive practices as well. Scholars studying the Gospels may be more interested in the immaterial Q than in the Gospel of Luke. This is one way in which a selection of textual data often needs to be made. Another way is particularly apparent in legal contexts, in which one needs to select the relevant legal clauses that are to be taken into account in a legal case (cf. Bernstein 2017). What counts as textual data, then, is not given—it is a matter of selection.

3.2.2 – Contextual Data

Interpreters often claim that texts should be read in their contexts. This very broad category of *context* in fact includes a variety of different sources and types of data. One type of contextual data is linguistic: linguistic data are syntactical and semantical properties that words have in virtue of being words in a particular language. Such data can often be derived from grammars and dictionaries, which in turn typically depend on multiple past uses of words and phrases. Data from such sources may not be decisive, since words and sentence structures are sometimes used in unconventional ways by authors and speakers; but they are still data that the interpreter needs to take into account.

A closely related type of data consists of the pragmatics of language, the conventions about language use. The question “How are you?” can have a conventional use that is different from its sentence meaning: it could be a mere greeting, rather than an inquiry into someone’s well-being. Semantics, syntax, and pragmatics often of-

7. This information about the textual history of the book is from the edition by Armstrong (2017).

fer multiple options, and it's the interpreter's task to select the best.

But contextual data need not be restricted to what we find in a dictionary and a catalogue of pragmatic conventions. It could also be provided by what we may call *encyclopedic data*, that is, data about the world of the author and the text, and about the objects and events to which the text refers.

One such type of data is (1) biographical information about the author—his or her life, ideas, sources of information, and so on. Whether we should use such data as evidence is controversial, for example, in the approach called *new criticism* in literary theory, which declared biographical information to be of limited use in interpretive practices (see my chapter 1). Interpretive approaches that take authorial intentions into account have, to a greater or lesser degree, been open to the idea that the author's biography may provide us with relevant information. It may be useful to know that Conrad was a late nineteenth-century author rather than a medieval phantasy writer, and that he was a European, not an Arab, and that he had worked in Congo himself. It could be informative to be acquainted with his reflections on the purpose of art: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything" (Conrad [1897] 2017, 261). To some extent, such biographical information is relevant even for structuralists or anti-intentionalists, who believe that we should not aim to discern the author's meaning but the text's meaning. For assuming that a text's meaning is not completely independent of its extra-textual context (the era of writing, the language used in the author's circle, etc.), biographical information about the author informs us about this extra-textual context.⁸

Such potentially relevant contextual data may go beyond the

8. A similar point is made by such exponents of new criticism as Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946, 477–478): "The use of biographical evidence need not involve intentionalism, because while it may be evidence of what the author intended, it may also be evidence of the meaning of his words and the dramatic character of his utterance" (478).

strictly biographical information about the author and may consist, for example, of (2) specific historical events that took place at the time of writing and the referents of words, persons, and events mentioned in the text. Our understanding of *Heart of Darkness* is improved by our knowledge of British and Belgian imperialism; and if we seek to discern Conrad's perlocutionary intentions for this novella, it may be good to know that he wrote during a time of growing protests against the Belgian king Leopold II's rule in Congo. This type of data may also concern (3) information about what the world generally looked like when the text was composed; for instance, whether the quickest way to travel was riding a horse or flying on a plane, and whether people had telephones or were writing letters all the time. Finally, such data may be about (4) the ideas and concepts that were in vogue when the story was written. The imperial structures figuring in Conrad's novella may seem hardly, or at best only superficially, understandable to modern readers. The pervasiveness, motivations, and ideologies of these structures will probably be better understood if readers are acquainted with nineteenth-century views on race as developed, shared, and discussed by, for instance, Hegel, Darwin, and Herbert Spencer.

Similar questions are relevant to other interpretive practices as well. If we aim to establish the perlocutionary intentions of lawmakers with their laws, should we search their diaries and private letters for clues or restrict ourselves to the minutes of their meetings?⁹ Or, in the context of biblical exegesis, what is the relevant background of the New Testament? What views were in vogue in first-century Judaism? These last two questions are of great significance, for example, in debates on the so-called new perspective on Paul in the field of New Testament studies. Another contentious question in

9. For a discussion of intentionalism, see my chapter 1. For a discussion in law, see Scalia (1997), who may appear to be denying the relevance of authorial intent altogether, but who, as Dworkin (1997) points out in the same volume, endorses intentionalism in some sense (called *semantic intention* by Dworkin) while rejecting it in another sense (called *expectational intention* by Dworkin).

this field is this: Should we read John 1:1 with Platonism or Stoicism as its relevant background, or would that distort our reading of it?

3.2.3 – General Principles

Texts and contexts are fairly commonly noted as types of data. The principles, rules, maxims, and so forth that we work with when we're interpreting texts are less often mentioned as such. Traditionally, hermeneutics was concerned with the identification and study of such rules for interpretation. Part of hermeneutics consists in the description of linguistic conventions, which today are studied in pragmatics. But it often went beyond describing communicational conventions and involved particular prescriptions or principles for reasoning. Rabbi Hillel wrote, in the first century BC, his seven rules for Midrashic interpretation. Christian theology also has a long tradition of seeking rules for interpretation (Greijdanus 1946; Stuart 2001; Blomberg and Markley 2010). And here is a legal example. In law, a principle called the *argumentum a contrario* is allowed, an argument from the contrary. The assumption is that if the lawgiver had wanted to state that p, he would have stated p; from the fact that he did not state p, it is concluded that the lawgiver did not endorse p. For example:

That the place where the marriage was entered into is irrelevant is confirmed, a *contrario*, by the Union legislature's decision to make express reference to the law of the host Member State in the case of a registered partnership. That difference may easily be explained by the fact that the legal institution of marriage has, or at the very least is presumed to have, a certain universality in the rights it confers and the obligations it places on the spouses, whereas the laws on "partnerships" differ and vary in their personal and material scope, as do their legal consequences.¹⁰

10. Relu Adrian Coman, Robert Clabourn Hamilton, Asociația Accept v Inspectoratul General pentru Imigrări, Ministerul Afacerilor Interne, Consiliul Național pentru Combaterea Discriminării, Case C-673/16 (2018),

Thus, from the fact that the legislature did not make express reference to *x* with respect to the institutional provision A, whereas he *did* with respect to another institutional provision B, we may, so this author, conclude that the legislature did not mean to connect *x* with A. This is, of course, nonsense by logical standards—from the absence of evidence no evidence of absence follows—but it could be an accepted rule in particular interpretive practices. If such rules have any value for the communicative practices of a particular group of people, they can be used as data or function as premises in the interpretation of their texts.

3.2.4 – Background Knowledge

When we employ the data listed so far, we are usually, to some degree, aware that we do so. However, we may also employ these three types of data without being aware of it. Moreover, there may be other factors functioning in our interpretive practices without us realizing it. This extends not only to information but also to our expectations, when we expect authors to say things that somehow fit our presumptions about the author. Such conventions and presumptions function as data from which we draw conclusions, even if we are unconscious of doing so. This is, or so it seems, at least part of the idea of prejudices (or *Vorurteilen*) often mentioned by hermeneuticists from Heidegger and, especially, Gadamer onwards. The same holds for the notion of tradition as a store of background knowledge employed in understanding (Gadamer 1975, 279). As in a scientific paradigm, we acquire the beliefs, values, expectations, standards, and so on of the world we grow up in, take them as a given, and employ them (unconsciously) in our interpretations of texts (cf. Kuhn [1962] 1996).

<http://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=interpretation&docid=198383&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=req&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=5937462#ctx1>.

3.3 – *The Problem of Data and Evidence Selection and Its Theoretical Solution*

While discussing the types of data, we noticed how often decisions are made and need to be made as to what counts as relevant data for particular interpretive beliefs, hypotheses, and statements. We may call this *the problem of data and evidence selection*.¹¹ The data we select affect the interpretation we give. Part of the solution to this problem comes from clarity about the concepts of data and evidence. Given an interpretive claim, we need—for data selection—to consider if a piece of information *x* potentially shows the truth, probability, or credibility of the interpretive claim. In selecting evidence, we need to consider whether *x* actually supports the truth, probability, or credibility of the interpretive claim. If the claim is about the first manuscript of *Heart of Darkness*, or about the first manuscript of the Gospel of Luke, then later versions do not count as relevant data—or only to the extent to which they bear witness to that first manuscript. Similarly, if the claim is about the 1902 version of *Heart of Darkness* or about the Gospel of Luke as found in a particular canonical edition, the earlier versions do not count as relevant data—or perhaps only to the extent to which they bear witness to these later versions. Similarly for contextual data and evidence. If we make a claim about the intentions of an author, all data that bear witness to the intended properties count as data. But if we are concerned with a text as such (i.e., to a greater or lesser extent detached from the author's intentions), this type of data is less relevant and hence does not provide evidence. And so on. Therefore, the problem of data and evidence selection, in whichever form it is presented to us, has at least a theoretical solution (practical solutions in actual interpretive practices can be hard to come by). But its theoretical nature does not make it useless.

The utility of this criterion can be illustrated by the question of the selection of *interpretation methods* in the Dutch law system. Most introductory literature on Dutch law distinguish at least four notions of interpretation: (a) grammatical or linguistic interpreta-

11. Petraschka (2016, 163) calls it the *Datenidentifikationsproblem*.

tion, (b) historical interpretation, (c) teleological interpretation, and (d) systematic interpretation. They are sometimes called *interpretation methods* (Scholten 1954, §§ 10–12, 25; Groenewegen 2006, 77–192; Pontier 1998; Kloosterhuis 2011, 206–214). It is common to assume that there is no strict order in which these four notions (or methods) should be applied (e.g., Pontier 1998, 39–40). There is at most a relative order, since in practice, (a) typically comes first, followed by (d) and, finally, (c) (so Groenewegen 2006, 187–192). The criterion for data and evidence selection offers a clear way to determine the relevance and value of the various approaches (or methods, or notions). It helps us to determine, first, what counts as relevant data in case of an interpretive problem. Second, given the application of this criterion for data selection, we can give the approach with the greater epistemic value priority over the approach with the lesser epistemic value, with the epistemic value of an approach being determined by the quantity and quality of the data. The approach for which we have the best and most data has the highest epistemic value. The epistemic value of grammatical interpretation will often be great, but it decreases in cases of ambiguity or vagueness. The epistemic value of historical interpretation depends on the availability and reliability of sources for the law's history. If the interpretive problem isn't addressed, directly or indirectly, in the sources, historical interpretation has a low epistemic value. The same holds for the teleological approach: if it is not clear that the lawgiver had a particular effect *x* in view, the teleological approach is of little use.¹² The epistemic value of the systematic approach depends on the extent to which the system of the law is clear and relevant. In this way, the solution to the problem of data and evidence selection suggests a procedure for the selection and application of the relevant approaches.

We can stipulate limitations to what counts as relevant data

12. Teleological interpretation, as it is here understood, is concerned with the perlocutionary effects the lawgiver had in mind when adopting the law. This is different from a sense of *creative interpretation* with which teleological interpretation is sometimes associated.

and to the evidence we seek. For example, we may decide that diaries of lawmakers are not to be taken into account when we attempt to determine the intended meaning of a text—perhaps because we cannot ensure that such data are publicly available, or because we want to ensure that it is clear which data people are supposed to work with. This is indeed of particular relevance in law contexts. For example, the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties states that

the context for the purpose of the interpretation of a treaty shall comprise, in addition to the text, including its preamble and annexes:

- (a) any agreement relating to the treaty which was made between all the parties in connection with the conclusion of the treaty;
- (b) any instrument which was made by one or more parties in connection with the conclusion of the treaty and accepted by the other parties as an instrument related to the treaty.¹³

Note that working with a limited data set is not uncommon: at some point in any research project, researchers stop seeking further data, assuming they have enough to test their hypothesis or that more data cannot be acquired.

Some people feel uneasy about all this “data talk.” In their view, there is no *datum* available to us: nothing is *given* as a plain fact or pure object, given for us to use and build our theories on. All things we call *data* are in fact *facta*—things that are made and construed by us (cf. Schmidt 2000, 628). We perceive and reason from a particular perspective or standpoint or historical situation, and our perspective (standpoint, historical situation) determines (partially) what we see and think, and so determines what we take to be data. We do not need to go radical and deny that there is an objective reality existing independently of our mind. For this point to hold, it suffices that all our beliefs and ideas are not directly given to us but

13. https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf.

pass through the sieve of our cognitive categories and personal formation when they are acquired. Chapter 6 addresses this view, which I, for ease of reference, call *perspectivism*.

4 – Interpretive Reasoning

4.1 – Interpretive Arguments: Deduction and Induction

If arguments are wanted for heuristic, justificatory, didactic, or any other reasons, we must argue from the data relevant to a certain interpretation problem in a way that is rational and transparent. Hence, we have arguments from textual data, from contextual data, and from interpretive principles. Perhaps we can also get the background beliefs in view, upon reflection, but there is no guarantee we will be able to know the depths of our souls.

A (valid) argument consists of conclusions derived with probability or necessity from premises. Arguments in which the conclusions are derived with probability are inductive. The (joint) truth of their premises is *very likely (but not necessarily) sufficient* for the truth of the conclusion if the argument is strong. Arguments in which the conclusions are derived with necessity are deductive. The (joint) truth of their premises is *necessarily sufficient* for the truth of the (validly derived) conclusions. Thus, in a deductively valid argument, if the premises are true and the conclusion follows from the premises, it is impossible for the conclusion to be false.

Both types of arguments may come in various forms.¹⁴ Examples of inductive arguments are enumerative induction, statistical syllo-

14. It is perhaps worth pointing out that we are concerned here only with types of arguments, not with methods, explanation models, or theories of evidential relations in which these types of arguments figure. Thus, in saying that interpretive practices employ deductive arguments, I am not suggesting that they employ the hypothetico-deductive method, the deductive-nomological model as a model of explanation, or hypothetico-deductivism as a theory of evidential relations. Nor does the adoption of inductive arguments imply the employment of statistic testing of hypotheses as a method,

gisms, and analogies. Examples of deductive arguments are, in first-order logic, arguments in predicate logic and propositional logic. It has become standard to also discuss abduction or the inference to the best explanation (IBE), in the context of types of arguments. Here, my focus is on deduction and induction in relation to interpretation. The next three sections (§§ 4.2–4.4) are concerned with abduction.

Although interpretive arguments are hardly ever qualified as deduction or induction, it is possible to reconstruct them as such (see, for examples, Descher and Petraschka 2019, especially chapter 5). Two examples, using one of the interpretive questions mentioned in section 1, may suffice to illustrate this. Jesus is reported in Luke 22:36 as telling his disciples this: “But now, whomever has a purse, let him take it, and likewise his travel bag, and if he does not have one already, let him sell his cloak and buy a sword.” This verse has puzzled many readers: isn’t this at odds with Jesus’s reputation as the humble and meek teacher of love, as the Son of God who knowingly and willingly went to his death? Moreover, just a little later, when one of his disciples cuts off the ear of one of his arrestors (v. 50), Jesus tells him to stop (v. 51). A question we may seek to answer in solving this puzzle is whether *μάχαιρα* here really means “sword.” Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* tell us that the word in older Greek referred not only to a sword, as a weapon, but also to a knife for cutting up or carving meat, and even to a kind of razor for cutting hair. Let us, for now, assume that this dictionary is correct and that this word still had this semantic property when the Gospel of Luke was written. Perhaps we should understand *μάχαιρα* in one of these alternative senses. Wouldn’t that make sense? Jesus would instruct his disciples to prepare for travel: “Get your purse, your travel bag, and your cutlery,” or, alternatively, “your razor.” One thing we may do to answer this question is to look at the use of *μάχαιρα* in other places in the Gospel of Luke, on the assumption—

or an inductive statistical explanation as a model of explanation, or some probabilistic theory of evidential relations. Although deduction and induction are essential to these, they are inessential to deduction and induction.

perhaps a debatable one—that authors tend to use words in a consistent way. Let us just focus on Luke and develop an enumerative inductive argument (P_n indicating a premise, C indicating a conclusion).

P_1 In Luke 21:24, *μάχαιρα* means “sword.”

P_2 In Luke 22:52, *μάχαιρα* means “sword.”

C Therefore, in Luke 22:36, *μάχαιρα* means “sword.”

This is an enumerative induction: we list the cases from a relevant sample in which something x has a property y and generalize from them. Even though the example suffices for illustrative purposes, the argument is not very strong. For even if we assume the premises to be true, the number of cases is rather low.¹⁵ But this is how we usually establish what counts as a word’s lexical properties, such as being a synonym, a paraphrase, a similar word, a different word, an antonym, a meaningful use, a semantic anomaly, or a semantic ambiguity.

Interpretive arguments could also be deductive, using propositional logic.¹⁶ For example:

P_1 If the sentence meaning of Jesus’s sayings is radically at odds with the thrust of what else he said, we are to take that particular saying metaphorically.

P_2 Luke 22:36 is radically at odds with the thrust of everything else Jesus said.

C We are to take Luke 22:36 metaphorically.

15. This could be mitigated if we extend our contextual scope and search for uses of the word in literature more or less contemporary to it, or stemming from more or less the same groups or social circles, and so forth, on the assumption that words have particular conventional meanings among particular groups. In this case, the other Gospels, the New Testament as a whole, or contemporary literature from the same era and area might provide us with such a corpus.

As is the case in any argument, validity and truth come apart. The example argument is valid, but this validity is independent of the premises' truth. When we deductively account for our interpretive claims, validity is a necessary condition. But whether the argument is sound depends not just on its validity but also on the truth of the premises.

This is just a quick and simple illustration of the use of ordinary types of arguments in interpretive practices, and it seems rather uncontroversial. We evaluate both types of arguments by the standards that normally apply to them: validity (in the case of deduction), sufficient support (in the case of induction), truth or plausibility of the premises, explicitness of the premises, clarity of the argument's formulation, and so forth. Such an argumentative practice can be developed further, again, along the lines of ordinary argumentation theory. We can develop more-detailed argumentation models, such as that of Stephen Toulmin (2003). Moreover, just like in ordinary argumentation theory, we can formulate typical fallacies for interpretive practices (e.g., Carson 1996). In short, interpretive practices may involve arguments, and such arguments are just the common sort of arguments found in any truth-aiming inquiry.

4.2 – *Interpretive Arguments: Inference to the Best Explanation*

Regarding standards and practices of reasoning, much discussion in argumentation theory, epistemology, and the philosophy of science today centres around abduction or IBE. IBE is now widely viewed as the type of inference or method characteristic not only of scientific inquiries but also of everyday quests for explanation: Where did I leave my keys? Why is there milk spilled all over the floor?¹⁷ It is also increasingly identified as the “method” of interpre-

16. This is perhaps not entirely self-evident, since Shusterman (1978) remarks that “I know of no aesthetician who has argued that interpretive logic is deductive” (322), and then goes on to consider one possible exception.

17. A useful introduction is provided by Douven (2017), but see also the various views (some of them more critical than Douven's) defended in McCain and Poston (2017).

tive practices—e.g., in philology and literary studies, biblical exegesis, and linguistics.¹⁸ Definitions of abduction or IBE differ, and some complain that IBE is nothing but a slogan never properly articulated.¹⁹

Abduction and IBE are sometimes taken to be synonyms. Here, I assume that *abduction* is a method of generating hypotheses and IBE is a way of justifying or supporting hypotheses (cf. McAuliffe 2015). My concern, then, is with IBE. There are, or so it seems to me, two features essential to any theory of IBE: the inferential move from “Hypothesis Hx is the best explanation of phenomenon P” to “Hx is most likely or most probable,” and the reflection on what counts as the “best” explanation. These aspects are examined below, and then the question will be considered as to whether interpretive practices can be described as inferences to the best explanation.

We sometimes see IBE being added to a list of “three major types of inference, the other two being deduction and induction” (Douven 2017; cf. Eco 1991, 39–43). But we may wonder whether IBE is in fact a type of inference, like induction and deduction. A closer look at some suggested IBE models or reconstructions may be informative. Here are some examples, the first two of which are adapted from, respectively, Lycan (2002, 413) and Fumerton (2017, 67).

18. Proponents of the view that interpretation employs abduction or IBE in literary studies are Eco (1991, 39–43); Scholz (2015); Petraschka (2016). Cf. Wirth (2001) on Eco and abduction. The view is defended in relation to pragmatics and the interpretation of law by Macagno, Walton, and Sartor (2018). In biblical exegesis, abduction is adopted by, for example, Wright (1992). Since IBE and abduction are variously defined, however, these authors may not all be talking about the same thing.

19. See Douven (2017) for a short list of examples of definitions; Douven defends the slogan character of IBE and argues that it can be fleshed out in various ways, depending on the context of use.

- (1) Phenomena F_1, F_2, \dots, F_n are facts in need of explanation.
- (2) H explains the Fs.
- (3) No available competing hypotheses would explain the Fs as well as H does.
- (4) Therefore, H is true.

And:

- (1) Phenomenon O.
- (2) Explanation E is the most plausible explanation of O.
- (3) Therefore, E.

Or, for cases of textual interpretation (adapted from Macagno, Walton, and Sartor 2018, 82):

- (1) F (a textual utterance) is an observed event.
- (2) E_1 is a satisfactory ascription of meaning to F.
- (3) No alternative interpretations $E_{2\dots n}$ given so far are as satisfactory as E_1 .
- (4) Therefore, E_1 is a plausible interpretation, based on what is known so far.

Central to the idea of drawing an inference to the best explanation is the idea that, given some set of data, we try to determine the hypothesis that suits the data best (H_1), and draw the conclusion that this hypothesis is the most probable one—perhaps given that conditions are met that state the required amount of data, the minimal level of probability, and a minimal difference in probability between H_1 and the second-to-most-probable hypothesis. Truth or probability is inferred from the explanatory power of a hypothesis or candidate explanation.

It is questionable, or so it seems to me, that IBE constitutes a type of inference of its own, as a third type in addition to induction and deduction. We defined *inductive arguments* as arguments in which the premises make the conclusion probable. Likewise, the conclusion of IBES always follows with probability, not with necessity. Just

like inductive arguments, *IBES* are usually considered to be ampliative, in the sense that their conclusions go beyond what is logically contained in the premises; they do not follow logically from their premises, but only with probability (e.g., Douven 2017; Lycan 2002). Just like inductions, they are also considered to be non-monotonic, in the sense that, if an inference from p and q to conclusion z is valid, adding an arbitrary premise r may block the inference from p , q , and r to z (e.g., Lycan 2002; De Jong 2005, 132; Douven 2017). That is to say, new data can change everything. Thus, *IBE* has the properties of an inductive argument. So, either (enumerative) inductive arguments are all *IBES*—as, for example, Harman (1965) thought—or all *IBES* are inductions, perhaps forming a subclass of their own for the typical concern of *IBES* with explanatory power. In neither case is *IBE* a species of the genus *inferences* (or *argumentative structures*, or something like that)—a genus also including deduction and induction.

This relation between induction and *IBE* notwithstanding, *IBES* can also be reconstructed as deductive arguments, just like other inductive arguments. In that case, one takes the examples cited above to leave premises implicit, which could be explicated as follows: if hypothesis H_1 explains the data D better than H_n , then it is rational (or reasonable, or epistemically justified) to accept or to believe that H_1 is true (or likely, or probable)—perhaps, given that conditions are met that state the required amount of data, the minimal level of probability, and a minimal difference in probability between H_1 and the second-to-most-probable hypothesis. This is the constitutive assumption in an *IBE*. As such, this assumption can be used as a premise in—or an assumption of—a deductive argument of the type *modus ponendo ponens*, like this:

- (1) If hypothesis H_x explains the data D better than H_n and meets some standard of sufficient data, minimal level of probability, and so forth, then H_x is probable.
- (2) H_x explains D better than H_n .
- (3) H_x is probable.

Let not appearances mislead us here; the conclusion states that H_x is probable, and it is, as such, a conclusion to a probability. But that does not make it an inductive argument, for the conclusion follows with necessity. Given the premises, it follows with necessity that H_x is probable. Something similar can be done to all inductive arguments. Counting the white swans—a standard example of inductive enumeration—we may explicate the assumption “If all swans I count are white, then probably all swans are white” and reason deductively to the conclusion “All swans are white.” In short, IBE is a form of inductive reasoning that, like all inductive reasoning, can be reconstructed as a deductive argument. Crucially, IBE is a conclusion with regard to the probability of a particular proposition.

IBE helps us to adjudicate multiple and mutually incompatible hypotheses or candidate explanations. Premises are themselves often (ultimately) conclusions from (inductive) arguments. This is also true for the premises of our interpretive arguments. The theory of IBE may therefore help us choose between the multiple and mutually incompatible candidate premises for our arguments by drawing inferences to the best of the possible explanations of a dataset. An important topic in the literature on IBE is the notion of “bestness” of explanation. Given multiple possible hypotheses, which one is best? What qualities make theories or hypotheses good? It is to this question that we turn now.

4.3 – *Theoretical Virtues*

We typically do not think that unnecessarily complex and inherently inconsistent theories with a very limited scope are any good. At least, theories that do not exhibit these vices are to be preferred over such “bad” ones. It makes sense, then, to explicate what counts as virtues or good-making properties for a theory. Moreover, since such virtues should weigh in our deliberation on which theories are better than their rivals, we may want to explicate the theoretical or explanatory virtues in terms of defeasible maxims of rationality or plausibility. That is, although these virtues may function as premis-

es in arguments, they are not absolute laws because they can be defeated—they trade on probabilities, not certainties. Various lists may be provided, and some virtues seem rather similar, such as precision and empirical adequacy. Here is a sample of such virtues, together with their accompanying principles (cf. Douven 2017; Keas 2018).

- (1) *Simplicity*: If proposition *p* explains the same data as rival propositions do, but by reference to fewer causes, entities, variables, or assumptions, or to more likely causes, entities, variables, or assumptions, then *p* is more probable or acceptable than its rivals.
- (2) *Evidential or empirical scope*: If *p* accounts for more (relevant) data than rival claims do, *p* is more probable than these rivals.
- (3) *Fertility*: If *p* offers (or leads to) additional insights or discovery through prediction, coherence, and so forth, more than its rivals would, then *p* is more probable than its rivals.
- (4) *Causal adequacy*: If the causal factors posited (or implied) by *p* plausibly produce the data in need of explanation and the alternatives do not, then *p* is more probable than the alternatives.
- (5) *Universal coherence*: If *p* is more coherent with (at least not contradicted by; perhaps made plausible by) other warranted beliefs than *p*'s rivals, then *p* is more probable than its rivals.
- (6) *Beauty*: If *p* evokes more aesthetic pleasure in properly functioning and sufficiently informed persons than its rivals, then *p* is more probable than its rivals.
- (7) *Durability*: If *p* has survived more testing by successful prediction or plausible accommodation of new data than *p*'s rivals, then *p* is more probable.

One can imagine that these virtues are not uncontroversial. Why would simple explanations be more probable than complex ones? Why would beauty matter to the probability of a proposition? Some may want to argue that these virtues are meaningless. Such critiques are to be welcomed: one just needs to specify the values, em-

ploy them as maxims, and see what objections can be raised against them. Endorsing such virtues will not offer us an easy way out of debates on conflicting theories—we still may need to weigh such theories, in many cases, against each other. But these virtues provide us with explicit reasons to reject a good many of the involved theories that unambiguously fail to live up to such virtues. They only go so far—but they go pretty far nevertheless.

Theoretical virtues are relevant not only in choosing between several mutually exclusive hypotheses that may follow as conclusions from arguments, but also for determining which premises should be part of the argument. Here is the idea. Premises—and, consequently, conclusions—depend on data. Starting with the data, we formulate premises and reason to some conclusion about something *x*. So, if I'm formulating a conclusion about who committed a certain crime or about whether or not human beings have a soul, this conclusion must be inferred deductively or inductively from premises, and these premises must be about the data that support my conclusion. Thus, we have (a) raw data, perhaps of a non-propositional nature; (b) premises, which explicate the data or state claims about the data; and (c) conclusions, deductively or inductively inferred from the premises. To determine the best fit between (a) and (b), we need particular standards, and theoretical virtues provide these. In short, theoretical virtues have two functions in IBES: they are relevant to adjudicating several mutually exclusive hypotheses that may follow as conclusions from arguments, and they are relevant to determining what data should be part of the argument.

Now, let's see whether interpretive practices can be adequately modelled as (possibly involving) IBES.

4.4 – *Interpretive Practices as Inferences to the Best Interpretation*

We may hesitate at the notion of explanation in the phrase “inference to the best explanation.” The notion *explanation* has gained much attention and—perhaps because of that—multiple different definitions. Some have considered this to be a reason to reject the

utility of IBE as a model of interpretive practices.²⁰ Explanations can take various shapes and structures. An explanation of *x* may be an analysis of *x*, an account of *x*, a theory of *x*, or a description of *x*. On some accounts, it involves a description of the causality involved in the phenomenon and its origins, or a reduction from the unfamiliar to the familiar, and so on (cf. Lycan 2002, 411). In all these cases, an explanation may aim for an understanding of *x*, either to be produced in oneself or in a conversation partner. Understanding seems to be the favoured result of an explanation. Interestingly, interpretation is typically thought to have the same goal (in addition to knowledge; see my chapter 2). Are textual interpretations explanations?

If we are to use the term *explanation*, we either have to allow for the wide range of senses in which the term can be adequately used or define it in a specific way and use it as a technical term. The first option seems preferable, given that there is little consensus on technical notions and that the procedure of IBE works for *explanation* in a loose sense. Textual interpretation, as argued in chapter 1, is concerned with solving such textual problems as questions about word meaning, sentence meaning, author's meaning, style, and structure. In our attempts to solve these problems, we arguably form hypotheses or develop arguments. That suits the idea of IBE well. Given the looseness with which the term *explanation* can be used, there seems to be no objection to identifying explanation with interpretation, at least in relation to texts. Thus, inferences to the best explanation include inferences to the best interpretation.

In regard to our question whether interpretive practices can be adequately modelled as IBES, we need to know what is required of an adequate model of an interpretive practice. Presumably, (i) it should ensure that the data are taken into account—and we have seen that IBE does so. Also, (ii) it should ensure that the relation it develops between the data and the interpretans is an evidential one, in the sense that this relation is truth-conducive or at least makes

20. E.g., the view is criticized by Mantzavinos (2014, 52), because according to him, it assumes that it is possible to provide a satisfying analysis of the notions of explanation and best explanation, which he thinks is untenable.

the interpretans more likely than its alternatives. There is no reason to suppose that IBE serves this purpose for interpretive practices worse—or, for that matter, better—than for any other truth-aiming inquiry. Preferably, (iii) an adequate model also has a wide scope, in the sense that it allows for all, or at least a significant number of, interpretive practices—as envisioned here—to be described as such. Our broad focus on interpretive questions as matters of problem-solving ascertains this.

One might wonder if the peculiarities of interpretive practices are sufficiently accounted for in the IBE approach. One such peculiarity often mentioned is the following principle derived from the virtue of charity: the principle of attending to a person (e.g., an author) as a well-meaning, rational person who is consistent, “a believer of truths and a lover of the good” (Davidson 2001, 222; see my chapter 1). This principle is especially worth applying when our interpretive statements about a text suggest that the author was mean, malicious, stupid, speaking falsehoods, and so forth. Since it is particularly pertinent to attempts to understand other persons and, perhaps, animals, this virtue of charity may be a particular addition from the field of hermeneutics to the list of theoretical virtues given above. The model of IBE allows for the inclusion of this virtue and principle of charity.

This virtue approach has an additional interesting feature. The things we call virtues here are sometimes listed as alternatives for truth as the aim of an interpretive practice—e.g., fruitfulness, plausibility, and completeness (so Strube 1988, 161–162). The IBE model suggests that, instead of being alternatives to truth, such properties all factor into the search for truth and provide a way to evaluate the implications of interpretive statements exhibiting these virtues.

In sum, interpretive practices can well be understood as inferences to the best interpretation. This leads us to a related, much-disputed question.

5 – Interpretation and the Question of Method

According to Spinoza, “the method of interpreting Scripture is not at all different from the method of interpreting nature, but wholly concurs with it.”²¹ The methodological monists agree, but the methodological dualists claim that the humanities—or, perhaps, interpretive practices in general—have their own method that is distinct from that of the natural sciences.²² Given that IBE is widely considered to be characteristic of inquiry in the natural sciences and that interpretive practices may involve IBE as well, does this settle the case in favour of the monists?

An evaluation of the idea that interpretive practices employ, or should employ, ordinary scientific methods is encumbered not only by the multiplicity of ideas of what the methodology of science consists of, but also by the associations the notion of method tends to have. Gadamer, for example, cautioned against presuming that the methodological nature of science gives us an objective and *vorurteilslose Wissenschaft*, something which, he argues, is in fact unattainable (Gadamer 1975, e.g., 266, 341; cf. “Anhang,” 483–484). But such presumptions are not inherent in the idea of proceeding in some methodological way. Moreover, the notion of method ranges from very detailed prescriptions—manuals for the writing

21. Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, chapter 7: “Eam autem, ut hic paucis complectar, dico methodum interpretandi Scripturam haud differre a methodo interpretandi naturam, sed cum ea prorsus convenire.”

22. Caution is required in classifying historical authors as methodological monists or dualists. Usually, Mill ([1843] 1911) and Helmholtz ([1862] 1903) are considered monists, but this should not obscure the differences between the two. For one, while Helmholtz defends the humanities’ own peculiar nature, Mill only legitimizes, in comparison to the natural sciences, the “inexactness” of the “moral sciences” (the term that Jacob Heinrich Wilhelm Schiel translated in German with the new term *Geisteswissenschaft* [Mill 1849]). Windelband ([1894] 1924) and Dilthey (1973) are usually considered dualists, again, with different motivations.

of software, for example—to something as abstract and general as IBE.²³

In this chapter, I argued that there is a structural similarity between inferences to the best explanation as (we assume) it is used in the sciences and inferences to the best interpretation. This seems to support a monist view. But interpreters of texts seem to go about their tasks in ways that are different from those of their colleagues in the departments of the natural and social sciences. They have no laboratories to set up experiments—computers and searchable databases are typically among their most advanced machinery. They hardly ever go out to take surveys among populations, they are less involved in formulating and testing predictions, and so on. It may be hard to see similarity in methodology here, beyond the more abstract level of IBE. There is, moreover, another difference. In many sciences, we can generate new data by developing experiments. That possibility is not often available to interpreters of texts. The corpus of relevant texts, for example, cannot be enlarged at will, and interpreters hardly ever get the chance to make predictions based on their interpretive hypotheses and have them tested by new research.²⁴

One could argue that these differences pertain only to the context of discovery and not to the context of justification—and that seems right. We took IBE to be concerned with the justification of statements, and in that respect, there does not seem to be any significant difference between practices of interpreting texts and other

23. It has been rightly observed that Gadamer's notion of method—the scientific method as the only, objective, certain, and disengaged way to acquire knowledge—belonged to a positivism that “was rapidly drawing to a close (and probably already over) when *Truth and Method* was published” (Weinsheimer 1985, 3).

24. There are exceptions, of course, when new manuscripts are recovered. Examples are the Rosetta Stone, which was key to the interpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contributed to the study of the Hebrew Bible. But still, these are not examples of enlarging the dataset at will.

truth-aiming practices. Moreover, the methodological differences pointed out are of a more concrete nature than the rather abstract idea of an IBE; and commonality on a more abstract level is not wiped out by differences on a less abstract level. Monism, then, is feasible with respect to this more abstract level. Note that dualism would be unfeasible both on this and on a more concrete level. This would make room for pluralism, for a chemist may be involved in rather different concrete practices than a physicist or a mathematician.

6 – Conclusion

A number of questions can be raised against the idea of interpretive practices as evidence-based quests for truth in which we try to arrive at an inference to the best interpretation by developing arguments that are subject to the ordinary standards of logic and argumentation. In answer to these questions, I argued that, even though many interpretive claims come without explicit defence for good reasons, there are contexts in which their justification is desirable or required. In justifying them, we face the problems of deciding which data are relevant and which data count as evidence for our interpretive claims. I argued that clearly defining *data* and *evidence* allows us, in principle, to settle this. Truth-aiming interpretive practices are subject to the normal rules of argumentation and logic, and they can be modelled as inferences to the best interpretation. That is to say, interpretive practices also involve the inferential move of inferences to the best explanation, referring to theoretical virtues to decide which explanation or interpretation is best. This similarity between interpretive practices and other truth-aiming inquiries supports the monist view. Yet, this is not to deny that there are significant differences between them when it comes to identifying the relevant types of data and concrete research procedures. The analogy between inferences to the best explanation and inferences to the best interpretation does not indicate any more concrete similarity in methodology.

5 – Hermeneutical Circularity: Types and Epistemological Significance

1 – Introduction

Many texts on hermeneutics and interpretation speak of a *hermeneutical circle*. What this term refers to, however, differs among its users—in fact, it has been suggested that the term’s vagueness contributes to its attraction.¹ Perhaps due to this vagueness, it is not very clear what the epistemic implications are if a particular cognitive process involves a hermeneutical circle.² Is hermeneutical circularity an epistemically positive phenomenon, enabling knowledge or understanding? Is it a negative phenomenon, preventing knowledge or understanding from arising? Or are there no epistemic implications inherent in hermeneutical circularity? The previous chapter addressed the relation between argumentative practices and interpretive practices. This chapter examines one particular sort of argument or phenomenon often associated with textual interpretation.

The aim of this chapter is to identify and describe various notions of hermeneutical circularity and to explore the epistemological implications of each of them. First, section 2 presents the results of an analysis of the various ways in which the hermeneutical circle

1. Weimar (2000, 32–33). Cf. Fricke (2007, 50), and two proposals to disambiguate the term in Göttner (1973, chapter 3) and Stegmüller (1973).

2. A variety of definitions are presented below. The implications of some notions of hermeneutical circularity for acquiring knowledge or understanding are considered to be positive by, for instance, Heidegger (e.g., 1927, 153, 315) and Gadamer (e.g., 1975, 251), and as potentially negative by, for instance, Stegmüller (1973, e.g., 31) and Hirsch (1967, 166); but, due to the different uses of the term, it is not always clear whether they refer to the same concept. Cf. Grondin (2016, 299, 301).

is described in the literature. As it turns out, each of these descriptions can be reconstructed in terms of a binary relation. I identify two pairs of relata and three ways to specify the binary relation. In total, then, there are six ways to spell out the notion of hermeneutical circle. Second, for each of these six notions, I consider whether they raise epistemic problems, provide epistemic advantages, or are epistemically neutral, or whether the formulations of hermeneutical circularity implicate none of these three options, since the formulations would underdetermine any of them (§ 3).

In this chapter, as in the rest of this book, the interpretation of texts is taken as a paradigmatic example of the sort of process that could involve a hermeneutical circle. Successful interpretation, in that case, results in understanding of or knowledge about a text. This is not to deny that attempts to understand objects other than texts, such as paintings and gestures, may involve one or more hermeneutical circles as well. Moreover, just for ease in reading, reference is made to “understanding” rather than to “understanding of or knowledge about a text.”

2 – Conceptualizing Hermeneutical Circularity: Six Types

The first purpose of this chapter is to describe the various notions of hermeneutical circle as they can be found in the literature. My aim is not just to list quotations but to explicate the content of these notions and to examine how they relate to each other. In my attempt to make their differences clear, the presented reconstructions may appear to be more specific than their sources warrant. Even if that were the case, there is much to gain from such reconstructions. For one, they lay out different theoretical options for explicating the notion of hermeneutical circularity. Especially Gadamer’s descriptions of this notion are diverse in a way that can best be accounted for by taking them to be descriptions of different phenomena. Moreover, the explications allow us to examine and discuss the proposed concepts in further detail, to indicate where rejections or

adaptations are needed and new contributions are possible. In other words, they provide us with something to work with. Although no variety or type is deliberately left out, no exhaustiveness is claimed for the list of notions distinguished here, if only for the ubiquity of the term and the variety of its uses.

One way to structure the many descriptions of *hermeneutical circle* in the literature is to analyse them in terms of binary relations—i.e., as relations between two relata. An example of a binary relation is expressed in the sentence “James is taller than Billy”: the relation is that of *being taller than*, and the two relata are, respectively, *James* and *Billy*. This should give us a helpful structure to get two aspects in view with respect to which the accounts of hermeneutical circles differ, viz., the nature of the pairs of relata and the nature of the relation between them.

In descriptions of hermeneutical circularity, we may identify two types of pairs of relata and three kinds of relations.³

One of the two different types of pairs of relata identifiable in the literature on hermeneutical circularity is the pair of *whole* and *parts* as found in, for example, the following quotations. According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, “Everywhere full knowledge comes in this apparent circle, that every particular can only be understood from the general of which it is a part, and the other way round.”⁴ The terms *particular* and *general* were later on commonly replaced by *parts* and *whole*: “The hermeneutical circle is that of the whole and its parts: we can only understand the parts of a text, or any body of meaning, out of a general idea of its whole, yet we can only gain this understanding of the whole by understanding its parts” (Grondin 2016, 299). Going beyond texts as objects of interpreta-

3. The two types of pairs are also distinguished by Thiselton (2005, 281) and Grondin (2016, e.g., 299). The labels and descriptions of the three kinds of relations are my own.

4. Schleiermacher (1838, “Einleitung,” § 20.1): “Überall ist das vollkommene Wissen in diesem scheinbaren Kreise, daß jedes Besondere nur aus dem Allgemeinen dessen Theil es ist verstanden werden kann und umgekehrt.” He does not use the term *hermeneutical circle*.

tion, some say that the hermeneutical circle pertains to “the fact that we cannot understand the parts of a strange culture, practice, theory, language, or whatever, unless we know something about how the whole thing works, whereas we cannot get a grasp on how the whole works until we have some understanding of its parts” (Rorty 1979, 319).⁵

These quotations propound the idea that the understanding of a part of something *x* depends or can depend—in some sense of *depending* to be considered later—on one’s understanding of the whole of *x*, and vice versa. The last quotation extends the range of *x* so as to include the wholes, and their respective parts, of a foreign culture, practice, theory, language, “or whatever” (Rorty 1979, 319). As said before, textual interpretation is here taken to be the paradigm case of the sort of process that could involve a hermeneutical circle. The *whole* of a text, then, could be a poem, a book, a law, an article, an oeuvre, and so forth, or a particular unit of these, such as a section, paragraph, or sentence. The idea is that whenever we do not understand a particular word in a sentence, or a sentence in a paragraph, we use—or could or should use—what we know about a greater whole of the textual unit to understand that particular part. The idea is that our interpretation of, for example, the individual lines of a text depends, or can depend, on our knowledge that the

5. See also, e.g., Weimar (2000, 31): the hermeneutical circle refers to “wechselseitige Abhängigkeit von Verständnis eines Ganzen und Verstehen seiner Teile.” Similarly, Jollivet and Thouard (2015, 75; cf. 76) have it that hermeneutical circularity is a “principe de base de l’interprétation selon lequel le tout ne peut être compris qu’à partir de ses parties, la compréhension des parties présupposant elle-même toujours le tout auquel elles participent.” Danneberg (1995) argues that, contrary to what is often thought, Friedrich Ast was not the first to identify a “circle” in interpretive reasoning (Ast 1808, 179ff.). An earlier case is found in the work of Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider (1776–1848), who described the circle in *Über die historisch-dogmatische Auslegung des Neuen Testaments* two years before Ast. According to Weimar (2000, 32), August Boeckh was the first to use the composite term *hermeneutical circle* in a lecture he gave repeatedly between 1809 and 1865.

whole of the text is a poem, or a newspaper article. And, the other way round, we may come to know the genre of that text by studying its parts. This first type of pairs of relata involved in hermeneutical circularity—the pair of an interpretandum’s parts and its whole—I call *type A*.

The whole need not refer to a text only, or to a set of texts, such as an oeuvre. Much of the literature also seems to allow for the whole to include such data as a whole language. This, however, raises questions. For example, what does it mean to understand (the whole of) a language? For the sake of charitable reading of the literature on hermeneutical circularity, I will assume such questions to have a satisfying answer.

Let’s focus on individual texts for a moment. The notion of “understanding the whole of a text” deserves some clarification, and it is useful for my inquiry if we can be a little more precise here. What do we understand when we understand the whole of a text? There are at least four options.

(1) S understands the whole of a text if S understands everything about the whole of the text, including all its parts. This is a very demanding claim and probably for that reason foreign—to my knowledge—to descriptions of hermeneutical circularity in the literature. It will be set aside in the rest of this chapter.

(2) S understands the whole of a text if S understands some part of the whole. Suppose we understand one word of the Rosetta Stone. This means we understand something about the whole: that one word is the specific part that we understand about the whole of the Rosetta Stone. According to option (2), we can therefore be said to understand the whole. Option (2) makes “understanding the whole of something *x*” redundant and the notion of hermeneutical circularity superfluous: understanding the whole of *x* and understanding a part of it would, on (2), amount to the same thing. I will therefore ignore this second option as well.

(3) S understands the whole of a text if S understands something about the text that is true of the text as a whole. An example of this is one’s understanding of a text’s genre, since genre is a property of the text as a whole. Both this option and option (4) are relevant to the rest of this chapter.

(4) S understands the whole of a text if S understands something about a part of a text in relation to other parts of it or in virtue of its being a part of a larger whole. Later on, we will see an example in which the meaning of one particular word that occurs multiple times in a particular whole is determined by reference to the other occurrences of that word. In the rest of this chapter, when I speak of the whole in type A relata, I refer to options (3) and (4).

A second pair of relata identifiable in some descriptions of a hermeneutical circle became particularly influential through the work of Gadamer.⁶ We may call this pair of relata *pre-understanding* and *subsequent understanding*. In one quotation, Gadamer says that when one seeks to understand a text, one “puts forward a sense of the whole as soon as a first sense becomes apparent in the text.”⁷ In seeking to understand a text, we project or assume a sense of what the text is about. An explanation of a text starts with prejudices (*Vorurteilen*), preconceptions (*Vorbegriffen*), outlines (*Ent-*

6. Thiselton (2005, 282) maintains that the positive view on pre-understanding is most widely associated with Rudolf Bultmann, though also present in Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer. He even identifies a “rudimentary awareness” of it in a 1538 work of Heinrich Bullinger, and he notes Johann Martin Chladenius’s emphasis, in 1742, on the relevance of a perspective (*Sehepunkt*) in interpretation (Chladenius [1742] 1976). Schmitz-Emans (2007, 444) refers to Gadamer for three hermeneutical circles, two of which seem to involve type B relata: “Der Interpret geht innerhalb seines jeweiligen Erwartungshorizonts mit einem eigenen Vorverständnis an den Text heran, der im Interpretationsprozess aber auf dieses Vorverständnis zurückwirkt und die Erwartungen modifiziert.” The other circle is described as follows: “Während der zu interpretierende Text seinen Ort in einem historischen Horizont hat, steht der Interpret in einem Gegenwartshorizont. Im Interpretationsprozess treten beide Horizonte in Wechselbezug; im Fall gelingender Interpretation verschmelzen sie miteinander.” See also Dalferth (2018, 139), who argues, in relation to hermeneutical circularity, that we cannot understand anything without having a *Gesichtspunkt*. Cf. Göttner (1973, 136).

7. Gadamer (1975, 251): “Er wirft sich einen Sinn des Ganzen voraus, sobald sich ein erster Sinn im Text zeigt.”

würfe), or opinions (*Vormeinungen*) that one has prior to the consideration of the object of understanding, and these are to be replaced by better ones in the process in which one comes to understand the relevant object. These four terms—*Vorurteilen*, *Vorbegriffen*, *Entwürfe*, *Vormeinungen*—are used more or less synonymously. Gadamer argues that the notion *Vorurteil* or *prejudice* was mistakenly discredited in the Enlightenment and uses it in the sense of *prejudgment*, a judgment one has prior to approaching a potential object of understanding.

The idea of this second type of pairs of *relata* is that, for example, in starting to read Plato's *Meno*, we automatically use our present understanding of words such as *virtue*, *good*, *definition*, and *hypothesis* in our attempt to understand their occurrences in the text. Or, to give another example, a liberation theologian may, due to his training and experiences, expect the operation of power structures and instances of oppression in texts he encounters, and he may hence describe the text's content predominantly in terms of power and oppression. Subsequently, the resulting beliefs about the text can newly inform his notions of power and oppression with which he approaches texts. One's attempt to understand a text is affected by such preconceptions. Put differently, our pre-understanding determines or constitutes the perspective or standpoint from which we develop our interpretation. It is typically held that, in principle, such preconceptions can be adapted to the object of understanding if we encounter inconsistencies between this object and our preconceptions (e.g., Gadamer 1959, 27; 1975, 251, 253). This type of *relata* we may label *type B*; it involves a relation between one's prior beliefs and resulting beliefs in subsequent stages of the understanding process. The next chapter addresses the epistemological questions about the function of such pre-understanding (or perspective) and its implications. Here, the focus is on pre-understanding as involved in hermeneutical circularity.

The main difference between type A and type B is that the former is concerned with a relation—of a kind to be explored later on in this chapter—between two units of an object of understanding (*viz.*, a part of it and its whole), whereas type B is concerned with a

relation between a subject's prior beliefs (or pre-understanding) and his resulting beliefs in subsequent stages of the understanding process. In other words, the first type is concerned with properties of the object of understanding; the second, with the interpreting subject. Moreover, the second has an aspect of chronological order—prior beliefs and resulting beliefs—which the first lacks. Arguably, the first type does have a temporal aspect: the idea is that, starting from either the parts or the whole of x at time t_1 , one seeks to understand the whole of x or its parts at time t_2 . However, the difference with type B relata is that there is in principle no set chronological order in which part and whole are considered.

This concludes my discussion of the two types of pairs of relata that can be found in descriptions of hermeneutical circularity, with type B being particularly popular among theorists inspired by Gadamer.

The nature of the relation between the relata in these pairs is often left somewhat implicit. The idea of a circle is usually understood in a metaphorical sense, referring to mutual dependence (cf. Schleiermacher 1838, "Einleitung," § 20.1; Heidegger 1927, e.g., 153, 315; Gadamer 1975, 277). The view that this relation between the relata is a circular relation in the way in which an argument can be logically circular is generally rejected (Heidegger 1927, 153; Gadamer 1975, 251; Mantzavinos 2009; Fricke 2007, 50). Some have argued that the metaphor of a spiral is more apt than that of a circle, because the relation is one of progressing belief formation (Bolten 1985; Fricke 2007, 50). Yet others reject both metaphors as mistaken (Stegmüller 1973; Weimar 2000, 31–32).

The metaphorical language leaves much to be desired. The circle metaphor suggests that the understanding of an element x through the understanding of an element y returns to the same understanding of x . That is inadequate, since in all descriptions of hermeneutical circularity, the understanding of y does not return to exactly the same understanding of x , but leads to a new understanding of x . Moreover, the idea of some sort of circular relation is especially implausible for type B relata, which, as I argued above, have an aspect of chronological order: the order of pre-understanding and subse-

quent understanding is fixed. That said, *hermeneutical circularity* is an established term, and the odds are probably against replacing it with *hermeneutical spirality*, even though this term is more appropriate. To give the descriptions of hermeneutical circularity found in the literature a charitable reading, I explicate this metaphor of circularity for type B *relata* as a sort of feedback loop: one starts with pre-understanding, one acquires resulting understanding, and this resulting understanding informs the pre-understanding in the next stage of one's understanding process.

The relation between the pairs is a dependence relation of sorts. One of this chapter's aims is to reconstruct the different sorts of dependence relations as they can be found in, or are implied by, descriptions of hermeneutical circularity. It seems to me that there are three ways to specify the dependence relation involved in hermeneutical circularity (to be considered in the next section in more detail). These relations are usually not distinguished and described in this manner in the literature—the explications I offer here are reconstructions. As it happens, we can identify three kinds of relations in the literature; two of them apply to both types of pairs of *relata*, and one of them applies only to one type.

The first way to specify the dependence relation is as a *concurrency between the two relata*. If the one *relatum* is involved, then so is the other. Both *relata* are, as a matter of fact, taken into account in an interpretive process. This concurrence is—so the proponents—actually present in one's attempts to understand something.

The second way to specify the dependence relation is in terms of a *transcendental relation*. By a transcendental relation, we mean a relation in which something *x* is a condition for the possibility of something *y* to occur. This possibility condition *x* for *y* expresses a necessary—though not necessarily sufficient—condition that must be met for *y* to be possible at all.

The third way to specify the dependence relation is in terms of an *evidential relation*, in which case something *x* is evidence, ground, or justification for something *y*.

Thus, we can identify the following six ways to spell out the notion of hermeneutical circularity (with *x* in this chapter taken to be a text):

- (I) In trying to understand the whole of something x, we take parts of x into account, and vice versa. (type A, relation 1).
- (II) In trying to understand something x, we employ our pre-understanding of x, and the resulting understanding informs (corrects, complements, etc.) the pre-understanding in the next stage of the understanding process. (type B, relation 1).
- (III) It is impossible to understand the whole of something x without understanding a part of x, and vice versa. (type A, relation 2).
- (IV) It is impossible to understand something x without employing one's pre-understanding of x, and the resulting understanding informs one's pre-understanding in the next stage of the understanding process. (type B, relation 2).
- (v) An understanding of the whole of something x must be justified by reference to (an understanding of) its parts, and vice versa. (type A, relation 3).
- (VI) An understanding of something x must be justified by our pre-understanding of x, and it functions as a justificatory ground for the understanding we start from in the next stage of the understanding process. (type B, relation 3).

Section 3 aims to describe the six notions of hermeneutical circularity in more detail, to show how they are rooted in the literature, to briefly consider whether they are plausible or sensible, and to provide an epistemological evaluation of each of them. Though not located in the literature, (VI) is discussed as an instructive example suggested by the systematic structure of my analysis.

3 – Elaboration and Epistemological Evaluation

Hermeneutical circles are said to occur in attempts to understand laws, sacred scriptures, historical sources, literary texts, art products, and so on. It seems plausible that knowledge about or understanding of such objects is valuable. Hence, the following questions arise for each of the six hermeneutical circles, assuming they de-

scribe real phenomena (or, if they are normative, valid norms): Do they raise epistemic problems, or do they provide epistemic advantages in the process of obtaining knowledge or understanding, or are they neutral? Or can they, in and of themselves, not be classified as *advantageous, negative, or neutral*?

Rather straightforward notions of epistemic problems, advantages, and neutrality suffice for my purposes. Let *epistemic aims* be aims such as understanding, knowledge, and epistemically justified beliefs. Something *x* is an *epistemic problem* for someone *S* if, in *S*'s attempt to achieve epistemic aim *A*, *x* hinders *S* or even prevents *S* from achieving *A*. This does not necessarily mean that the problem is unsolvable; it could be a surmountable challenge. Something *x* is an *epistemic advantage* for someone *S* if, in *S*'s attempt to achieve epistemic aim *A*, *x* supports *S*. That is, *S* would be epistemically worse off without *A*. Something *x* is *epistemically neutral* for someone *S* if, in *S*'s attempt to achieve epistemic aim *A*, *x* neither supports nor hinders *S*. In that case, whether or not *S* achieves *A* is fully independent of *x*. Finally, a description does not allow for classification into any of these three categories if it is not specific enough to decide the issue of whether a particular circle falls into either of these three categories.

3.1 – (1) *In trying to understand the whole of something x, we take parts of x into account, and vice versa*

The dependence relation involved in this notion of hermeneutical circularity is that of an actual concurrence—in this case, a concurrence between considering the parts and the whole of *x* in our attempt to understand both. Whenever someone tries to understand a part of something *x*, he actually takes the whole of *x* into account, and vice versa. The consideration of parts and whole concur in our attempts at understanding.

A formulation of a hermeneutical circle of this kind thus agrees with the claim that *hermeneutical circularity* is a name for what actually happens in the understanding process. An example of one such claim is the following (Mantzavinos 2009, 308–309):

It thus appears that in understanding, the phenomenon called “hermeneutic circle” is at work. As soon as a word occurs, people attempt to extract as much meaning as possible out of it: they do not ... wait until a sentence is completed to decide on how to interpret a word. ... If a sentence contains unfamiliar words, which cannot be understood immediately, then one spends additional time at the end of the phrase or the sentence to integrate the meaning.⁸

The phenomenon called *hermeneutical circle*, on this view, is the process involved in our attempts to understand a textual unit—in this case, a sentence.

We may consider (1) to have some plausibility. Here is an example of an interpretive problem, one we will refer to later on as well. The King James Bible translates Ecclesiastes 3:11 as follows: “He hath made every *thing* beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” One interpretive issue here is the meaning of “he hath set the world in their heart.” The King James Bible agrees with the Vulgate in translating the Hebrew *olaam* (עולם) as “world,” but this translation is widely contested. This Hebrew word commonly translates as “eternity” in English. Others suggest translating it as “a sense of duration” (Murphy 1992, 29; also Aalders 1948, 77) and yet others think “toil,” “knowledge,” or “ignorance” is the better rendering (see for references Barton 1908, 105; Seow 1997, 163). Now, if (1) is true (that is, if it is indeed the case that in trying to understand the whole of something *x*, we take parts of *x* into account, and vice versa), then we may expect commentators to try to relate this word (the part) to its broader context (the whole). And indeed, many commentators take into account some whole of which *olaam* is a part: the immediate textual context (e.g., Aalders

8. Mantzavinos (2009, 307) also thinks that “nowadays psycholinguistics does not only offer more precise descriptions of the phenomenon, it also provides explanations of the underlying search processes and mechanisms of language comprehension.”

1948, 77; Seow 1997, 163; Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004, 268), the rest of Ecclesiastes (e.g., Barton 1908, 105; Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004, 267–268), and also other units that may be thought of as a whole of which this verse is a part, such as Hebrew wisdom literature (see for references Seow 1997, 163), contemporary Hebrew language (e.g., Aalders 1948, 76), and other Semitic languages (see for references Seow 1997, 163). This practice also works the other way round (hence the “and vice versa” in [1]): one takes individual parts, like individual words, into account when trying to understand the whole of an object of understanding. It seems unlikely that a single word or sentence could provide one with understanding of the whole, but it may contribute to it. Suppose one reads a few lines of Ecclesiastes, noting its style and its theme. Such knowledge of a part of the book may contribute to one’s understanding of something about the whole of the book, or in fact provide such understanding—for example, the understanding that the book belongs to the genre of ancient wisdom literature.

Let us, for the sake of argument, suppose that (1) is true, or sometimes true. That is, let us suppose that in trying to understand a part of a particular text *x*, we indeed take a greater whole of the text into account, and the other way round. It is worth noting that (1) does not claim anything more: it may be that (1) merely gives a proper description of what happens in interpretive practices that nevertheless do not lead to any understanding. Would the truth of (1) affect the epistemic status of the beliefs resulting from a cognitive practice for which (1) holds?

The answer is that we cannot really tell. It could be the case that our understanding of the whole of a text aids us in our attempt to understand a part of it, by informing us about the way in which the word is used in other places. In that case, (1) would seem to be an epistemic advantage. But (1), as such, does not imply an epistemic advantage or problem, because it depends on the relevance of the whole by which an understanding of a part is to be justified. As noted above, the kinds of wholes involved in a hermeneutical circle are not necessarily limited to the whole of a particular text (Ecclesiastes, in the above example). Such wholes could also be (i) any other

texts by the same author, if known; (ii) a particular part of the text, if the part belongs to a particular unity within the text; (iii) a particular literary genre, such as Hebrew or Semitic wisdom literature; or (iv) a particular language, such as ancient Hebrew or a related language. But suppose the word occurs in Modern Hebrew as well: Does (v) Modern Hebrew text then count as relevant data? It would be incorrect to simply assume semantic continuity based on morphological similarity. And that is true not just in the case of morphological similarity between Modern Hebrew and the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes, but also in the case of morphological similarity between the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes and the Hebrew of the other wholes listed in (i)–(iv). If we take the wholes of (i)–(v) into account for our understanding of a particular part of Ecclesiastes (say, of a particular word or allusion), we may end up with the wrong data—that is, we may end up with assuming similarities where there are none. Moreover, it could also prevent us from noticing a development in an author’s thought, or a new, extraordinary use of that word or allusion.⁹ Referring to any of these wholes in order to understand a particular part assumes that they provide us with relevant data. That assumption, however, may not be warranted. As argued in the previous chapter, we need to apply the criterion for the selection of relevant data to determine which wholes are relevant to our interpretive question. In the previous chapter, I offered a theoretical solution to the problem of data and evidence selection. So, we know what the criteria are for something to count as data and evidence. Yet that theoretical solution does not settle the practical problem of identifying which wholes meet these criteria. Since (1) is meant as a description, it will not do to simply stipulate that the whole is a *relevant* whole. Moreover, if we reformulated (1) to restrict it to relevant wholes, the plausibility of (1) would decrease: it simply is not the case that, as a matter of fact, we take the *relevant* whole of x into account when trying to understand a part of something x. In sum, therefore, (1) as such does not involve epistemic ad-

9. See, e.g., Skinner (1969), who rightly objects to the idea that a writer can be expected to exhibit “inner coherence” throughout his oeuvre.

vantages or problems; depending on further qualifications, it could involve either one of them. Thus, (I) is underdetermined: absent further specifications, we cannot tell to which category it belongs.

3.2 – (II) *In trying to understand something x, we employ our pre-understanding of x, and the resulting understanding informs (corrects, complements, etc.) the pre-understanding in the next stage of the understanding process*

When type B relata were introduced, reference was made to Gadamer's idea that, in seeking to understand a text, we project or assume certain things about texts. One way Gadamer seems to think about this is expressed in (II) (e.g., Gadamer 1959, 27). In our attempt to understand something x, we start from preconceptions that determine, to some extent, how we understand x (or what we think we understand of x). Since the preconceptions can be revised, due to what one learns in the process of interpretation, the relation is supposed by Gadamer to be symmetrical.¹⁰ The idea seems to be that in coming to understand x, we employ preconceptions p, q, and r, and even though these preconceptions determine our understanding of x to some extent, there is room for other factors to determine our understanding of x as well and to correct our preconceptions p, q, and r. Only if p, q, and r are not the only factors determining our understanding of x can the relation be symmetrical, because if our preconceptions determined our understanding of x entirely, there would be nothing to occasion their adaptation. Hence, the two kinds of relata here are the preconceptions and the resulting understanding (our type B relata). And since Gadamer proposes this notion of hermeneutical circularity as a description of what actually happens when we try to understand something, it seems proper to analyse it in terms of a concurrence—in the sense that when the one relatum is involved, then so is the other—between type B relata.

As with (I), whether (II) is true is an empirical question that we

10. Gadamer (1959, 27): "Im Ausarbeiten eines solchen Vorentwurfs, der freilich beständig von dem her revidiert wird, was sich bei weiterem Eindringen in den Sinn ergibt, besteht das Verstehen dessen, was dasteht."

need not settle here, but perhaps we can see that (II) is not implausible. For example, when one author states that the not uncommon rendering of the Hebrew phrase referred to before as “God has put eternity in their heart” “makes no sense” (Barton 1908, 105), he seems to be employing a pre-understanding with respect to the text: he assumes that Ecclesiastes is a text that makes sense, and he has a pre-understanding, apparently, of what makes sense and what doesn’t.

Suppose, then, that (II) describes an actual phenomenon. What are the implications for the epistemic status of our interpretive beliefs? Our answer here must be similar to the answer to the same question with respect to (I): we cannot tell. Perhaps one’s pre-understanding fosters epistemically valuable purposes. A prior view of what makes sense and what doesn’t, for example, seems to function in *argumenta ad absurdum*, and these are widely accepted as proper arguments. Likewise, a preconception of what does and does not make sense may aid us in textual interpretation. Moreover, if we count linguistic knowledge among our preconceptions, then it is hard to see how we could come to understand a text without such preconceptions. But one’s preconceptions could also be entirely distorted or inadequate. Unless they are corrected in the interpretive process, they could hinder the understanding process or even prevent us from gaining understanding. For such a correction, however, there is no guarantee. We cannot tell the difference between a correct and a false pre-understanding on the basis of (II) alone; (II) is underdetermined in that respect.

3.3 – (III) *It is impossible to understand the whole of something x without understanding a part of x, and vice versa*

The second pair of ways to spell out the notion of hermeneutical circularity takes the dependence relation to be a transcendental relation, expressing something x as a possibility condition for something y. In this case, the dependence relation is a transcendental relation because understanding the whole of x is a possibility condition for understanding a part of x, and the other way round. It seems to me that this is an adequate take on descriptions of the relation in-

volved in hermeneutical circularity according to which “the circle is that of the whole and its parts: we can only understand the parts of a text, or any body of meaning, out of a general idea of its whole, yet we can only gain this understanding of the whole by understanding its parts” (Grondin 2016, 299).¹¹ Here, the words “can only” suggest that understanding the whole of a text is only possible if one understands the parts of a text, and vice versa. Thus, according to such formulations, understanding one *relatum* is a possibility condition for understanding the other *relatum*.

If (III) were true, no understanding of parts and wholes would be possible. No understanding of either *x* or *y* is possible if understanding *x* is a possibility condition for understanding *y* and understanding *y* is a possibility condition for understanding *x*. If the two *relata* are each other’s possibility conditions, neither one can be understood.

As it stands, however, (III) is false. For it is possible to understand a part of something without understanding its whole. For example, one could understand the Hebrew word *olaam* to some extent, without understanding the relevant whole of which it is a part. If one knows that it is typically translated as “eternity,” one has some understanding of the word—it is not as foreign as a hieroglyph one never encountered before—without thereby immediately understanding its meaning in the context of this particular textual whole. It is probably less common to understand or know something about the whole of a text without understanding any of its parts, but it is not impossible. We may come to understand that a piece of text in a foreign-language newspaper is a weather forecast because we recognize the accompanying weather map. In that case,

11. Cf. Stegmüller (1973, 28–29): “Das eigensprachliche Interpretationsdilemma”: “um A zu verstehen, müßte man erst B wissen; um ein Wissen über B zu erwerben, müßte man erst A verstehen.” The “must” in this sentence indicates the necessity of understanding, respectively, B and A, in order for there to be the possibility of understanding, respectively, A and B. Similarly (with respect to the nature of the relation) Ast (1808, 179); Hirsch (1967, 76); Jollivet and Thouard (2015, 75).

we may say we understand something about the whole, namely, its genre, without understanding its parts.

In short, we can understand a part without understanding the whole of which it is a part, and the other way round. Therefore, (III) is false.

3.4 – (IV) *It is impossible to understand something x without employing one's pre-understanding of x, and the resulting understanding informs one's pre-understanding in the next stage of the understanding process*

This fourth notion of hermeneutical circularity is one way of explicating the idea that the pre-understanding involved in the hermeneutical circle is constitutive of understanding. Statement (II) says that, when we face a candidate object of understanding, we do not approach it with a mind like a tabula rasa but bring all sorts of concepts, ideas, concerns, and so forth to bear on that object. Notion (IV) is different from (II) in that it claims that we *need* such concepts, ideas, and so forth in order to be able to attain understanding at all. These preconceptions, pre-understandings, or prejudices are necessary for understanding, and in that sense, they are (part of) what enables understanding.

Especially Gadamer elaborated on this idea—for which he refers to Heidegger (Gadamer 1959, 26–27, referring to Heidegger 1927, 153; cf. Heidegger 1927, 4)—and he calls the hermeneutical circle an “ontological structural moment of understanding,” rather than a methodological circle (Gadamer 1975, 277; cf. Heidegger 1927, 153). As such, it is something “positive,” making understanding possible (Gadamer 1975, 251). Prejudgments are transcendental conditions for understanding (cf. Gadamer 1975, 261).

Whether or not (IV) is plausible depends on the sort of preconceptions we allow for. If they include correct preconceptions provided by linguistic capacities (as suggested by Gadamer 1975, e.g., 252), (IV) seems plausible. When we read the Hebrew phrase we considered in an English translation above, we employ our knowledge of the relevant language to understand the text. The relation expressed in (IV) can, in that case, not be understood as a strictly

circular process—metaphorically speaking—because type B has a chronological aspect that type A lacks. The circle can only start with preconceptions or pre-understanding and then lead to a resulting understanding, not the other way round. However, our understanding of a particular word may be adjusted to the whole if it turns out that our initial take on the word does not accord with how it is used in the whole of a particular text. Similarly, our understanding of an individual word might cause us to adjust our understanding of the whole. Again, the spiral metaphor is more apt than the circle metaphor.

Since there is no strictly symmetrical relation between the two relata in (IV), the sceptical problem we noted for (III) does not arise for (IV). There may be a feedback loop to one's preconceptions—they can be adjusted—but only when the circular movement has started. The process has to start with the pre-understanding in order to arrive at understanding. This required starting point prevents the sceptical challenge from rearing its head (or, at least, from rearing it here). For type A, there is no principled reason why the process should start with the one relatum and not the other, and the one relatum can only be understood through understanding the other. For type B, the occurrence of our pre-understanding does not depend on the other relatum (i.e., understanding x).

Suppose that (IV) is true. Is it epistemologically advantageous, disadvantageous, or neutral? We could think of this transcendental relation as a hindrance to understanding, since it sets a requirement on understanding. We need to meet this requirement if we are to understand something. But it is of course mistaken to deem something an epistemological problem if it sets certain requirements for obtaining a certain epistemic goal, such as understanding. It would be an epistemological problem if it were impossible, or difficult, to meet such requirements. Yet that is not implied by (IV). Apparently, one's pre-understanding can start the understanding process and can in that way contribute to attaining the epistemic goal of understanding—unless, of course, a false pre-understanding negatively influences the resulting understanding. Falsehoods could be confirmed (or insufficiently corrected) in the understanding process—an obvious hindrance to our epistemic purposes. As it stands, how-

ever, (1v) is in and of itself not epistemically advantageous or problematic; absent further qualifications, we cannot tell to which category it belongs.

3.5 – (v) *An understanding of the whole of something x must be justified by reference to (an understanding of) its parts, and vice versa*

The third pair of ways to spell out the relation involved in hermeneutical circularity is in terms of a justificatory relation of an evidentialist kind. On this evidentialist notion of justification, a subject S is epistemically justified in believing a proposition p iff S has adequate evidence, data, or grounds for p. In the previous chapter, we noted that there are various ways to spell out the notions of evidence and of “S has adequate evidence for p,” but no further specification is needed for my purposes here. Applied to type A *relata*, the idea is that an understanding of the whole of something x is justified by grounding it on (an understanding of) its parts, and the other way round (since it is a symmetrical relation).

Statement (v) aims to explicate such descriptions of the hermeneutical circle as the following: “This is one way of trying to express what has been called the ‘hermeneutical circle’. What we are trying to establish is a certain reading of text or expressions, and what we appeal to as our grounds for this reading can only be other readings” (Taylor 1971, 6). The idea is that our understanding of one *relatum* functions as a ground for our beliefs about the other *relatum*. To justify a certain interpretative statement about a part of the text, we appeal to interpretive statements about the whole of it, and the other way round. This notion of a hermeneutical circle can also be found in the literature, in which it is characterized in terms of testing hypotheses. One formulates hypotheses about the meaning of a part of the text and tests these against hypotheses about the whole. Such hypotheses can be corrected and then tested again.¹² In that

12. Fricke (2007, 50): we develop “ungesicherte Hypothesen, überprüfen sie gezielt an Daten, korrigieren von daher unsere Hypothesen für neue empirische Kontrollen usw.” Cf. Stegmüller (1973, 29); Gadamer (1975, 275).

case, one relatum, or a belief about one relatum, is used as evidence in the attempt to confirm or falsify a hypothesis about another relatum.

The verb phrase “must be justified” in the statement may suggest that (v) is, or allows the derivation of, a methodological principle, stated by the following imperatives: “Justify your understanding of a part of x by (your understanding of) the whole of x! And the other way round!” Something like that might have been what Gadamer had in mind when he gave an example of hermeneutical circularity from the study of ancient languages, in which one learns that one must first “construe” a sentence before one seeks to understand its individual parts. Hermeneutical circularity seems, in that case, to be a methodological rule (Gadamer 1975, 275).

However, in addition to (v) stating a methodological rule, it could also be taken to state a necessary condition for justification. Justification is the end or aim of the process, and the methodological rule is the means. Since the notion of justification involved in (v) is evidential, the methodological rule and the necessary condition can complement each other: to meet this necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) condition of justification, one must satisfy the methodological requirement. We justify an understanding of a part of x by following the methodological rule, and our understanding of the part is justified to the extent that we followed this methodological rule.

Although often left implicit, (v) seems to function as a norm in many, if not all, interpretive practices. In the Ecclesiastes case, the interpretation of *olaam* as having a meaning equivalent to *eternity* in English is defended by an explanation of how well it fits with an earlier part of the book (Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004, 268). Others reject this interpretation by reference to another part of the book (Beek 1984, 64). Defences of alternative interpretations proceed in a similar way, translating *olaam* as “ignorance” (Barton 1908, 105–106) or “duration” (Murphy 1992, 34; Aalders 1948, 77), with reference to other uses of the word. Thus, even though reference to a broader context does not necessarily suffice to solve dis-

agreements, (v) seems to function as a norm in interpretive debates.

Suppose we endorse and apply (v); is that epistemically problematic, neutral, or advantageous, or is there no way to tell? It seems sensible to require that one's understanding of the whole of a text provides evidential support for one's understanding of its parts or, at least, does not undermine it. If information about the whole of the text—its genre, its uses of a particular word, its topic(s), and so forth—does not support our interpretation of a particular part of that text, it makes sense to reconsider our interpretation. Thus, it seems plausible that (v) can be epistemically advantageous.

There are, however, at least two ways in which (v) could also be epistemically problematic. First, (v) seems to allow for—but not necessarily lead to—a “self-confirmability of interpretations,” as Hirsch (1967, 164) calls it, in a slightly different context. Due to the symmetry of the justificatory relation, it is possible that one's hypothesis is supported by the evidence only because the evidence was constituted by this hypothesis to begin with. In that case, we have a logical circle. For example, suppose we reject the interpretation of *olaam* as having a meaning equivalent to the English word *eternity*, in the sense of something outside of time, because we believe Hebrew never uses *olaam* in that sense: the Hebrew eternity is not something outside of time, but just a lot of time (Aalders 1948, 76–77). How do we know that? Arguably, we know this by the ways in which the word is used in Hebrew writings, including Ecclesiastes 3:11. In that case, our interpretive argument can become logically circular: we reject an interpretation of *olaam* as “eternity” (in the sense of something outside of time) in particular text T because we believe that the word is not used in Hebrew in that way, and we came to believe the latter by examining the actual uses of the word in Hebrew texts, including T itself.

Second, (v) faces the same potential problem as (I) and (II) did. What is the relevant whole by which an understanding of a part is to be justified? Suppose we find that our understanding of a part is not corroborated by some whole to which we relate it: Would that, as such, defeat our justification for our understanding of that part?

Again, that might be unjustified, because the relation between that specific pair of part and whole may be irrelevant and failing to support one interpretation or another.

In short, then, we cannot in general tell the difference between a correct and a false pre-understanding on the basis of (v) alone. Therefore, (v) is underdetermined; absent further qualifications, we cannot tell to which category it belongs.

3.6 – (v1) *An understanding of something x must be justified by our pre-understanding of x, and it functions as a justificatory ground for the understanding we start from in the next stage of the understanding process*

The final notion of hermeneutical circularity to be considered here is a symmetrical justificatory relation between type B relata. The idea is that one's pre-understanding functions as a justifying ground for one's understanding of something x, and this understanding functions as a justificatory ground for one's subsequent attempts to understand x. As far as justification processes go, this probably sounds strange; and indeed, it seems to be merely a theoretical option rather than one actually propounded in the literature.¹³ That said, it may be instructive to consider why (v1) is problematic.

Adopting (v1) would clearly have quite disastrous epistemic consequences. It is hard to see how we could get beyond our preconceptions and learn something really new from a text, since our under-

13. Though see Gadamer (1975, 276), where he mentions Augustine who, on Gadamer's reading, tried to bring the stories of the Old Testament in agreement with the Christian faith through allegorizing them. In chapter 1 we noted that, on Gadamer's view of the history of hermeneutics, hermeneutics has had, up to Friedrich Ast, the task of restoring the agreement between the traditions of antiquity and Christianity. That could amount to requiring one's pre-understanding to function as justification for one's understanding of a text, although we should be careful here: the understanding Gadamer seems to be aiming at is not the understanding of the text but of what the text is about (the *Sache*).

standing of a text is justified by reference to our pre-understanding of it. It seems likely that this involves a confirmation of our pre-understanding to at least some extent, and to that extent, the reasoning would involve a *circulus vitiosus*. Notion (vI) is, in this respect, similar to a coherence theory of justification, according to which, for a proposition p to be epistemically justified, it is necessary and sufficient for p to be coherent with background beliefs. Such a theory of justification would fail for similar reasons: it invites logical circularity. In any case, the hermeneutical circle would hinder us in our attempt to obtain knowledge or understanding or even prevent us from obtaining knowledge or understanding. As said, (vI) seems merely a theoretical option; adopting it would in any case be ill-advised, for (vI) is certainly epistemically problematic.

4 – Conclusion

Where do this survey and this evaluation leave us? We identified six notions of hermeneutical circularity by analysing descriptions found in the literature—except in the case of (vI)—in terms of binary relations with two possible pairs of relata and three possible kinds of relations.

Of these six notions of hermeneutical circularity, (I), (II), (IV), and (v) could not, without further qualifications, be categorized as either epistemically positive or epistemically negative or neutral. Notions (III) and (vI) would be epistemically problematic, but (III) seemed either false or not really a case of hermeneutical circularity after all, and (vI) seemed merely a theoretical option and certainly an unwise prescription anyway.

In none of the cases did hermeneutical circularity turn out to be a straightforwardly positive phenomenon, even though it could be epistemically positive in (I), (II), (IV), and (v). Such hermeneutical circles could, in principle, make a positive contribution to interpretive processes. In addition, the general rejection of the idea that a hermeneutical circle is circular in the sense in which an argument can be logically circular seems too optimistic; we noted two cases—

(v) and (v1)—in which the involvement of hermeneutical circles, even though they are not cases of *circulus vitiosus* themselves, could lead to logically circular reasoning—although (v1) seems merely a theoretical option.

6 – Interpretation as a Source of Knowledge

1 – Introduction

In chapter 1, I argued that textual interpretation has epistemic aims, viz., knowledge and understanding. The characteristics of these aims in the case of textual interpretation were explored in chapter 2 (on textual understanding) and chapter 3 (on truth). Chapter 4 argued that, with respect to the justification of their claims, interpretive practices are not, or need not be, different from other truth-aiming practices, such as the sciences. Chapter 5 evaluated the epistemic implications of hermeneutical circularity, a phenomenon associated with interpretive practices. Building on these chapters, I am now in a position to spell out an answer to the main question in this book, viz., whether an interpretive belief can, in principle, amount to knowledge or understanding. That is, can it have the same epistemic status as beliefs derived from scientific experiments, such as beliefs on Boyle's law, the existence of the Higgs boson, and the function of the vermiform appendix as a "reservoir" of useful bacteria?

A second question is related to this, and answering it adds clarity to our answer to the first question. The standard list of knowledge sources on which epistemologists reflect includes perception, introspection, reason, memory, and, often, testimony, but not the ubiquitous phenomenon of textual interpretation (cf., e.g., Audi 1998, part 1; 2002, 79–82; Steup 2018). And yet textual interpretation seems not identical to any of these standard knowledge sources. The second question to be addressed in this chapter is, therefore, the following: Should we think of textual interpretation as a source of knowledge in its own right, that is, a knowledge source not reducible to any of these other sources?

A negative answer to the first question would be an excellent rea-

son to ignore the second. Throughout this book, we noted, examined, and refuted multiple reasons to doubt that beliefs formed through textual interpretation could amount to knowledge or factual understanding. Apart from refuting objections, we can consider arguments for answering my first question positively—which is what we do in section 3 of this chapter. Next, section 4 addresses one more potential (and often-heard) objection—viz., the idea that an epistemic practice, such as textual interpretation, involves a “perspective,” or a cognitive outlook, that may negatively affect our doxastic processes. Having argued that this objection also fails and that interpretive practices can, in principle, be a source of knowledge, I consider in section 5 my second question, namely, whether we should think of textual interpretation as a non-reducible source of knowledge in its own right. As a preliminary to the rest of our discussion, section 2 introduces the idea of a scale of epistemic statuses, which helps us to be more explicit and precise about the epistemic value of our beliefs. As in the rest of this book, by *interpretation* I mean *textual interpretation*, unless qualified otherwise.

2 – Knowledge and the Scale of Epistemic Statuses

One may, so to speak, sing epistemology in either a major or a minor key. Major-key epistemologists are optimistic about the viability of knowledge claims, even in the face of sceptical scenarios. They typically embrace fallibilism, maintaining that what we think we know could in fact be false—we are not infallible.¹ Yet, they have no scruples about speaking of knowledge and facts. Minor-key epistemologists are less optimistic; they are more conscious of the ever-present epistemic constraints that our human condition puts on our epistemic endeavours, and they prefer to forego talk of knowledge, facts, or objectivity altogether. Many theorists writing about hermeneutics join the choir singing in the minor key. For them, terms

1. Hetherington’s (2020) article on fallibilism in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* gives a useful overview of the relevant issues.

like *knowledge*, *facts*, and *objectivity* are associated with claims of certainty and neutrality and with the implicit presumption that we have access to “God’s point of view” in our cognitive processes.²

The difference between major-key and minor-key epistemologists easily leads to linguistic confusions, suggesting disagreements where there are none. Both types of epistemologists would probably agree on most of the structural differences between various degrees of certitude, or likelihood, or credibility. A comparison of differences in epistemic statuses could provide us with a more explicit, precise, and intuitive way to speak about what we mean when we claim to know some proposition *p*. We may imagine a scale of epistemic statuses reflecting these differences:³

- (1) *p is certain*: *p* is beyond reasonable doubt, and there is no alternative proposition *p** such that accepting *p** is more reasonable than or equally reasonable as accepting *p*.
- (2) *p is evident*: *p* is beyond reasonable doubt; and for every other *p**, if accepting *p** is more reasonable than accepting *p*, then *p** is certain.
- (3) *p is beyond reasonable doubt*: accepting *p* is more reasonable than withholding *p*.
- (4) *p is more likely than not*: *p* is more than 50 percent likely to be true.
- (5) *p is acceptable*: withholding *p* is no more reasonable than accepting *p*.
- (6) *p has some presumption in its favour*: accepting *p* is more reasonable than rejecting *p*.
- (7) *p has some presumption against it*: accepting not-*p* is more reasonable than rejecting not-*p*.
- (8) *p is unacceptable*: withholding not-*p* is no more reasonable than accepting not-*p*.

2. This holds for much of the hermeneutical and, indeed, philosophical literature in the twentieth century; see section 4.

3. This scale is an adaptation from Van den Brink, Van Woudenberg, and De Ridder (2017, 456–457), who adapted it from Chisholm (1976, appendix D; 1977).

- (9) *p* is gratuitous: *p* clearly deserves rejection.
(10) *p* is known to be false.

This scale can be envisioned as a continuum, so for all but its first and last level, we can distinguish between degrees in which one approaches a particular level. A proposition *p* can be more or less evident than another proposition *q*, for example.

We noted that theorists differ about the application of the word *knowledge*. If we reserve it for level 1 only, we probably have little use for it. The major-key epistemologists may use the term to refer to beliefs at level 2, or even level 3. Although the minor-key epistemologists think there is no use for such terms as *knowledge*, *facts*, and *objectivity*, they are probably ready to ascribe a level 2 or level 3 status to some of their beliefs. As it happens, the same notes are sung in different keys.

There are at least two advantages to using such a scale of epistemic statuses when we try to speak with some precision about knowledge. First, it may prevent mere linguistic quarrels from breaking out between the two types of epistemologists. It adds precision to epistemological reflection and makes plain that there are more options besides being absolutely certain and knowing a proposition to be false.

Second, an epistemic scale allows for interesting kinds of comparisons in considering the epistemic status of particular claims. Contrasts may bring clarification, also in comparing one epistemic status with another. For example, we could compare the status of “*p* having some presumption in its favour” with that of “*p* being beyond reasonable doubt” and see if, and in virtue of what, one is more plausible than the other. Moreover, we can compare the epistemic status of statements of one particular type with that of another. For example, we may consider whether the maximal epistemic status of a statement derived from an interpretive process is, *in principle* (a qualification to which we will return), higher or lower compared to that of a statement obtained via another process, such as statistical research or everyday experiences.⁴

A discussion of epistemic statuses in relation to interpretive

practices may provide us with claims about the highest epistemic status that interpretive statements can, in principle, attain, and about how this compares to statuses attained in other epistemic practices. The qualification “in principle” is characteristic of my project here: I am looking for general reasons why beliefs of a particular sort (i.e., beliefs acquired through textual interpretation) would (not) be able to attain a high epistemic status. Such general reasons apply, obviously, to all cases. Whether there are further epistemic constraints on an individual case depends on its particularities. One could, of course, continue the evaluation of the epistemic status of interpretive beliefs on the above-mentioned epistemic scale with a particular interpretive practice or statement in view, and it could turn out that the particular practice or statement cannot or does not attain the highest epistemic status it in principle could attain.

My first question can thus be reformulated as follows: What is, in principle, the maximal epistemic status of an interpretive belief, compared with beliefs acquired through other epistemic practices?

One more preliminary. Throughout this book, the focus has been on the two epistemic aims of interpretation—knowledge and understanding. Chapter 2 presented an argument for the view that understanding entails knowledge. The rest of this chapter focusses on interpretation as a source of knowledge. If we wanted to develop a scale of epistemic statuses with textual understanding in mind, we would need to include the other conditions of understanding as well, especially (ii) (see chapter 2). In the rest of this chapter, it will be assumed that, if textual interpretation is a source of knowledge, it is also a source of understanding.

4. To be sure, this second type of comparison is also available if we speak only of knowledge, without differentiating various epistemic statuses.

3 – Interpretive Beliefs on the Scale of Epistemic Statuses

Interpretive practices aim for beliefs with a high epistemic status. Perhaps the highest epistemic level of absolute certainty (in the epistemic, non-psychological sense) is unattainable for most of our beliefs. Even if one felt free to ignore the standard sceptical scenarios altogether, fallibilism would still be a position to be commended, and interpretive beliefs are no exception in this regard. What about the other levels? What is the highest epistemic status that interpretive beliefs could, in principle, acquire? Could they reach a high epistemic level, say, a level 2 or 3?

How are we to answer this question? There are at least three complementary ways to address it. First, we could look at common sense. It will not convince a sceptic, but many non-sceptics are happy to have common sense at their side. Second, we could consider the following question: *In virtue of what* does a belief have, or can a belief have, a high epistemic status? Listing those factors gives us criteria to assess the epistemic value of a particular (type of) statement. Third, we could evaluate the best objections raised against the idea that interpretive statements can have a high epistemic status and see whether they hold water. Let's review these options in turn in order to assess an interpretive belief's maximal epistemic status.

First, for those for whom common sense has some value, it is worth pointing out that we indeed often proceed as if we know what a text, even a difficult one, means—be it a contract, a newspaper article, a novel, or a poem. After all, we sign complex contracts, act upon what we read in newspapers, review literature, and so on, even if these texts initially pose difficulties for us, because we think we know what they say or mean and what they do not say or mean. By pragmatic standards, we often find that this works rather well. Common sense, then, suggests that interpretive beliefs can have a rather high epistemic status, and “rather high” here means somewhere in the range of levels 2–3.

Second, the factors in virtue of which a belief has, or can have, a

high epistemic status are likely to vary among different doxastic practices. To explain this, we need more space than for the explanation of the common-sense approach. A comparison with reading is illustrative here. Chapter 1 argued that interpretation is different from reading, assuming that reading a text proceeds without the need to solve difficulties. Like everyday communication in a familiar language, reading usually proceeds without much trouble in terms of finding out what the other is trying to communicate to us. It is plausible that the nature of ordinary understanding differs in directness from what is required to gain knowledge or understanding when we come across a difficulty in a text. Due to this difference, the standards of justification are likely to differ as well.

Internalism is here taken to be the view that the degree to which one is epistemically justified in believing a particular proposition *p* depends on one's access to evidence supportive of *p* and on whether one's belief is based on this evidence.⁵ In contrast, *externalism* is the view that one's justification can be determined by factors other than access to evidence—for instance, by the reliability of a belief-forming process (on process reliabilism, which is one form of externalism). It has been argued that the direct comprehension of linguistic utterances does not depend on inferences from evidence, but is similar to perceptual belief in its immediacy and warrant (see Burge 2013). What is argued for linguistic utterances may hold for reading as well. Such a view would align with a form of externalism. However, although externalism may be plausible for utterance understanding and reading, it is unlikely that interpretation is externalist in nature. On my definition and use of the term *interpretation*, the need for interpretation arises when we encounter a difficulty in understanding something, and the attempt to solve it has phenomenally (usually) little immediacy to it (see chapter 1). The internalist approach suits the nature of justification in interpretive practices, in which the justification (and hence also the epistemic status) of an

5. The internalism-externalism literature is extensive. For some useful readings, see Alston (1986); Bonjour (2002); Carter et al. (2014); Poston (2015).

interpretive belief depends on the access to the evidence and arguments supporting the belief.

The epistemic status of an interpretive belief depends, therefore, on our access to the evidence and on the relation between this evidence and our beliefs. Chapter 4 argued that an interpretive practice can be described as an evidence-based quest for truth in which we try to draw an inference to the best interpretation by developing arguments that are subject to the ordinary standards of logic and argumentation. The data and evidence may include not only the text itself but also its linguistic, historical, and intellectual context, perhaps related to interpretive principles and relevant unconscious background knowledge. In this regard, interpretive practices are not significantly different from other truth-aiming inquiries, such as empirical research in the natural sciences.

Interpretive beliefs can have a high epistemic status in virtue of the quantity and quality of the evidence, the quality of the arguments supporting the interpretive beliefs, the extent to which the interpretive statements cohere with other, related interpretive statements and relevant background beliefs, and their success in competing with alternative interpretive hypotheses (see chapter 4). The differences between interpretive practices and empirical research in the natural and social sciences notwithstanding, interpretive statements can be based on sufficient evidence and strong arguments. My argument in this book so far suggests that our interpretive beliefs can in principle acquire, if not the highest epistemic status, at least a level 2 or level 3 status.

The third way to defend the possibility of interpretive beliefs gaining a high epistemic status is to refute objections brought against it. Throughout this book, a number of objections have been considered that touch on the (im)possibility of a high epistemic status of interpretive beliefs, such as (i) that there is no unified notion of textual interpretation (chapter 1), (ii) that the aim of understanding is non-epistemic (chapter 2), (iii) that such interpretive beliefs lack truth-value (chapter 3), (iv) that textual interpretation cannot or does not involve a relevant justificatory practice (chapter 4), and (v) that such practices are circular in a sense that negatively affects

the epistemic status of interpretive beliefs (chapter 5). The previous chapters include discussions of these objections and reasons to refute them. But there is one very popular objection that still needs to be addressed.

4 – A Final Objection: Perspectivism

For all their diversity, a number of views in the philosophy of, say, the past two or three centuries share the idea that we do not encounter the world directly but in a mediated way. One's experience of the world is not neutral—reality is not simply reflected on the *tabula rasa* of one's mind—but mediated by (or filtered through, or coloured by) one's concepts, experiences, language, history, culture, and so on. A frequently used term in this regard is that of a *perspective*, which seems to have been introduced into hermeneutics as a metaphor from optics (Chladenius [1742] 1976, § 309). Our experience of the world is to some extent affected by our perspective, and as a result, this perspective affects, in one way or another, what we come to believe, perceive, and experience. We may call this idea *perspectivism*. This section first explores the idea of perspectivism in a broad and general way and then highlights three points on a continuum of ways to spell out the idea of a perspective, relates them to interpretive practices, and considers their epistemic implications—i.e., whether the truth of that particular notion of perspectivism has any implications for the maximal epistemic status of interpretive beliefs.

In one of its senses, the word *interpretation* is related to perspectivism. When people tell us that everything is a matter of interpretation, or that all perception, all thought, all experience, is interpretive, they usually do not mean that everything poses epistemic difficulties for us, which we could try to solve (as *interpretation* was defined in chapter 1). Rather, they mean that we do not have direct access to the world but “interpret” the world, in the sense that our concepts, prejudices, and so on filter our experiences and colour our experience of the world.

Immanuel Kant's idea that we do not experience the world itself but only as it appears to us is one important source for this cluster of views. Vestiges of this idea are, in various forms, present in later hermeneutical theories and philosophy at large, in the writings of thinkers as diverse as Dilthey (*Weltanschauung*), Nietzsche (perspectivism), Heidegger and Gadamer (prejudices, horizon), Foucault (episteme), Kuhn (paradigm), and the proponents of scientific perspectivism in the philosophy of science, and in several standpoint theories in critical theory. This point of convergence does not prove, or even hint, that these views are similar in other respects as well. Differences between these approaches are due to such questions as which exact elements constitute a perspective; how we obtain a perspective; whether one thinks of every individual as having his or her own perspective, or of groups as sharing one perspective; whether one thinks that particular approaches to the world are superior over others or holds that any perspective is as good or bad as another; and whether or not perspectivism combines with a realist view of reality, according to which the constitution of reality is something that is independent of our perspective.

Reference to perspectival elements is sometimes used to argue that we cannot attain objectivity, truth, knowledge, or factual understanding. The idea is that what is operative in our perspective can determine—to a greater or lesser extent—the beliefs we form, with the consequence that these beliefs predominantly express the peculiarities of our perspective rather than the properties of what these beliefs are about. Let me give just one, arbitrarily chosen, quotation to illustrate this view: “The experience of re-reading a text ... shows us that we never read a text ‘objectively’ or ‘neutrally’. It is always we who read and that means that it is through the application of our very particular perspectives that we allow a text to become real for us” (Jeanron 1994, 2). To see if, and how, this idea of a perspective functioning in our cognitive processes has any epistemological implications, we need to unpack it further by examining some of its varieties and consider whether it has any points of analogy with our interpretive practices.

It may be useful to start with the metaphor of a perspective. I give

here three notions of a perspective, and they are all on a continuum. The first notion is that of the *optical perspective*. Optical perspectives are certainly familiar to us, and not just in artworks, such as Andrea Pozzo's work in the Sant'Ignazio or the works of seventeenth-century Dutch painters. It is of note that this optical perspective could explain how different accounts of a single object or event can refer to the same object or event. Leibniz, to give an early example, writes in his *Monadologie*: "And like one and the same city, approached from different sides, appears totally different and, as it were, perspectival-ly multiplied, so it is that through the unlimited multiplicity of simple substances there are many different worlds, which, however, are merely perspectives of the one, according to the various points of view of the monad."⁶ Here, the relativity of our view to a particular perspective does not suggest a low epistemic status of our beliefs; rather, the perspectival nature of perception serves to explain how the apparent plurality of worlds really is one world.

Does this notion of an optical perspective have an analogy in textual interpretation? Only trivially so, it seems. It obviously matters whether you are in the right physical position to view a text well—that is a minimal requirement for success in interpretation. And in novels, it matters what optical perspective the narrator or the characters had, of course. But reflection on the optical perspective of the interpreter is of little interest.

More interesting is the second notion of a perspective, which is the idea of a *Sehepunkt*, introduced by Chladenius from the field of optics into hermeneutics. He defined a *viewpoint* as "the circumstances of our soul, our body, and our entire person that make ... us imagine [*vorstellen*] a thing in one way, and not another."⁷ On

6. Leibniz ([1714] 2009, § 57): "Et comme une même ville regardée de différence côtés paroît toute autre, et est comme multipliée perspectivement; il arrive de même, que par la multitude infinie des substances simples, il y a comme autant de differens univers, quie ne sont pourtant que les perspectives d'un seul selon les differens points de veüe de chaque Monade."

7. Chladenius ([1742] 1976, § 309): "Diejenigen Umstände unserer Seele, unseres Leibes und unserer ganzen Person, welche machen oder Ursache

Chladenius's use, the viewpoint is not just a matter of spatiality—it also consists of other personal properties that determine the particular way in which we perceive the world.

This elaboration on the phenomenon of a *Sehepunkt* or viewpoint is also familiar to us and recognizable in interpretive practices. The “circumstances of our soul, our body, and our entire person” arguably include the reliability of one's eyesight, one's attention, one's focus as inspired by one's questions and interests, the concepts employed in the description of one's experiences, one's reasoning capacities, and so on. Attention (partially) determines what one perceives; one's questions, aims, or interests (partially) determine what one tries to interpret. Concepts are relevant to seeing something *as* something; they are also relevant to seeing letters as a series of signs. The reliability of one's eyesight matters to success in perception; similarly, it seems plausible that one's ability to interpret a text can be more or less reliable as well. Thus, there are points of analogy between perception and interpretation with regard to this notion of a perspective or viewpoint.

This idea of a viewpoint involving some of the agent's personal properties illuminates features of particular epistemological interest. The content of one's experiences and beliefs results from a process that is indeed partially dependent on the reliability of one's faculties, on the focus of one's attention, and so on, but it also depends on the perceived or interpreted object itself, which does not depend on the perceiver or interpreter. The epistemic impact of a perspective in this sense can be positive or negative. It can be positive, for we need reliable eyesight, attention, and concepts in order to perceive something *as* something *x*. It can also be negative, for example, when one's perceptual and reasoning faculties are not reliable, when one is focussed on irrelevant matters, or when one lacks the concepts to see something *as x*. In such cases, the epistemic status of one's belief is likely to be low. This is equally true of perception and interpretation.

sind, daß wir uns eine Sache so und nicht anders vorstellen, wollen wir den Sehe-Punkt nennen.”

Yet the sort of perspectivism that so many philosophers described and, in one form or another, endorsed encompasses more, although the difference is a difference in degree. The third notion of a perspective to be considered here is that of a *thick perspective*. It consists of more aspects than the previous two and maintains that one's perspective is to a large extent constitutive of one's perceptions and doxastic processes. A perspective in this "thick" sense consists of some or all of the following features: (i) background beliefs we already have, including prejudices; (ii) concepts involved in the description of our experiences; (iii) interests or questions we have, which determine what we attend to; (iv) physical capacities; (v) style of thought (e.g., whether one thinks more associatively than discursively); (vi) emotional state; and (vii) values.⁸ On this third notion, these aspects of the perspective determine what we perceive and believe. On the first, optical notion of a perspective, although what we see and do not see depends partially on our spatiality, we are mostly "receivers" of the light reflected by our surroundings. The third notion of a perspective is much thicker: what we perceive depends to a large degree on our perspective's properties.

Is anything like this thick perspective operative in our belief-forming processes? Well, how are we to tell? Is it part of our experience and cognitive reflection that our values, concerns, prejudices, capacities, and so forth, are informing our doxastic processes? It may be possible to become aware, through reflection, of the impact of some of a thick perspective's elements on our cognitive activities, but such awareness, and the ability to trace the influence of such a perspective on our doxastic processes, seem rather limited. For example, we may hear someone say, referring to one's formative life experiences: "I grew up under Soviet rule, so I believe civil liberties

8. Because a perspective somehow contributes to our cognitive outlook, the constitutive elements of a perspective have become such due to the earlier state of one's perspective. For example, our values may inform our concerns, which may in turn inform our beliefs, habits, patterns of reasoning, and expectations, and that integrated whole may affect what we come to believe, experience, value, and so on.

are vulnerable, and their violation often starts with little steps.” While that may count as a reference to the impact of some of a thick perspective’s elements on our cognitive activities, it seems likely that many of the relations between our perspective and our beliefs (and other cognitive activities) are less transparent. Moreover, it seems plausible that we are often not aware of the constitutive elements that determine our perspective.

If it is impossible to measure the influence of a thick perspective on our doxastic processes, we also lack a way to decisively evaluate whether this influence is epistemically positive or negative. The point of referring to perspectives is, precisely, that we don’t have a non-perspectival point of view. We cannot “calibrate” our perspective by reference to a non-perspectival point of view. This prevents us from giving a conclusive judgment on the epistemic implications of perspectivism, but a few things are worth noting.

A perspectivism of some sort seems plausible and epistemically positive. If we didn’t have any prior concepts, experiences, beliefs, and so forth at all, we probably could not acquire knowledge or understanding—a point made emphatically by Gadamer (1975, e.g., 261ff.). Considering all aspects that a perspective consists of (background beliefs, values, experiences, concepts, and so on), one wonders how one could come to know anything without a perspective. Many of our beliefs we could never have formed without quite a few of a perspective’s elements. If we are to form new beliefs, we typically need some background beliefs, concepts, some focus or interest, and so on. A perspective is, on this account, indispensable for many or all of our beliefs.

One perspective can be better than another. Blaise Pascal made the point that for paintings, there is one indivisible point that is the right place to look at them; other places are too near, too close, too high, or too low. In painting, that point is determined by the perspective. But who, asks Pascal, will determine it for truth and morality?⁹ Dutch painters of the seventeenth century are often

9. Pascal ([1670] 1963, § 21 [381], 502): “Ainsi les tableaux vus de trop loin et de trop près. Et il n’y a qu’un point indivisible qui soit le véritable lieu. Les

praised for their capacity to portrait people in such a way that viewers from many different vantage points get the feeling that the person portrayed is looking at them, specifically. But the idea that some vantage points are better than others for viewing a painting seems right. And, as in the case of the optical perspective, our thick perspective could be less or more adequate for forming beliefs with a high epistemic status. Perhaps the formation of a true belief requires different background beliefs than the ones we have, a different language, or different values, concerns, experiences, capacities, concepts, and so forth. Taking note of just any old “different perspective” on some issue is no guarantee for acquiring beliefs with a higher epistemic status. One perspective can be better than another for acquiring beliefs of a particular sort. Our perspective could also position us well to form true beliefs. In that case, the influence of a perspective on our doxastic processes may contribute to our beliefs having a very high epistemic status.

In addition to pointing out the positive epistemic influence a thick perspective may have, we also can exclude some extreme views. For one, perspectivism does not imply that anything goes. Perspectivism does not brush away the differences in epistemic statuses between different beliefs. Given perspectivism, our beliefs can still be gratuitous or acceptable or evident. Perhaps level 1 (absolute certainty) would be beyond us, but, as we noted already, the general fallibility of human beings is in itself sufficient reason to believe this. One may also hesitate about level 2 (certain), since it can be objectively the case that there is a proposition p^* the accepting of which is more reasonable than, or equally reasonable as, accepting p , without us being aware of it. Such hesitation, however, is not just warranted by perspectivism as such—it is already warranted by our epistemic limitations in knowing all the relevant propositions.

Moreover, acknowledging that our cognitive outlook is perspectival does not entail that reality or facts or values are mere constructs. Perspectivism doesn't entail relativism or pluralism if these

autres sont trop près, trop loin, trop haut ou trop bas. La perspective l'assigne dans l'art de la peinture, mais dans la vérité et dans la morale qui l'assignera?”

are taken to imply that there is no truth or that we cannot know facts.¹⁰ It is impossible to conclude from perspectivism to a relativism that claims that there are no facts or that knowledge and understanding are impossible—for that would assume one's relativist view to be non-perspectival.

In addition to excluding these extreme positions, we may also be able to mitigate the potentially negative influences of our perspective. Here are four suggestions.

First, we can compare our experience of an event with someone else's experience; in this way, we may find differences and become aware of our perspective. In textual interpretation, a text's reception history, or *Wirkungsgeschichte*, may offer relevant insights.¹¹ Through acquainting ourselves with the interpretation history of a text, we can become aware of ignorance on our part and of the particularity and, perhaps, weaknesses of our own perspective, and try to improve it accordingly.

Second, if a perspective is something shareable among groups (like a paradigm among scientists), then one's beliefs could have intersubjective justification. A group of people could share a particular perspective and hold particular beliefs that are, given that perspective, justified. Such justification seems valuable, since it increases, in principle, the number of possibilities to verify and falsify ideas. Moreover, it increases the likelihood that anomalies between standard views and actual experiences are identified, which could lead someone to critically question elements of their perspective.

One could object that, with respect to these first two options, we may not be able to judge whether other people's concepts or beliefs are radically different from or similar to our own. If we have a perspective and then encounter someone else's perspective, is there a way for us to get to know the exact nature of that other perspective? Perhaps perspectives are incommensurable: one perspective's con-

10. A topic recently discussed with respect to scientific perspectivism; see the contributions to Massimi and McCoy (2019).

11. Gadamer (1975, 284–290) introduces this notion; for him, it goes beyond the function it has in my argument.

cepts and formulations may not map onto those of another perspective, and hence, perspectives may simply not allow comparison.¹² We may believe we have experienced thinking from the perspective of someone else—a person with a different social position, for example, or from a different place and era—but such an experience could be merely illusory. Again, we have no way to demonstrate the truth or falsity of this objection.

Third, we can perhaps become “more objective” in our beliefs and attitudes, as Thomas Nagel proposed, if we step back from our original view of some aspect of life or the world and form a new conception that includes the original view and its relation to the world as its object, developing, in addition, a more detached understanding of ourselves, the world, and the interactions between the world and ourselves.¹³ That much seems possible, at least to some extent. And it helps that we can learn new things (on purpose), become aware of things we were not attentive to before, actively search for falsification, use multiple sources, reflect critically, and so forth. Still, we have no secure way to weigh all the effects of these things on the epistemic status of our beliefs.

Fourth, if we are (to some extent) aware of the elements that constitute our perspective, and if we are able to explicate them, we can perhaps evaluate them as well. Our background beliefs, concepts, interest or focus, abilities, style of thinking, emotional state, and so forth can, once we are aware of them, be evaluated with respect to their influence on our epistemic practices. This evaluation doesn't take them out of our perspective (and, hence, has its limitations),

12. A view sometimes associated with Kuhn ([1962] 1996), but see, e.g., his “Postscript–1969” (*ibid.*, 174–210). Cf. Davidson (1984, 183–198).

13. From Nagel (1986, 4, 5, 7), who suggests, in the context of the debate on the philosophy of mind, the possibility of taking up a point of view other than one's own. Cf. his famous (1974) essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” in which Nagel distinguishes between “objective” methods of understanding the world and “subjective” methods. While the objective method grasps, or understands, the world by eliminating the subjective point of view, the subjective method grasps the world in a different way, *viz.*, by imaginatively assuming the viewpoint of others.

but it does subject them to further scrutiny. So, these four ways suggest that the potentially negative effects of our perspective on our epistemic condition could be mitigated.

Summing up the epistemological implications of a perspective, we can conclude, first of all, that perspectives may contribute positively to our cognitive activities, including interpretive practices. They even seem indispensable. In addition, one perspective can be better than another. Furthermore, extreme positions, such as radical relativism or scepticism, are not supported by the observation that perspectives factor into our cognitive processes. Finally, there may be ways to mitigate a perspective's (potentially) negative epistemic influences.

If we assume that something like a thick perspective is, to some undeterminable extent, involved in our interpretive practices, what does all this mean for the epistemic status of our interpretive beliefs? Does the perspectival nature of our cognitive processes relate their results to a particular range of epistemic statuses? That is, does the influence of perspectives implicate that our beliefs cannot but have a particular epistemic status, or that some epistemic statuses are unattainable for us and our beliefs?

One thing to note is that the perspectival nature of our cognitive processes extends to all the epistemic statuses on the above-mentioned scale—none of them is non-perspectival. An implication of acknowledging the influence of a thick perspective (and also, incidentally, of the optical perspective) is that we should not even be looking for “non-perspectival knowledge.” That would be pointless.

Perspectives have positive and negative epistemic potential. The actual epistemic status of our interpretive beliefs depends on the degree to which we can actualize the positive epistemic potential and mitigate the negative. Perspectivism as such does not give us a reason to think that our interpretive beliefs always and necessarily have a low epistemic status. To the contrary—a perspective is even necessary for any seriously high epistemic status to be possible at all. It all depends on our evidence, the quality of our arguments, and our capability to mitigate negative perspectival effects on our beliefs.

Interpretive practices do not seem to be any different from other cognitive practices. The scale of epistemic statuses makes it possible for us to compare beliefs resulting from interpretive practices with beliefs resulting from scientific practices. It is worth pointing out that perspectivism is not unique for textual interpretation—it affects all our cognitive endeavours. A number of developments in the philosophy of science suggest that perspectives are as much at work in the natural sciences as in textual interpretive practices. Recently, quite a few authors have made the point that science too is “hermeneutic” in nature, by which at least some of them mean that it is an enterprise in which our personal and communal perspectives are important (see, e.g., Kisiel 1971; Markus 1987, 7–8; Van den Brink 2009, 82–83, and his chapter 3; Parrini 2010, 44–45). They point at Kuhn’s paradigm concept, the theory-ladenness of observation, the Duhem-Quine thesis on underdetermination of theories by data, the function of values in scientific research, and so on. For both scientific and interpretive practices, it is true that perspectives have positive and negative epistemic potential and that the actual epistemic status of our interpretive beliefs depends on the degree to which we can actualize the positive epistemic potential and mitigate the negative. This is something we should judge per case, but in general, perspectivism as such does not give us a reason to think that our scientific and interpretive beliefs cannot have a considerably high epistemic status.

My first question was this: What is, in principle, the maximal epistemic status of an interpretive belief, compared with beliefs acquired via other epistemic practices? I’ve argued that there is no principled reason to think that interpretive statements have a low epistemic status and cannot have a high epistemic status. None of the objections to this conclusion were found convincing in this book, including the objection of perspectivism considered in this chapter. As such, perspectivism does not prevent our beliefs from having a high epistemic status. In any case, interpretive practices are in the same boat as scientific practices.

5 – Textual Interpretation as a Source of Knowledge

Sources of knowledge are types of ways of acquiring beliefs that generally amount to knowledge or have a high epistemic status on our scale, absent incidental failure. In that sense, my argument for the principled possibility of textual interpretation resulting in beliefs with a high epistemic status is an argument for the view that textual interpretation is a source of knowledge. Yet, not all knowledge sources are included in the standard list of knowledge sources studied in epistemology. Perception typically appears on it, but for reasons I will come back to, visual-perception-of-a-cow does not, even though it is, arguably, a source of knowledge. Textual interpretation is not on this list either. If interpretation is a source of knowledge, does it make sense to individuate it as such and include it in the list of standard types of knowledge sources, such as perception, reason, introspection, memory, and testimony, to be studied in (analytic) epistemology? We may call this *the problem of knowledge source individuation*.

The question as to how we are to individuate knowledge sources is a question that asks for a criterion. If knowledge sources are natural kinds (as, for instance, William Alston suggested in the context of the debate about the generality problem for reliabilism),¹⁴ they are delineable according to structures present in the natural world. In that case, we could try to individuate knowledge sources according to these natural structures. But it is one thing to accept the ontological claim that sources of knowledge are natural kinds, and quite another to solve the epistemological and semantic problems of

14. Alston (1995). In the debate on the generality problem for reliabilism, the focus is on sources of beliefs rather than sources of knowledge. Since, on the assumption that knowledge entails belief, a source of knowledge is also a source of belief (though the reverse, of course, does not hold), the individuation problem is similar. Alston's claim is controversial, however. For example, Conee and Feldman (1998) objected to Alston (1995); Adler and Levin (2002) defended Alston's view against them; and their views were objected to by Comesaña (2006).

identifying them and making our knowledge source individuation match them. Which “structures,” if any, are present in the natural world, when it comes to knowledge sources? What would be a useful criterion for the individuation of knowledge sources? Perhaps these questions are broader than the one we’re interested in here. To be clear, I’m not casting doubt on whether one of the widely acknowledged knowledge sources is in fact a knowledge source. Rather, I wonder if textual interpretation shouldn’t be added to that list.

The following seems to be a sensible criterion for our quest: if we are to individuate *x* meaningfully as a source of knowledge worth adding to the standard list, *x* should not be a knowledge source that is covered by the sources already acknowledged. Seeing a cow in front of you can be a source of knowledge, but visual-perception-of-a-cow-in-front-of-you is not typically listed as a knowledge source. It is a token of a single type of knowledge source that is already widely acknowledged, viz., perception. It is, therefore, fully reducible to perception.

How does textual interpretation fare by this criterion? There are several options here. Interpretation could be (i) a basic source, on the following account of *basic source*: “To call a source of knowledge (or justification) *basic* is to say that it yields knowledge without positive dependence on the operation of some other source of knowledge (or of justification)” (Audi 2002, 72). In that case, interpretation would be a knowledge source without involving any of the other knowledge sources. Alternatively, interpretation could be (ii) a knowledge source fully reducible to one of the already acknowledged knowledge sources, or (iii) a knowledge source partially reducible to these sources, while also involving an ability or capacity of its own, or (iv) a knowledge source fully reducible to some combination of the already acknowledged knowledge sources. On all these accounts, interpretation is a source of knowledge. On (ii), it would not make sense to individuate it as a distinct knowledge source. On (i), on the other hand, it clearly would, and perhaps also on (iii) and (iv). The rest of this section considers each of these four options.

Option (i) can be quickly dismissed: interpretation is not a basic source, but crucially involves some widely acknowledged sources. Suppose we seek to interpret the script on the Rosetta Stone. In order to do this, we need to perceive the signs, have a working memory of them and of various sorts of information, and reason from that information to an interpretative statement. It seems likely that our interpretive efforts also involve testimony as a knowledge source—for example, for linguistic knowledge we cannot acquire otherwise. Hence, interpretation arguably depends positively on the operation of perception, memory, reason, and perhaps testimony.

Option (ii) can also be dismissed: interpretation is not a token of a single other source, such as perception, memory, reason, or testimony. It is inadequate to say that *to interpret a text* is identical to one of the following disjuncts: to perceive a text or to remember a text, or to reason from a text or to reason about a text. Interpretation involves perception, memory, reason, and perhaps testimony, but it is not a token of a single one of them.

One may hesitate here about testimonial knowledge. Isn't interpretive knowledge just testimonial knowledge? Consider a case in which someone S interprets a text and, in this way, acquires interpretive knowledge about it. Did S also acquire testimonial knowledge from that text? Not necessarily. Our interpretive efforts may give us knowledge *about* the text, such as "This text says that p." But this interpretive knowledge is not yet testimonial knowledge. It is only under certain conditions that we also obtain testimonial knowledge via our interpretation of the text. What these conditions are, exactly, is discussed in the literature on testimony, but it seems possible to gain interpretive knowledge *about* a text without gaining testimonial knowledge *from* that text. For example, a text may be correctly interpreted and yet fail to give its reader testimonial knowledge because it states only falsehoods or is believed to have been written by a false witness. In that case, one can have a true interpretive belief—"This text says that p"—while lacking testimonial knowledge that p. Thus, interpretive knowledge differs from testimonial knowledge.

In short, interpretive knowledge is knowledge *about* a text, and testimonial knowledge is knowledge obtained *from* a text. Interpretation, as a source of knowledge, can therefore not be reduced to testimony or testimonial knowledge alone. Since we noted that interpretation can also not be reduced to the other sources of knowledge, option (ii) is off the table.

If (iii) is the relevant option, interpretation involves not only one or some of the widely acknowledged knowledge sources but also a cognitive function or cognitive ability of its own. On (iii), interpretation is not a *basic* source of knowledge. Note that other knowledge sources are also non-basic, such as memory and testimony. Testimony involves perception, and memory is dependent on input from perception or reason, and often from testimony and introspection as well. That they are non-basic sources of knowledge apparently does not prevent them from being included in the standard list of knowledge sources. Therefore, if interpretation is a non-basic knowledge source, it is like memory in that respect and should, like memory, be individuated as a source in its own right.

One way to understand (iii) with respect to interpretation uses the idea that text interpretation is a high-level form of mind reading.¹⁵ *Mind reading* refers to the practice of ascribing mental states, such as feelings, intentions, longings, and thoughts, to other people (or oneself) and referring to these states in the explanation and prediction of actions. A common distinction is that between *low-level mind reading*, which is concerned with the perception of facial expressions, motor intentions, and emotions, and *high-level mind reading*, in which propositional attitudes are attributed to a subject. Text interpretation could be understood in terms of the latter, and perhaps even as one of the highest levels of mind reading. When

15. Goldman (2013, 176–177), for example, explicitly relates his theory of mental simulation—a theory about mind reading—to the (Romantic) hermeneutical tradition of *Verstehen* on the point of empathetic identification with the thoughts and feeling of the person whose mind one is reading. I have been critical of this Romantic view in chapters 1 and 2, but it suffices for illustrative purposes.

reading a text in search of either the author's meaning or the text's meaning, we set out to ascribe mental states to the author. Interpretation, which is required when we encounter difficulties in reading a text, has similar purposes. One could argue, for example, that the interpreter aims to mentally simulate the psychological states and processes of the author, aided by textual clues, in order to reconstruct the intention of the author or the meaning of the text. In addition, we could think of this form of mind reading as a special kind of ability, an ability one could, moreover, lack. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that interpretation involves this ability or cognitive function. The question then arises whether this ability is reducible to the already acknowledged sources. And that, in fact, seems quite plausible. One of the widely acknowledged sources is reason (perception would be another case in point). To accept the idea that textual interpretation is a distinct knowledge source in virtue of this special cognitive function involved in mind reading, we would have to argue that this function is not a matter of reason cooperating with perception, memory, introspection, and so on. But that seems a difficult case to make. In short, if textual interpretation is like (iii), it is a knowledge source worth adding to the list of standard sources; but we would need a proper reason to think interpretation is like (iii).

On the final option, interpretation is a combination of already individuated knowledge sources. Suppose (iv) is the correct way to understand interpretation. As stated above, it seems plausible that interpretation at least involves perception, memory, reason, and perhaps testimony, but it is not reducible to any single one of them. Yet, as I've argued, interpretation is a source of knowledge. On option (iv), interpretation is a source of knowledge that positively depends on specific combinations of these other sources. Textual interpretation seems, indeed, reducible to such a combination of sources. Importantly, not just any kind of instantiation of these sources will do. If text interpretation is fully reducible to a combination of perception, memory, and reason, it is likely to involve a very specific kind of perception (e.g., the kind that is also involved in reading), a number of very specific memories (e.g., about the se-

semantic value of words and grammatical rules), and perhaps also rather specific forms of reasoning. Moreover, not just any combination of these instantiations will do to interpret a text, the same way that not just any combination of doors, windows, walls, and a roof makes a house. In fact, most combinations will provide us with nothing but a mere heap of doors, windows, walls, and a roof. The same is true of textual interpretation: not just any combination of the relevant instantiations of perception, memory, and reason makes for an interpretation. For instance, the combination of perceiving a cow, remembering the Hebrew alphabet, and being disposed to reason deductively does not add up to an interpretation. In short, the knowledge sources involved should work together in specific ways.

Interpretation not only requires a specific constellation of specific instantiations of other knowledge sources; it also has its own characteristics as a knowledge source. Therefore, it faces problems that are not necessarily addressed in the study of other knowledge sources. Quite a few of these problems have been discussed in the previous chapters. Should we, for example, think of the possibility of an author being unsuccessful in expressing his intentions as a sceptical challenge to all intentionalist interpretations? What assumptions are justified in interpreting beliefs? Should we, for instance, assume that the text's author was rational when he wrote the text, as the principle of charity states? How can interpretive beliefs be justified, and can our interpretive beliefs obtain an epistemic status similar to that of beliefs formed via established scientific practices? These are epistemological questions specific for interpretive practices, and this book has addressed a number of them. Although one may not think of these questions as difficult or interesting, it is, in any case, not obvious that epistemological reflection on such knowledge sources as perception, reason, and memory can provide us with answers to them. Even if interpretation is a specific combination of specific outputs of perception, reason, memory, and, perhaps, testimony (in addition to also involving an ability of its own, or not), epistemological reflection on the latter sources does not cover the epistemological questions we may raise about interpretation.

Adding textual interpretation to the standard list of knowledge sources would probably open the door for many other candidate knowledge sources (statistical knowledge or knowledge acquired by AI may be examples here), and one may worry that there would be no end to this list. Be that as it may, textual interpretation certainly is a source of knowledge that, for its specific characteristics, deserves independent study.

6 – Conclusion

Interpretive beliefs about texts can, in principle, have a high epistemic status. In this respect, they are not principally different from beliefs acquired through other truth-aiming practices, such as we find in the sciences. Perspectivism—the view that our cognitive outlook is influenced by our concepts, values, background beliefs, and so forth—does not alter this. Thus, textual interpretation is a source of knowledge in its own right. It is not a basic knowledge source, but, just like memory and testimony, it is a source that involves standard sources of knowledge traditionally discussed in (analytic) epistemology, such as perception, reason, introspection, memory, and testimony.

Conclusions

The main question in this book is epistemological in nature: Can our textual interpretive beliefs acquire a high epistemic status—that is, can they amount to knowledge or factual understanding?

There are many reasons to doubt the viability of an affirmative answer to this question. The notion of interpretation is notoriously unclear, and it is often contrasted to knowledge or matters of fact. Understanding may not be factual at all and hence not involve truth, and texts are often said to be indeterminate, not allowing for true interpretive statements. One could think the question is misguided: some argue that the humanities, or scholarship often involved with textual interpretation, have idiosyncratic definitions of the epistemic aims of knowledge and understanding. Justifying an interpretive statement is just different from justifying a scientific statement, or so one could think. Upon further scrutiny, however, all these (and other) reasons to doubt that interpretive beliefs can have a high epistemic status turned out to be weak. To answer my main question, I proceeded in a number of steps, considering possible objections along the way.

There is a wide variety of senses of *interpretation*, and there are many ways to engage with texts, quite a few of which have been labelled *interpretation*. I argued that it makes sense to endorse the quite traditional definition of *textual interpretation*, according to which to interpret a text T is to try to solve difficulties in understanding or acquiring knowledge about T. I defined *text* as an ordered set of signs with a linguistic function in a particular language L. A sign is a figure or otherwise perceptible object that in L has an x-stands-for-y structure. The ordered set of signs constitutes words, sentences, paragraphs, and longer textual units, all with particular properties. Textual interpretation thus seeks to solve difficulties in understanding, or acquiring knowledge about, the relations be-

tween the perceptible properties and the represented properties.

Part of this attempt is concerned with establishing communicative authorial intentions, that is, with establishing that which the author sought to communicate by a particular text. Communicative authorial intentions are in some circles controversial, but common objections turned out not to succeed. Moreover, several ways of engaging with texts do not count as cases of textual interpretation on my definition. Examples of such non-interpretive activities are appreciating the text from an aesthetic point of view, acquiring testimonial knowledge and/or understanding from the text, identifying indicators or symptoms of one thing or another, and allegorical interpretation. Gadamer's apparent claim that all interpretation involves application turned out to lack support.

Textual interpretation has, on my definition, the epistemic aims of knowledge and understanding. The understanding of texts has received scant attention in current (analytic) epistemology. On my view, a subject *S* understands a proposition (or set of propositions) *p* about a text *T* to a degree *D* iff (i) *S* knows *p*, with *p* being about linguistic properties of *T* and their relations; and (ii) *S* correctly constructed the relations between the linguistic properties of *T*; and (iii) *D* increases with the number of textual properties that are being correctly taken into account and relations that have adequately been constructed between the linguistic properties of *T*. To understand a poem, we not only need to know about the relations between the poem's properties but also need to be able to reconstruct the relations in virtue of the textual properties. This account of textual understanding differs from causal notions of understanding, which we find, for example, in the literature on scientific understanding, but it is close to more general theories of understanding that emphasize the ability to see relations between relevant properties or between pieces of information. Such similarities between my analysis of textual understanding and general theories of understanding increase the prospects of a unified account of understanding.

Truth is essential to both epistemic aims of knowledge and understanding. Although it is controversial whether interpretive state-

ments have truth-value at all (that is, whether they can be true or false), I have shown that several central objections fail. Moreover, there is much disagreement on the notion of truth that would be involved in true interpretive statements. I have shown that not all truth theories presented in the literature make the same types of claims. The projects offering potential answers to my question are forms of pragmatism, coherentism, and correspondence theories. Other theories prominent in the literature on interpretation, such as Heideggerian truth theories and theories describing truth in terms of power relations, are concerned with other types of questions; hence, they are irrelevant to my quest. As to the relevant truth theories, I argued that a correspondence theory of truth is the best candidate for characterizing the nature of truth for interpretive statements. The correspondence theory of truth is taken to state that a proposition *p* is true iff what *p* states to be the case actually is the case. Given this notion of truth, my second question—can interpretive statements have truth-value, that is, can they be true or false?—could be answered affirmatively.

The epistemic status of an interpretive belief depends on, or is manifested by, its justification or support. Chapter 4 argued that an interpretive practice can be described as an evidence-based quest for truth in which we try to arrive at an inference to the best interpretation of some text by developing arguments that are subject to the ordinary standards of logic and argumentation. That is to say, interpretive practices involve the inferential move of inferences to the best explanation, on the basis of theoretical virtues that decide which explanation or interpretation is best. They do not, in that sense, differ from other truth-aiming practices, such as found in the sciences.

Many interpretive claims come without explicit defence, and for good reasons. But there are contexts in which their justification is desirable or required. In formulating such justifications, we face the problem of deciding which data are relevant and which data count as evidence for interpretive claims. I argued that clearly defining the notions *data* and *evidence* allows us, in principle, to settle this. To select the relevant data, we need to consider whether, given a partic-

ular interpretive claim, a piece of information *x* potentially shows the truth, probability, or credibility of the interpretive claim. To select the evidence for our interpretive claims, we need to consider whether *x* actually supports the truth, probability, or credibility of the interpretive claim. I do not claim that selecting data and evidence is easy in actual interpretive practices—in fact, it seems to have caused many of the interpretive disagreements.

Hermeneutical circularity is often discussed in contexts of interpretive practices. I distinguished six uses of *hermeneutical circularity* and analysed them in terms of binary relations with two possible pairs of *relata* and three possible kinds of relations:

- (I) In trying to understand the whole of something *x*, we take parts of *x* into account, and vice versa.
- (II) In trying to understand something *x*, we employ our pre-understanding of *x*, and the resulting understanding informs (corrects, complements, etc.) the pre-understanding in the next stage of the understanding process.
- (III) It is impossible to understand the whole of something *x* without understanding a part of *x*, and vice versa.
- (IV) It is impossible to understand something *x* without employing one's pre-understanding of *x*, and the resulting understanding informs one's pre-understanding in the next stage of the understanding process.
- (v) An understanding of the whole of something *x* must be justified by reference to (an understanding of) its parts, and vice versa.
- (vi) An understanding of something *x* must be justified by our pre-understanding of *x*, and it functions as a justificatory ground for the understanding we start from in the next stage of the understanding process.

The epistemic import of each of these circles has been evaluated. The circularity metaphor may suggest that hermeneutical circularity is epistemically negative, due to associations with logical circularity. However, hermeneutical circularity has often been consid-

ered beneficial, particularly in twentieth-century reflection on interpretation. I argued that most hermeneutical circles are insufficiently specific for us to decide whether their epistemic import is positive or negative. Of the six identified notions, (I), (II), (IV), and (v) could not, without further qualifications, be categorized as epistemically positive, negative, or neutral. The other two would be epistemically problematic, but (III) turned out to be either false or not really a case of hermeneutical circularity after all, and (VI) appeared to be merely a theoretical option.

A final reason for hesitating to answer my main questions affirmatively could be the view I called *perspectivism*, which is the idea that all our cognitive endeavours depend on a subject's perspective, cognitive outlook, presumptions, and so on. In evaluating the epistemological implications of perspectivism, I argued that interpretive beliefs about texts can have a high epistemic status; in that respect, they are not principally different from beliefs acquired through other truth-aiming practices. I argued that textual interpretation is a source of knowledge (and understanding), albeit not a source of knowledge involving the standard knowledge sources traditionally discussed in (analytic) epistemology, such as perception, reason, introspection, memory, and testimony. The answer to my main question, then, is that textual interpretive beliefs can acquire a high epistemic status, a status that does not, in principle, differ from the epistemic status of beliefs acquired through other truth-aiming activities.

Summary

Textual interpretation is crucial to our knowledge about and understanding of conversations, laws, holy writings, political declarations, scientific texts, letters, poems, and so on. Many disagreements hinge on interpretive questions and raise epistemological questions about textual interpretations. Can interpretive statements be correct or incorrect, and if so, in virtue of what? Can interpretive beliefs amount to knowledge, or are matters of interpretation never factual? Can readers do justice to an author in their attempt to describe an author's communicative aims?

This book is about the epistemology of textual interpretation, and it addresses the question of whether textual interpretive beliefs can acquire a high epistemic status—that is, whether they can amount to knowledge or factual understanding.

The theory of textual interpretation used to be the topic of the discipline of hermeneutics. The philosophical hermeneutics of, especially, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer occasioned a break in this tradition. This new approach to hermeneutics is perhaps relevant to—but did not include nor surpass—the traditional hermeneutical issues. My concern is not with this new approach to hermeneutics but with the hermeneutics of textual interpretation. I distinguish two main projects within this hermeneutics. The first is *epistemic hermeneutics*; this project is concerned with the epistemic aims of textual interpretation, viz., knowledge and understanding. The second is *practical hermeneutics*; this project is concerned with practical aims or actual effects of textual interpretation, such as application, evaluation, reception, critical analysis, and use of a text as a source of information. Although the two are almost always relevant to a particular interpretive practice, yet they are different (philosophical) projects. However important practical hermeneutics may be, this book restricts itself to epistemic hermeneutics.

My take on epistemology and, hence, on hermeneutics aligns with the analytic tradition in philosophy, which is typically contrasted to the continental tradition—though such delineations are not always very clear. Up to now, hermeneutical questions have been mainly addressed in the continental tradition. I maintain that the stereotypical features of the analytic-philosophical approach seem particularly called for in current debates on hermeneutics, such as its focus on conceptual clarity, the univocal use of language, explicit argumentation, detailed evaluation of arguments, and reflection on the theory of argumentation and on the nature of data. The other way round, reflection on the topic of textual interpretation may also be particularly relevant to a number of topics currently discussed not only in the context of the analytic-philosophical tradition but also in analytic theology.

The word *interpretation* has been defined in many different ways. I argue that there is a sense in which judges, preachers, historians, literary critics, and many others engage in the same kind of activity when they interpret a text. It makes sense to endorse the quite traditional definition of *textual interpretation*, according to which to interpret a text T is to try to solve difficulties in understanding or acquiring knowledge about T. As to the notion of text, I reject the distinction between text and work that is found in literary theory, and I define *text* as an ordered set of signs with a linguistic function in a particular language L. A sign is a figure, or an otherwise perceptible object, which in L has an x-stands-for-y structure. The ordered set of signs constitutes words, sentences, paragraphs, and longer textual units, all with particular properties. Textual interpretation thus seeks to solve difficulties in understanding, or acquiring knowledge about, the relations between the perceptible properties and the represented properties. Thus, the interpretation of a text includes identifying the grammatical and semantical properties of words, their referential potential, stylistic features, illocutionary acts and intentions, perlocutionary acts and intentions, narrative patterns, a text's genre, and the message or moral of a story. Textual interpretation can be concerned with establishing communicative authorial intentions, that is, establishing what it is that the author seeks to commu-

nicate by a particular text. Communicative authorial intentions are in some circles controversial, but the common objections discussed in this book turn out to fail. I reject the notion of intentionalism according to which intentionalist interpretation seeks to describe the actual psychological event of the author's thinking *p*, and which takes texts to be expressions of the author's mind (or soul, personality, etc.).

Textual interpretation as I define it is to be distinguished from other uses of the term. For example, on one use of *interpretation*, it is the property of every cognitive process (including seeing and reading) in virtue of which reality is not approached in an immediate way, or directly, but with a set of beliefs, values, experiences, and so forth that affect sensory experiences and doxastic processes. Whatever else may be true of this perspectivist notion of interpretation, it is in any case different from and compatible with the notion that I defend. Moreover, a number of ways of engaging with texts do not count as cases of textual interpretation on my definition. Examples of such non-interpretive activities are appreciating the text from an aesthetic point of view, acquiring testimonial knowledge and/or understanding from the text, identifying indicators or symptoms of one thing or another, and allegorical interpretation. Gadamer's apparent claim that all interpretation involves application turns out to lack proper support; at best, Gadamer offers support for the view that interpretation in actual practice always goes together with application.

Textual interpretation has, on my definition, the epistemic aims of knowledge and understanding. I assume that knowledge about textual properties is not a different sort of knowledge than knowledge about anything else, and I refer to the extensive debates of the past decades on the nature of knowledge for further discussion. The study of understanding in analytic literature on epistemology and the philosophy of science has started only recently. The nature of understanding is often treated as dependent on the nature of its objects. The understanding of texts has received scant attention so far. In the literature on understanding, the understanding of empirical phenomena and scientific theories is distinguished from the un-

derstanding of persons and the understanding of language. We cannot tell whether this is correct unless we compare the analyses of what it is to understand these different objects.

On my view, a subject *S* understands a proposition (or set of propositions) *p* about a text *T* to a degree *D* iff (i) *S* knows *p*, with *p* being about linguistic properties of *T* and their relations; and (ii) *S* correctly constructed the relations between the linguistic properties of *T*; and (iii) *D* increases with the number of textual properties that are being correctly taken into account and relations that have adequately been constructed between the linguistic properties of *T*. Thus, contrary to various objections, understanding involves propositions, beliefs, truth, and justification (plus a condition excluding understanding by luck). It does not fully coincide with cases of knowledge. To understand a poem, we not only need to know about the relations between the poem's properties but also need to be able to reconstruct the relations in virtue of the textual properties.

This account of understanding texts differs from causal notions of understanding, which we find, for example, in the literature on scientific understanding, but it is close to more general theories of understanding that emphasize the ability to see relations between relevant properties or between pieces of information. Such similarities between my analysis of textual understanding and general theories of understanding increase the prospects of a unified account of understanding.

Truth is essential to both epistemic aims of knowledge and understanding. It is controversial whether interpretive statements have truth-value at all (i.e., whether they can be true or false). Moreover, there is much disagreement on the notion of truth that would be involved in true interpretive statements. I show that not all truth theories presented in the literature make the same types of claims. The projects offering potential answers to my question are forms of pragmatism, coherentism, and correspondence theories. Other theories prominent in the literature on interpretation, such as Heideggerian truth theories and theories describing truth in terms of power relations, are concerned with other types of questions; hence, they are irrelevant to my quest.

Two criteria are useful for the selection of the best truth theory (or theories) to characterize the nature of truth for interpretive statements: (1) common sense and (2) a value criterion which says we should not call any proposed interpretans “true” if it does not do justice to the text or its author. Examining the candidate truth theories, I argue that a correspondence theory of truth is the best candidate for characterizing the nature of truth for interpretive statements, taking the correspondence theory of truth to state that a proposition *p* is true iff what *p* states to be the case actually is the case. Given this notion of truth, my second question—can interpretive statements have truth-value, that is, can they be true or false?—can be answered affirmatively.

There are several types of suspicions about and objections to the idea that interpretive statements can have truth-value. I argue they all fail. Some of them are inspired by the colloquial opposition of interpretations and facts, or by truisms that seem to render distinctions between true and false interpretive statements trivial. Others express worries about the indeterminacy of meaning due to the instability of the relation between sign and signifier, and about the underdetermination of interpretive statements by the evidence.

The epistemic status of an interpretive belief depends on, or is manifested by, its justification or support. Chapter 4 argues that an interpretive practice can be described as an evidence-based quest for truth in which we try to arrive at an inference to the best interpretation of some text by developing arguments that are subject to the ordinary standards of logic and argumentation. Interpretive practices (can) employ inductive and deductive arguments and involve the inferential move of inferences to the best explanation, on the basis of theoretical virtues that decide which explanation or interpretation is best. They do not, in that sense, differ from other truth-aiming practices, such as found in the sciences. This seems to support a monist view, according to which the humanities and the sciences employ the same method. Yet, this is not to deny that there are significant differences between the two when it comes to identifying the relevant types of data and concrete research procedures. The analogy between inferences to the best explanation and infer-

ences to the best interpretation does not indicate any more concrete similarity in methodology.

Many interpretive claims come without explicit defence or argument, and for good reasons. But there are contexts in which their justification is desirable or required. In formulating such justifications, we face the problem of deciding which data are relevant and which data count as evidence for our interpretive claims. It is argued that clearly defining the notions of data and evidence allows us, in principle, to settle this. To select the relevant data, we need to consider whether, given a particular interpretive claim, a piece of information *x* potentially shows the truth, probability, or credibility of the interpretive claim. To select the evidence for an interpretive claim, we need to consider whether *x* actually supports the truth, probability, or credibility of that particular claim. I distinguish four types of items that may function as data and evidence in textual interpretation, namely, texts, various types of contexts, general principles, and background beliefs one may not be aware of. Even though there is a theoretical criterion for selecting the relevant data and evidence, its application in actual practices is difficult—in fact, it seems to cause many of the interpretive disagreements.

Hermeneutical circularity is often discussed in contexts of interpretive practices. Distinguishing six uses of the term *hermeneutical circularity*, I analyse these in terms of binary relations with two possible pairs of relata and three possible kinds of relations:

- (I) In trying to understand the whole of something *x*, we take parts of *x* into account, and vice versa.
- (II) In trying to understand something *x*, we employ our pre-understanding of *x*, and the resulting understanding informs (corrects, complements, etc.) the pre-understanding in the next stage of the understanding process.
- (III) It is impossible to understand the whole of something *x* without understanding a part of *x*, and vice versa.
- (IV) It is impossible to understand something *x* without employing one's pre-understanding of *x*, and the resulting understanding informs one's pre-understanding in the next stage of the understanding process.

- (v) An understanding of the whole of something x must be justified by reference to (an understanding of) its parts, and vice versa.
- (vi) An understanding of something x must be justified by our pre-understanding of x, and it functions as a justificatory ground for the understanding we start from in the next stage of the understanding process.

Evaluating their epistemic import, I note that the circularity metaphor may suggest that hermeneutical circularity is epistemically negative, due to its associations with logical circularity. On the other hand, hermeneutical circularity has often been considered to be beneficial, particularly in twentieth-century reflection on interpretation. I argue that, of the six identified hermeneutical circles, four cannot, without further qualifications, be categorized as epistemically positive, negative, or neutral. Two of the six could be epistemically problematic, but one of these is either false or not really a case of hermeneutical circularity after all, and the other appears to be merely a theoretical option.

One final reason to answer my main question negatively could be the view I call *perspectivism*, which is the idea that all cognitive endeavours depend on a subject's perspective, cognitive outlook, presumptions, and so on. Starting from the optical metaphor of a perspective, I highlight three points on a continuum of ways to spell out this metaphor, relate them to interpretive practices, and consider their epistemic implications; that is, I consider whether the truth of that particular notion of perspectivism has any implications for the maximal epistemic status of our interpretive beliefs. It is argued that it is impossible to measure the influence of a perspective on our doxastic processes and that we lack a way to decisively evaluate whether this influence is epistemically positive or negative. I also argue that (a) perspectives may contribute positively to our cognitive activities, including interpretive practices, and even seem indispensable; (b) one perspective can be better than another; (c) extreme positions, such as radical relativism or scepticism, are not supported by the observation that perspectives factor into our cognitive

processes; and (d) there may be ways to mitigate a perspective's (potentially) negative epistemic influences. With regard to perspectivism, interpretive practices do not differ from other cognitive practices. As such, then, perspectivism does not entail that our interpretive beliefs have a low epistemic status.

My main question is this: Can our textual interpretive beliefs acquire a high epistemic status—that is, can they amount to knowledge or factual understanding? First, I argue that common sense suggests an affirmative answer, but that may not convince a sceptic. Second, I argue that interpretive beliefs can meet the conditions in virtue of which interpretive beliefs amount to knowledge or understanding. Third, I evaluate the best objections raised against an affirmative answer to my main question and conclude that they fail. Therefore, I conclude that interpretive beliefs about texts can indeed amount to knowledge or factual understanding—i.e., they can have a high epistemic status. In that sense, they are not principally different from beliefs acquired through other truth-aiming practices.

This implies that textual interpretation is a source of knowledge (and understanding), even though it has not, up to now, been included in the list of standard knowledge sources traditionally discussed in (analytic) epistemology, such as perception, reason, introspection, memory, and testimony. In examining the nature of the knowledge source that textual interpretation is, I discuss four options: interpretation (i) is a basic source, in the sense that it yields knowledge without positive dependence on the operation of some other source of knowledge (or of justification); (ii) is a knowledge source fully reducible to one of the already acknowledged knowledge sources; (iii) is partially reducible to these sources, while also involving an ability or capacity of its own; or (iv) is fully reducible to some combination of the already acknowledged knowledge sources. I argue that (i) and (ii) certainly do not apply, and the case for (iii) seems difficult as well. In either of these cases, textual interpretation is a knowledge source that deserves independent study.

Nederlandse Samenvatting

Tekstinterpretatie is cruciaal voor onze kennis over en ons begrip van gesprekken, wetten, heilige geschriften, politieke verklaringen, wetenschappelijke teksten, brieven, gedichten, enzovoorts. Veel onenigheden betreffen interpretatiekwesties en roepen epistemologische vragen aangaande tekstinterpretatie op. Kunnen interpretatieve beweringen juist of onjuist zijn, en zo ja, waar hangt dat dan van af? Kunnen interpretatieve overtuigingen kennis zijn, of gaat het bij kwesties van interpretatie niet om feiten? Kunnen lezers recht doen aan een auteur in hun poging om diens communicatieve doelen te beschrijven?

Dit boek gaat over de epistemologie of kennistheorie van tekstinterpretatie. Het gaat in op de vraag of overtuigingen gebaseerd op tekstinterpretatie een hoge epistemische status kunnen bereiken—met andere woorden, of we door tekstinterpretatie kennis kunnen verwerven, of waarheidsgetrouw begrip.

De theorie van tekstinterpretatie was lange tijd het onderwerp van de hermeneutiek. De filosofische hermeneutiek van (voornamelijk) Martin Heidegger en Hans-Georg Gadamer brak met deze traditie. Hun nieuwe benadering van de hermeneutiek is wellicht relevant voor—maar behelst noch overstijgt—de traditionele hermeneutische kwesties. Mijn aandacht gaat in dit boek niet uit naar deze nieuwe filosofische benadering van de hermeneutiek, maar naar de hermeneutiek van tekstinterpretatie. Ik maak een onderscheid tussen twee projecten in deze hermeneutiek. In de eerste plaats is er, wat ik noem, *epistemische hermeneutiek*; dit project heeft betrekking op de epistemische doelen van tekstinterpretatie, namelijk, kennis en begrip. Deze epistemische hermeneutiek onderscheid ik van de *praktische hermeneutiek*; daarbij gaat het om de praktische doelen of gevolgen van tekstinterpretatie, zoals toepassing, evaluatie, receptie, kritische analyse, en gebruik van een tekst als bron van

informatie. Hoewel de twee soorten hermeneutiek bijna altijd relevant zijn voor een bepaalde interpretatieve praktijk, zijn het verschillende (filosofische) projecten. Hoezeer de praktische hermeneutiek ook van belang is, dit boek beperkt zich tot de epistemische hermeneutiek.

Mijn benadering van de epistemologie, en dus ook van de epistemische hermeneutiek, sluit aan bij de analytische traditie in de filosofie. Deze wordt vaak gecontrasteerd met de continentale traditie, al is de scheidslijn niet altijd helder. Tot op heden kwamen hermeneutische vragen voornamelijk in de continentale traditie aan de orde. De stereotypische eigenschappen van de analytische traditie lijken echter heel relevant voor de huidige debatten over hermeneutische thema's. Voorbeelden van deze eigenschappen zijn de focus op conceptuele helderheid, consistent taalgebruik, expliciete argumentatie, gedetailleerde evaluatie van argumenten, en reflectie op de theorie van argumentatie en op de aard van data en bewijs. Omgekeerd kan reflectie op het onderwerp van tekstinterpretatie relevant zijn voor een aantal debatten in de analytische traditie, zoals debatten over begrip en getuigenis, en ook voor de analytische theologie.

Het woord *interpretatie* wordt op vele manieren gedefinieerd. Ik beargumenteer dat er een betekenis van het woord is waarin rechters, predikanten, historici, literatuurcritici en vele anderen eenzelfde soort activiteit verrichten wanneer ze een tekst interpreteren. Het is zinvol om een vrij traditionele definitie van *tekstinterpretatie* te gebruiken, volgens welke een tekst T interpreteren een poging is om moeilijkheden om tot begrip van of kennis over T te komen, op te lossen. Wat het begrip *tekst* aangaat, neem ik het onderscheid tussen tekst en werk, wat we soms zien in literaire theorieën, niet over. Ik definieer *tekst* als een geordende verzameling tekens die in een bepaalde taal L een talige functie hebben. Een teken is een figuur, of een anderszins waarneembaar object, dat in L een x-staatvoor-y structuur heeft. De geordende verzameling tekens constitueert woorden, zinnen, alinea's en langere teksteenheden, allemaal met bepaalde eigenschappen. In het interpreteren van teksten proberen we moeilijkheden in het verwerven van begrip van, of kennis over, de relaties tussen de waarneembare eigenschappen en de gere-

presenteerde eigenschappen op te lossen. Het interpreteren van een tekst behelst onder meer het identificeren van de grammaticale en semantische eigenschappen van woorden, hun referentiepotentieel, stilistische eigenschappen, illocutionaire handelingen en intenties, perlocutionaire handelingen en intenties, narratieve patronen, het genre van de tekst en de boodschap of moraal van het verhaal. Tekstinterpretatie kan zich richten op het vaststellen van de communicatieve auteursintenties, dat wil zeggen, vaststellen wat de auteur probeerde te communiceren door middel van de tekst. De aard en functie van dergelijke intenties zijn in sommige kringen controverseel, maar de gangbare bezwaren die ik heb besproken bleken geen stand te houden. Het soort intentionalisme dat stelt dat intentionele interpretaties het psychologische proces van de vorming van de tekst proberen te achterhalen—waarmee teksten uitingen worden van de geest (of ziel, of persoonlijkheid, etc.) van de auteur—is eveneens inadequaat.

Tekstinterpretatie, in de betekenis waarin ik het woord gebruik, verschilt van een aantal andere gangbare definities van het woord. Soms wordt *interpretatie* bijvoorbeeld begrepen als de eigenschap van elk cognitief proces (bv. zien, lezen) waardoor de werkelijkheid niet op onmiddellijke of directe wijze benaderd wordt, maar met een verzameling overtuigingen, waarden, ervaringen, enzovoorts, die onze zintuiglijke ervaringen en overtuigingsvormende processen beïnvloeden. Ongeacht of we dit perspectivistische begrip van *interpretatie* willen hanteren, is het in ieder geval een andere, maar ermee verenigbare, definitie van het begrip *interpretatie*. Mijn definitie rekent dus een aantal zaken niet tot de categorie 'interpretatie' die volgens andere definities er wel toe zouden behoren. Voorbeelden van dergelijke praktijken (die dus volgens mijn definitie niet-interpretatief zijn) zijn de esthetische appreciatie van een tekst, het verkrijgen van (getuigenis-)kennis en/of begrip door middel van de tekst, het identificeren van indicatoren of symptomen van een bepaald verschijnsel (bijv. in psychoanalytische interpretaties), en allegorische interpretaties. Gadamer's bewering dat alle interpretatie ook applicatie behelst blijkt ongegrond; hooguit onderbouwde hij de gedachte dat interpretatie vaak of altijd samengaat met applicatie.

Tekstinterpretatie heeft, volgens de door mij gehanteerde definitie, epistemische doelen, namelijk het verwerven van kennis over en/of begrip van een tekst. Ik ga ervan uit dat kennis over tekstuele eigenschappen geen ander soort kennis is dan kennis over om het even wat. Wat de analyse van dit kennisbegrip betreft, verwijs ik voor verdere bespreking naar de zeer uitgebreide debatten van de laatste decennia over de aard van kennis. De reflectie op de aard van *begrip* is in de analytische traditie relatief jong. Doorgaans wordt de aard van begrip besproken in relatie tot de aard van de verschillende objecten van begrip. Talig begrip wordt dan, bijvoorbeeld, onderscheiden van het begrijpen van empirische fenomenen, en beide worden vaak onderscheiden van het begrijpen van personen—alsof er steeds een ander idee van *begrip* aan de orde zou zijn. Tekstbegrip is in dat kader nog nauwelijks besproken. Of deze gedifferentieerde benadering correct is weten we pas als we de analyses kunnen vergelijken van wat het is om deze verschillende soorten objecten te begrijpen.

Mijn analyse van tekstbegrip luidt, wat technisch geformuleerd, als volgt. Een subject S begrijpt een propositie (of verzameling van proposities) *p* ten aanzien van een tekst T in een bepaalde gradatie D dan en slechts dan als (i) S weet dat *p*, waarbij *p* gaat over de linguïstische eigenschappen van T en hun relaties; en (ii) S op juiste wijze deze relaties tussen de linguïstische eigenschappen van T construeerde; en (iii) de gradatie D toeneemt met het aantal tekstuele eigenschappen dat op juiste wijze verdisconteerd wordt en met het aantal relaties dat correct geconstrueerd wordt tussen de linguïstische eigenschappen van T. Dus ik beargumenteer, in tegenstelling tot wat wel in de literatuur betoogd wordt, dat tekstbegrip overtuigingen, waarheid, en rechtvaardiging (met een conditie die 'toeval-*lig*' begrip uitsluit) behelst. Begrip valt niet volledig samen met kennis. Om bijvoorbeeld een gedicht te begrijpen moeten we niet alleen kennis hebben over de relaties tussen de eigenschappen van het gedicht, maar moeten we ook in staat zijn deze relaties zelf te reconstrueren aan de hand van de tekstuele eigenschappen.

Deze analyse van tekstbegrip verschilt van causale analyses van begrip die we bijvoorbeeld vinden in de literatuur over wetenschap-

pelijk begrip. Hij sluit wel nauw aan bij meer algemene theorieën over begrip die de nadruk leggen op het vermogen relaties te leggen tussen relevante eigenschappen of tussen informatie-eenheden. Dergelijke overeenkomsten tussen mijn analyse van tekstbegrip en algemene theorieën over begrijpen suggereren dat er mogelijkheden zijn om te komen tot een omvattende notie van begrip.

Waarheid is een essentiële voorwaarde in de analyse van kennis en begrip. In de literatuur wordt soms betwist dat interpretatieve beweringen waarheidswaarde hebben (dat wil zeggen: waar of onwaar kunnen zijn). Bovendien zijn er grote verschillen in opvattingen over de notie van waarheid die zou gelden voor 'ware' interpretatieve beweringen. Ik laat zien dat niet alle waarheidstheorieën die besproken worden in de filosofische literatuur dezelfde typen beweringen doen. De relevante kandidaten die antwoord kunnen geven op de vraag of interpretatieve beweringen waarheidswaarde hebben, en welke waarheidstheorie dan van toepassing is, zijn vormen van pragmatisme, coherentisme, en de correspondentietheorie van waarheid. Andere bekende waarheidstheorieën die in de literatuur over interpretatie besproken worden, zoals Heideggeriaanse waarheidstheorieën en theorieën die waarheid beschrijven in termen van machtsrelaties, hebben betrekking op een ander type vragen dan waarmee ik me bezighoud en zijn derhalve irrelevant voor mijn onderzoek.

Twee criteria zijn bruikbaar voor de selectie van de waarheidstheorie die het meest geschikt is (of theorieën die geschikt zijn) om de aard van waarheid in relatie tot interpretatieve beweringen te karakteriseren: dit zijn (1) *common sense* en (2) een waarde-criterium dat stelt dat we een potentiële interpretatieve bewering niet 'waar' moeten noemen als deze bewering geen recht doet aan de tekst of de auteur. Als we hierop de potentiële waarheidstheorieën onderzoeken, dan komt een vorm van de correspondentietheorie van waarheid naar voren als het meest geschikt om de aard van waarheid in relatie tot interpretatieve beweringen te karakteriseren. Deze vorm van de correspondentietheorie van waarheid stelt dat een propositie *p* waar is dan en slechts dan als wat volgens *p* het geval is ook daadwerkelijk het geval is. Gegeven deze notie van waarheid kan

mijn tweede vraag—namelijk, of interpretatieve beweringen waarheidswaarde hebben—bevestigend beantwoord worden.

Er zijn verscheidene twijfels over en bezwaren tegen het idee dat interpretatieve beweringen waarheidswaarde kunnen hebben. Sommige gaan uit van ons dagelijks taalgebruik en gangbare uitdrukkingen, waarin *interpretatie* vaak gecontrasteerd wordt met *feit*. Andere betwisten dat woorden en zinnen betekenis kunnen bepalen, omdat de relatie tussen teken en betekenis instabiel zou zijn. Hieraan gerelateerd is de gedachte dat interpretatieve beweringen ondergedetermineerd worden door het bewijs. Ik betoog dat geen van deze bezwaren standhouden.

De epistemische status van een interpretatieve overtuiging is afhankelijk van (of blijkt uit) de rechtvaardiging of onderbouwing van deze overtuiging. In hoofdstuk 4 betoog ik dat interpretatieve praktijken beschreven kunnen worden als onderzoek dat zich op bewijs baseert en waarin men streeft naar waarheid, waartoe men probeert te komen door middel van een inferentie tot de beste interpretatie door argumenten te ontwikkelen die moeten voldoen aan de gewone standaarden van de logica en van de argumentatietheorie. Interpretatieve praktijken maken gebruik van, of kunnen gebruikmaken van, inductieve en deductieve argumenten, en behelzen een *zgn. inference to the best explanation*, op basis van theoretische deugden waarmee bepaald wordt welke verklaring of interpretatie de beste is. In die zin verschillen interpretatieve praktijken niet van andere waarheidszoekende praktijken, zoals we die bijvoorbeeld in de natuurwetenschappen vinden. Dit lijkt een monistische visie te steunen, volgens welke de geesteswetenschappen en de natuurwetenschappen dezelfde methode hanteren. Dat is op zich correct, maar er zijn ook significante verschillen tussen de twee soorten wetenschappen als het gaat om het identificeren van de relevante typen data en de concrete onderzoeksprocedures. De analogie tussen inferenties tot de beste verklaring en inferenties tot de beste interpretatie suggereert nog geen overeenkomsten op een concreter methodologisch niveau.

Voor veel interpretatieve beweringen wordt er geen expliciete onderbouwing gegeven, en daar kunnen goede redenen voor zijn.

Maar er zijn ook contexten waarin hun rechtvaardiging wenselijk of vereist is. In een poging interpretatieve beweringen te onderbouwen worden we voor de vraag gesteld welke data relevant zijn en welke data als bewijs kunnen gelden voor onze interpretatieve beweringen. In hoofdstuk 4 betoog ik dat een heldere definitie van de begrippen *data* en *bewijs* ons in staat stelt deze vragen in principe te beantwoorden. Om de relevante data vast te stellen moeten we nagaan of, gegeven een bepaalde interpretatieve bewering, een bepaalde informatie-eenheid de potentie heeft om bij te dragen aan het tonen van de waarheid, waarschijnlijkheid of geloofwaardigheid van die betreffende interpretatieve bewering. Om het bewijs voor een interpretatieve bewering vast te stellen, moeten we nagaan of een bepaalde informatie-eenheid daadwerkelijk bijdraagt aan het tonen van de waarheid, waarschijnlijkheid of geloofwaardigheid van de betreffende interpretatieve bewering. Ik onderscheid vier typen zaken die als data en bewijs kunnen functioneren in tekstinterpretatie, namelijk, teksten, verscheidene typen contexten, algemene interpretatieprincipes en achtergrondovertuigingen die we, onbewust, kunnen hebben. Hoewel er dus een theoretisch criterium is waarmee de relevante data en het bewijs kunnen worden vastgesteld, is dit praktisch vaak moeilijk—en dit praktische probleem ligt vaak ten grondslag aan onenigheid over interpretaties.

Eén bijzondere vorm van redeneren of argumenteren in de context van interpretatieve praktijken is het veelbesproken idee van hermeneutische circulariteit. Ik analyseer het gebruik van dit begrip in de literatuur in termen van binaire relaties met twee mogelijke paren van *relata* en drie mogelijke soorten relaties. In totaal onderscheid ik dus zes gebruiken van het begrip *hermeneutische circulariteit*.

- (I) In een poging het geheel van iets (x) te begrijpen, verdisconteneren we delen van x, en vice versa.
- (II) In een poging om iets (x) te begrijpen, gebruiken we ons voorverstaan van x, en het resulterende begrip informeert (corrigeert, complementeert, etc.) dit voorverstaan in de volgende fase van het begripsproces.

- (III) Het is onmogelijk om het geheel van iets (x) te begrijpen zonder een deel van x te begrijpen, en vice versa.
- (IV) Het is onmogelijk om iets (x) te begrijpen zonder ons voorverstaan van x te gebruiken, en het resulterende begrip informeert ons voorverstaan in de volgende fase van het begripsproces.
- (v) Het begrip van het geheel van iets (x) moet gerechtvaardigd worden door (een begrip van) de delen van x, en vice versa.
- (VI) Het begrip van iets (x) moet gerechtvaardigd worden door ons voorverstaan van x, en dit begrip functioneert als rechtvaardigingsgrond voor het begrip waarmee we in de volgende fase van het begripsproces beginnen.

Als we de epistemische implicaties van deze noties van hermeneutische circulariteit evalueren, zouden we kunnen verwachten dat deze, vanwege een associatie met logische circulariteit, negatief uitvalt. Anderzijds is hermeneutische circulariteit juist vaak als epistemisch positief gezien, in het bijzonder in de twintigste eeuw. Ik betoog dat, van de zes onderscheiden hermeneutische cirkels, er vier zijn die als zodanig niet als epistemisch positief, negatief of neutraal geassocieerd kunnen worden: een dergelijke kwalificatie zou afhangen van iets anders dan wat in de huidige karakterisering van deze cirkels vervat is. Twee van de zes zouden epistemisch negatief zijn, ware het niet dat één ervan onjuist is, en de andere eigenlijk vooral een theoretische mogelijkheid lijkt.

Een laatste reden om mijn hoofdvraag in dit boek negatief te beantwoorden zou een idee kunnen zijn die ik *perspectivisme* genoemd heb—we kwamen het al in hoofdstuk 1 tegen. Dat is de gedachte dat al onze cognitieve activiteiten afhankelijk zijn van ons perspectief, de manier waarop we de werkelijkheid beschouwen, onze vooronderstellingen, enzovoorts. Beginnend met de optische metafoor van het perspectief bespreek ik drie punten op een continuüm van manieren om de grondgedachte van dit perspectivisme verder uit te werken. Ik relateer ze aan interpretatieve praktijken en ga hun epistemische implicaties na—dat wil zeggen: ik ga na of de waarheid van die bepaalde notie van perspectivisme implicaties heeft voor de

maximaal haalbare epistemische status van onze interpretatieve overtuigingen. Ik betoog dat het onmogelijk is om de invloed van een perspectief op onze overtuigingsvormende processen te bepalen en dat het ons ontbreekt aan een manier om grondig te evalueren of deze invloed epistemisch positief of negatief is. Ik betoog ook (a) dat perspectieven positief zouden kunnen bijdragen aan onze cognitieve activiteiten, inclusief interpretatieve praktijken, en zelfs onontbeerlijk lijken te zijn; (b) dat het ene perspectief in epistemische zin beter kan zijn dan het andere; (c) dat extreme posities, zoals radicaal relativisme of scepticisme, niet onderbouwd worden door de observatie dat perspectieven invloed hebben op onze cognitieve processen; en (d) dat er wellicht manieren zijn om (potentieel) negatieve invloeden te matigen. Met betrekking tot perspectivisme verschillen interpretatieve praktijken niet van andere cognitieve praktijken. Als zodanig impliceert perspectivisme geen lage epistemische status voor onze interpretatieve overtuigingen.

Mijn hoofdvraag was deze: kunnen onze tekstinterpretatieve overtuigingen een hoge epistemische status verwerven—dat wil zeggen, kunnen ze een vorm van kennis zijn of waarheidsgetrouw begrip? Op deze vraag wordt in deze dissertatie op verschillende manieren een antwoord gegeven. Ten eerste kan men stellen dat *common sense* een bevestigend antwoord suggereert—maar dat zal een wat sceptischer persoon niet overtuigen. Ten tweede heb ik betoogd dat interpretatieve overtuigingen in principe kunnen voldoen aan de voorwaarden die we stellen aan overtuigingen om een vorm van kennis of begrip te zijn. Ten derde heb ik de meest centrale bezwaren die in de literatuur tegen een affirmatief antwoord zijn ingebracht besproken, en vastgesteld dat ze geen stand houden. Daarom concludeer ik dat interpretatieve beweringen over teksten inderdaad een hoge epistemische status kunnen hebben. In dat opzicht zijn ze niet principieel verschillend van overtuigingen die in andere waarheidsgerichte praktijken gevormd worden.

Dit impliceert dat tekstinterpretatie een bron van kennis (en begrip) is, hoewel tekstinterpretatie als zodanig tot op heden niet gerekend wordt tot de standaard kenbronnen die traditioneel in de (analytische) epistemologie besproken worden, zoals perceptie, re-

de, introspectie, geheugen en getuigenis. Om te onderzoeken wat de aard is van de kenbron die tekstinterpretatie is, bespreek ik vier mogelijkheden: tekstinterpretatie is (i) een basale kenbron, in de zin dat tekstinterpretatie kennis verschaft zonder afhankelijk te zijn van de werking van een andere kenbron (of rechtvaardigingsbron); (ii) een kenbron die volledig gereduceerd kan worden tot één van de standaard kenbronnen; (iii) een kenbron die gedeeltelijk te reduceren is tot dergelijke kenbronnen, maar tegelijkertijd ook een eigen vermogen behelst; of (iv) een kenbron die volledig gereduceerd kan worden tot een combinatie van een aantal standaard kenbronnen. Ik be- toog dat (i) en (ii) niet van toepassing zijn, en ook (iii) lijkt niet een- voudig om te verdedigen. In elk geval is tekstinterpretatie een ken- bron die als zelfstandig onderwerp onderzoek behoeft.

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Colofon

This PhD project was part of the project “The Epistemic Responsibilities of the University”, sponsored by the Templeton World Charity Foundation at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

The views expressed in this dissertation do not necessarily coincide with those of the Foundation.

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Book design by Steven van der Gaauw
Printed by Vanderperk Groep

