

INTEGRAL AND DIFFERENTIAL HERMENEUTICS¹

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There are at least two leading questions in the study of hermeneutics and the ethics of interpretation. The first and more familiar is ‘How are we to understand texts?’ The second is ‘How shall we know whose interpretation is right (or ‘true’ or ‘legitimate’)? In the course of this essay, I will describe this first approach as ‘integral’ hermeneutics. The second, less familiar question challenges us to explain why the most knowledgeable and wisest interpreters so often disagree about what a text means. This approach I will characterize and advocate under the name ‘differential’ hermeneutics.

Differential hermeneutics receives less vigorous attention in debates over meaning and interpretation. Essays in hermeneutics rarely address interpretive difference at all, and those that broach the topic typically elide the distinction between interpretive *difference* and interpretive *error*. If, by contrast, we were to make the study of interpretive difference a more prominent focus of hermeneutical discussion, we would be in a better position to characterize and weigh the differences among interpreters. Then we might acclimate ourselves to a hermeneutical ecology in which difference, far from implying error on one or another part, constitutes a positive contribution toward a fuller understanding of textuality and (in the sphere of biblical interpretation) revelation. For these and other reasons, interpreters who care particularly about the convergence of ethics and interpretation ought to think twice before simply adopting a hermeneutic of ‘correctness’ or ‘legitimacy’. A hermeneutic that focuses on interpretive difference offers strengths that avail mightily to help interpreters make sense not only of the texts they study but also of the ways those texts inhabit and inform ethical and theological deliberation.

In the summaries of integral and differential hermeneutics that follow, I synthesize a variety of positions on each side. By synthesizing, I try in brief scope to articulate and interweave the leading characteristics of each position, but this allows the possibility, perhaps the likelihood, that my synthesis misrepresents the thought of the particular authors whom the summary covers. Readers should not for a moment mistake a heuristic overview for a detailed analysis of a particular scholar’s thought. Still less should they suppose that if I identify weaknesses in a

1. This essay owes much to conversations with principals in the discussion on which it reports, especially Stephen Fowl, Francis Watson and Kevin Vanhoozer. As the essay took shape, Thomas Matrullo, Philip Cubeta, David Weinberger, Trevor Bechtel and Margaret Adam teased, probed, challenged, encouraged and refined the ideas that I propose here, and I heartily thank them all.

particular (summarized) approach, then each of the scholars whose work I summarize partakes equally in that weakness. Those interested in further examining these issues should turn to the specific works of the authors in question. I am a thoroughly interested party in the arguments over the merits of integral and differential hermeneutics. I have devoted considerable energy to articulating the case for differential hermeneutics and neither could nor would want to write an objective essay on the topic. This essay endeavors to sketch the terrain of the disagreement between integral and differential hermeneutics and to propose evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of these two positions in the field in order to make clear the rationale for a differential hermeneutic.

The first of these lines of investigation – integral hermeneutics’ search for a legitimate path to correct interpretation – has motivated most studies of hermeneutics. A moment’s reflection reveals the reason that such studies often display a fervor that far outweighs the extent of their contribution to the debate over hermeneutics, a debate whose broad outlines have remained largely constant for decades. Once a scholar has figured out how to reach true understandings, he or she naturally feels disinclined to depart from that approach or even to entertain seriously the possibility of changing direction. Such a scholar may see colleagues who hesitate to adopt his or her new-found (or newly-reaffirmed) true approach as recalcitrants who threaten the very structure of knowledge, the academy, even the church’s teaching. In order to stave off such threats, scholars have long sought the definitive answer to the urgent question of how to interpret texts correctly. They have offered accounts of insight, understanding, empathy, intention and various other features of legitimate hermeneutics. I call this search that emphasizes correct interpretation ‘integral’ hermeneutics because it poses for itself (and for the domain of all meaning, over which it usually claims dominion) the task of articulating the positive characteristics of unitary interpretive truth.

Integral hermeneutics grounds its claim to preeminence on a number of premises. Some theories of integral hermeneutics posit a unique divinatory *sympathy* or *understanding* or *meaning* at which the interpreter must aim in order to qualify as methodologically legitimate. Some theorists, however, make an explicitly ethical defense of integral hermeneutics. This case – enunciated and elaborated by E.D. Hirsch² – maintains that textual interpretation² by its very nature owes an ethical debt to the author’s compositional intent. Any interpretive deviation from attention to the author’s intent may count as a more or less valuable significance of the text;³ we do the author an injustice, however, if we say that the text in question means anything other than what the author intended. Proponents of this interpretive ethic argue that readers should grant primary authority to interpretation that coheres with the author’s intent as it took specific shape in the composition of the text (whether

2. E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); ‘Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics’, in *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

3. Hirsch distinguishes the (original) verbal ‘meaning’ of the text, as a property of the text, from the later ‘significances’ the text can acquire in new contexts, significances that are valid only insofar as they are based on and cohere with the verbal meaning.

that author be construed as a human wordsmith or the Spirit that gives illumination and provocation to write). Because an author intended that we construe words in a single way, we as interpreters stand under an obligation to accede to the author's intent. Unless we acknowledge the determinative role of the author's compositional intent, we lack the criteria for distinguishing genuine meaning from counterfeit, exegesis from eisegesis, true divine teaching from hermeneutical legerdemain.

The case for integral hermeneutics has developed into a finely-nuanced complex of integrated arguments. While E.D. Hirsch presented the foundational work for this position in his studies in literary and philosophical hermeneutics, Anthony Thiselton,⁴ Francis Watson⁵ and Kevin Vanhoozer⁶ stand as pre-eminent mediators of this approach to the field of biblical interpretation. The cogency of their arguments has built upon a more generally-held intuition that texts simply mean single things. They have reinforced this beginning with sophisticated philosophical, theological and ethical arguments on behalf of the premise that texts mean one thing, that which the text's author intended to mean. Their work has staked out and refined the integralist approach, responding thoughtfully to any serious challenge to their enterprise. When opponents argue, for instance, that 'the author's intention' is unsuitable as a criterion for assessing interpretations – perhaps it is unavailable or insufficiently distinct – the practitioners of integral hermeneutics respond by developing an account of their field that takes into consideration and overcomes their critics' objections by refining their conception of 'intentionality' or defining more precisely their criteria of legitimate interpretation. Their conception of *how* to attain correct interpretation has shifted in response to challenges, but their impulse to attain the proper approach remains undeflected.

The philosophical case for integral hermeneutics proposes that 'meaning' is a property of things called 'texts', so that 'meaningless text' is a contradiction in terms. A text has a meaning built-in; that meaning is the effect of the author's intentionality in composing the text. A text's meaning need not be obvious, although it can be. An octagonal red placard with the white letters 'S-T-O-P' almost surely demands that approaching vehicles halt their forward motion at that point. But the meaning of a text such as Romans 7 has defied centuries of efforts to make it unambiguously clear. Nevertheless, Romans 7 does have a meaning – interpreters simply haven't yet arrived at a shared determination of that meaning with a degree of certainty that matches their certainty that octagonal red road signs require automobiles to stop. The text does not lack meaning, but interpreters lack agreement about what the meaning is.

4. Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (London: HarperCollins, 1992; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

5. Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994); Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997).

6. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Biblical Knowledge* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1998; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Body Piercing, the Natural Sense, and the Task of Theological Interpretation: A Hermeneutical Homily on John 19.34', *ExAu*, 16 (2000), pp. 1–29.

According to these premises, a text's meaning subsists even though hidden, just as the back of a refrigerator continues to exist when no one observes it, or as the earthward side of a house's foundation continues to exist even when no one observes it (and when no one can state with certainty how far below the visible surface that earthward side lies or what it looks like). The presence of a cement floor in my basement provides sufficient evidence for me to infer the existence of its opposite side; the presence of a text in my hand provides sufficient evidence for me to infer the existence of its meaning. The intentional dimension of the text is its meaning, and when a text's meaning remains concealed, interpreters deploy a variety of devices to ascertain that hidden meaning.

The interpreter bears an ethical obligation to respect the authorial intention of the text because the meaning resides there. An interpreter who treats the text as though it meant something other than its authorial intent distorts the truth about the text. Such interpretations are unjust to the author (who imbued the text with its meaning) and are capriciously inconsistent with the stability we expect of textual meaning in our everyday lives. A meaning inherent in texts demands our interpretive deference.

Moreover, a text exemplifies a type of communicative action: a meaningful action between an author and an auditor by means of a particular expression. The essence of communication rests on the premise that something controllable and specific is being conveyed from author to audience. If an interpreter wilfully ignores the author's communicative intent (while relying on their own readers to acknowledge *their* communicative intent), that interpreter transgresses against the author and the reader both. Interpreters who flout the integrity of communicative action saw away the ethical limb on which they perch and undermine the deeply-held human covenant that makes effective communication possible. An ethics of communicative action obligates all participants in the social bonds that permit communication with the necessity of respecting an author's communicative intent.

The tight integration that binds together participants in the communicative act and the text/meaning heightens the importance of the ethical question, 'How then ought we interpret texts?' From the perspective of integral hermeneutics, the clear answer is that we should interpret texts in a way that expresses the meaning that constitutes the intentional dimension of the text as the author composed it. Likewise, we ought to interpret texts within the context of the author-text-audience configurations that inform them. To the extent that we treat texts (correctly, on this account) as communicative acts, we should observe the authorial and audience-oriented constraints at work on communication in order to find the perspective that correctly illuminates the meaning subsistent in the text, that connects the author and the audience.

Thus, the ethical case for integral hermeneutics rests to a great extent upon exegetical analyses of the natures of 'text' and 'communication'. The advocates of this position find that neither the term 'text' nor the notion of 'communication' can sustain the possibility that texts not possess the property of 'having a meaning'. If texts lack this property, we lack the leverage necessary to account for the innumerable messages that humanity successfully composes and effectively

responds to from moment to moment. The vast preponderance of clarity in communication testifies to the soundness of supposing that meaning subsists, somehow, in textuality.

The case for integral hermeneutics has dominated discussions of biblical hermeneutics in part because of this sophisticated reasoning that backs it up, but also in part because it tends to confirm a colloquial tendency to assume what should be demonstrated in this sort of argument. Common experience seems to confirm the premise that texts mean a single thing and that recipients of texts can usually determine that meaning with a high degree of confidence. So powerful is this intuition that detractors of integral hermeneutics have been reproached for performative contradiction if they endeavor to correct misapprehensions about their work. If an interpreter suggests that human communication admits of various interpretations but suggests that another critic has *misunderstood* her work, she frequently encounters the charge that her own premise should allow others to interpret her work as they choose ('Now you're trying to say that there's only one correct way to understand your position!'). Some indeed have endured the less imaginative tactic of being told, 'You have broccoli between your teeth', by a sly boots who thinks that one's impulse to check one's reflection in a mirror for stray vegetable matter 'proves' that utterances have meanings as their property.

The debate over interpretation thus falls out with opponents to integral hermeneutics ostensibly holding up as a positive goal just exactly the interpretive wilderness that defenders of integral hermeneutics warn against. The principal counterposition to integral hermeneutics has typically been one or another mode of pluralism. While 'pluralism' itself may stand for many different things, practitioners of integral hermeneutics have often represented pluralists as advocating divergence in interpretation as a positive value. A pluralist, on this account, would suppose that the more different interpretations one could devise, the better for all concerned. Moreover, a pluralist would have no particular ground on which to object to alleged misconstruals of his work.

Theorists of integral hermeneutics have (rightly) pointed out many philosophical, theological and practical weaknesses of the pluralist case for meaning. Pluralism as a positive program for interpretation devolves rapidly into an uninteresting exercise in improbable, unsatisfying fancy. As long as pluralism (or 'relativism') has stood as the only distinguishable alternative to integral hermeneutics, the integral program in hermeneutics has held center stage, especially with regard to interpretation of the Bible.

Recently, however, certain scholars have tried to outline a basis for a hermeneutics that begins from the ineluctable fact of interpretive difference. If, as a moment's perusal of the most respected journals of biblical scholarship will attest, the wisest and most careful interpreters have not been able to attain unanimity in ascertaining the meanings of the texts they examine, perhaps hermeneutics went wrong in supposing that 'meaning' should be constrained to singularity, no matter how painstakingly defined or remotely deferred. Whereas recent interpretive discourses wrestle and bite to attain and hold pre-eminence over other approaches, in a former age – an era that modern scholars have dismissed as 'pre-critical' – plurality in

interpretation constituted a tolerable condition, indeed a positive dispensation from God. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* represents the sterling example of a theological celebration of plurality in interpretation (plurality that did not diminish the scriptures' testimony to the One God of love and grace). Likewise, the varying traditions of spiritual exegesis affirm that readers might find an inexhaustible plenitude of quite legitimate interpretations of scripture. When early Christian teachers criticize erroneous interpretations – as in Irenaeus famously saying that the Gnostics take the mosaic of a king and rearrange the pieces to form the picture of a dog – the argument doesn't insist on a single text-immanent meaning but relies on what we might call a physiognomy of legitimate interpretation. Those interpretations of scripture that point toward the Jesus whom the church recognizes in scripture, that depict the subject of the mosaic as a king, in other words, would not fall under Irenaeus' anathema. The problem for Irenaeus is with interpretations that misrepresent Jesus, not with a general plurality in interpretation.

Today's theorists of interpretative difference follow the early church in not simply creating plurality as a good in and of itself. Instead, they have begun putting together a way of deliberating about hermeneutics that offers an explanation for interpretive variety and complexes of criteria for evaluating better and worse interpretations. This hermeneutics of difference does not resolve every interpretive problem but offers ample advantages that may attract interpreters dissatisfied with both pluralistic and integral hermeneutics. A differential hermeneutic permits practitioners to see in interpretive variety a sign of the variety in human imagination (in establishing historical facts as well as in drawing theological inferences), to account positively for difference among interpreters, to envision the practice of biblical interpretation less as a contest of experts and more as the shared effort of Christian communities, and at the same time to provide clearer, more specific and more modest criteria for correctness and legitimacy in interpretation.

The differential riposte to integral hermeneutics' ethical claim shifts attention away from interpreters' ethical obligation to the author and toward their ethical obligation to their readers and one another. Instead of supposing that the nature of textuality involves a hermeneutical trinity of author, text and reader, such that all readers must strive to articulate an author's intentional meaning in the text, practitioners of differential hermeneutics observe that the act of offering an interpretation involves not only the author and the text but also one's interpretive colleagues and the audience of the interpretation. Hence, interpreters must devise interpretations that are accountable not only to text and author but also to rival interpreters and audiences. Moreover, the divided churches have sought justification for their sides of various ecclesiastical disputes by appealing to scripture; yet this tactic loses much of its force if one allows that scripture may also offer support for the opposite party's opinion. The integral-hermeneutic quest for single textual meaning feeds on, and in turn itself feeds, theological conflicts. Finally, integral hermeneutics benefits from its advocates having made their premises so familiar that any alternative approach to interpretation must either justify itself on terms indigenous to integral hermeneutics (terms that strongly favor the outlook that generates them) or suffer the dubiety that accompanies the impres-

sion that the alternative hermeneutic neglects apparently necessary aspects of hermeneutical reasoning. Familiarity with a dominant point of view breeds contempt for alternative ways of considering an issue.

Integral hermeneutics derives further strength from theological buttresses to its philosophical ramparts. Inasmuch as God is One and God's will cannot err or equivocate ('For God is not a God of confusion but of peace', as the Apostle said in the Revised Standard Version), so the written communication of God's word must not permit ambiguity in expression or plurality in interpretation. God's will is perfectly expressed in the words of scripture. Interpreters, therefore, stand under the obligation to seek and promulgate that singular divine intent. Likewise, the communicative triad of Author, Text, and Reader matches the theological trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit. Finally, many scholars identify the necessity of 'interpretation' with the fall from grace in Eden. The prelapsarian humans enjoyed unambiguous, 'uninterpreted' converse with one another and with God. Since interpretation manifests itself as a consequence of sinful rebellion, faithful readers should strive for the true meaning as they strive to resist sin. The congruence of God's unitary purpose and triune identity with the text's (alleged) singular meaning and triadic appropriation, along with the apparent sinfulness of multiplicity in interpretation, reinforces the integral-hermeneutic case for singularity in meaning and for the obligation to aim for that meaning in our encounter with texts.⁷

All these reasons combine to give integral hermeneutics the high ground in debates over interpretation. The alternative case for differential hermeneutics rests on reasoning every bit as sophisticated as that for integral hermeneutics, but the differential side lacks the support of conventional wisdom and ecclesiastical approval. Its force depends on readers stepping outside what they have taken for granted about hermeneutics and considering the hermeneutical problem differently from the start. But familiarity does not by itself constitute an argument in support of integral hermeneutics. The unfamiliarity of alternative approaches to hermeneutics should not count against the case their proponents argue.

A practitioner of differential hermeneutics does not begin by wondering what the correct interpretive method (or 'approach' or 'perspective') might be or even by assuming that the question itself makes sense. Differential hermeneutics arises from the observation that people interpret constantly and interpret so successfully that they manage extremely complex lives in indifferent (or even hostile) social environments. On the whole, people seem remarkably skillful at interpretation. The proponents of integral hermeneutics should welcome this aptitude; it tends to underscore the weight of their argument from communicative action. But at this point the differential interpreter raises the frustrating question, 'Why do the most erudite, pious, intelligent and expert interpreters of scripture so rarely agree with one another?'

7. My summary of the trinitarian case for integral hermeneutics grossly oversimplifies – but does not, I think, parody – Kevin Vanhoozer's arguments (*Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, pp. 455–57).

Just this ubiquity of interpretive difference motivates a heterogenous scattering of scholars – Daniel Patte,⁸ Charles Cosgrove,⁹ James K.A. Smith,¹⁰ Stephen Fowl,¹¹ and myself,¹² perhaps the most recent work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as well,¹³ among others¹⁴ – to press ethical questions that concern not just the author and the text alone. Instead, the differential interpreters ask how we can account for the differences among rivals' interpretations, especially when those interpreters show all the signs of extraordinary intelligence, wide and deep acquaintance with relevant historical and literary context, and even genuine reverence for the subjects of the texts in question.

Consider more closely this blind spot of integral hermeneutics. When Hans Dieter Betz,¹⁵ Donald Carson,¹⁶ and Amy-Jill Levine¹⁷ interpret the Sermon on the

8. Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995); Daniel Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount: Four Legitimate Readings, Four Plausible Views of Discipleship, and Their Relative Values* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

9. Charles H. Cosgrove, *Elusive Israel: The Puzzle of Election in Romans* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997); Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 154–80.

10. James K.A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

11. Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999); Stephen Fowl and Gregory L. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

12. A.K.M. Adam, 'The Future of Our Allusions', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, 31 (1992), pp. 5–13; A.K.M. Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: "Modern" Problems and Prospects* (Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics, 11; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995); A.K.M. Adam, 'The Sign of Jonah: A Fish-Eye View', *Semeia*, 51 (1990), pp. 177–91; A.K.M. Adam, 'Twisting to Destruction: A Memorandum on the Ethics of Interpretation', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 23 (1996), pp. 215–22; A.K.M. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

13. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship', *JBL*, 107 (1988), pp. 3–17; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

14. Two others are Trevor Bechtel, 'How to Eat Your Bible: Performance and Understanding for Mennonites', *Conrad Grebel Review* (forthcoming) and Margaret B. Adam, 'This Is My Story, This Is My Song... A Feminist Claim on Scripture, Ideology, and Interpretation', in Harold C. Washington, Susan Lochrie Graham and Pamela Thimmes (eds.), *Escaping Eden* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 218–32.

15. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5.3–7.27 and Luke 6.20-49)* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995).

16. Donald A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978); Donald A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5–10* (Toronto and Grand Rapids: Global Christian Publishers, 1999).

17. Amy-Jill Levine, 'Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and Hemorrhaging Woman', in D.R. Bauer and M.A. Powell (eds.), *Treasures Old and New: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies* (Symposium Series, 1; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 379–97; Amy-Jill Levine, 'Anti-Judaism and the Gospel of Matthew', in William R. Farmer (ed.), *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels* (Valley

Mount, they bring to bear all the capacities of spirit and intellect to which a biblical interpreter might aspire. Their interpretations of that text, however, diverge in numerous important ways. By the theory of integral hermeneutics, only one of them has truly interpreted the Sermon; the other two propound more or less gravely erroneous interpretations (unless all three have gone astray!). This state of affairs constitutes a troubling ramification for integral hermeneutics, since we who have not attained to the frontmost ranks of biblical interpretation must try to discern which of these three interpreters offers the soundest interpretation. Moreover, we do so without the full extent of the knowledge that each of these interpretive leaders brings to bear (else we would stand with them at the cutting edge). We must decide which of the three has correctly interpreted Matthew's Gospel, but we lack the scholarly standing requisite to adjudicate the question. If even these three leading scholars disagree, we would need to know more than they do in order to make an authoritative decision for or against their positions. But under the circumstances we do not know even as much as they do, still less do we possess the deeper understanding that would enable us to determine on which scholar we should rely.

More troubling still, a proponent of integral hermeneutics can in the end offer no respectful account of why anyone would disagree with him or her. The most honorable explicit explanation of difference under the integral approach runs more or less as follows: 'She doesn't understand the text (or the history or the culture or the background influences) as well as I do'. We mask such pretensions with claims such as 'He does not take full account of' or 'He doesn't show acquaintance with' or 'He doesn't consider' or 'She accords inappropriate weight to this and insufficient attention to that'. But these all amount to claiming that *I* have the soundest insight into this text and all *others* have fallen short in one way or another.

Sometimes interpreters offer less charitable explanations of interpretive difference. We sometimes describe others' divergence from our conclusions to their succumbing to inappropriate influences. They are fundamentalists or radical skeptics or feminists or patriarchs or racists or 'politically correct' or traditionalists or victims of brainwashing by the dominant cultural environment. (Thanks be to God that 'we', or perhaps just 'I', have escaped such pernicious influences!) Sometimes we chalk up divergence to ignorance or moral weakness (a desire for publicity or approval, let us say, or financial greed, or the hunger for a biblical rationale for indulging other unspiritual appetites). Explanations such as these fit the assumptions of integral hermeneutics perfectly but leave other pivotal questions unanswered. How did one scholar avoid the subtle pitfalls that so confound others? Does a reader who is interpreting under the influence of something bad know that he or she is beclouded and, if not, how can we be sure that interpreters who vigorously proclaim their innocence of ideological determination are not simply unconscious of the deeper influences bearing down on them.

At the end of a debate conducted under the auspices of integral hermeneutics, however, one is left only with the alternatives of saying that one's rival is either ignorant, less intelligent, misguided, perverse or insane. If she knew the relevant factors as well as the correct interpreter – me, or you – and if she understood the proper weight to ascribe to each bit of evidence, she, too, would assent to our interpretation. At the most polite, one can decline to speculate as to why one's rival disagrees; in more candid moments, practitioners allow that their interlocutors simply work with their vision narrowed by commitments that the (correct) interpreter doesn't hold. Yet without a strong account of how it is that wise, learned interpreters come to disagree with one another, a theory of how *correctly* to understand a text risks serving flatly as a justification for one interpretive party's efforts to shout louder than all others. Each participant in an interpretive disagreement arrives at the point of dissent by way of confidence that he or she has pursued the correct understanding with a legitimate method. That which an advocate of integral hermeneutics proposes as a diligent effort to ascertain the true meaning of the text, a supporter of differential hermeneutics may see as a mystified expression of an interpretive will to power (an example of what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza might diagnose as 'kyriarchy', the unholy union of power-over with spiritual leadership¹⁸).

On the account of differential hermeneutics, on the other hand, the explanations for interpretive difference proliferate. These by no means exclude ignorance, intellectual limitation, error, perversity or madness, but they include positive characteristics as well. The differential interpreter can frankly admit that presuppositions make knowledge possible but also that they limit knowledge, such that our capacity to sympathize with ancient perspectives on the nature of reality may, for instance, inhibit our capacity to note and acknowledge our complicity with contemporary oppressive political forces. Or, to give another example, our profound acquaintance with recent scholarship on postcolonialism and subaltern literature may overshadow our attention to the grammatical nuances of the text. Most scholars have observed some of their colleagues riding interpretive hobby-horses, solving every exegetical conundrum with a single interpretive device, whether it be chiasm, honor/shame dynamics, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, etymology or whatever. Pertinent though these all may be to interpretive discernment, it is doubtful that any one of them resolves every dilemma. To a less obvious degree, however, all interpreters favor a particular limited range of exegetical explanations and depreciate others. Just as the hobby-horse jockey may be faulted for adhering to too limited a range of interpretive tools, so we all may advocate a range of interpretive preferences that, while generally sound, undervalues contributions from the fields we do not ourselves prefer. In short, differential hermeneutics begins from the recognition that different interpreters have good reasons for adopting different interpretations, reasons that cannot be exhaustively or even thoroughly evaluated. The criteria by which we evaluate our rationales are themselves, after all, subject to evaluation – and so on to an infinite regress.

18. On Schüssler Fiorenza's notion of kyriarchy, see her book, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, p. ix and passim.

Proponents of integral hermeneutics are liable quickly to respond that on this account of differential hermeneutics, no interpretation can be better than another, or that differential hermeneutics renders all interpretive decisions radically subjective. They collapse differential hermeneutics into a purely pluralistic hermeneutic in which all interpretations are merely interpretations, none better than another, with no reason to adopt one rather than another. One can offer an immediate practical rebuttal to this objection by observing, once again, that practitioners of differential approaches simply do not behave or argue as this objection presumes. At this point, most proponents of integral hermeneutics insist that differential interpreters must be pluralists or that they have no reason for approving one interpretation rather than another. On the premises of integral hermeneutics, this may be true, but the practitioners of differential hermeneutics do not assent to the premises of integral hermeneutics.

Differential hermeneutics proceeds by identifying the criteria by which an interpretation claims validity, the soundness of that claim, and the scope of that claim and those criteria. All criteria, on this account, are local criteria. Some criteria are narrowly local (as particular schools of biblical interpretation exemplify; an interpretation that would be warmly received at Harvard might reasonably and appropriately be less welcome at Fuller – and vice versa). Other criteria extend to groups so expansive as to seem universal, although in such cases one should remember that ‘universal’ includes many more interpreters than ‘everyone I can think of’, however often confident interpreters ignore this fact. The claim that a premise holds universally can be disconfirmed, after all, if a single interpreter dissents.

Interpretive agreement indicates not the discovery of a hitherto-concealed ‘true meaning’ but the convergence of interpreters’ priorities and sensibilities, such that two interpreters share a sense of which aspects of the text count and how to associate the pertinent aspects of the text to cultural, grammatical, theological and other such correlates in the broader communicative environment. Agreement arises most readily among readers who learned about the Bible from the same teachers, who share interests, whose theologies (or lack thereof) converge and so on. Such convergence doesn’t dissolve agreement into ‘congruent formation’, as though identical (academic, theological) twins would automatically agree on interpretive issues simply because of their training; one need not look far to find examples of classmates and denominational colleagues who disagree bitterly with one another. When readers agree, however, they attest a common evaluation of a variety of dimensions of interpretation. These common evaluations are made more likely when readers inhabit common educational and theological spheres.

Moreover, the local criteria that derive from identity and experience intersect, envelope and overlap each other. My outlook on interpretation has been informed by my adherence to Anglican ecclesial identity and to the catholic wing of that expansive communion. But my interpretations have likewise been formed by the institutions at which I have studied (and taught), by writings of and friendships with scholars at schools where I have not studied, by my upbringing in a home redolent of respect for the English literary canon (especially of Shakespeare and the English novel), by my undergraduate philosophy major, by my ministries in

inner-city parishes, by my familiarity with a variety of languages, by my participation in ministries to people affected with AIDS, and so on indefinitely. No single set of interpretive priorities always takes precedence over all others, although my perspective shows enough consistency that readers who are well-acquainted with my work can suggest that such-and-such an interpretation was 'predictable' or that another is 'surprising'. In other words, although no single criterion (or set of criteria) determines a particular interpreter's perspective on a text, the problem of assessing interpretations derives not from the paucity of available criteria but from the superabundance of possible criteria.

One can legitimately criticize my postmodern predilections, for instance, either on the basis that my whole entanglement with postmodern theory is misguided and dangerous from the outset, or on the basis that I do not understand the scholars whom I pretend to draw on, or on the basis that my postmodern premises (although neither intrinsically misguided nor misconstrued) are simply wrong. If I make a technical argument that the history of first-century Judaism, the grammar and rhetoric of the ancient texts, and the canons of historical plausibility that predominate among the practitioners of historical reasoning in the major academies of Europe and North America all support my claim that Jesus of Nazareth most closely resembles a wandering Jewish cynic-like figure, then the bounds of my argument's authority extend just as far as my audience assents to my premises. Somebody who dissents from Euro-American scholarly norms or who cares not a bit about first-century Judaism or who relies on the King James Version of the Bible may not be interested in my argument. (We can argue about whether such a person *should* demur from my priorities, but for now, granted the possibility of such a person's existence, we will allow him or her these predispositions.) Differential hermeneutics does not banish judgments about correctness but ties these judgments to specific premises that constitute the particular interpretive process.

Whereas integral hermeneutics falters over the question of whence disagreements arise, on the account of differential hermeneutics, reasons for adopting one interpretation rather than another abound. A differential hermeneutic can stipulate explicitly what counts as a good reason within a particular interpretive discourse without demanding that every interpretive discourse adhere to that criterion. Thus, African-American hermeneutics will produce interpretations that vary from those produced under hermeneutical approaches that do not attend specifically to racial contingencies. Literary-critical interpreters will advance exegetical results that derive their cogency not necessarily from attention to the historical background of the text in question but from observations about the interplays of character, plot, diction and so on (which may themselves interweave, to varying degrees, with historical discourses). Anglican interpreters will, with sound reason, propose interpretations that differ from those offered by Southern Baptist interpreters – and this, not because of a pernicious influence that clouds the minds of theologically-motivated interpreters but precisely because the cast of mind that inspires one to sympathize with the Southern Baptist tradition may incline one to weigh interpretive decisions differently from one's Anglican colleagues. Scholars who adhere to no particular ecclesiastical tradition are not thereby uninfluenced, but are influ-

enced by a different array of ideals. Were such denominational, philosophical or cultural alliances subject to disinterested comparison and criticism, one might attain to an intellectual clarity that permitted the sort of judgment that integral hermeneutics requires; under the conditions of mortal knowledge, however, advocacy of integral hermeneutics amounts to a kind of interpretive ethnocentrism.

From the perspective of differential hermeneutics, the limitations of human understanding and interpretation do not derive from sin and the fall but, like diversity in human constitution and identity, signal the human distinction from God and serve to give God glory precisely by the harmonious expression of their difference. As parts of the body are not all eyes, feet, hands or nose, so interpretations of scripture are not all historically-warranted assertions about the original intent of a human (or divine) author; nor is interpretive differentiation any more a result of sin than is corporal differentiation. Again, the very existence of difference serves the positive purpose of enabling human beings, whose individual limitations cannot satisfactorily represent God, to begin to represent truth by the harmonious ordering of differentiated bodies and interpretations.

Similarly, the claim that the interpretive triad of Author, Text and Reader reflects God's triune identity in a sort of literary *vestigium trinitatis* fails to account for the possibility that the constitutive elements of interpretation number some quantity other than three. Perhaps 'context' should be reckoned among the characteristics of the interpretive situation. Indeed, the author's context and the reader's context may both make fair claims to stand among the definitive elements of an interpretive act. Moreover, other numbers than 'three' carry theological significance within the Christian tradition. 'Four' might be a more appropriate number for theological constituents of interpretive practice, since four gospels interpret the identity of Jesus to his disciples. Without multiplying examples indefinitely, the argument from trinity should be granted ornamental, not probative, force.

Last, although God's will is perfect, singular and unconfused, our appropriation of these terms should attend to the likelihood that these attributes function differently with regard to God's intentions than with regard to ours, with regard to God's thoughts than with regard to our thoughts. While we might assent to the proper unity of God's literary intent in inspiring scripture, could we but see with God's eyes, we ought not simply assume that 'singularity' in human interpretation reflects fittingly the complex unity of God's purpose. Integral hermeneutics provides one coherent way of positing a connection between meaning, interpretation, divine identity and the Christian theological tradition; differential hermeneutics proposes another coherent approach to connecting these dots and does so without some of the problematic implications that characterize integral hermeneutics.

The extent to which local cultural currents determine interpretation, for example, motivates some proponents of differential hermeneutics to pay particular attention to interpretive discourses in Africa, Asia, Latin America and among indigenous peoples, discourses to which the dominant European and North American schools typically pay only cursory attention, when they attend at all. Proponents of integral hermeneutics certainly do not cultivate a deliberate policy of excluding interlocu-

tors based on race or culture, but when they interact only with interpretations from other Euro-American interpreters (or with interpreters from outside Europe and North America only to the extent that those interpreters reflect Euro-American critical priorities), they effect a culturally-colored exclusion, whether deliberately or inadvertently. Moreover, since integral hermeneutics allows for only a single standard of legitimacy, if a practitioner of integral hermeneutics excludes any particular groups of interpreters, that exclusion implies the group's lack of legitimate interpretive authority.

Differential hermeneutics, on the other hand, describes interpretive practices as always necessarily imbued with cultural specificity, such that Euro-American interpreters would not ordinarily be expected to interact with interpreters from non-Western cultures. If Euro-American interpreters do scan more distant cultural horizons, they may legitimately do so without justifying their research as seeking the correct interpretation but seeking to learn critically from readers whose angle of vision enables them to see texts in ways that customary Western approaches exclude. Differential interpreters may pursue such illumination in the name of inclusivity or of liberation from theology's Constantinian captivity of Western culture. Or they may do so out of their humble appreciation that interpretive wisdom dwells with interpreters without academic training as well as with those who hold advanced degrees, with inhabitants of any continent, indeed with illiterate as well as erudite readers ('I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will'¹⁹).

That humility does not necessitate a romantic inerrancy-of-the-primitive. One can assess non-academic readings critically without either dismissing them for failure to meet the local standards of twenty-first century Northern, Western culture or abjectly deferring to the privilege of a romanticized Outsider. In order critically to evaluate non-academic (or non-Western or non-historical) readings, however, one should learn to recognize non-academic criteria without prejudging them as 'pre-critical' or 'naive'. Interpreters from all times and places exercise critical judgment and will always appraise critically interpretations from other contexts. A richly critical, ethical, theologically-sound practice of interpretive discernment will develop the capacity to distinguish stronger from weaker interpretations by a variety of different sets of criteria.

The geo-cultural aspect of differential hermeneutics entails momentous implications for missional theology. Past generations of evangelists and expositors have often sought to inculcate an authoritative version of integral hermeneutics along with inviting their neighbors to share in the welcoming grace of God. On their assumptions, the unity of the presence of Christ, made manifest in the singular meaning of the text, requires learning not only the stories, the laws, the wisdom and counsel of scripture but also the authorized mode for interpreting. If the presence of Christ abides not in the 'letter', however, but in the Spirit that integrates separated people and nations into one body, then a differential hermeneutic may

19. Mt. 11.25-26 (NRSV).

more fitly acknowledge the Spirit's freedom to make the meaning of scripture active in various peoples in various ways.

Differential hermeneutics provides a way of thinking about correct interpretation that respects the relevance of particular criteria and the necessity of attending to the applicable criteria at all times and in all places. A practitioner of differential hermeneutics can comfortably uphold some interpretations as right and reject others as wrong without self-contradiction. Since criteria and contexts always infuse interpretation, interpreters will always encounter canons by which critics distinguish better from worse interpretations. At the same time, differential hermeneutics does not extrapolate from the criteria that one critic applies in one situation to a universal set of norms for distinguishing valid from invalid interpretations. Integral hermeneutics practically implies ongoing interpretive conflict among Christians. What, shall we wonder, is the single correct meaning of, for example, Jesus' blessing of Simon Peter in Mt. 16.18, the prohibition of a woman having 'authority over a man' in 1 Tim. 2.12, the New Testament descriptions of baptism, the genocidal wars of God in the conquest narratives? Differential hermeneutics, by contrast, recognizes that disciples will always adopt divergent interpretations of the Bible (and of their life-worlds as well), so that the unity by which believers bespeak their allegiance to the one God derives not from their consensus about the textual meaning of scripture but from the obligation to bear with one another, to testify to the truth as we have received it, and to continue to show forbearance and patience in the shared hope that when all things are revealed, the Revealer will also display the manner in which our diverse interpretations form a comprehensive concord in ways that presently elude our comprehension.

In expressing such a hope, this advocate of differential hermeneutics draws near again, I think, to the proponents of integral hermeneutics. The advocates of integral hermeneutics do not, after all, deny the existence of varying interpretations; nor do they repudiate faith in a wisdom greater than human interpretive insight. As readers who operate under the sign of differential hermeneutics can stoutly argue for the correctness of a particular interpretation, so readers who adhere to the premises of integral hermeneutics can allow that no mortal interpretation will attain finality and that advocates of various competing interpretive claims can each usually cite a cornucopia of reasons in defense of their respective interpretations.

The operative distinction between differential and integral hermeneutics involves a particular sort of ethical argument. In this case, the ethical question concerns not so much 'Who's right and who's wrong?' as 'What sort of lives and interactions should our hermeneutics engender?' The integral quest for rectitude and unity bespeaks the unique identity and perfect will of God but with the consequence of setting readers over against one another in an interpretive contest without end. The differential vision of hermeneutics leaves final answers to the questions of rectitude and unity in God's hands and espouses instead the shared endeavor patiently and respectfully to cultivate distinct, concordant testimonies to God's glory, from every tribe and language and people and nation.