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PREVIEW

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**Ethics and interpretation**

**Embree, Warren Charles, Ph.D.**

**The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1991**

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PREVIEW

**Ethics and Interpretation**

**by**

**Warren C. Embree**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Major: English**

**Under the Supervision of Professor Robert S. Haller**

**Lincoln, Nebraska**

**August, 1991**

DISSERTATION TITLE  
Ethics and Interpretation

BY

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Ethics and Interpretation

Warren C. Embree, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1991

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This dissertation develops the thesis that the formulation, development, and application of hermeneutical principles or procedures are influenced by the way in which an interpreter chooses to perceive--implicitly or explicitly--the ethical relationships that obtain among author, interpreter, and audience. The dissertation argues that interpreters choose their ethical stances actively or passively, and regard the influence of ethics on interpretation as either positive or negative. Those who seek actively an ethical standard, motivation, and justification and actively relate these ethical elements to the principles used to arrive at an interpretation consider the influence positive. Those who argue that an ethical standard, motivation, or justification should be removed or prevented from interfering with the hermeneutical process regard the possibility of such influence as a negative.

This thesis examines four significant individuals in the history of language use and interpretation who exemplify a wide range of attitudes toward the ethical

standards of interpretation. The Apostle Paul argues for active ethical choices and the responsibility of an author; Augustine argues for submissive ethical choices and the responsibility of the interpreter; Ludwig Wittgenstein argues for the interpreter's resisting ethical choices out of concern for himself or herself; and Jacques Derrida argues for refusing ethical choices and the issue of alternatives. The concluding chapter examines various hermeneutical consequences of each of these four avenues of choice.

The purpose of this dissertation is to alert the reader to the fact that hermeneutics and literary interpretation are not ethically neutral. No attempt is made to examine all possible combinations and permutations of this ethical influence. Nevertheless, the dissertation demonstrates by means of Paul, Augustine, Wittgenstein, and Derrida, that ethics--positively or negatively--is a fundamental factor in the formulation, development, and application of hermeneutical principles and procedures.



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## Preface

A number of years ago, I became perplexed by a certain line of reasoning concerning the interpretation of the book of Genesis. I was perplexed because, while a particular interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis seemed to be clearly in error, this interpretation was defended by the argument that it was arrived at by means of hermeneutical principles and therefore was as justified as any other interpretation. As a result of this line of argumentation, I began to study the history of Biblical interpretation--which study lead me into an investigation of hermeneutics in general. This study of hermeneutics in general led to an investigation into theories of language, meaning, knowledge, metaphysics, reality, and ethics. This last area--ethics--is what began to intrigue me the most. I had discovered in my research that the primary source of hermeneutical authority and justification to which interpreters appealed was generally some theory of meaning. However, as I began to struggle with the various theories of meaning, I began to notice that the way in which an interpreter viewed the ethical relationships among author, interpreter, and audience played as critical a role in the formulation,

development, and application of hermeneutical principles and procedures as did his or her theory of meaning. Yet, when these hermeneutical principles and procedures took the form of papers or books on the subject of hermeneutics, the influence of ethics all but disappeared in favor of appeals to theories of meaning and knowledge. I began to ask myself why and for what reason.

The fruits of that questioning is this present dissertation. In the following chapters, I discuss what I consider to be the most important aspects of ethical influence upon the formulation, development, and application of hermeneutical principles. These aspects come most clearly to light when an interpreter seeks to justify his or her whole approach to the hermeneutical enterprise. I found that such a justification seeks its power, oddly enough, by some appeal to the way in which ethics relates to the hermeneutical enterprise. There began to appear that certain obvious issues in this ethical force were subliminated beneath the semantic and epistemological appeals. First, there is the issue of whether or not ethics is a positive or a negative factor in the hermeneutical process. Some would answer positively, others negatively; but in either case there has been a decision regarding the way in which ethical

relationships will be allowed to define the whole hermeneutical project. Second, there is the issue of active as opposed to passive ethical relationships. Again, some will follow the active, some the passive; but there is little question that one or the other is followed at some point in the hermeneutical procedure. Third, there is the whole question of choice. As noted above, choice has historically been concerned with choosing an appropriate theory of meaning. Yet, and to the point, a more fundamental choice has preceded even this choice of meaning. An interpreter--implicitly or explicitly--chooses in what way he or she will consider the moral rights and obligations that obtain among author, interpreter, and audience. This choice, more than any other, determines the direction that the whole interpretative process follows.

In modern thought, however, perhaps more than in ancient thought, the impact of this ethical choice is more often disregarded than taken as an important issue. Owing to the philosophical, religious, and scientific programs of the past three hundred years, there has gradually developed an acceptance of some form of relativistic thought and a more keenly felt alienation of human beings from their environment, their thoughts, and each other. As a consequence--as the ancients would

perhaps have phrased it--there has been a focus upon *scientia* as opposed to *sapientia*; that is, "knowledge" as opposed to "wisdom." Wisdom is born of an ethical response to the world in which we live; knowledge, on the other hand, is viewed as a more neutral, intellectual response. This shift from an ethical grounding to an intellectual grounding has shifted as well the sense in which ethics constitutes any kind of authority or justification. We have been willing to analyze the issues of ethics to death; we have not, however, been willing to do much about them. The result has been that ethics in almost all fields of human endeavor has been relegated to a position of annoyance at best; and the serious questions surrounding its influence on the process of human understanding has largely been ignored. Yet, as the thesis of this dissertation argues, that ethical influence still surrounds the whole hermeneutical process and determines the formulation, development, and application of hermeneutical principles and procedures from the start.

I cannot hope nor do I intend to offer solutions to all the problems surrounding this influence of ethics on interpretation. However, the question of this ethical influence is an important one as it relates to the whole hermeneutical enterprise. For this reason, I have

chosen to focus upon this influence in the following chapters of this dissertation. In the following discussion, I intend to alert the reader to the fact that even as you read this dissertation, you are doing so with certain ethical expectations in mind. Among these expectations are whether or not you expect something of value from the words of this text, in what way you will hold me responsible for the words of this text, in what way you will hold yourself responsible for your sense of the text, and in what way--should you choose to do so--you would explain what is here written to someone else. Such expectations may very well be below the surface of your reading. I would argue, however, that you should give careful consideration to the consequences of having chosen a certain path of ethical pursuits. That path--with those consequences--determines as much the outcome of your reading than those of knowledge and meaning.

In order that the reader find no surprises in the following discussion of this issue, I should alert the reader to the fact that my chief concern is for Biblical interpretation. As may have been discerned in the opening paragraph, I hold the writings of the Bible in the highest esteem and consider a proper understanding of its teachings to be of the greatest importance.

Furthermore, I hold without reservation to the belief that Jesus Christ is the "truth, the way, and the life;" and that truth, way, and life has been inscripturated in what is commonly called the Bible. Moreover, I am Calvinistic and Reformed in my life and thinking and, yes, I believe in TULIP. I believe in the total depravity of all human beings, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Were this dissertation designed for the defense of those teachings, I would gladly engage in such a defense. More than that, I would be more than happy to demonstrate that the system of Calvinistic and Reformed thought is far more comprehensive and well-rounded than merely those five points defined by the Synod of Dordt. However, this is not the purpose of this dissertation nor my intent. It cannot be denied, however, that my conception of truth, knowledge, and ethics has been influenced on all points by that system of thought. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that all understanding is from God and therefore what I have to say upon the issue of ethics and hermeneutics is of value to those who are willing to read it.

In closing this preface, I would like to express my deep gratitude and appreciation to certain individuals. Lou Crompton, who was the chairman of the Graduate

Committee of the English Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln when I first endeavored to pursue this investigation, warned me that, given my particular religious proclivities, I would have a tough row to hoe. Nevertheless, he did not forbid me the attempt and wished me well; for this I am indeed thankful. Robert Haller, who has been willing to chair my supervisory committee, has spent long hours helping me focus my thoughts for this dissertation, has handled all the bureaucratic red tape incumbent upon seeing a dissertation to its conclusion, and has selflessly goaded me into getting something down on paper. Mr. Haller deserves far more gratitude than I am capable of expressing in such a small space. Bruce Erlich, one of the readers of this dissertation, who has been willing to debate with me the various points of my dissertation, has provided me with invaluable information concerning not only authors and texts, but content and arguments (I am constantly amazed at his breadth of knowledge and capacity of memory), and has been willing to read and help revise this dissertation. He deserves a particular expression of thanks from me. John Turner, who is the other reader, has been willing to serve as a sounding board to my fairly conservative religious notions, has served as a valuable resource for religious writings and



thought, and has aided me in focusing my passions as well as my intellect (for those who know me, this has been no small task), has my deepest gratitude for all his time and effort. Charles Mignon and James McShane, the other two members of my supervisory committee, have both been willing to read and edit my dissertation, provide useful changes to the manuscript, and above all have encouraged me in all steps of the whole process; to them I express my sincere thanks. Jim Ford, a professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, continually asked me "So what?" when I would give him my most profound thoughts. This question had the affect he sought: I tried to dig a little deeper. To him I owe my thanks. Ray Coffey, Business Manager at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln--and my boss--allowed me time to work on this program. His deep concern for a happy relationship between academic and non-academic departments at the University and his personal interest in my pursuits has provided a unique motivation to see this dissertation to its conclusion. He deserves my gratitude as well. Clara Anne Embree, my wife, who endured my rantings at the impossiblity of ever finishing a dissertation, has been my first reader and editor, has provided an atmosphere in which I could research and write this dissertation, and has generally

been my chief support and encouragement. She deserves all the gratitude I can muster and that is not sufficient. Finally, as I hope the reader would expect, I owe all I have in gratitude and thanksgiving to God. It is with him I conclude this preface.

*Sola Deo gloria*

PREVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

## Through the Narrow Gate

Hermeneutics has always had to justify its principles and conclusions by an appeal to some source of authority. Such an appeal generates both theoretical and practical problems. It generates theoretical problems because the sources of authority generally appealed to depend upon correlative theories of such things as knowledge, language, understanding, or meaning. None of these theories possess any sort of universal consensus; and each theory appealed to must in its turn be justified.<sup>1</sup> It generates practical problems because, for better or for worse, the interpreter is viewed as holding the office of a mediator between the author and the audience.<sup>2</sup> To undertake the task of interpreting a written text therefore requires the interpreter to have a good understanding of what it is that goes into the writing of a text and a good understanding of how it is that the interpretation of a text relates to the audience for which an interpretation has been made. The acceptance of either the theoretical or practical appeals to authority depend a great deal upon the disposition of an audience to grant weight to such appeals or authority; and the interpreter runs the

very real risk of those appeals being rejected, the authority being questioned, and the interpretation finally judged unjustified and unjustifiable.

This risk has been compounded because the very need of and reliance upon either theoretical or practical authority has been both questioned and attacked in recent years. With respect to the appeals to theoretical authority, Vincent B. Leitch writes:

Deliberately, deconstruction disrupts settled arrangements, protected judgments, and requisite conclusions. It confronts conventions, producing new forms of writing and reading. *Without restoration, it ravages authority.* It moves beyond conclusion (Deconstructive Criticism 254 emphasis added).

Leitch argues that there is no need to appeal to any authority to justify what one has to say about a written text. Indeed, one's attitude toward authority should be disruptive, confrontative, and violent. Rather than appeal to any authority, literary interpretation should seek to reject, deny, and vilify all authority--theoretical or otherwise. With respect to the practical side of this issue, Susan Sontag wonders why it is that we need someone to tell us that "X is really--or really

means--A . . . . That Y is really B . . . . That Z is really C . . . ." (Against Interpretation 5). On the one hand, then, there is a rejection and attack upon the traditional sorts of theoretical authority--whether those appeals find their source in metaphysical or practical realms--and a refusal to substitute or replace this authority with anything other than, perhaps, "dealing with the flux" (Radical Hermeneutics Caputo 258). On the other hand, there is not only a rejection of the need for a mediator but a condemnation of the office itself. It is replaced with the argument that the reader of a written text should experience the "luminousness of the thing itself" (Sontag 13).

Yet these people write. Not only do they write arguments against the need for authority and the office of mediation; they write about other texts. What is lacking is a desire to be held accountable for what is written. In fact, there is a rejection not only of authority but of the very notion of accountability itself. "Mediums of metaphor and madness," writes Leitch; "we are not responsible, except perhaps for our will to power over texts and for our presumption in writing" (Deconstructive Criticism 267 emphasis added). One is reminded, in a certain way, of the poor Sibyl before the shrine of Apollo

Struggling in vain, impatient of her load,  
And laboring underneath the ponderous god,  
The more she strove to shake him from her  
breast,  
With more, and far superior force he pressed;  
Commands his entrance, and, without control,  
Usurps her organs, and inspires her soul.  
(The Aeneid of Virgil 181).

Perhaps these mediums are at least responsible for having granted entrance to the demon.<sup>3</sup>

There are, however, a few obstinate souls who regard the written word as having the need of being made manifest; who regard what is to be made manifest and how it is made manifest the very heart of the hermeneutical enterprise. These persons assume that this enterprise requires a justification for the choice of the "what" that is to be made manifest; and they also assume that there is a correlation between the authority used to justify the "what" and the method of extracting it from the text and the final interpretation and conclusions. If such persons are wrong, if such justification has no standard by which the value and relevance of those interpretations can be tested and measured, it is still the case--as cited above--that those who would discredit the claims of these persons and inveigh against the

authorities to which they appeal carry out their refutations by attacking the very claims of authority and standards proposed by these wrong-headed persons. These refutations and attacks, rather than detracting from the importance, reinforce the fact that the importance of hermeneutical authority and justification is still the most significant theoretical and practical question among the set of hermeneutical problems.

#### I. Historical Background on Authority

Traditionally, both the defense and attacks against hermeneutical authority and justification have focused upon the relation of language to meaning. The general assumption has been that language itself--the very use of which precipitates the hermeneutical drive--is merely sounds if spoken or marks on the page if written. This assumption therefore motivates a search for the "what" that is to be extracted (or perceived) by, with, under, or through the language of the text. The "what" has almost universally been assumed to be "meaning;" and meaning has therefore long served as the primary starting point in the debate over hermeneutical authority and justification.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that there is any universal consensus as to what meaning is; or that there is a consensus as to the way in which meaning is to be

accessed in or through language. However, for those who regularly use and interpret language there seems to be nothing more central to the definition of language and language use than the assumption that it is designed primarily with the concern for expressing and communicating meaning. This question of meaning, moreover, is not restricted to the question of language alone. It can be and is expanded into the whole realm of the meaning of existence and the meaning of the human condition. As the central issue of language interpretation, meaning concerns itself as well with "meaning" in general and the way in which this "meaning"--however defined--relates to language in particular.

There are three main attitudes toward this relation of meaning to language. The first attitude, which has the most history behind it, is that meaning is autonomous; that is, that meaning is prior to and independent of the language used to bring it to expression. Adam, after all, named the animals (Genesis). Solomon was known for his ability to bring wisdom to expression by means of proverbs as well as his ability to talk properly about trees, beasts, birds, creeping things, and fishes (The Book of Proverbs and I Kings). In the *Upanishads*, the desire is that speech may bring out the meaning of the Vedas. Socrates