

## *Interpretation and Meaning: Two Histories*

### *Hermeneutics*

The discipline of hermeneutics has its historical origin in the interpretation of texts that had in various cultures attained the status of "scriptures," "classics," or "canonical texts." The early and paradigm case of such texts are those writings that arose in the "axial period"<sup>1</sup> (c. 800 B.C. to 600 A.D.): the Upanishads, the Buddhist Pali Canon, the Bible, the Qur'an, the Greek Classics, and the Confucian and Taoist works from pre-Han China. The following is a very simplified and generalized history of the treatment of such texts, situating the approach I will take to the *Tao Te Ching* in the context of this history.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning stands a person or a group who feel "carried away" with enthusiasm for a certain vision of the world, and who express this vision in verbal form. The vision itself is extraordinary, has an extraordinary greatness, but the human processes through which the vision first arises and is adopted are not fundamentally different from those processes through which world-views in general arise and are accepted. The human group in which this vision arose were substantially "people like us" relying on experiences of reality with which we can in principle empathically identify, given enough information and imaginative effort.

Next comes "canonization." The book becomes known outside the community of its origin. Others, in other communities and then in other eras, feel a greatness in it. Since they are out of touch with the original context and experiences out of which the book arose, substantial parts of the text become vague and ambiguous to them, and they fail to understand, or they misunderstand, large parts of it. But because of the book's aura of greatness, they fill in these gaps in ways that further enhance the book's status. That is, they read messages into the book which are actually more appropriate and inspirational for their own age than would have been the case had they stuck completely to the vision of the original community in all its particulars. The book

gains in this way a "scriptural," "canonical," "classical" status. And the reading habits described above give rise to a certain genre, "scripture interpretation."<sup>3</sup> This genre is governed by an unquestioned presupposition that the text is a repository of authoritative norms for the culture. But this presupposition operates in a special way. That is, it does not lead to impartial empirical research to discover the text's original meaning, and to then taking this meaning as authoritative. Rather, the presupposition that to understand the meaning of the text is to discover something authoritative for us leads interpreters to take advantage of apparent ambiguities in the text to read into it whatever norms they take to be authoritative.<sup>4</sup> Interpreters do not of course regard themselves as reading these norms into the text. They experience the study of canonical texts as a process by which one *discovers* norms that are there in the text. In the best case, this impression reflects the fact that, psychologically, scriptural interpretation is an essentially divinatory process. The grand but mysterious language, the authoritative aura surrounding the text, and a sense of continuity with a long tradition of interpretation stimulate the interpreter's mind to rise to a higher level and grasp normative ideals in a more and more ideal form. What is "there" is the genuine ideal goodness<sup>5</sup> of these norms.

This habit of reading gradually generates the idea that the canonical text contains some inexhaustible hidden core of universal truths; each divergent interpretation represents a partial grasp of this hidden core. And this picture of the book's nature is projected back into stories of its origin. Such an extraordinary book cannot have arisen in the way books normally arise. It must have arisen, at the least, in the mind of a giant among men, a mind not bound down to the particularities of mundane life in a specific concrete community, a mind which pierced the clouds to achieve a direct, not-to-be-duplicated grasp of timeless and transcendent truths. The fact that the mental act of grasping these truths cannot be duplicated gives the truths themselves an authority beyond question.

Enter, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the West, the modern study of history and culture,<sup>6</sup> governed by two key ideas. First, there is the idea that all great writings of the past are essentially human products, generated in a way not fundamentally different from the way our own ideas and writing are generated. The ideas in them did not fall from the transcendent sky, nor do they present to us timelessly authoritative doctrines to be blind-

ly accepted. The ideas arose out of some human experiences, and to understand them is to reconnect them to their experiential roots, to empathically and vicariously relive the human experiences which gave rise to them.<sup>7</sup> The second basic idea of historical and cultural study is that to understand peoples of another era or another culture we must overcome the tendency to see them within the framework of our own culture, or within some "universal" framework, and try to enter empathically into another entire cultural framework.<sup>8</sup> This study has heightened immeasurably our appreciation of the particularity and the otherness of people of other cultures and of our own historical past, and correspondingly heightened our appreciation of the great imaginative effort and discipline that is needed if we are to understand these others in their otherness. A printed text becomes ambiguous when removed from its original context. Rather than taking advantage of this ambiguity to read modern meanings into classical texts, historical and cultural study tries systematically to reconnect them with their original contexts, and hence to reconstruct the meaning that the text had for its original authors and audience.

This historical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics focused on reconstructing original meanings: For historical hermeneutics an interpretation is a "good interpretation" insofar as the interpreter's understanding of the text approximates that of the original author and audience. This criterion for a good interpretation is fundamentally different from the criterion implicit in traditional scriptural hermeneutics. For scriptural hermeneutics, an interpretation is a "good interpretation" insofar as the reading it gives is meaningful for a modern audience.

The most recent development in the history of hermeneutics is the rejection of nineteenth-century historical hermeneutics and a return to an approach that either adopts, or is parasitic upon,<sup>9</sup> the basic aims and assumptions of traditional scriptural interpretation. This turn is represented in the writings of the most influential recent hermeneutic theorists, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida.<sup>10</sup> It is largely due to their influence that the word *hermeneutics* today has come to mean for many people the rejection of any attempt to reconstruct historical meanings, and a focus on giving readings the interpreter regards as most appropriate and meaningful for her modern audience. The most frequently cited reason for this turn against historical hermeneutics is the fact that we can never achieve an understanding of people culturally distant from ourselves that is completely

accurate and completely certain.<sup>11</sup> Some advocates of historical hermeneutics did in fact hope for such accuracy and certainty, but the impossibility of accuracy and certainty in reaching a goal does not render all attempts to approximate the goal futile or self-contradictory. Most goals that are worth achieving perfectly and with certainty are also worth achieving partially and with some degree of probability. (Why else do we continue to value such imperfect disciplines as meteorology, economics, and diagnostic medicine?) There are other and more serious weaknesses in nineteenth-century historical hermeneutic theory, having to do primarily with the foundationalist ambitions of the theorists, and with their subjectivization of meaning (see p. 19). I hope to show in Chapter 2 that these weaknesses can be remedied in a way that makes historical hermeneutics a viable project.

If these weaknesses can be remedied, then there is nothing illogical or immoral in either the historical or the scriptural approach to interpretation. My choice of the historical approach is due to the fact that it facilitates a critical confrontation with classical texts, a confrontation that is open to rational public discussion. Several features of the scriptural approach place obstacles in the way of such critical confrontation.

Historical hermeneutics makes possible a rationally negotiated critical confrontation in two ways. First, historical hermeneutics can help us critically evaluate traditional ideas by tracing these ideas to the originating experiences that gave rise to them. The real value of writings like the *Tao Te Ching* that stand at the beginning of a tradition is precisely that the authors of such texts *cannot* rely on "traditional authority" to carry the ideas they present. Composed before the ideas have gained established authority, these texts must evoke the human experiential<sup>12</sup> bases on which the ideas first became persuasive. These bases represent the best claim these ideas have to represent something authoritative. Reconnecting the ideas to their originating experiences is thus a precondition for a critical evaluation of their claims to authority. Understanding the experiential basis of a tradition is thus like understanding the experiments, data, and logic on which a scientific theory rests. It gives us critical leverage by which we can form some rational estimate of the ideas or theories themselves.

More specifically—and this will be crucial in the present interpretation of the *Tao Te Ching*—such understanding allows us to determine *under what interpretation* the ideas presented to us in such classic texts have some claim to our respect. This is what

German theorists call *Sachkritik*, a critical understanding of the text with reference to *die Sach*, "the thing," the reality of which the text speaks.<sup>13</sup> Here, however, *Sachkritik* has a particularist, experiential, historical basis, rather than a basis in timeless truths. This is the precise opposite of "scriptural" interpretation (including Gadamer's updated version), which *starts* with an uncritical belief<sup>14</sup> in the authority of classic texts, and which then takes it as its task to sustain this authority by producing plausibly authoritative or inspirational contemporary readings.

The second way that historical hermeneutics facilitates a critical confrontation with classical texts is that it makes possible a fully explicit, rational, public discussion concerning the contemporary relevance<sup>15</sup> of any given classic. Advances in historical and cultural studies on the one hand, and rapid and fundamental changes in the modern world on the other, render implausible the traditional assumption that we can and should try to live by ideals identical to those of our distant ancestors. Some critical sifting of traditions is an obvious necessity. The critical assessment of the modern relevance of any given classical text is made more complex and problematic, however, by the fact that any discussion of such relevance will necessarily involve some particular evaluative analysis of modernity itself. But the correctness of any given assessment of modernity is itself a problematic and hotly contested issue, quite apart from any relation to classic texts. Different American subcultures exist with radically different views about modernity.

In this context, rational and public discussion of the modern relevance of a classic text requires that we conceive of this as involving two separate projects.<sup>16</sup> One project consists in trying to recover the original meaning of the text. The other project consists in a critical assessment as to whether and how the message of the text is relevant to us today. Of course, these need not be separated into two chronologically separate steps. But they are *logically* separate projects, with different epistemologies. What counts as a good reason to say, "X is probably the meaning the *Tao Te Ching* had for its original authors and audience," is completely different from what counts as a good reason to say, "X is something we ought to take as a guide for our lives today." The fact that commentators in premodern times did not make this distinction is what limits the usefulness of traditional commentaries for modern historical hermeneutics. This does not imply that traditional commentators were unintelligent. They were simply not engaged in the same project as the modern historical interpreter.

If we conceive of these two projects separately, we can conduct rational and public discussion of both questions, in which the issues are made explicit and considerations truly relevant to any given issue can be put on the table and evaluated as such. For example, (1) in this case we can recognize that certain philological and historiographical skills give special weight to the opinions some people form about original meanings, but that these same skills are largely irrelevant in discussions about the character of modernity and hence of the contemporary relevance of the text. (2) We can also see that reconstructing original contexts already gives us important *negative* clues about modern relevance, by making clear important differences between ancient and modern social environments (e.g., paternalist vs. democratic governments, ethnocentrism, attitudes toward social and sexual inequalities, etc.). These make it necessary to reject certain elements woven into the fabric of ancient texts. (3) We can make explicit and open for critical discussion the different assessments of modernity that cause different subcultures today to evaluate classical texts in fundamentally different ways. Different subcultures might then be encouraged to discuss directly the fundamental differences that divide them, instead of making the classics a battleground in which competing groups struggle for control, turning "interpretation" into ideological warfare pursued by indirect means.<sup>17</sup>

The basically scriptural approach to hermeneutics advocated by recent theorists is incompatible with these two facets of the critical confrontation with classic texts made possible by historical hermeneutics. On the first count, the recovery of the originating experiences that gave rise to a given classical text requires a systematic and *in principle unrestricted* attempt to understand the historical other as other. We can never, of course, actually achieve a perfect and certain understanding of the culturally distant other as other. To say that our attempt should be *in principle* unrestricted is only to say that whenever we detect some way in which our interpretation is governed by cultural suppositions at odds with those of the text's author, we should regard this as a mistake and try to correct it. By contrast, scriptural interpretation guarantees that, no matter what, *some* particular cultural suppositions of ours will retain an important place in the framework within which the text is to be interpreted.<sup>18</sup> It guarantees this in advance and in principle. If we regard certain of our suppositions as important enough (e.g., our commitment to some cause, philosophy, or faith) it will never be a mistake to let these suppositions decisively



influence our interpretation, even if these suppositions are at odds with those of the text's author. This will be, first, a restriction on our attempts to fully appreciate the originating experiences underlying the text, in all their concreteness and particularity, and to understand the text in the light of these experiences. Such an understanding, I will argue, is crucial to a critical assessment of the text's claim to authority. Secondly, since the text is being interpreted basically *within* a framework constituted by certain assumptions dear to the interpreter, these assumptions will automatically escape any possible challenge by the text. This is an artificial restriction on the critical confrontation between the classic text and the modern reader. The interpreter will never be required to explicitly defend her most favored personal assumptions against a challenge from the text.

On the second count, from a rational point of view traditional scriptural interpretation was always implicitly based on circular logic. Values and suppositions held quite independently of the text largely determine the nature of what interpreters "find" in the text. In scripture interpretation, the suppositions one goes in with largely determine the message one comes out with. But then one turns around and declares that these suppositions are especially authoritative because they are "based on" something discovered in this authoritative text. Though often done very creatively and for good causes, from a rational point of view this process always has the character of something achieved with smoke and mirrors. In the worst case, "interpretation" becomes a rhetorical trick by which one takes advantage of verbal ambiguity to attach one's own ideas to the words of an authoritative text, claiming that, because the same words are used, one's ideas are also clothed with the authority traditionally accorded to the text.

Ultimately the most important thing we can gain from the study of ancient classics is some guidance and inspiration for our own lives. And this ultimately demands a "fusion of horizons," a blending of our concerns, assumptions, and values with those of ancient thinkers. But this blending should be called what it is: syncretism. Masking this syncretism under the guise of "discovering the timeless core" of the text clouds rational discussion both of ancient thought and of our own modern problems.

Scripture interpretation as a social practice grew up in traditional authoritarian cultures. It was a device by which a scholarly elite guild determined the contents of a unitary high culture normative for the entire society. The implicit assumption that inter-

pretation determines authoritative norms still governs much scholarly debate today, even though the non-scholarly public who share this assumption has shrunk drastically. It is difficult to transform this institution into an academic discipline in the context of an egalitarian, pluralist democracy committed to deciding public norms through rational public discussion. This context demands that one make a distinction between the evidence, arguments, and skills relevant to recovering original meanings, on the one hand, and the evidence and arguments relevant to assessing the contemporary relevance of these meanings.

These criticisms apply to interpretive scholarship as an academic discipline. There are other social contexts in which an essentially "scriptural" mode of interpretation still serves important purposes (e.g., scriptural interpretation as a mode of consciousness raising among the Christian poor in Latin America, or the reinterpretation of classical Buddhist ideas in the service of autonomous rural development programs in Sri Lanka<sup>19</sup>). Further, the above remarks are not directed against certain genres—for example, "Meditations on" or "Reflections on" classical writings—forms of "interpretation" different from "interpretive scholarship" as envisioned here. My only objection to these latter works is that their authors often make a show of special philological or historical expertise, as though these give special authority to their personal meditations. If such expertise is not seriously pressed into the service of historical hermeneutics, it becomes a mere status badge, a signal to other members of the scholarly elite that the author is one of them, and that therefore her personal meditations deserve special weight that would not be accorded to the meditations of the uneducated. This is simply ungrounded elitism.

Finally, these remarks are not directed against the project of studying "the interpretation of scriptures" as a discipline in its own right.<sup>20</sup> I would only say that the study of the way medieval Chinese Taoists understood the *Tao Te Ching*, for example, belongs to the study of medieval Chinese culture, an inquiry completely different from inquiry into the meaning of the *Tao Te Ching* in its original context.

### *The Ontology of Meaning: A History and a Proposal*

The project of recovering original meaning is generally associated with philosophical foundationalism and/or with an identifi-



cation of textual meaning with "the author's intention." It is usually assumed that the rejection of foundationalism and "the author's intention" renders incoherent the very idea of original meaning. This is the fundamental position underlying "postmodern," "deconstructionist" approaches to interpretation.<sup>21</sup> The present hermeneutics accepts the postfoundational philosophical suppositions underlying these latter approaches, but uses these as a basis for better defining what "the original meaning" consists in, and as a guide to its recovery. The crucial issue here is the ontology of meaning—not primarily the meaning of texts, but meaning as it appears in what German philosophers call the *Lebenswelt*,<sup>22</sup> the world as it appears in ordinary experience prior to conscious critical reflection. Again I can best present the view taken in the present study by situating it in the context of a historical narrative concerning the status of meaning.

Previous to the sixteenth century, there reigned a naive trust in ordinary experience and a naive ethnocentrism. For ordinary experience, meaning appears to be "out there" in the world. People attending a wedding ceremony do not experience certain physical actions of the participants as "bare facts," to which are then added some "meanings." They experience the physical actions themselves as meaningful actions; their meaning appears to be as objective and external as the color of the clothes, the location of the parties, the sound of their speech, the slowness or quickness of their motions. If a stranger happens by who comes from a different culture, where marriage ceremonies look completely different, she of course would not perceive these meanings. But this does not generally shake people's confidence that the meanings are out there. Most people are naively ethnocentric; they assume that the meanings they perceive the actions to have are objectively real, and that there is something defective about the stranger's perception. She is like a blind person, who doesn't know what's going on because she doesn't see what's really there.

Enter two developments decisive for a change in modern consciousness. (1) The development of the modern physical sciences cast radical doubt on a naive trust in ordinary experience to tell us what the world is really like. (2) A growing awareness of cultural diversity undermined naive ethnocentrism. Both these developments render problematic the status of meanings. The methodology of the physical sciences, with its emphasis on objectivity and atomistic analysis, precludes the discovery of meanings in the world. The awareness that different cultures attribute very differ-

ent meanings to the same phenomena contributes to the sense that meanings are not really out there in the world.

The growth and spectacular success of the physical sciences (1) by their rigorous methods gave rise to radically new and vastly higher standards concerning what objectivity and certainty in knowledge consists in, and (2) by many of their counterintuitive results undermined in a fundamental way people's naive trust in ordinary experience to tell them what the world is like.<sup>23</sup> This determined the ambitions of most early modern philosophers.<sup>24</sup> Borrowing what they took to be the fundamental features of scientific thought, they conceived of philosophical thought as a preemptive attack on mistakes. Rather than being a method of correcting individual mistakes about the *Lebenswelt* when they occur, reason would now aim to establish a body of knowledge that would entirely replace the *Lebenswelt*. This would be a body of knowledge guaranteed from the beginning to be a representation of reality that was entirely free of mistakes, because it consisted of conclusions deduced by rigorous logic from absolutely certain foundations. This describes the ambitions of what is now called "foundationalist" thought.<sup>25</sup> In foundationalist thought, epistemology became preoccupied with absolute certainty, and epistemology in turn determined ontology; what could not be known with certainty was implicitly excluded from the realm of the objectively real. Foundationalist epistemology thus had the indirect but important effect of limiting the kind of *categories* in which valid thought could take place. Not just any concepts one might derive from ordinary experience of the *Lebenswelt* will do, but only those categories susceptible of verification by objective foundations and rigorous logic.

Foundationalist thought recognized only two categories<sup>26</sup> of objective truth that could serve as certain foundations for knowledge: objective data gathered by exact observations like those in the physical sciences, and necessary truths, which include the truths of logic, and include also for Kantians the allegedly universal structure which the human mind imposes on reality in all acts of cognition. One important consequence was that goodness and rightness, as aspects of human experience, could have no claim to separate ontological status, but had to be ontologically reduced to something else.<sup>27</sup> Being morally wrong had to be reduced to being mistaken about some objective facts or some necessary truths, or to being logically inconsistent. (Objective facts seemed to many to be ruled out, however: The nature of "facts" had been narrowed to what could be scientifically verified. The factual world was thus

stripped of all the human meanings it has in ordinary experience, including meanings having to do with good and bad. It is this stripping the world of human meaning that gave rise to the "fact/value" problem, the problem that values seem to have no basis in the world of facts.)

The foundationalist ambitions of modern philosophy were intrinsically bound up with the role that philosophy played in personal and political ambitions of modern philosophers. Philosophical reason is what makes an individual "auto-nomous," self-ruled, giving him or her independence and critical leverage over against tradition and religious and civil authorities, whose standards many philosophers felt to be alien. But philosophers also aspired to a leadership role in the modern world. They hoped that philosophical reason would provide universal and unifying norms for a disunited Europe, taking over the role of now fragmented medieval Christendom as the arbiter of high culture and the foundation for political authority.<sup>28</sup> Some philosophers relaxed the rigor of "scientific" thought, but a great deal of philosophical literature is still governed by the assumption that philosophy centers on a debate about the one correct set of categories through which we can grasp the truth about the world.

One result of foundationalism especially important for hermeneutics is the fundamental bifurcation it led to in the way one accounts for the deliverances of ordinary experience. Whatever can be verified by the methods of physical science—or perhaps what is universal to all human experience—is given a "cognitive" explanation: The reason these aspects of reality appear to be there is because they actually are there. Whatever appears to be out there but cannot be scientifically verified (or perhaps whatever is not common to all human experience) is given a "non-cognitive" explanation. Naive commonsense is fundamentally mistaken here: These aspects of apparent reality only appear to be out there in the world; they are actually "creations of the human mind," projected onto the external world. What must be explained then, is the act of mental creation, and this is explained in various ways. Adherents of what might be called "Romantic Kantianism"<sup>29</sup> glorify it as the wonderful activity of the creative human spirit, best exemplified in the creative artist. Others give a causal account: Social conditioning or internal psychological dynamics "cause" the mind to attribute certain meanings to events and actions, and the forces governing such production of meaning can be the subject of a social science (Marx, Durkheim), or a psychological science (Freud), or even a biological

science (Edward O. Wilson).<sup>30</sup> All agree that culturally variable meanings are subjective creations and projections. This is what I mean by the "subjectivization of meaning."<sup>31</sup>

It is important to see that this new view of things involves some new *ontological*<sup>32</sup> suppositions. Ontological suppositions are assumptions one makes about what *kinds* of real things there are, the basic categories in terms of which one interprets whatever concrete individual perceptions one has. If we compare it to the ontology implicit in ordinary experience, this new view of things involves an ontology that can best be described as "separative." For example, ordinary experience perceives just one thing, "a wedding" happening out there in the world. This new ontology insists that culturally relative perceptions like this are perceptions of two separate and fundamentally different kinds of reality: On the one hand, there are some objective facts about moving physical bodies, and perhaps whatever universal meanings all humans would attribute to such movements. On the other hand, there are some "meanings" created in the mind and projected onto the physical events. This revision of ordinary perception is based on an *ontological* assumption. It is not only that, on some particular occasions, people mistakenly project meanings onto events that do not really have these meanings. This kind of mistake was always widely recognized by everyone. The new ontological assumption is a blanket assumption that culturally variable meanings are never out there in the world. Reality does not include culturally variable meanings out there in the world. We know this before we investigate any particular case. Similar remarks can be made about perceptions of rightness and goodness.

The foundationalist ambitions that have driven much of Western philosophy since Descartes have been severely questioned by the most influential twentieth-century philosophers.<sup>33</sup> One way of putting the argument is this.<sup>34</sup> The foundationalist project can at best be carried out with respect to very limited aspects of the world as we perceive it. After several centuries of attempts and critiques, there have emerged too few things with a plausible claim to represent purely objective facts and/or universal truths to be able to constitute a "world" we can actually live in. Meanwhile, all of our perceptions, thought, and talk centered on these relatively few things take place against a massive backdrop of the culturally conditioned world we actually do perceive, live in, and conduct our business in, the world that German phenomenology refers to as the *Lebenswelt*, the "life-world." Further-

more, without this context our talk about those few things we might plausibly regard as objective/universal truths would not have the meaning that we attribute to it; it would in fact be largely and literally meaningless talk, since meaning is defined in relation to the *Lebenswelt* in which we actually live. This *Lebenswelt* is too massively and pervasively present to our consciousness and beyond its control to be actually regarded as not part of "the real world," as a mental creation or projection, and so on. Inevitably, when we speak of something being "part of objective reality," the "objective reality" we actually have in mind is the *Lebenswelt* we live in. Discourse asserting a separative ontology, asserting the purely subjective origin of all culturally variable meaning in our own *Lebenswelt*, undercuts the very conditions of its own meaningfulness, and so in the end is incoherent. This theoretical self-contradiction is born out in practice. We usually invoke the supposedly subjective origin of culturally variable meanings in a very selective and ad hoc fashion, as a way of discrediting or explaining away those particular aspects of traditional worldviews or the worldviews of others which seem to us implausible or objectionable. We never apply such explanations to our own (empiricist, Kantian, behaviorist, Freudian, etc.) explanations.

One logical conclusion that ought to follow the rejection of foundationalism is a restoration of the ontology implicit in ordinary experience, that is, an acceptance of such things as rightness and goodness, and of "culturally variable meanings out there" as categories of reality.

This would mean an end to philosophical debates about the one correct set of categories appropriate to grasping the truth about the world as it is. Since people in different cultures perceive things and events to have very different meanings, the logical conclusion of accepting "culturally variable meanings out there" is that there is not only one world out there, there are many worlds out there.<sup>35</sup> This assertion about "many worlds" does not, of course, deny that the many cultural worlds there are have massive amounts of elements in common. It only denies that commonality has any decisive *ontological* significance. Those elements which one cultural world has in common with others are not "more real" than those elements unique to it. The "many worlds" theory is simply the logical result of restoring a naive trust in the ontology implicit in ordinary experience, while rejecting the naive ethnocentrism which formerly accompanied this trust.

This "many worlds" theory does not assert that reality is what-

ever we perceive it to be, that our experience never deceives us, or that we never mistakenly project onto events meanings that they do not have. It only means that detecting such mistakes must be done on a case-by-case basis, rather than settled ahead of time by blanket *ontological* assumptions. This theory must also be distinguished from what might be called metaphysical<sup>36</sup> relativism, the doctrine that there is some fundamental truth which, in an *a priori* way, renders illusory all distinctions between right and wrong or good and bad that appear to be present in the *Lebenswelt*. The restoration of ordinary-experience ontology does away with the fact/value problem by restoring also a class of meanings which I will refer to as "the good": those meanings involved in our perception that certain things matter, are precious, are good, deserve something from us, make a claim on us, and so on. Ordinary experience recognizes a distinction between this class of meanings and the meanings things have for us because of purely self-centered interests, meanings which we consciously create, and so on. This distinction, as a basis for valid obligations, value judgments, ideals, and so on, remains intact in principle (which does not deny the difficulty of avoiding mistakes in many specific cases). Foundationalist thought dismissed our ("subjective," "culturally conditioned") experiential perceptions of the good in principle, and required that any genuine knowledge of the good be based on objective facts or necessary truths. It is an *incomplete* rejection of foundationalist thought that leads to skeptical and nihilist, metaphysical relativism. Such incomplete rejection retains the requirement that knowledge of the good *needs* grounding in objective reality beyond experience to be valid, while rejecting only the possibility of *knowing* any such objective truths.<sup>37</sup>

This thesis about the reality of the good is developed further on pages 270–77. It is ultimately necessary to the present hermeneutics, because it is the foundation of the possibility that we might learn something important in a critical confrontation with the text. On this view, what makes any given text "great" is not that it is founded on universally valid truths, but that it represents an organization of the world which results when one allows one's concerned engagement with the world to be dominated by idealistic concern for some excellent good (see p. 277–80). The good that authors culturally distant from us were concerned with can be generalized and this can open up for us the possibility of being converted to a similar good ourselves. There are a diversity of goods, and focus on some particular good is more appropriate



in some contexts than in others. Great texts from distant cultures reveal to us highly developed visions of the good which might not otherwise occur to us. Whether and to what extent the good revealed in any given text is appropriate to take as primary in our modern context, is always a matter for critical discussion.

The above ontology of meaning has fundamental implications for the way we conceive our task in trying to understand the writings of people from other cultures. It undermines both the appeal to the author's intention and the foundationalism that were often central to hermeneutics in the past. Identifying the meaning of a text with the author's intention reflects the subjectivization of meaning described above. That is, "the author's intention" consists of some ideas or meanings in the mind of the author, which (s)he wanted to project onto the world. The goal of interpretation is not to understand the *world* of which the text speaks, but to understand some ideas an author created.<sup>38</sup>

In rejecting this view, the present hermeneutics takes it as its task to understand the world of which the text speaks. But the "many worlds" thesis adopted here means that this "world" is not understood in a foundationalist way.<sup>39</sup> This eliminates the several approaches that are based on the supposition that there is one way the world objectively is and "the meaning of the text" must be measured in relation to this: the naive approach that assumes that the reader's worldview represents the world as it is, and what the text says must be measured in this context; the converse authoritarian view that what the text says represents the one objective truth; and the foundationalist philosopher's view that interpretation must take place in some third realm of objective truth, different both from the unreflective worldview of the naive reader and from the worldview expounded in the text.

But rejecting these underpinnings of traditional hermeneutics does not necessarily leave us with the view that "the original meaning of the text" is an incoherent notion, and so force us to abandon the project of recovering it. There are after all many different *definite* worlds. "The original meaning of the text" consists in what it says about the world, the *Lebenswelt* of the text's author(s). The interpretive task is to approximate as best we can an empathic understanding of this world and how the text relates to it.

In comparison with the way the views of ancient peoples are usually studied, this hermeneutics makes such study a more diffi-

cult endeavor, and an endeavor that puts the interpreter's own views more at risk. Non-cognitive explanations of the views of a text's author implicitly privilege the views of the interpreter. For example, a Freudian interpretation explains the views of the author by saying what psychological factors caused him to hold these views. But the interpreter does not explain her acceptance of Freud's ideas by saying what psychological factors caused her to hold these ideas. Implicitly, adherence to these ideas is explained cognitively: She believes them because they are a true account of what happens in the world.

Non-cognitive explanations are also in general easier to devise. One commonly assumes here that human creativity can create almost anything, human beings will arbitrarily believe almost anything, they can be conditioned to believe almost anything, and so on. On these assumptions, almost any beliefs can rather easily be explained. The interpretation envisioned here, on the other hand, often requires a strenuous imaginative effort to imagine a *plausible human world* in which what foreign people say would have some basis in reality. (This does not, of course, rule out non-cognitive explanations, it only means avoiding reaching for this as the first and preferred explanation for any statements in a foreign text that seem out of joint with our own sense of what is real.)

Even if one thinks that the above ontology and the "many worlds" theory is not actually true—that there is only one "real" world—I argue that it is better to provisionally adopt this ontology and many worlds theory as a basis for interpretation. This is because the world that ancient writers are generally talking about, the world to which the words of their text refer, is the world as they experience it. This ought to be our default assumption, the assumption we ought to make in the absence of positive evidence to the contrary. (Such evidence might consist of positive indications that a text's author is specifically making statements that have an ontological scope and directly conflict with the ontology of ordinary experience, for example Galileo's discussion of the reality of color.) To "understand before criticizing" means that one ought first to try to understand *the author's particular world*, which may be different from our own world, and to understand the words in reference to this world. After this, one can use one's supposed knowledge of the real world, "universal truths," and so on, as a critical basis for sifting out what is valid and what is invalid in what the text says.

Finally, the abandonment of foundationalism and the restoration of ordinary experience ontology brings the present study into accord with the current trend among many Sinologists who emphasize the inappropriateness of studying ancient Chinese texts in the light of the categories, dichotomies, and problems that have preoccupied much Western philosophy. Specific targets of attack here are, for example, the Platonist theory of ideas with its accompanying essentialism,<sup>40</sup> the fact/value dichotomy,<sup>41</sup> mind/body dualism,<sup>42</sup> the idea of a self-contained and self-subsisting transcendent reality.<sup>43</sup> The present hermeneutics would simply situate the criticisms these Sinologists make at a different level. The reason it is important to clear one's mind of these categories when studying Chinese classics is not that ancient Chinese taught philosophical doctrines opposed to them. It is rather that ancient Chinese thinkers were not infected with the foundationalist ambition to build a system of theories to replace the *Lebenswelt* (see p. 14). And it is this ambition, and the consequent denigration of the *Lebenswelt*, that gave rise to so many problematic notions like those listed above. People not infected with this ambition—including many ordinary Westerners outside of scholarly circles—also escaped many of these problems.