

Allowing that critical reflection, or critical appropriation, can be more or less critical; and allowing that the difference between more or less critical is the difference between criticizing solely by the ultimate—or primal—criteria of experience and reason based on experience, and criticizing by the merely consuetudinary criteria established in the given context of self-understanding and life-praxis—allowing all this, one faces the question, But what makes critical *interpretation*, as distinct from critical validation, more rather than less critical? Or, alternatively, What, exactly, are the criteria of more rather than less, critical *interpretation*? And in what sense may they be said to be criteria of experience and reason based on experience?

The criteria of more, rather than less, critical interpretation are solely the immanent criteria provided by the *interpretandum* itself. Thus, in the case of interpreting a text more, rather than less, critically, the only criteria for determining the meaning of the text are what *the text itself* says and means. This is to say, first, that determining what the text *says* requires methodically following the so-called hermeneutical rules, or the historical-critical and literary-critical methods, of reading the text. And it is to say, second, that although any determination of what the text *means* requires also presupposing some question to be put to it in a methodical way—whether the question to which ^{itself} it is addressed or some other question to which the interpreter, for her or his part, is interested in putting to it—no determination of the text's meaning may be prejudiced, in the sense of preempting the text's own answer to the question. In short, more, rather than less, critical interpretation of a text abstracts entirely, because methodically, from employing any transcendent criteria, in the sense of criteria that go beyond what the text itself says and means, given some way of asking about its meaning without preempting its answer.

But, then, the sense in which the criteria of more, rather than less, critical interpretation of a text are solely the criteria of experience and reason based thereon should also be clear. For the only thing that counts in more critical interpretation is experience of the text itself and reasoning accordingly. Hence

the first point of Bengel's instruction: "*Te totum applica ad textum, rem totum applica ad te.*"

Furthermore, heeding Bengel's instruction is entirely consistent with satisfying the other main requirement of more, rather than less, critical interpretation. No interpretation of a text can be carried out except in some second language (the *interpretans*) into which the first language of the text itself (the *interpretandum*) can be appropriately rendered. So no interpretation of a text can be more, rather than less, critical unless it is correspondingly critical in determining the second language—in the broad sense of the conceptuality/terminology it is to use in rendering the first language of the text itself. But, then, again, the criteria of more critical interpretation are to be found solely in the text; for what the text itself says and means alone can determine whether the language that is to interpret and reformulate what it means is really appropriate—is really capable of grasping and expressing its meaning. So, once more: "Apply thy entire self to the text."

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Note to Myself

The next time I take up the question of just what it is that makes critical interpretation, as distinct from critical validation, more rather than less critical I need to recall the point I've made for some time in different contexts that interpretation involves not only a guiding question, or "hermeneutical principle," but also an appropriate conceptuality/terminology in which the meaning being interpreted can be rendered (cf., e.g., my entry on "Existentialist Theology").

In what I've had to say so far in trying to answer the question, I've dealt at most with the guiding question (as well as, of course, the hermeneutical rules, or historical- and literary-critical studies) and said nothing at all about the appropriate conceptuality/terminology. This is the more unfortunate because no interpretation can be carried out except in some second language (the *interpretans*) into which the first language (of the *interpretandum*) can be appropriately rendered. And no *critical* interpretation can be *more*, rather than less, critical except by being correspondingly critical in determining the second language it is to use in its interpretation.

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Addendum—Yet another thing it would be well to keep in mind the next time I take up the same question is my discussion of critical interpretation in "Paul in Contemporary Theology and Ethics: Presuppositions of Critically Appropriating Paul's Letters Today": 297-300. This is as extended a discussion as I've ever published (and, possibly, ever written) of what I speak of as "the first step in critically appropriating Paul's letters in contemporary theology and ethics." At the very least, it helpfully supplements such other discussions as I've offered.

20 February 2009