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Is There Life in This Author?

The Living Author and the Business and Importance of the Humanities

by Mark J. Boone

I. Introduction

At least for most forms of writing, the author is not dead. I shall give two arguments that, as a medium of communication between the author and the reader, a writing's meaning is shaped by its author's intent. The first is an indirect argument that the author's *not* being entirely dead is a common-sense principle which is likelier to be true than almost any evidence that might be offered against it. Second, I shall present a direct argument showing that it is impossible to argue *against* my thesis, or at least that it is impossible for one person to try to persuade others of the falsity of my thesis through writing while also taking credit for their work. Since there are signs of life in the author, we must not ignore the author when we interpret a text, which teaches us three lessons. First, those traditional hermeneutical practices which aim at discerning and conveying an author's intent are central to the study of English, literature, and linguistics. Second, the necessity of understanding authorial contributions to textual meaning justifies the humanities for academic and other purposes. Third, these insights support a pedagogy less focused on rote learning and more focused on the critical thinking skills needed to discern textual meaning.

And what has this to do with transculturation—meaning, roughly, the process whereby a culture changes through interaction with other cultures? Particularly, how does this apply to transculturation in South Asia? This is a question to which I will return regularly throughout this chapter, showing how the hermeneutical questions and principles articulated here apply to the cultural situation in South Asia, where we must not ignore the author when we approach the plethora of texts that cause and express cultural change in the modern world.

I shall first review the problem of the location of the meaning of a text. Then I shall explain why this is relevant to religion, law, and culture in general. Then I shall argue for the enduring relevance of the author of a text. I shall conclude with some comments on the importance of my case for the disciplines of English, literature, and linguistics; on the importance of the humanities for other disciplines; and on critical thinking as a necessary part of education.

II. Where Is the Meaning of a Text?

This is an important question calling for a convenient illustration from popular literature and a survey of some major theories. Afterwards we must consider why it is important not only for literary theory, but also for other areas such as religion and law, and indeed for all the texts on the interpretation of which modern culture turns.

A. Is Dumbledore Gay?

Oversimplifying somewhat, the possible loci of textual meaning are the author, the text, and the reader. I shall present these possibilities by looking at strong versions of the relevant theories: that meaning is fully located within the mind of the author, that it is fully within the text, and that it is fully within the mind of the reader. I shall illustrate these theories by applying them to a question pertaining to the Harry Potter series. After writing the series, J. K. Rowling announced that Albus Dumbledore is homosexual. No one had been able to infer this from the books, making it an interesting case study in hermeneutical theory.

Perhaps the meaning of a text is *in the intent of its author*, which we may call *intentionalism*. This is a simple, natural understanding of textual meaning; a text is *made* by its author, so it seems that its meaning is also *determined* by its author. It is no accident that the word *author* is contained in the word *authority*, for the author would seem to have complete control over the meaning they put in their text.

Perhaps the meaning of a text is *in the text*, which is the theory of *textualism*. Once again, merely to understand this view is to understand its appeal. It is, after all, *the text* that *has* meaning, so it is natural to think that the meaning is also *in* it.

Perhaps the meaning of a text is *in the mind of the reader*. After all, does a text *mean* anything without a mind for it to *mean something to*? The mind of the reader seems to be the place where the text *means something to* someone, so naturally it may be taken as the place where the meaning also *is*.

If textual meaning is located in *the author's mind*, then Dumbledore is gay if Rowling says he is! What the author says goes. There is no need for textual support for Dumbledore's homosexuality. For that matter, if Rowling says Dumbledore has a mole on the big toe of his left foot, that will be true also. If she later decides Dumbledore is *not* gay, he will no longer be gay.

If textual meaning is in *the text*, then Dumbledore is not gay, no matter what Rowling says. The literature provides insufficient grounds for inferring it; its author, having written a text without such evidence, cannot alter this—unless she should also alter the words of the text.

If textual meaning is located in *the reader's mind*, then neither textual evidence nor the author's intent matters to the question. Dumbledore is gay if the reader thinks he is. Of course, since readers will have different perceptions, he will not *always* be gay. This calls for subtlety, for he cannot both simply be and simply not be gay at the same time. Rather, he will be gay for one reader and not for another: *gay for you*, perhaps, but not *for me*. More precisely, we should probably say that there are diverse Dumbledores for diverse readers; perhaps, for example, *your Dumbledore* is gay, but not *mine*.

B. Some Major Theories on the Locus of Meaning

Now I shall survey three major theories on the location of textual meaning. The basic idea of *originalism* is that the meaning of a text does not change except when the text changes. Thus, all versions of originalism in all fields will consider the meaning of the text to be determined by something that is not changing—except insofar as the words of the text are also changing. In biblical theology, for example, originalism tends to emphasize the intent of the human authors of the Bible. (See, for example, The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy 1982.) Constitutional originalism in the study of American law has undergone some recent shifts in its view of the location of the meaning of the United States Constitution (Paulsen 2003: 1134–48; Delahunty and Yoo 2015: 1088–97). Earlier originalists emphasized the original *intent in writing* on the part of the Constitutional *authors*—locating the meaning in the *author*. Originalists later shifted to emphasize the original *understanding in approving* by the Constitutional *adopters*—locating the meaning in those particular *readers*. Later they shifted again to emphasize the original *meaning in reading* by reasonable and informed *readers*—locating the meaning in the *text* as read. (Michael Paulsen and Gary Lawson are highly recommended authors in the area of originalism in American law; Paulsen 2014: 1385–441; Lawson 2012: 1551–71). These subtle variations in originalism do not prevent a fairly reliable generalization of originalist theories: Originalism presumes that the meaning of the text is determined both by the text and by the author; meaning is *in* the text, and is *shaped by* the author. What a text means is not necessarily determined strictly by what the author merely *thinks*, but is largely a function of what the author *puts into the text*.

To return to our case study, a simple originalist *intentionalism* may take the author's word as law: If Rowling says Dumbledore is gay, then he is. However, it is possible for a hardy originalist account to have a different view. The author shapes the meaning of the text, but all the same if Dumbledore is gay then there ought to be *something* in the text about it. Perhaps he is not gay after

all; however, if we should actually *find* something in the text which suggests the possibility, we should consider Rowling's intentions decisive in telling us what it means.

According to *formalism*, the meaning of a text is in the text. Formalism is 'an interpretive approach that emphasizes literary form and the study of literary devices within the text' (Brewton n. d.). The text determines its own meaning largely independently of both the author and the reader.

And Dumbledore? Formalism would seem to suggest that he is *not* gay, unless a good case can be made that certain themes in the text point to that conclusion.

According to reader-response theory, the meaning of a text is in the reading of it. It is determined by the reader. Rather, according to Stanley Fish, a major proponent of this view, meaning is determined by the *community* of readers (Fish 1982).

As for Dumbledore, a simple version of reader-response theory might suggest that the reader can decide for themselves whether Dumbledore is gay. And a sophisticated community-based version such as Fish's would seem to suggest that the readers can make that determination—together.

III. The Importance of These Theories

Where is the meaning of a text? Is it determined by the author, by the reader, or merely by the text itself? These questions matter a great deal.

Literature hangs in the balance, for its correct interpretation depends on this. Law hangs in the balance for the same reason. The current legal situation in the United States is illustrative. On the United States Supreme Court, at the time of the writing of this chapter and as I understand the situation, there are five confirmed originalists (Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Amy Coney Barrett, Neil Gorsuch, and Brett Kavanaugh) alongside three foes of originalism (Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan) who tend towards the theory of the 'living Constitution,' a

legal corollary to reader-response theory. Chief Justice John Roberts is a bit harder to nail down, although in my working understanding he tends to be in the middle as far as legal hermeneutics goes.

Religion likewise hangs in the balance. The nature and direction of a text-based religion such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism hangs on the interpretation of its foundational text or texts.

We must elaborate in the context of South Asian transculturation. I suppose most or all cultures are largely the result of cross-cultural change. Past and current transculturation in South Asia is especially vividly. In Lahore (where I worked at Forman Christian College for some five years), one need only look around in order to observe what a complex set of cultural influences intermingle in this region. The Arabic call to prayer echoes from the mosques across McDonald's, street signs in Urdu and English, colonial architecture, Mughal ruins, Christian church buildings, and more vestiges of the different cultures that have dwelt at this crossroads of civilizations. These cultural influences shaped the culture we see today—one still changing as different cultural influences continue to effect life in the subcontinent, and as cultural influences from the subcontinent have an effect elsewhere in the world!

What are some of the major ways in which the question of authorial authority effects South Asian civilization? This transcultural world is shaped by a plethora of texts. Even Dumbledore is quite relevant, for Harry Potter books are widely read in South Asia. So are a dizzying array of texts of all genres from many different cultures—and all calling for reading and interpreting. South Asian life and culture are shaped by texts central to the world's five most prominent religions. They are shaped by both eastern and western literature and philosophy. Their governments are under the authority of written Constitutions. Central to the development of these societies is the

interpretation of, to name only a few, the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Buddhist scriptures; the Bible, the Quran, and the Hadith; Shakespeare, Tolkien, the Harry Potter series, and the *Mahabharata*; Plato, Shankara, Allama Iqbal, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan; and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the writings of Gandhi, and the Constitutions of Pakistan and India.

Should we presume—with reader-response theory—that the meanings of these texts are in the eyes of their many beholders, or perhaps that each text’s meaning is in the eye of the community of its readers? Should we follow formalism and assume that the meaning of each text will be shaped only by its internal characteristics? Or should we follow some version of originalism and look to the authors of these diverse texts—or to some interplay between the authors, texts, and readers—to find their meanings?

Let us elaborate with a few observations on some of the more salient relevancies in law and religion in the South Asian context.

The combined population of India and Pakistan exceeds 1.5 billion people—and they all live under a written Constitution as the supreme law of their respective nations. This makes the exercise of judicial review in South Asia an extremely important power in the future of human civilization. David Mervin in the *Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations* gives a helpful introduction to the concept. Judicial review is:

The power to review legislative and executive acts and to nullify those that are believed to contravene a constitution. Used in a number of countries including Australia, Pakistan, Japan, India, Germany, Italy, and the United States. (Mervin 2018)

Judicial review is what a court does when it interprets a Constitution and some lesser law to determine whether they are compatible. Mervin elaborates on judicial review in the context of American law, on which I would suggest the interested reader consult Mervin or perhaps Paulsen

(2003: 1113–1214). I know much less about the particularities of judicial review in the South Asian context by the Supreme Courts of India and Pakistan, although I can suggest articles which seem to be promising introductions to this vast field of study. Sharan (1978: 526–37) and Shekhawat (1994: 177–82) give us informative introductions to the complexities, methods, and early history of judicial review in India. Ahmed and Safder (2014: 483–96) contrast the relative strength of the judiciary in the United States with the relative weakness of the Pakistani judiciary, suggesting that the American approach could strengthen the Pakistani judiciary to perform its much-needed interpretation of law. Cheema (2018: 503–26) argues that the history of the Pakistani judiciary reveals a long practice of judicial review of executive action, a practice which strengthened its role in government.

In any case, the fundamental point here is clear: Just as it is in the United States, judicial review in South Asia is an extremely important and powerful function of the courts. Powerful and necessary structures of legal interpretation are built right into the governments of India and Pakistan. Judicial review is a process of figuring out the meaning of laws. This force that directs civilization is guided by the theory of interpretation employed by courts. Hermeneutics reigns; a bad hermeneutics will reign badly, but a better one will do better.

The relevance of hermeneutics to religion in the South Asian context is all too obvious, but we might as well review the major players: Something like one billion followers of Hinduism, half a billion followers of Islam, and sizeable populations of Christians, Buddhists, and other religious perspectives inhabit this region. Of course, there are internal as well as interreligious disagreements about exactly which texts should be held sacred, about what exactly this sacredness means, about how to discern their meaning, etc. But, by and large, these adherents look to the texts recognized as sacred by their cultural traditions—and they must needs interpret them.

For example, the *Bhagavad-Gita* condones Arjuna's decision to slay the Kauravas, including his own relations. Is this to be interpreted as some sort of support for violence in the real world? Or is the conflict only a symbol for a spiritual struggle? And how shall we answer these questions? Where is the meaning of this text—in the mind of the author, in the mind of the reader, or in the text itself? Perhaps the meaning is determined by circumstances at the time of the original writing of this text—perhaps by whatever the author or authors of the *Bhagavad-Gita* had in mind, or perhaps only by what the author or authors put into the text. Or perhaps its meaning is a function of the structure and literary devices of the text itself. Or perhaps the meaning is up to the individual reader, or perhaps it is up to the community of readers. In this last case, we might also need to ask *which* community in particular is responsible for interpreting the text; does the religious community holding a text as sacred have a privileged place in its interpretation?

Questions along these lines with detailed illustrations could be multiplied endlessly. Is the meaning of the first chapters of Genesis a function of the efforts of Moses (or whoever else may be its author) in his original context, a function of the readers' reading, or a function of the internal characteristics of the text? What of the Vedas, the Upanishads, and so on?

Plainly, with all these texts needing to be interpreted, ways of life and fates of cultures and entire civilizations depend on how we answer the questions *Where is the meaning of a text?* and *Who or what determines that meaning?* There may be more important questions. But there are not very many.

We will return to these connections between texts, cultures, and the humanities. First let us consider the author's prospects for life.

IV. The Living Author

The philosopher Jacques Derrida has said, ‘*There is nothing outside of the text*’ (Derrida 1974: 158), meaning that there is no construal of reality is exhaustive, correct in every detail, and accessible to any attentive reader. Every construal of reality is subject to interpretation; more precisely, every construal *is* an interpretation. And no construal of a text escapes beyond the text into a pre-existent reality—not even into the pre-existent mind of the author! Similarly, Roland Barthes has proclaimed ‘the death of the author’ (Barthes 1967). Well-established views like reader-response theory and formalism place the meaning of the text outside the author’s mind. With such forces arrayed against them, can the author still hope to have any relevance?

Indeed they can.

One voice speaking up for the author is theologian Kevin Vanhoozer in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Vanhoozer defends a view I like to call *textual realism* which is the conjunction of three common-sense principles: that there is a text, that it has an original meaning, and that the original meaning is to some degree accessible to the careful reader. (I consider textual realism with respect to the Bible in more detail in Boone 2016: 35–52.) Vanhoozer delightfully links textual realism to philosopher Alvin Plantinga’s theory of knowledge, which is rooted in the common-sense tradition of Thomas Reid and other philosophers (Vanhoozer 1998: 283ff).

Now Vanhoozer’s account of the original meaning of the Bible involves both the author *and* the reader. That meaning is an action on the part of the author—an action demanding *a response* from the reader. This view has connections both to reader-response theory *and* to an intentionalist originalism. But the two points most important for our present purposes are as follows. First, Vanhoozer adds a fourth principle to the three which constitute textual realism: that the author has something to do with the original meaning of a text. I suggest we call this additional view *authorial realism*. Second, an epistemological point: *These are all common-sense principles.*

For example, it is just common sense that the Ring of Power is evil because Tolkien meant it to be, that Shylock is less virtuous than Antonio because Shakespeare meant him to be, and so forth.

This sort of common-sense thinking is very right and proper. I believe in textual and authorial realism myself. And, as Plantinga might say, I am right to believe in them in the same way I am right to believe that other minds exist, that a world outside my mind exists, that my five senses allow me to access that world, and so on. If someone objects to any of these beliefs, I can reasonably infer that the objection is probably mistaken; if a powerful argument is given, I can reasonably infer that there is probably something wrong with the argument's premises.

Now a *thorough* defense of textual and authorial realism would entail a systematic dismantling of objections, a presentation of arguments for textual and authorial realism, and an account of the quality that makes my belief in it rational—perhaps the sort of account of common-sense knowledge which Plantinga gives in the second book of his Warrant Trilogy (Plantinga 1993). Nevertheless, even for a person who has *not* made such a defense or studied one made by others, it is best to accept the common-sense notion that there is a text having an original meaning which is shaped by the author and is to some degree accessible to the reader. Like the belief that other minds exist, the eminently sensible belief in textual and authorial realism has a stronger presumption in its favor than the premises of any objections are likely ever to have. The fact that *you* are reading a paragraph by *me* and understanding some (hopefully all) of what I say testifies to this. This is why are you able to think that *what I am saying* is correct, incorrect, reasonable, silly, interesting, boring, or whatever else you may happen to think of it.

To sum up, there are four criteria for a thorough defense of a common-sense view: that it be acknowledged as a default position whose accuracy may be reasonably presumed unless very good evidence to the contrary should present itself; that objections to it be answered; that

arguments for its accuracy be made; and that an account be given of this common-sense reality that some find so mysterious as to doubt its existence.

In what follows I shall do the *first* and *third* of these things in defense of textual and authorial realism.

A. The Indirect Argument Against Dead-Author Theories

The view that the author is irrelevant to textual meaning is not a common-sense view. That counts against it. Common-sense views may be presumed right until very good evidence against them is presented. Generalizing somewhat, the following pattern of argument is appropriate to use in favor of common-sense views: *If theory Y is true, X is false. It is only common-sense that X. Therefore, X is probably true. Therefore, Y is probably false.*

Such an argument works because common sense is necessary if we are to know anything at all. I refer to *common sense* as defined by philosophers in the tradition of Reid and developed in Plantinga 1993. Common sense is the work of those mental faculties or processes which tell us those things that we all know to be true, particularly the foundational truths by means of which we know everything else. No matter how common they may be (or may have been) in certain cultural contexts, neither geocentrism nor heliocentrism nor atheism nor the existence of God is common sense—for many people have not believed in each of these views. However, it *is* common sense that the world outside the mind exists, that it existed in the past, that the five senses give us knowledge of that past, that our memories give us knowledge of it, that other minds exist, that we can know something about what they are thinking, that good reasoning can be trusted, and so on.

Common-sense is, no doubt, fallible. But no objection to an article of common sense is possible which does not presume some other principle of common sense—including, at a minimum, the reliability of the reasoning used to make the objection, but often a good deal more

than that. So, a presumption in favor of common sense is reasonable, and only a very strong argument against a common-sense view can succeed.

On the strategy of an indirect argument it is helpful to remember the philosophers who have used them, such as Thomas Reid and G. E. Moore. Noting that skeptical principles such as those of David Hume lead to un-commonsensical conclusions, Moore and Reid would reply that the un-commonsensical conclusions are false, and conclude that there was something wrong with the skeptical premises. For example, *If Hume is right, then I don't know that I have hands. I do know that I have hands. So Hume is wrong.* Rowe is helpful in explaining this strategy, which he calls the 'G. E. Moore Shift,' and I owe him the terminology I use when speaking of an 'indirect' argument (Rowe 1979: 339).

The indirect argument against dead-author theories is, then, this: *If a dead-author theory is true, then it is not true that the author of a text communicates their thoughts to me through the text. It is, however, only common-sense that the author of a text communicates their thoughts to me through the text. Therefore, it is probably true that the author of a text communicates their thoughts to me through the text. Therefore, dead-author theories are probably false.*

B. A Direct Argument Against Dead-Author Theories

I shall now make a more direct and formal argument against dead-author theories:

1. *If dead-author theories are true, then no author can accurately be credited for any of the meaning of a text they wrote.*
2. *If no author can accurately be credited for any of the meaning of a text they wrote, then no author can rightfully take credit for that meaning.*
3. *So, if dead-author theories are true, then no author can rightfully take credit for the meaning of a text they wrote. (From 1 and 2.)*

4. *So, if dead-author theories are true, then no dead-author theorist can promote their view in writing and rightfully take credit for it.* (From 3.)
5. *Dead-author theorists have promoted their views in writing and rightfully taken credit for them.*
6. *So dead-author theories are not true.* (From 4 and 5.)

Statement 1 is guaranteed by the meaning of dead-author theories. Statement 2 is true as a matter of justice; no one has a right to credit for anything for which they are not responsible. Statement 5 is a fact known to those familiar with the academic work of dead-author theorists. Statements 3 and 4 are sub-conclusions from earlier premises, statement 6 is the argument's final conclusion, and each conclusion is guaranteed by its respective premises. So dead-author theories are not true.

Here I must admit that my two arguments have but one foundation, for Statement 5 relies on common-sense. This suggests how a dead-author theorist might respond to this argument. I think their best option is to reject Statement 5—not by denying that dead-author theorists have promoted their views but by denying that they had any right to take credit for their views *as expressed in writing* by listing their publications on their CVs, accepting promotions based on their academic work, and so on. Accordingly, what they may not do is take any credit for their reply—at least not if they put it in writing.

The same principles may be applied to this very chapter. I am arguing that authorial intent is relevant. Perhaps some reader will disagree with that thesis. But, if they are correct, then they cannot disagree with *me*, for in that case my intentions as author are no longer relevant to the meaning of this chapter. One cannot consistently disagree with *me* when reading this chapter.

V. Practical Consequences

Why does this matter? I think there are at least three practical consequences to these conclusions. Textual meaning follows a complex course through author, text, reader, and community. My philosophical arguments above can help us in the pursuit of this meaning. The fact that there are signs of the life in the author does not by itself give us any kind of simple map to textual meaning in the literature, scriptures, and law of South Asian (or anywhere else). But it can give us some signs along the road. We cannot ignore the author when we go searching for textual meaning. Accordingly, and first, the disciplines of English and linguistics have a responsibility to attend to authorial intent. Second, the humanities are extremely important to other fields of learning and to society at large. Third, South Asian pedagogy should shift somewhat away from rote learning and towards critical thinking.

A. The Business of the Humanities

I am an originalist textualist (with some intentionalist leanings, particularly in the case of the Bible). However, nothing I have said here ties me to any particular variety of living author theory. It may well be the case that for some or all texts (or genres) the author is not the whole story, that neither intentionalism nor textualism nor originalism is the whole truth, or that the reader or community of readers is a source of textual meaning.

In short, I argue that the author is *a* determiner or source of textual meaning—not that the author is the *only* one.

I do not argue that teachers of English, literature, and linguistics should place no emphasis on the instability of language or on reader response or on the difficulty of accessing authorial intent. I *do* suggest that it would behoove teachers in these fields to place at least a little more emphasis on the techniques that are useful for knowing the intent of the author—the priority of the original languages, attention to genre and to literary influences, attention to historical and

geographical context, solid logical inference from available textual evidence, etc. Understanding the intent of an author can be a tricky and difficult business; but this is no reason to despair of its success; nor is it evidence that success is impossible. That it can be *difficult* is all the more reason to get on with it and to work hard at it.

This, simply, is a large part of the business of these fields—and of other fields in the humanities as well, such as the studies of various languages and whatever else helps us understand authorial contributions to original meaning.

B. The Importance of the Humanities

Every field of study has its own subject matter. In the natural sciences, the primary subject matter is the stars, the earth, or living organisms. In some fields a text or a corpus of texts is the primary or a secondary subject matter. Theologians study the Torah, the New Testament, or the Quran; philosophers study Plato's *Republic*; and law scholars study a national Constitution, statutory law, and court decisions. In any field in which the subject matter includes a text or a corpus of texts, the tools that allow a scholar to understand the meaning of these texts will be relevant to that field. Some such tools are strictly literary, such as the study of grammar and genre—the special province of literature and linguistics. Others involve the study of other languages—whether Sanskrit, Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, Latin, or others. Still others help us understand the minds of a text's original authors and readers. History and philosophy, for example, are helpful in understanding the mindset of the generation of the Americans that initially created the U. S. Constitution; and they are helpful in understanding the mindset of the Jews living in a Greco-Roman world who wrote most of the New Testament.

It follows that at least some areas of the humanities—such as literature, linguistics, history, philosophy, and the study of various languages—are relevant to understanding at least some other fields—such as law.

But there is more. For, in some fields, a text or a corpus of texts may not be part of the subject matter, but is relevant to it. When a field of study includes the ideas and behavior of human beings and when those humans are influenced by texts, the tools that allow a scholar to understand the meaning of the text or texts will be relevant to that field. Thus, a sociologist of religion benefits from whatever tools are useful in understanding the Quran, the Bible, or the Vedas. A political scientist benefits from whatever tools are useful in understanding a country's Constitution as well as any other texts that influence the politics of the same country—perhaps certain religious texts or influential works of literature. For that matter, even the study of the hard sciences involves the interpretation of scientific writings—from Newton and Einstein to a science article just published last week.

For this reason also fields in the humanities such as literature, linguistics, language studies from Sanskrit to Latin, philosophy, and religion are relevant to the gaining of knowledge in other fields. I argued previously for the relevance of philosophy and theology to the understanding of American law (Boone 2015: 1–11). The same reasoning applies more broadly to the relevance of the humanities for understanding texts important to various other fields of study.

This, simply, is one reason the humanities matter now as much as ever. The humanities are essential to cross-disciplinary knowledge and pedagogy, for the fields of study that help us access authorial contributions to textual meaning are fields of the humanities.

Moreover, what is true in the academy is true out of it. The humanities matter for transcultural experience and development. In South Asia alone culture is shaped by law; novels;

poetry; western, Indian, and Islamic philosophy; religious texts from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity; and more. Every skill practiced in the humanities which helps us access authorial contributions to the meaning of these texts is a necessary skill for navigating and developing the transcultural world we live in. In fact, we can go a bit further and say that an interdisciplinary and intertextual study of texts will be needed.

To illustrate, I think I am a decent philosophical and religious interpreter of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, a work of western medieval philosophy. But the *Consolation* is also a work of literature and history, and my abilities are much more limited here. And how does this book relate to the writings of church fathers that I have never studied although Boethius did? I have even learned that scholars of medieval *music* have been able to reproduce the music of the songs in the *Consolation*, and one can even listen to them on YouTube! (See Sequentia n. d.)

Just to drive home the point, how much *more* is it the case that a philosopher like me reading the *Bhagavad-Gita* in English translation and having never studied the Vedas is not going to be the final word on its meaning, even if my own analysis does have something to contribute? How much more is this the case with all the other relevant texts of literature, law, religion, and so on in South Asian civilization?

C. A Critical Thinking Pedagogy

The 2009 Bollywood film *Three Idiots* has entertained and touched hundreds of millions (Hirani 2009). One of its central themes was its criticism of the educational system in South Asia for relying too much on rote memorization and repetition—not enough on comprehension and independent thought.

Not that I have any objection to memorization and repetition: Some facts need to be memorized and, for that matter, some texts. But memorization is not enough; we also need to be able to comprehend what we're learning and think about it for ourselves.

The author's relevance to textual meaning is one reason critical thinking is an essential goal of education. If textual and authorial realism are correct and if the meaning of a text is at least partly a function of the author's efforts, then in order fully to understand the meaning of a text we need to be able to exegete its meaning with attention to its authorship and the original circumstances of its writings. We cannot do that without critical thinking. To discern the meaning of the text it is not enough merely to register our responses to it. We must also comprehend various facts relevant to the author and to the text and correctly infer from them truths about textual meaning. This requires a good bit of logic and independent thought—critical thinking.

A brief explanation of how I use this term. In my experience, academics talk about 'critical thinking' more often than they define it. In my view it is not exclusively—or even primarily—about *criticism* as such. It's no good criticizing everything; just to name one simple example, even those of us with no scientific training are right to trust the scientists who tell us about the efficacy of polio vaccines. Rather, 'critical thinking' is a metonym for the best sort of independent and logical thinking—the sort ready to criticize at need, but also having the wisdom to know when it really is needed.

Such thinking that is needed to discern textual meaning. Since textual and authorial realism are correct and since the author is still relevant to textual meaning, a good education should train students to use the tools needed to understand the author's contribution to the meaning of a text. Education needs not only to convey the necessary tools from the humanities—grammatical, linguistic, literary, historical, etc.—to know facts about the circumstances of a text's writing. We

also need the critical thinking tools necessary to learn from these facts what is the meaning of that text.

Interestingly, this shows how culture can both determine textual meaning and also obscure it. We must understand the cultural context of a text's origins in order fully to grasp its meaning. At the same time, our own cultural presumptions, priorities, and thought processes may obscure that meaning—and more so the more the original culture differs from our own. Critical thinking as a hermeneutical tool will sometimes need to be a transcultural process—being aware of one's own culture as well as the culture which produced a particular text, and being able independently to think outside of one's own cultural presumptions.

VI. Conclusion

So it seems that Vanhoozer is not a lone voice in the hermeneutical wilderness calling out on behalf of the author. All the voices that cry out *against* the author are really crying out *for* the author—insofar as they have bothered to write their views down and want credit for those views as they appear in the writing.

In short, whatever may be the linguistic or epistemological limitations of authorial intent, and whatever other sources of meaning there may be, authorial intent is still relevant to textual meaning. What I have called *textual realism* is the view that there is a text and that it has an original meaning which is to some degree accessible to the careful reader, and *authorial realism* is the view that that original meaning is shaped, at least in part, by the intent of the author. These are common-sense views, a presumption in favor of which is reasonable, although a careful explanation of them as well as an examination of arguments both for and against them is appropriate. I have not given this explanation or looked at the arguments against it, but I have given one direct argument for it—namely, that either these views must be correct, or else that those offering written arguments

against them do not deserve any credit for their own written views. And, this being the case, I contend that a part of the work of teaching in the humanities is to help students learn to understand original meaning generally, and authorial intent specifically. Moreover, the humanities help us access the original meanings of the literary, religious, philosophical, political, and legal texts which shape the transcultural worlds we live in. The humanities, whatever other important work they may have, are never free of the responsibility to study authorial intent. This is one reason they will always be necessary, and why educators need to teach the critical thinking skills needed for reading texts well. It is, finally, one reason that these tools will be necessary in the future as we work to interpret the multiplicity of texts that shaped, express, and continue to develop South Asian culture.

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