The Confluence of Aesthetics and Hermeneutics in Baumgarten, Meier, and Kant

In the eighteenth century we see the rise of modern aesthetics as a distinct philosophical discipline in a wide range of writers such as Addison, Dubos, and Baumgarten. By focusing on the disinterestedness of aesthetic pleasure, Hutcheson, Mendelssohn, and Kant, among others, are prepared to distinguish the aesthetic realm from the theoretical and practical interests of ordinary experience. However, they in no way intend to separate the aesthetic realm from the other realms of experience. The fact that beauty has its own inherent value according to Kant does not prevent it from also serving as a symbol for moral ends. Even Moritz, who defines beauty as that which is complete or perfect in itself, does not mean to make the aesthetic an autonomous domain. His definition is meant to counter the view of Mendelssohn and Sulzer that the purpose of art lies in its pleasurable output for us. However, Moritz insists that our input is necessary for the true existence of the work of art. “We can very well exist without looking at beautiful artworks, but they cannot well exist as such without our gaze.” The perfection of the work consists in presenting us with a self-sufficient whole, but through the input of our gaze it continues to imitate the world. Moritz thus clearly stops short of later theories of art for art’s sake.

Some have stressed the anti-rationalist aspects of the rise of modern aesthetics, claiming that it pits sense, feeling, and imagination against reason. But when Alfred Baeumler thematized the problem of irrationality in eighteenth-century aesthetics, he meant something different, for according to him the inability of reason to express the individuality of sensory aesthetic phenomena was the challenge that allowed reason to move from a dogmatic to a critical stance. The significance of Kant’s Critique of Judgment for aesthetics is said to be that it moves beyond an abstract subsumption of particulars under a universal to a more concrete correlation of particulars in which the universal takes on the function of an encompassing, individuated whole. This at the same time makes Kant’s aesthetics relevant for the rise of modern historical consciousness, for the aesthetic appreciation of the individuality of human products can go hand in hand with a better understanding of them in relation to their historical context.

However, even to see Kant’s aesthetics as grappling with Baeumler’s formulation of the problem of irrationality may be too extreme, for Kant ends up affirming the possibility of finding aesthetic analogues for rational ideas. Through symbolical presentation we can, if only indirectly, mediate between sense and reason. Aesthetic reflection locates the meaning of sense through a process of contextualization in which reason still plays a role. Considered in this way, modern aesthetics can be seen to link up with the rise of secular hermeneutics. Instead of concentrating on the tensions between sense and reason, hermeneutics points to their continuity. We can make a case for the intersection of aesthetic and hermeneutic concerns in Baumgarten and Kant, but the relation is actually worked out by the intermediary figure of Georg Friedrich Meier in his Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst (Attempt at a General Art of Interpretation). Meier was a student of Baumgarten, and Kant used Meier’s aesthetic writings in his own lectures. The main purpose of this paper will be to examine the relation between aesthetic appreciation and the problem of interpretation by considering the basis for linking them in Baumgarten, and then in Meier and Kant.

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The latter attach great importance to the idea of authentic interpretation, causing us to explore the meaning of authenticity in some detail.

I. BAUMGARTEN'S AESTHETICS AND MEIER'S HERMENEUTICS

In defining the new discipline of aesthetics as the "science of sensible knowledge,"4 Baumgarten envisioned its scope as not limited to the fine arts. In the Prolegomena of his Aesthetica (1750–1758), he foresees it as also relevant to all the liberal arts and the practical activities of daily life. Aesthetics has philological, hermeneutical, exegetical, rhetorical, and other applications.5 Baumgarten did not carry out his full program and concentrated mainly on the cognitive conditions for the appreciation of beauty. Even his applications to the fine arts tend to be limited to literature.

Baumgarten defines beauty as "the perfection of sensible knowledge."6 Christian Wolff had already described beauty as the sensible and pleasurable appearance of perfection. From Wolff's standpoint the same rational perfection can be appreciated sensibly as well as conceptually. But Baumgarten's point is different, namely, that despite being a lower form of knowledge than conceptual knowledge, sensible knowledge nevertheless has its own perfection. Conceptual knowledge is both clear and distinct; sensible knowledge cannot be distinct, but it can develop clarity in ways not explored by logic. In his Reflections on Poetry of 1735, Baumgarten interpreted the difference between the clear and the distinct as a difference in modes of clarity. A clear representation differs from an obscure one by having enough marks or characteristic traits (notas) to distinguish it from other representations.7 For a clear representation to also become distinct, it must be made "intensively clearer"8 by having its marks internally articulated. Distinctness requires the logical explanation of marks within marks in order to deepen or purify the clarity of a representation. The perfection of aesthetic knowledge does not lie in this internal logical articulation. Rather its aim is to make representations "extensively clearer"9 by widening their scope to encompass ever more marks.

This "extensive clarity" is later called "richness" in the Aesthetica. Such richness leaves an extensively clear representation confused rather than distinct, but, as Ernst Cassirer has pointed out, aesthetically this confusion should be conceived neutrally as a confluence that is not at all tantamount to disorder.10 Baumgarten is exploiting Leibniz's insight that as more characteristics are compressed into a single representation it becomes more suggestive of order. By gaining extensive clarity, an aesthetic representation may become less distinct within, but it gains a determinacy that allows it to become more clearly distinguishable from without, that is, from other representations. This realization allows Baumgarten to relate the richness (ubertas) of extensive clarity to the specificity that singles out a concrete individual.11 As he had already argued in his Reflections on Poetry, the task of the poet is not to describe in terms of abstract universals, but to portray vividly individuals "determined in every respect."12

If, as Dilthey claims, the ultimate hermeneutic task is the understanding of individuality, poetic portrayals as defined by Baumgarten can make an important contribution. By locating the boundary conditions that mark off the representation of a thing from its surroundings, aesthetic knowledge provides clarity about the part-whole relations of the hermeneutical process. That is, we understand something in terms of its context, as a part of a whole, but that whole in turn only makes sense in relation to the parts that constitute it. Aesthetically, the hermeneutic circle is anticipated by the process of specifying the extensive clarity of representations. Whereas extensive clarity is always situational or contextual, the intensive clarity needed for logical distinctness produces abstract marks that can be isolated from their immediate context. A particular mark can then be regarded as an instance of a non-situational universal. We can thus suggest that aesthetical extensive clarity is a condition for hermeneutic understanding and logical intensive clarity a condition for explanation by universals.

Baumgarten's student, Georg Friedrich Meier, had a greater immediate influence with his more popular, and therefore perhaps unfairly dismissed, aesthetics. In his three-volume Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften (1754), Meier used and applied many of the distinctions first made by Baumgarten in his lectures, but never fully worked out in his unfinished Aes-
theitica. Expanding on Baumgarten’s suggestion that clarity and richness of aesthetic representations contribute to the “life of knowledge,” Meier describes the liveliness of aesthetic representations with considerable psychological detail. A lively representation does not merely engage our cognitive faculty; it also engages our desires and thus fills the whole mind. The more lively a representation, the more beautiful it can become. Like Baumgarten, Meier makes use of the concept of imitation, but he diminishes its importance by defining it as “a striving to make something similar to something else” on the basis of “wit.” As a consequence, only children are serious imitators; adults imitate by applying a self-conscious wit or by making playful allusions. Another result of this kind of imitation is parody.

By making wit such an important aesthetic power, Meier also pays more attention to the imagination and lists as its three main perfections: scope (extensio), strength (intensio), and lastingness (protensio). Whereas wit by itself can extend the scope (extensio) of the imagination, the cooperation of acumen or discernment (Scharfsinnigkeit) is required if the representations being compared are not to lose their individual strength (intensio). This appeal to acumen allows the various clear representations that make up a whole work to “be artistically proportional to one another.” However, if the parts of a whole are recognized as proportional to each other, they must have been differentiated in some way. This suggests a kind of imaginative differentiation as the aesthetic counterpart to conceptual distinctness. Whereas logical acumen enables us to articulate representations from within, imaginative acumen must be able to differentiate representations from without.

Another of Meier’s contributions is his effort to provide the application of aesthetics to hermeneutics that Baumgarten had merely anticipated. Meier relates hermeneutics to what he calls the last faculty of sensible knowledge, one which involves using signs as a way to come to know something else. According to Jean Grondin, Meier is the first to expand hermeneutics to interpret signs in general, so that “any thing in the world can be a sign or a character insofar as it is a means for knowing the reality of something else.” When a represented relation between a sign and what is designated is natural, then we have a natural sign; when the relation is based on a voluntary choice of a thinking being then we have an arbitrary or artificial sign. Regarding this latter arbitrary relation, we can proceed either from the designated matter to invent a sign for it by means of a heuristic ars characteristica or from the sign to the designated matter by means of a hermeneutica. In his Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst (1757), Meier defines interpretation as based on a clear rather than a distinct knowledge of the meaning of sensible signs. The main principle of Meier’s sensible hermeneutics is that of reasonableness or fairness (Billigkeit), which is the aesthetic counterpart of rationality. According to this principle one must interpret artificial, humanly created signs as perfectly appropriate to their subject matter until the opposite can be proved. Just as natural signs are known to be perfectly appropriate in a rational Leibnizian world, so artificial signs must be assumed to have been chosen reasonably if we are to draw the most possible meaning from them. Having shown that the liveliness of many compressed characteristics within an aesthetic representation is sufficient to specify a determinate individual, the aim of the interpretation of linguistic characteristics is similarly to obtain a grasp of individual meaning contexts.

The aesthetics of Baumgarten and Meier are focused on the appreciation of the individuality of the objects of experience. What is striking about Meier’s hermeneutics is its stress on the individuality of the subject who is the source of the signs being interpreted. Meier defines the hermeneutically true meaning of a sign as “the intention or purpose for which the author of the sign uses it.” The author’s main purpose defines what Meier calls “the immediate sense” of a sign or speech (as distinct from a mediate sense defined by a more remote purpose). This all-important immediate sense is distinguished from the literal sense which is based on the common usage of language. But common usage can leave open several possible meanings, only one of which is proper (eigentlich) given the specific context. However, an interpretation is only authentic (eigen, authentisch) if it discloses the immediate sense of the author. This is usually one of the literal senses, and may even be the proper sense, but it need not be, for the author may have misspoken. An interpretation
may be correct in using the linguistic and historical means available, but it can be overruled by the authentic interpretation provided by the author. Authenticity, which was initially a concern of philological criticism concerning the genuineness of texts, is used to characterize a type of interpretation by Meier. A factual concern about the original existence of a text is transformed into a concern with its originally intended meaning.

In addition to authentic interpretation there is also authentic explanation. This occurs when an author clarifies the sense of his own text by other, clearer expressions. The appeal to authenticity, which is often said to be a hallmark of twentieth-century existentialism (more on this later), is here used to establish a subjective standard for interpretation. To be sure, it is not an absolute standard. According to Meier, there is initially "sufficient ground" to follow an authentic interpretation. Not to do so would be "unfair (unbillig) because it would presuppose that the author either spoke and wrote without using his intellect or has not understood himself. Accordingly, an interpreter must regard the authentic interpretation as true (für wahr halten) until it becomes evident that the author has changed his meaning and had another meaning than he says."24 Meier here establishes something like Quine's and Davidson's principle of charity25 but it is used as an aesthetic standard for fruitful interpretation, not as an acknowledgment of the indeterminacy of meaning. In the context of his theory of authentic interpretation, Meier's principle of fairness is too generous in allowing authors to make the primary determination of the meaning of their works. But subsequent counter-determinations are not ruled out. Although it is probable that authors have a good sense of what they mean, we can never be sure. We have the basis for belief, not for knowledge.

The idea of authentic interpretation is meant to resist reading too much into a text. Often texts are accommodated to an external doctrinal perspective, which means that meaning is imported into them that is not really there. For this reason Meier attacks the practice of "thinking more than the author understands"26 and would undoubtedly have been uncomfortable with the Kant-inspired maxim of Schleiermacher and Dilthey that the task of hermeneutics is to make it possible to understand an author better than he understood himself. Since Meier makes the author's intention the primary determinant of what a text means, he can be said to commit the intentionalist fallacy. However, he admits that someone other than the author may be better able to follow out the text's implications. Moreover, he writes: "If an author is to be understood correctly, it is not also necessary for the interpreter to think what the author has thought in the same way as the author thought it."27 The thought must be the same, but the mode of thinking it may be different. An interpretation may not endow a text with more meaning than the author gave it, nor with less. If the literal sense contains more than the immediate sense that reflects the author's main intention, we must institute a restrictive interpretation; if it contains less there is need for an "expanded interpretation (erweitende Auslegung)."28 It seems that the "more" that may properly be added by interpretation concerns degree of clarity rather than scope.

To sum up this section, we can say that Baumgarten was concerned to bring out the distinctive appearance of objects in his aesthetics (how things present themselves), and Meier to penetrate to the authentic core of a subjective perspective on things in his hermeneutics (how things are taken). When we move to the role of aesthetics and hermeneutics in Kant we will find authenticity less directly tied to the privacy of the individual subject. Authenticity is still conceived subjectively, but cannot be defined without reference to others. Just as aesthetic judgments are only valid for Kant if they can in principle be shared, so authentic interpretations are implicitly intersubjective.

II. AUTHENTIC INTERPRETATION AND REFLECTIVE JUDGMENT IN KANT

Kant is most explicit about the nature of interpretation in his writings on religion. Thus, before seeing the aesthetic relevance of his conception of authentic interpretation we must explore its more general significance. Kant first speaks of authentic interpretation in his essay, "On the Failure of All Attempted Philosophical Theodies," of 1791.29 Here an authentic interpretation is the self-interpretation not just of any author, but of God conceived as a legislator.
establishing decrees. Kant shifts the term “authentic” from Meier’s general hermeneutics in the direction of religious and legal hermeneutics. The implications of such a shift are more fully developed by Francis Lieber, a German-trained American legal theorist, who claims that authentic interpretation comes into play when a law or decree needs to be interpreted. Lieber writes in his *Legal and Political Hermeneutics* (1839): “If a legislative body, or monarch, give an interpretation, it is called authentic, though the same individuals who issued the law to be interpreted, may not give the interpretation, because the successive assemblies or monarchs are considered as one and the same, making the law and giving the interpretation in their representative, and not in their personal characters.”

Over time the same legislative body may need to give authentic interpretations of its laws, but it must do so in an impersonal way. Legislators derive their authority from being representatives, and therefore their private intentions are irrelevant. The authority of this kind of interpretation really makes it a “declaration.” Because different individuals are involved, an authentic interpretation “need not always be correct”: nevertheless, it has a “binding power.” That the binding authority of authentic interpretations can be transferred from the original legislators to their successors is relevant to Kant’s own use of authentic interpretation in relation to the problem of theodicy.

Kant asserts that “all theodicy should really be the interpretation (Auslegung) of nature insofar as God manifests the intention of his will through it. Every interpretation of the declared will of a legislator is either doctrinal or authentic.” Kant does not really explain the distinction between authentic and doctrinal interpretation. According to Manfred Beetz’s study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century hermeneutics, in an authentic interpretation one clarifies one’s own sayings or writings, in a doctrinal interpretation one clarifies someone else’s. We will see Kant moving beyond this particular form of the distinction. At first, however, the authentic interpretation of God’s will is claimed literally to come from God himself in his role as the legislator who decrees what the end of each species of nature should be. It is the philosopher who then attempts to interpret God’s intentions for nature doctrinally. That is, philosophers have given speculative theoretical reasons to attempt to show that events in nature seemingly “contrary to purpose (zweckwidrig)” can nevertheless be interpreted as compatible with divine wisdom. But theoretical attempts to find such doctrinal interpretations disclosing a deeper divine purpose are in the last analysis merely “sophistical (vernünftelnd).” Instead of basing theodicy in theoretical reason, we must, according to Kant, appeal to practical reason. Returning to the theme of authentic or self-interpretation, we find the intriguing claim that insofar as we conceive God rationally as a moral and wise being it is “through our reason itself that God becomes the interpreter of his will as proclaimed in his creation.” Kant hereby anticipates the Hegelian conception of divinity by claiming that it is through the medium of human practical reason that God authentically interprets his own will. As in legal hermeneutics an authentic interpretation possesses an authority or bindingness that is passed on through time.

As was indicated earlier, the original sense of authenticity stems from philological criticism, which is concerned to test whether a work is really the product of the author that it is reputed to be. Here authenticity literally means being an original source. But in Kant’s *philosophical critique*, authenticity involves something more general, namely, having an appropriate relation to an original source. In this expanded sense, the author need not be the only one who can give an authentic interpretation. An authentic theodicy thus becomes possible for someone who stands in a proper respectful relation to God, but not for those who claim to approximate his omniscience.

Kant points to Job as an instance of someone searching for an authentic understanding of what has befallen him and thus indirectly striving for an authentic theodicy. Job’s friends give a doctrinal interpretation of his mysterious suffering by applying the generally accepted teaching that suffering is God’s punishment for unknown past sins. On the basis of this pseudo-explanation of Job’s suffering, they advise him to confess his sins and thus obtain relief from his suffering through God’s forgiveness. Job, however, continues to declare that his suffering is inscrutable to him and rejects their advice. While recognizing his share of human frailty and the sovereignty of God’s will, he relies on his own con-
science, which does not condemn him. He refuses to feign contrition as a way of obtaining relief. According to Kant, Job's rejection of his friends' doctrinal interpretation is ultimately vindicated by God, who shows him "an ordering of the whole which demonstrates a wise Creator, although His ways remain inscrutable for us." What matters is "only the uprightness of the heart, not the merit of one's insights, the honesty to confess one's doubts and the shunning of feigned convictions which one does not really feel." Only a genuinely felt interpretation of his situation is authentic.

Generalizing from this, Kant claims that doctrinal theodicies pretending to give theoretical explanations of God's purposes in this world are bound to fail. Only authentic theodicies based on our moral conception of God are within our power. They address not our scientific knowledge of the world, but our moral faith. They contribute not some final truth, but a felt truthfulness. All that Job gains through his authentic response to his suffering is an acknowledgment of what he holds to be true (sein Fürwahrhalten).

Because an authentic theodicy judges the whole on the basis of a subjective or aesthetic-moral feeling, it makes sense to relate Kant's views on theodicy back to the work that precedes it: the Critique of Judgment. Indeed, I believe it is possible to relate the doctrinal-authentic interpretation distinction back to the determinant-reflective judgment distinction of the Critique of Judgment. These two modes of judgment are distinguished by the way in which they relate particulars to universals. The cognitive claims of the sciences are determinant in that they start with universal concepts or rules and explain particulars on this basis. A reflective judgment, by contrast, begins with a particular to find an appropriate universal. Reflective judgment can generalize either inductively or by means of analogies. Both aesthetic and teleological judgments are reflective in the latter sense. When I pronounce a rose beautiful I am not initiating an inductive inquiry into whether all roses deserve to be called beautiful, but whether all other human beings will find an analogous pleasure in it. When I pronounce an organism to be purposive I regard it as functioning by analogy with something that has been produced by design. This requires me to consider the organism not in terms of general laws, but in relation to its own environment. Hermeneutically, we can say that a determinant judgment is one where the meaning of a particular is derived from or explained by an accepted general rule; a reflective judgment, by contrast, begins with a particular and searches for its significance in light of its specific context.

We can now see that a doctrinal theodicy is like a determinant judgment in appealing to a theoretical generalization to make sense of particular events. But on the basis of what Kant says about purposiveness in nature and history, we can conclude that a doctrinal theodicy is really a pseudo-determinant attempt to explain God's purposes, whereas we can only legitimately make reflective judgments about such purposiveness. We are not able to explain the operations of nature by attributing real purposes to things, but we can describe them as purposive by analogy with the causality of our human, designing intellect. This reflective mode of describing the behavior of an organism in nature is a way of making sense of its operations for ourselves as human beings. If our intellect were more powerful we might be able to arrive at a mechanical explanation of organic behavior. As it is, we must content ourselves with a reflective teleological description. The same limit applies to theodicy. A theodicy must content itself with being authentic or making reflective judgments about God's purposes in nature and history. What an authentic theodicy and a teleological reflective judgment have in common is that they interpret the world rather than explain it. They make sense of the world by analogy with the causality of our human intellect, rather than claiming to understand fully nature's own causality. Earlier we saw Kant refer to Job's response to his suffering as the acknowledgment of his moral faith in God's wisdom. But his Fürwahrhalten, which was conceived literally as a holding to be true or a kind of belief, takes on a fuller meaning when related to Kant's theory of reflective judgment and his critique of taste.

It becomes clear from Kant's discussion of the aesthetic mode of reflective judgment that to hold something to be beautiful or sublime is also to assent to it. Specifically, what is judged to be beautiful furthers my feeling of life and is thus felt as pleasurable. Judgments about the sublime are more complex because here we simultane-
ously feel pleasure and pain. Their overall effect, however, is still pleasurable: a kind of negative pleasure. For Kant, aesthetic judgments do not so much pronounce something true about the object as they assent to the object in a way that is authentically human. I test my reflective judgment of taste not by some external objective standard but by whether my assent can be shared communally. Reflective judgment is the kind of judgment that expands its perspective to put itself in the place of everyone else. It encourages what Kant calls an expanded mode of thought (erweiterten Denkungsart).42 This expression recalls Meier’s discussion of expanded interpretation (erweitende Auslegung), but the difference is that Meier was interested in finding the actual meaning given to some text by its particular author. Kant’s maxim of expanded or enlarged thought involves a sensus communis that compares “our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgment of others.”43 This maxim will be shown to provide both aesthetics and hermeneutics more flexibility.

In making an aesthetic judgment I do not need the actual or empirical consent of others, but I do rely on a sense that my assent to the life-enhancing effect of the beautiful object can in principle be shared by other humans as well. This is another way of making Kant’s point that I expect the agreement of others on the basis of my own singular judgment.44 What I assent to in judging something to be beautiful is its harmony with what is human in me; in the case of the sublime I assent to what is most rational in me. This affirmation involved in aesthetic judging was also relevant to the Fürwahrhalten involved in Job’s authentic interpretation of his suffering. That is, he could only believe in God’s wisdom by assenting to his own situation. What an aesthetic judgment and an authentic interpretation have in common is that they are self-authenticating pronouncements that at the same time point beyond the self. In the case of the aesthetic judgment I expand my horizon to include the perspective of other human beings in general, whereas in the case of Job’s authentic interpretation of his suffering he subordinates his perspective to that of the absolute or sublime other: God.

I have argued elsewhere for the thesis that Kant’s reflective judgments, whether aesthetic or teleological, are interpretive judgments.45 They differ from determinant judgments in that they do not offer a direct knowledge-giving reading of the things in the world. Nevertheless, they provide an indirect understanding or interpretation of how what we already know about the world fits together. Aesthetic judgments, being reflective, produce no empirical knowledge, yet advance cognition in general.46 Although aesthetic judgments are not objectively meaningful according to Kant, they have a subjective significance that is more than private. They possess an intersubjective validity that points to a systematic order in our experience. Referring to beautiful flowers and “free delineations,” Kant writes that they “have no meaning (bedeuten nichts), depend on no definite concepts, and yet they please.”47 Although beautiful forms are mere ciphers and carry with them no determinate meaning, they offer us a “trace (Spur)” or a “hint (Wink)”48 that nature may be in general agreement with the needs of reflective judgment.

Whereas imaginative schema for the understanding allow us to fulfill intuitively the logical meaning of the categories so that they can be determinately applied to the objects of sense, the significance of beauty and sublimity lies in aesthetic ideas that can be only indirectly or symbolically schematized. The symbolical presentation of aesthetic ideas creates certain analogical relations between sense and reason that are indeterminate at best. Yet this symbolization provides a general orientational framework for our experience.

Aesthetic consciousness for Kant does not involve the determinately contextualized sensory experience of individual objects that we found in Baumgarten. Instead, it provides an indeterminate kind of orientation that relates sense and reason. Kant’s greater emphasis on the subjectivity of the aesthetic judgment goes hand in hand with his stress on the authenticity of interpretation. Yet, no matter how indeterminate and subjective aesthetic orientation may be, it provides a perspective that places the subject in the midst of a common world. To the extent that I make an aesthetic judgment I must expand my perspective to include those of other human beings. This perspectival adjustment can be seen to be hermeneutically relevant if we relate Kant’s theory of expanded thought back to Johann M. Chladenius’s Introduction to the Correct Inter-
pretation of Reasonable Discourses and Writings (1742). According to Chladnius’s rationalist hermeneutics, interpretation is needed to reconcile the differences that arise when there is more than one account of the same event from different viewpoints (Sehe-Punkte). But varying accounts from distinct perspectives need not be contradictory. It is the task of the interpreter to supply what is missing from any given viewpoint so that the adherent of that viewpoint can come to understand other viewpoints. Interpretation for Chladnius is only necessary to the extent that the reader of a text does not fully understand the author’s meaning. Interpretation is thus a mere remedial exercise of reproducing an author’s original meaning. There are as many interpretations of a text as there are limited readers who need to have their partial viewpoints supplemented. Interpretation has as its goal the complete understanding of the viewpoint of the author, or, as in the writing of history, the reconciled understanding of the multiple viewpoints of different historians writing about the same event. This suggests the possibility of moving beyond the self-understanding of any particular author. But it is hard to be sure that this was intended, for there exists a tension in Chladnius which can be exhibited in the following passages from his Introduction:

§155) One understands a speech or writing completely if one considers all the thoughts that the words can awaken in us according to the rules of reason (Vernunft) in our mind.

§157) A speech or written work is understandable if it is composed (abgefaßt) so that one can fully understand the intentions of the author according to psychological rules.49

As Diltzey claims in his history of hermeneutics, Chladnius goes back and forth between logical and psychological considerations in his hermeneutics.50 On the one hand, he seems to place the ultimate authority in the psychological perspective of the author. But on the other hand, no author can imagine all that can possibly be thought by means of his works. One way to reconcile paragraphs 155 and 157 is to posit an ideal author in accordance with a rational psychology. But then interpretation would become more than a remedial exercise for limited readers and assume the role of constructing an ideal meaning that goes beyond restoring the author’s original intention. To “construct” the meaning of a text is to give more than an immediate interpretation; it requires, to cite Lieber, drawing “conclusions, which are in the spirit, though not within the letter of the text.”51

The ideal of construction does not seem to lie within the ambit of Chladnius’s art of interpretation. Construction is implicit in Kant’s claim in the Critique of Pure Reason that we should aim to understand an author like Plato “better than he has understood himself,”52 because this goal is conceived in terms of a conceptual critique of doctrinal claims. The ideal of critical understanding is to subject every claim to rational conceptual analysis. This represents the logical concern of determinant judgment to weed out all possible indeterminacies. By contrast, the ideal of authentic interpretation that was discussed earlier represents the concerns of reflective judgment. These concerns are partly aesthetic, but also reflect a broader search for the meaning of our human existence.

I have pointed out that Kant’s recognition of the need for orientation and expanded thought leaves our interpretation of the world somewhat indeterminate. Similarly, the attempt to create analogies between sense and reason through symbolical presentation moves us beyond the determinacy of empirical experience. Yet Kant’s willingness to relate aesthetic ideas of imagination and rational ideas about the moral good in his Critique of Judgment allows him to introduce some specificity in what were initially mere abstract moral projections. Reflective judgment is indeterminate in that it searches for as yet unknown concepts whereby we can understand experience. It is, however, at the same time a mode of specification in that it gives descriptive content to what were theretofore abstract regulative precepts of theoretical and practical reason.53

Because Kant’s theory of authentic interpretation is expansive rather than restorative, it is more than a remedial operation as Chladnius conceives it. Indeed, authentic interpretation is an aesthetically inspired process of discovering the human significance of our rational aspirations. Viewed this way, interpretation has a philosophical contribution to make in reconciling
sense and reason. For pure rationalists, hermeneutics remains philosophically unimportant because it serves merely to make the thoughts of others accessible. For them, the real task of philosophers is to learn to think for themselves by relying on their own reason. From the standpoint of Kant's critique of reason, however, the maxim of thinking for oneself must be balanced by that of imaginatively putting "ourselves in thought in the place of everyone else." Our reason can never make us self-sufficient; we also need the larger perspective of the *sensus communis* to guide us in this world. What we can understand directly about the truth must be supplemented with what can only be interpreted indirectly. Here the perspective of the ideal other is as important as our own. But as much as authentic interpretation recognizes the binding practical authority of some ideal other, whether God or a legislator, it also requires us to be true to ourselves. Authentic interpretation as found in Kant's writings on religion and theology is expansive because it is situated at the interface of theoretical and practical interests while acknowledging the role of aesthetic feeling.

Taking note of Kant's reflections on authenticity is important if we are to overcome the stereotype that the categorical and universalizing nature of his thought overthrows human individuality. Job was an authentic moral human being for Kant precisely because he resisted the doctrinal constraints cited by his friends. It is easy to overlook the fact that Kant considered it important to philosophize not just doctrinally, i.e., according to the *Schulbegriff*, but also according to the *Weltbegriff*. Philosophy according to the scholastic concept is merely concerned with the "skill" of arriving at a unified system of knowledge. Philosophy according to the worldly concept has the "wisdom" also to reflect on the use of such knowledge. It is from the latter, worldly point of view that Kant displays an openness that is not always associated with his thought. In his rejection of scholastic philosophy Kant shows a surprising affinity with the "eclectics in philosophy who did not align themselves with any school, but sought and accepted the truth wherever they found it." At first it may seem strange that a philosophy concerned with authenticity—being true to oneself—should endorse eclecticism, which involves taking from others. But surely here Kant agrees with Christian Wolff, who used the label "eclecticism" to characterize his own philosophy because it takes from other philosophers only what fits into his own outlook. Eclecticism thus understood makes a selective use of the ideas of others as distinct from "syncretism," which is an indiscriminate mix of such ideas.

I point to Kant's approval of eclecticism in philosophy to suggest that Kant may not be as incompatible with twentieth-century approaches to "difference" as is generally thought. In his aesthetics, for instance, normal ideas of bodily beauty make allowance for cultural differences. This is not the place, however, to argue for Kant's contemporaneity. Here we can only raise the subordinate question what relation the discussion of authenticity in Meier and Kant can have with the more prevalent twentieth-century uses of the term. Thus, human existence is said to be authentic when it is resolute (Heidegger) or extricates itself from the generality of the commonplace (Sartre). Lionel Trilling, in his reflections on the status of the ideal of authenticity, points to the Greek ancestry of the word autentico: to have full power over, to master. For him, the authentic individual has a kind of self-mastery that makes him or her an originary power or force. All this is still very much in the spirit of authentic or self-interpretation in Meier and Kant.

Trilling also provides an illuminating contrast between the ideals of authenticity and sincerity. Both ideals concern the human subject—the former differentiating it as a self from the other, the latter insisting that the inner life of the subject be honestly externalized. Whereas sincerity is the social virtue of expressing one's inner states truthfully, authenticity manifests "a more strenuous moral experience ... a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life." Elsewhere, Trilling points to an affinity between authenticity and the aesthetics of the sublime. Both can move beyond the sincere enjoyment of beauty, beyond the social graces and virtues. What better place to look back for an orientation concerning these twin values of sincerity and authenticity than Kant's reflections
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24. Meier, Versuch, pp. 75–76.
26. Meier, Versuch, p. 70.
27. Meier, Versuch, p. 70.
31. Lieber, Legal and Political Hermeneutics, p. 70.
32. Lieber, Legal and Political Hermeneutics, p. 70.
35. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 235.
36. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 264.
37. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 264, emphasis added.
38. Here I apply a distinction made in a quite different context by Joel Rudinow in "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?", The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 52 (1994): 129.
39. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 266.
40. Kant, Ak, 8, pp. 266–267.
41. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 264.
42. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 264.
43. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 294.
44. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 294.
45. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 294.
46. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 294.
47. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 294.
48. Kant, Ak, 8, p. 294.
51. Lieber, Legal and Political Hermeneutics, p. 56.
52. Kant, Ak, 8, 314/B 370.

on the beautiful and the sublime? We can now suggest another reason why doctrinal theodicies had to be rejected: they impose a false beauty on the world at large. An authentic interpretation of history, by contrast, finds the beauty of order where it can be found, but is able to embrace the more austere and disorderly standpoint of the sublime as well. 62

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8. Baumgarten, Reflections, p. 43.


23. Meier, Versuch, p. 52.

55. The perspective of an ideal other seems to be especially important in moral reflection. Kant writes in the *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* of 1797 (trans. James Ellington, [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964], p. 101) that “conscience has the peculiarity that though this whole matter is an affair of man with himself, man sees himself, nevertheless, compelled to conduct this affair as though at the bidding of another person.”

56. Kant, Ak, 9, pp. 23 ff.

57. Kant, Ak, 9, p. 31.


59. See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §§17, 71.


62. The research for this paper was supported in part by an award from the University Research Committee of Emory University. Just before this essay went to press, Hans Rödeker referred me to the recently published essay, “Die allgemeine Hermeneutik bei G.F. Meier,” by Oliver Scholz in Axel Bühler, ed., *Unzeitgemässe Hermeneutik: Verstehen und Interpretation im Denken der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1994). Scholz focuses mainly on the importance of Meier’s hermeneutic principle of *Billigkeit*, which he conceives in terms of equity. In addition to comparing it to the principle of charity (see note 25, above), he likens it to Daniel Dennett’s “principle of optimality.” See p. 189.