

The Metaphysics of Meaning: Applying a Thomistic Ontology of Art to a Contemporary Hermeneutical Puzzle and the Problem of the *Sensus Literalis*

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THE AIM OF THIS PAPER is to clarify the concept of the *sensus literalis*, an exegetical and theological concept which has been understood in (sometimes widely) varying ways through Christian history. To do this, I will use Thomistic principles to mediate a contemporary hermeneutical debate over where meaning lies in a text. Hans Georg-Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) and E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) represent two sides of the debate, Gadamer focusing on the text as the site of meaning, and Hirsch on authorial intention. I will develop, using Thomistic principles, an ontology of a work of art that can be fruitfully applied to the contemporary hermeneutical question, and then reapplied to the question of the *sensus literalis*. The first two sections briefly set forth the problem of the literal sense and introduce my thesis that Aquinas can help mediate the debate between Gadamer and Hirsch. The third section summarizes the respective positions of Gadamer and Hirsch in closer detail. The fourth proposes a model along Thomistic lines that can clarify the parameters of the debate. In the conclusion, I summarize what has been found and reapply my findings to the question of the literal sense.

The *Sensus Literalis*: Ancient Concept, Contemporary Problem

Brevard Childs has called ascertaining the “literal sense” of Scripture “one of the most difficult and profound theological questions in the entire study of the Bible.”¹ Aquinas’s dictum that the literal sense is “that which the author intends” seems simple enough.² He also asserts—and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes him approvingly—that the literal sense is that “on which all other senses are based” and the foundation of all theological reflection.³ Church documents of the recent past, with the *Catechism*, have affirmed the primacy of the literal sense, leaving open its precise parameters while affirming the difficulty of its discernment partially rooted in the inspired character of the scriptural text.⁴ Both Church documents and Childs are aware that the concept of this traditional sense of Scripture winds a twisting path through the history of biblical interpretation. It has been associated variously with the “external” or “carnal” versus the spiritual meaning, with the Old versus New Testament meanings, with Christological and sometimes

¹ Brevard Childs, “The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem,” in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie*, ed. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolf Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 93.

² *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I, q.1, a.10, resp. *ST* translations are based on *Summa theologiae* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), with slight modifications.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993; hereafter, *CCC*), §116; and *ST* I, q.1, a.10, resp.

⁴ In *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), Pius XII described the literal sense as the “foremost and greatest endeavor” of the exegete (§23) and distinct from the spiritual sense (§26), but also as “difficult” to ascertain (§31) and “not always obvious” (§35). The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) defines the literal sense as “that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors,” demanding both careful historical and literary analysis and an attention to the “dynamic” aspect of the text, either to that which can unfold through time (as in the meaning of the royal psalms) or in respect to the meaning inspired by the “principle author,” God (section II.B.i). The *CCC* formulates a marvelously ambiguous definition of the literal sense: “the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation [*regulas rectae interpretationis*]” (§116)—begging the question as to *what* (or *who*) determines the rules. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010) affirms the *Catechism*’s and Commission’s statements (§33), while accenting a certain complexity in the discovery of the literal sense due to its intimate “unity and interrelation” (*unitatem et compaginem*) with the spiritual sense (§37).

lofty theological meanings, as necessitating sophisticated philosophical reflection to discern it, with the “plain sense” of Scripture, with a “canonical” sense, with the results of critical historical research, or more generally, with the “primary,” “real,” or “basic” meaning of the biblical text.⁵

The concept of the “literal sense” is complicated by two factors. First, Scripture has two authors, human and divine. Determining how and in what way each author’s intention warrants exegetical

⁵ General surveys of the history of biblical interpretation abound: see, variously, S.L. Greenslade, G.W.H. Lampe, P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, eds., *Cambridge History of the Bible*, vols. 1–3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963–1970); Bertrand de Margerie, S.J., *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis*, vols. 1–3, trans. Leonard Maluf, Paul Duggan, and Pierre Font-nouvelle (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1991–1995); Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, vols. 1–2 (Boston: Brill, 2004); Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, eds., *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vols. 1–2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003–2009); and Hans G. Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, vols. 1–4, trans. Leo G. Perdue and James O. Duke (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009–2010). For more specific treatment of the concept of the literal sense, Childs, “The *Sensus Literalis*,” provides a concise sketch. See also Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vols. 1–3, trans. Mark Sebanc and E. M. Macierowski, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998–2009); Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics Before Humanism and Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Matthew Levering, *Participatory Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974); Frei “The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?” in *Theology and Narrative*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 117–152; James Barr, “Literality,” *Faith and Philosophy* 6.4 (Oct. 1989): 412–442; Rowan Williams, “The Literal Sense of Scripture,” *Modern Theology* 7.2 (Jan. 1991): 121–134; Raymond Brown and Sandra Schneiders, “Hermeneutics,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E., Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1146–1165; Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); Schneiders, “Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture,” *Theological Studies* 39.4 (Dec. 1978): 719–736; and Olivier-Thomas Venard, ed., *Le sens littéral des Écritures* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2009), esp. his introductory essay, “Les deux asymptotes du sens littéral des Écritures” (9–24).

conclusions becomes a tremendously complex issue rivaling, and in conspicuous ways paralleling, Christological questions of how human and divine intentionality coalesce.⁶ Second, the rise of critical methods in the modern era and the deeper sense of historical awareness they have facilitated prevent the exegete from reading historical narratives as straightforwardly as he once did. Today the exegete must, as Hans Frei has put it, “distinguish sharply between literal sense and historical reference.”⁷

Olivier-Thomas Venard has captured the contemporary discussion well by comparing the *sensus literalis* to a curve bound by “two asymptotes,” historical and literary, that tend to frame all reflection on the issue: on one side, emphasis is placed on how historical circumstances shape meaning and, on the other, on how the literary features of the text itself generate an experience for the reader.⁸ The implications of

⁶ Underneath this, of course, is Scripture’s status as an inspired and inerrant document, two categories Joseph Ratzinger once called the “basis of the definition of the idea of ‘sacred Scripture,’” in his post-Second Vatican Council commentary on *Dei Verbum*, “Origin and Background,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. William Glen-Doepel et al. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 158. After the theological work of Paul Synave, O.P., and Pierre Benoit, O.P., in their *Prophecy and Inspiration: A Commentary on the Summa theologia II-II, Questions 171–178* (New York: Desclee Company, 1961), and James T. Burtchaell’s helpful historical survey in *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration Since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1969), the consideration of Scripture’s inspired status largely fell away from interest in the Catholic biblical academy. The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s recently published *Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture* (St. Joseph, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), however, may help to rouse the topic from its virtual slumber.

⁷ Frei, *Eclipse*, 11. In a review of Frei’s seminal book, Cornel West cogently captured the author’s concern to describe the “radical fissure” that arose in the modern era “between Biblical words and Biblical subject matter, between Biblical realism and ‘real’ facts, between Biblical history-like stories and ‘actual’ historical events. . . . Modernity, especially modern science, accented and elevated the side of subject matter, facts and events. Thereafter, the major traditions in modern theological hermeneutics remained caught in this fissure . . . as [the biblical] writings are reduced to mere sources for moral allegories, springboards for theological apologetics or launching pads for existential myths—all against the backdrop of unverifiable historical occurrences, events, and facts”; see West’s review in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 37.4 (1983): 300.

⁸ Venard, “Les deux asymptotes.” Venard’s excellent essay was presented at a 2009 conference at L’École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem, the specific purpose of which was to clarify the meaning of “literal sense.”

Venard's image are evocative: the more one focuses on the historical "asymptote," the further one seems to get from the textual narrative (Frei's concern with critical methods after the Enlightenment); alternatively, centering attention on the text itself and its ostensibly referenced subject matter seems often to lead to reflective processes that prescind from historical grounding.

Rowan Williams expresses simply but well the *status quaestionis* of this traditional "sense" of Scripture. "It has become difficult," he writes, "to see how. . . [this] central aspect of traditional and 'pre-critical' hermeneutics, the belief in the primacy of the 'literal' sense of Scripture, can now be understood."⁹ If, however, Venard is right that "the expression 'literal sense' . . . arises more from theological discourse than exegetical,"¹⁰ then philosophical reflection, specifically the field of hermeneutics, can potentially assist theology in clarifying the parameters of this question. This I intend to do, using Thomistic principles to mediate a contemporary debate over where "meaning" lies in a text.

Aquinas and a Contemporary Hermeneutical Puzzle

The theological problem of the literal sense finds a philosophical corollary in the contemporary debate between Hans-Georg Gadamer and E. D. Hirsch. Where Gadamer emphasizes the text's primacy as a site of meaning, Hirsch points to the primacy of authorial intention discoverable by various methods of historical and literary analysis. Insofar as the question of the literal sense asks where a text's "real," or "primary" meaning lies, Gadamer and Hirsch stand on two sides of a kind of pole between authorial consciousness, on the one hand, and the subject matter as received and applied by later communities, on the other. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) is cited in the

The conference arose in response to a conundrum at the outset of the École's project, *La Bible en ses Traditions*, where different scholars began to place a variety of material in the intended annotations on the "literal sense": "depuis des hypothèses historiques sur les circonstances ou les référents du texte, jusqu'à des analyses stylistiques" (9–10). Venard also noted that a "prestigious French scholar" has admitted that, after the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) was published, "Au fond, nous ne savons toujours pas ce que c'est, le sens littéral" (ibid., 9).

⁹ Rowan Williams, "The Literal Sense of Scripture," *Modern Theology* 7.2 (Jan. 1991): 121; see also, making a similar point, Sandra Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," *Theological Studies* 39.4 (Dec. 1978): 719–736, esp. 726–729.

¹⁰ Venard "Les deux asymptotes," 10.

essay “Hermeneutics” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* by no less an authority than Raymond Brown, in the context of defending the normativity of authorial intention for establishing the literal sense. In the same essay, Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* is cited by Sandra Schneiders as one of two texts behind the shift to a more language-based hermeneutic focusing on subject matter as received by the community.¹¹ In what appears to be a concession to the complexity of the issue, however, Brown states, in his final remarks to the essay, that, while an exegete may alternatively focus on “literal” or “more-than-literal” senses in a passage, in practice, “these are not separable categories.”¹²

Thomas Aquinas obviously did not approach such hermeneutical questions within a modern philosophical frame. Nevertheless, I propose that a few Thomistic principles, rightly applied, can assist in mediating the contemporary debate on textual meaning, while helping clarify the question of the literal sense. Specifically, Aquinas has a number of things to say about the dynamics of human making. A Thomistic “ontology of art” can be developed along these lines, since written texts can develop features that resemble works of art—that is, exhibit an integrity with dimensions of meaning that can unfold through a tradition of interpretation. My thesis is that such principles provide a helpful framework for affirming the primary contribution of the original author in establishing meaning in a text, while in proper proportion legitimating later developments in understanding that exceed the original author’s consciousness. As indicated at the outset, I will summarize some central features in the debate between Gadamer and Hirsch and then propose a Thomistic solution. I will then revisit the question of the *literal sense* and see what can be clarified.

Gadamer, Hirsch, and Meaning in a Text

When the American literary critic E. D. Hirsch first responded to Gadamer’s 1960 magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, he said he found the title “somewhat ironic.”¹³ This comment captures the kernel of

¹¹ See Brown and Schneiders, “Hermeneutics.” Brown co-wrote the hermeneutics article in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* with Sandra Schneiders, assigning to her the section on “The Contemporary Situation.” Brown cites Hirsch in the section on the “Literal Sense” (1148). Schneiders cites Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, along with Paul Ricoeur’s *Interpretation*, in her section on “The Contemporary Situation” as the primary philosophical sources of text-centered interpretation.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1162.

¹³ E. D. Hirsch, “Truth and Method in Interpretation,” *Review of Metaphysics* 18.3 (March 1965):488–507, at 488. *Truth and Method* was originally

what, in limited space, can be said of the crucial distinctions between them. Obviously I cannot adequately treat here the details of their respective positions, which, especially in the case of Gadamer, open into sprawling and complex philosophical questions coming out of his critique of nineteenth-century German historicism as linked up with his own hermeneutical project. In what I might call, however, a true Gadamerian vein, I am more interested in the questions each critic's position poses to us. The crucial differences can be stated rather straightforwardly, and I will focus on them, filling in background where necessary.

Gadamer develops his hermeneutic out of a two-sided critique, on the one hand, of nineteenth-century German aesthetics and the Kantian suppositions behind it, and on the other, of the "romanticist hermeneutic" he sees as coming out of it, a type of historicism embodied in the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher.¹⁴ Schleiermacher identified the interpreter's central aim as "re-creating the relationship between speaker and the original audience."¹⁵ The process, for Schleiermacher, involves a "grammatical moment" where the interpreter analyzes the language of the text in comparison to similar texts of the era and a "divinatory moment" where the interpreter infers, through a kind of psychological sympathy, how the text represents the author's

published in German in 1960, under the title *Warheit und Methode*. This paper will cite *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), which will henceforth be abbreviated "TM."

¹⁴ These two aspects of his critique comprise, respectively, the first two parts of *TM*. The third (final) part develops his unique hermeneutic based in an appropriation of Heidegger's theory of understanding and language. Gadamer's wider corpus is extensive, for which, see the bibliography compiled by Richard Palmer in Lewis Edwin Hahn, *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. L. E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1997), 555–602. Representative of the main lines of his thought are the essays and studies collected in the following: *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980); *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley, 1976); *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. and trans. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ See his lecture entitled "Foundations, General Theory and Art of Interpretation," in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1985), 78.

inward consciousness as a fact within his particular historical context.¹⁶ Gadamer is not so optimistic that this is possible.

Against it, he asserts in *Truth and Method* that “[t]he real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience . . . for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history.”¹⁷ For Gadamer, human beings are always embedded in a web of particular historical circumstances, and so any understanding of a text from the past will inevitably be mediated by the perspectives and “prejudices” not only of one’s own age, but also of all those that have accumulated through the course of history.¹⁸

Hermeneutics for Gadamer, therefore, is not a matter of getting a bird’s eye and pseudo-scientific view of the original author’s consciousness—to think this possible is a “naive illusion,” in his words.¹⁹ It is naive because texts, for Gadamer, do not stand over against the observer as an object susceptible to rigorous scientific investigation, classification, and comprehension.²⁰ They rather act more like works of *art* whose “meaning” evolves as a shared experience through time by successive audiences who appropriate and re-interpret this meaning for themselves. “What we are now concerned with,” he writes, “is not individuality and what it thinks, but the objective truth of what is said”; “a text is not understood as a mere expression of life, but taken seriously in its claim to truth.”²¹ Put more simply, the site of meaning,

¹⁶ For a handy summary of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic, see Bruce Marshall, “Hermeneutics and Dogmatics in Schleiermacher’s Theology,” *Journal of Religion* 67.1 (Jan. 1987): 14–32.

¹⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 296.

¹⁸ Such is his notion of the “effective history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) a text mediates to later audiences. He is keen, on this point, to rescue a positive sense of “prejudice” (*Vorurteil*) from what he calls the Enlightenment “prejudice against prejudices,” whose aim was to clear away such obstacles to understanding in order to recreate the original historical circumstance. Rather than an obstacle to understanding, Gadamer speaks of temporal distance from a text “no longer primarily [as] a gulf to be bridged because it separates . . . [but] the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted” (*ibid.*, 297).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 396.

²⁰ The problem is rooted, Gadamer argues, in a faulty application of the methods and models of the hard sciences to the “human sciences” (*Geisteswissenschaften*); see *ibid.*, 3–9.

²¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 297.

on Gadamer's model, is not authorial intention, but rather the *subject matter* of the text itself as it is received and engaged by later audiences.

The important supposition behind Gadamer's position is his theory that meaning is almost *essentially* linguistic. Words are not "tools" used as instrumental signs to denote objects, but virtually part the act of understanding itself, constituting an interpretive posture even in the act of perception.²² The honest interpreter will acknowledge the way his own historically-shaped perception comes into the interpretive process and, by a dialectical process of questioning and inquiry, continue to unfold the (potentially infinite) meanings of a text as they have emerged and gathered "sedimented" layers of meaning through time.²³ The payoff for Gadamer, and indeed much of the animating spirit behind his work, is that texts no longer become relegated to the past, closed-off from contemporary experience. Rather, they present, in the words of Georgia Warnke, "a challenge to the way the audience lives its life," raising "a claim to truth," a truth that is dynamic and in which audiences participate in an ongoing—and potentially limitless—dialogue unfolding through time.²⁴ Warnke aptly summa-

²² Ibid., 389ff. "The word," Gadamer writes, "is not formed only after the act of knowledge has been completed—in scholastic terms, after the intellect has been informed by the species—but it *is the act of knowledge itself*" (424, emphasis mine). This remarkable statement—which would seem to have dramatic implications for a theory of knowledge—comes in the midst of an exposition on the way the Christian theology of the Word has (positively) influenced the development of Western thought on the philosophy of speech and language. For comparisons of Aquinas's thought with Gadamer's, see: John Arthos, "'The Fullness of Understanding': The Career of the Inner Word in Gadamer Scholarship," *Philosophy Today* 55.2 (Summer 2011): 166–183; Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), esp. 135–161 and 260–284; and Kevin E. O'Reilly, "Transcending Gadamer: Towards a Participatory Hermeneutics," *The Review of Metaphysics* 65 (June 2012): 841–860.

²³ See *ibid.*, 275–307. Gadamer's thought is far too rich to develop here. The famous "hermeneutic circle" is integral to his schema, involving a circular, as it were, process whereby the reader brings his own "horizon" to the text and, encountering a part of it, intuitively some meaning of the whole, and then, as he encounters successive parts, gradually re-shapes his sense of the whole, which he brings in turn to successive parts. The process is dialectical and can be traced directly to Heidegger's influence, further back to Edmund Husserl, and even *in nuce* to Schleiermacher himself (see Schleiermacher, "Foundations," 84).

²⁴ Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 50 and 55.

rizes Gadamer's position on textual interpretation by describing it as a "break . . . with the history of modern hermeneutics itself." For Gadamer, if modern hermeneutics "is characterized by the turn from the truth-content of a claim to the intentions behind it and thus from the question of validity to the question of method, the turn must be reversed."²⁵

E. D. Hirsch found the title *Truth and Method* ironic when he originally reviewed it because, on his read, Gadamer's hermeneutic has no discernible method and is not particularly interested in truth. He saw Gadamer's major work as a prominent example within a stream of hermeneutical trends in the twentieth century that increasingly isolated texts from their original authors, rendering objective interpretation impossible.²⁶ At stake, he asserts, is "the right of *any* humanistic discipline to claim genuine knowledge." "Valid interpretation," by which Hirsch means the proposal of a hypothesis about meaning and its being weighed against available evidence for the sake of probable inference, "is crucial to the validity of all subsequent inferences in [humane] studies."²⁷

Thus, when Gadamer claims that "the detachment of a written text from the writer or author . . . gives it an existence of its own," Hirsch cries foul, observing that this fatal step leaves the text in a vacuous netherworld, with no determining norms or standards to constitute its meaning.²⁸ Though Gadamer tries to summon the concepts of "tradition" and "effective-history" to supply an objective norm for interpretation, Hirsch points out quite simply that traditions change. If the meaning of a text is centrally determined by the shifting modes of reception by communities through time, this comes to rendering the meaning precisely *indeterminable*, leaving us with the unhappy result that "we cannot even in principle make a valid choice between two differing interpretations, and are left with the consequence that the text means nothing in particular at all."²⁹

But Hirsch is also a literary critic, quite aware of the multivalence of texts and their ability to speak in diverse ways to audiences through

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), viii.

²⁷ Hirsch, *Validity*, viii–ix.

²⁸ Quoted in Hirsch, "Truth and Method in Interpretation," 491; see Gadamer, *TM*, 392.

²⁹ Hirsch, "Truth and Method in Interpretation," 494.

time. He makes a sharp distinction here between the “meaning *in*” a text, and its “significance *to*” later audiences. *Meaning* is “that which is represented by a text,” and *significance* “names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.”³⁰ The task of interpretation then becomes a matter of uncovering, as far as possible, the intentions of the original author in his historical situation.³¹

Hirsch is under no illusion that such an original meaning can always be unearthed with precision or certainty. He develops an extensive, though precisely formulated, set of distinctions that cannot be detailed here, but the main lines of which can be traced out. There will generally be, he says, a “range of determinacy” within which the interpreter can posit a probable interpretation.³² Such an interpretation may not be certain *per se*, may not be a crystalline window into the consciousness of the author, but it can usually circumscribe a range of possible meanings. Further, one can draw out “implications” of the meaning that were not perhaps immediately present to the author’s mind, but which *could have been* if you asked him at the time.³³ One must also

³⁰ Hirsch, *Validity*, 8. Paul Ricoeur and Umberto Eco make a similar distinction (see Venard, “Les deux asymptotes,” 17).

³¹ Hirsch’s thought develops significantly over the next two decades. *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) clarifies and, in places, modifies his position. Though Hirsch claims the essays in *Aims* “do not represent substantive revisions to the earlier argument” (*Aims*, 190), a growing awareness is evident that sharply distinguishing “meaning” and “significance” is more complex than he previously imagined. In a later essay, he does shift substantially, as he concedes that authors—especially in literature, law, and religion—often enough *intend* their original meanings to be reinterpreted through time, thus including “later significances” in the original intention itself; see his “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 205–206. This concession is most interesting, since Hirsch comes to it as a literary critic reflecting on the nature of textual meaning, while his previous position distinguishing original from later meanings more sharply seems to be an enduring, if often unarticulated, assumption of much historical-critical exegesis. For this paper, I will take Hirsch’s original position in *Validity* as representative of a particular hermeneutical posture useful for its contrast to Gadamer’s text-based model, and for reflecting on the “literal sense.”

³² Hirsch, *Validity*, 44 ff.

³³ He gives the example of a right triangle (*ibid.*, 65). An author may employ the term while not consciously thinking of the Pythagorean theorem, a truth intrinsic to the nature of a right triangle. One may draw out the implication of the Pythagorean theorem from the original statement, and thus construe

identify the literary genre by a process of textual comparison and acquire a knowledge of the standard “traits,” or features, that accompany a genre and so assist in drawing the right inferences.

Most explicit, however, is Hirsch’s definition of “verbal meaning,” which he defines as “whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs.”³⁴ The “shareability” of meaning is crucial to Hirsch’s hermeneutic, as a stable meaning must be able to be shared from speaker to receiver, then reproduced through time (this is against Gadamer, whom he sees as proposing meaning that is radically contingent on each particular moment). As Warnke observes, “nothing separates Gadamer and Hirsch so much as their views on sharing verbal meaning . . . [since] for Gadamer, if the meaning of a text is shared then such sharing involves more than either a knowledge of what an author’s intentions were or a capacity to reconstruct them; it means rather that readers share the text’s understanding of its subject-matter.”³⁵ For Hirsch, by contrast, the shareability and reproducibility through time of a willed statement are the twin conditions for its determinacy, a determinacy governed by the “type-character” of the given statement, under which certain interpretations are possible and others are excluded.³⁶

Much could be said in response to, or in critique of, both Gadamer and Hirsch. I have opened up any number of questions that merit further clarification, discussion, and debate. Having laid out, however, the main lines of each position on textual meaning, I proceed to a proposal along Thomistic lines that can, I will argue, mediate their respective positions.

Aquinas and Human Making

Aquinas obviously does not address questions of textual interpretation within the parameters of modern philosophical hermeneutics. Nor will one find any kind of “theory of art,” in the modern sense, spelled out

it as part of the original meaning, provided the author using it would have been aware of the theorem at the time. If the author had not been aware of such a theorem, it could not be legitimately construed as an implication of the meaning.

³⁴ Ibid., 31.

³⁵ Ibid., 47.

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 46–51. “The determinacy and sharability of verbal meaning resides in its being a type. The particular type that it is resides in the author’s determining will. *A verbal meaning is a willed type*” (51, emphasis his).

in his works. I aim rather to synthesize and employ some principles he articulates concerning the process of human making in order to propose a kind of “ontology of a book.” This, in turn, can be applied to the question of where meaning lies in a text to mediate the positions of Gadamer and Hirsch.³⁷

The dynamics of human making frequently come up in Aquinas when he discusses “exemplary ideas” in the Divine Mind.³⁸ “All creatures,” he writes, “are in the divine mind as a cabinet is in the mind of its maker . . . because of its idea and likeness.”³⁹ In each case (divine or human), the maker has an idea in mind that becomes, as it were,

³⁷ The locus classicus for Aquinas’s thought on language is his *Expositio libri Peryermeneias*, though, of course, much else can be found scattered throughout his works. Venard has asked the question of what a “Thomistic hermeneutic” would look like, drawing parallels and distinctions between Aquinas’s metaphysics and (implied) hermeneutical assumptions, on the one hand, and modern hermeneutics and linguistic theory, on the other; see his “Is There a Thomist Hermeneutic?” in *Redeeming Truth: Considering Faith and Reason*, ed. Laurence P. Hemming and Susan F. Parsons (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 125–153. For studies comparing and contrasting Gadamer and Aquinas, see Francis J. Ambrosio, “Gadamer and Aristotle: Hermeneutics as Participation in Tradition,” in *Hermeneutics and the Tradition: Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 72 (Washington, DC: American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1988), 174–182; Kevin E. O’Reilly, “Objective Prejudice: St. Thomas on the Elevation by Grace of the Life of Reason,” *Angelicum* 84 (2007): 59–95; and John Arthos, *Inner-Word*, esp. 135–161. For key studies in the area of “Thomistic aesthetics,” see Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Scribner, 1930); Maritain *Art and Scholasticism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953); Etienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957); Marie-Dominique Philippe, *L’Activité Artistique: Philosophie du faire*, vols. 1–2 (Paris: Beauchesne et ses Fils, 1969); Francis Joseph Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974); Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Kevin O’Reilly, *Aesthetic Perception: A Thomistic Perspective* (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2007); and Michael Storck, “The Meaning of the Word Art: A Neothomistic Investigation,” in *Philosophy and Language: Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 84 (Washington, DC: American Catholic Philosophical Association, 2010).

³⁸ Here and in much of what follows, I have benefited greatly from Eco’s helpful discussion of Aquinas’s notion of artistic form in *Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, esp. 163–189.

³⁹ *De veritate* q. 3, a. 1, sc 7. See also *ST I*, q.15, a. 1, resp.; q. 44, a. 3, resp.; and *De potentia* q. 3, a. 4, ad 9. All Aquinas references not from the *ST* are my own translations from the Latin editions used on *Corpus Thomisticum* (<http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/reoptedi.html>).

incarnate in a determinate shape and structure. The critical difference between divine and human making is that, where God supplies natural things with substantial forms and sustains them in being (or not), man can only take substances given in nature and impose upon them a structure that is “accidental” in the Aristotelian sense.⁴⁰

Such “accidental” compositions, however, still possess a principle of unity that Aquinas calls the “*figura*,” a determinate shape imposed on the various materials used in production.⁴¹ One begins to see Aquinas’s *hylomorphic* system applied analogously to secondary matter, *figura* standing for the “form” of the thing, and *materia* for the “matter,” or “stuff” out of which something is crafted. The efficient cause is, of course, the maker himself, or more specifically, the intellectual virtue of *ars* (practical skill) in the maker’s mind as it conceives and carries forth a plan. The final cause, though, is most pertinent.

Aquinas will say that the maker of an artifact imposes a *dispositio* on the thing in reference to its *end*. In the case of works of art, the *dispositio* is that it can be used effectively. “Every artist,” he says, “intends to give to his work the best disposition; not absolutely the best, but the best as regards the proposed end . . . as one who makes a saw for cutting makes it from iron, as something suitable for cutting; and he does not prefer to make it of glass, which is a more beautiful material, since such beauty would be an impediment to the end he has in view.”⁴²

At this point, the term “work of art” needs clarification. For Aquinas, a work of art is, quite simply, any product that is the result of human artifice or technical skill. *Ars*, akin to the Greek *technē*, is the intellectual virtue that produces such a work, or *opus*. It is properly *recta ratio fabricilium* (“right reason concerning things to be made”), in

⁴⁰ See *Sentencia libri de anima* II, lec. 1, no. 8: “Ars enim operatur ex materia quam natura ministrat; forma autem quae per artem inducitur, est forma accidentalis, sicut figura vel aliquid huiusmodi. Unde corpora artificialia non sunt in genere substantiae per suam formam, sed solum per suam materiam, quae est naturalis. Habent ergo a corporibus naturalibus quod sint substantiae. Unde corpora naturalia sunt magis substantiae quam corpora artificialia: sunt enim substantiae non solum ex parte materiae, sed etiam ex parte formae.”

⁴¹ For “*figura*,” see Aquinas, *In III Sent.*, d. 16, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1; and *ST I*, q. 1, a. 9, ad 2; q. 51, a. 3, ad 1. See also Eco’s exposition of the concept in *Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 176–178. Aquinas variously uses “*materia*,” “*materia artis*,” or “*exterior materia*” for the physical stuff out of which the artist crafts something (see *ST I-II*, q. 58, a. 5, obj. 2.; or *Sent. Eth.* I, lec. 1, no. 13, and *Sent. Eth.* VI, lec. 6, no. 1154).

⁴² *ST I*, q. 91, a. 3, resp.

contrast to *recta ratio agibilium* (“right reason concerning things to be done”), for which the governing virtue is *prudence*.⁴³ A glance through Roy Deferrari’s *Lexicon* gives a glimpse of the breadth of application for the terms *ars* and *opus*.⁴⁴ Vital for this paper is that both words—*ars* and *opus*—are used analogously by Aquinas to refer not only to physical products, but to “products” of intellectual and speculative reflection as well. Just as there is an *ars* of the shipbuilder, the architect, and the saw-maker, each of which fall under what Aquinas calls the *servile* arts (serving man in his physical needs), so there are the *liberal* (or “freeing” arts), the chief of which is logic, the *ars artium* (“art of arts”), which is capable of producing, in a descending hierarchy, syllogisms, dialectic, rhetoric, and poetry.⁴⁵ So too, not only are buildings, ships, and saws deemed *opera*, but also works of literary and speculative reflection, whether syllogisms, dialectically developed arguments, rhetorical displays, or poems.⁴⁶

⁴³ *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 4, resp.; see Eco, 164ff. and 184–85.

⁴⁴ Roy J. Deferrari and Sr. M. Inviolata Barry, C.D.P., *A Lexicon of St. Thomas Aquinas based on the Summa theologiae and selected passages of his other works* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2004), 85–87 and 777–778.

⁴⁵ See *Expositio libri posteriorum analyticorum* I, lec. 1, nos. 1–3 : “Si igitur ex hoc, quod ratio de actu manus ratiocinatur, adinventum est ars aedificatoria vel fabrilis, per quas homo faciliter et ordinate huiusmodi actus exercere potest; eadem ratione ars quaedam necessaria est, quae sit directiva ipsius actus rationis, per quam scilicet homo in ipso actu rationis ordinate, faciliter et sine errore procedat. Et haec ars est Logica, idest rationalis scientia. . . . Et ideo videtur esse *ars artium* [my emphasis], quia in actu rationis nos dirigit, a quo omnes artes procedunt.” a quo omnes artes procedunt” (<http://www.corpusthomicum.org/cpa1.html>). Aquinas goes on to detail here a hierarchy of rational discourse that, according to its ability to arrive at truth or not, imitates nature in its ability to produce things well or ill. In nature, Aquinas says, things may (1) become what they ought to be, (2) become partially what they should but fail in their act from time to time, or (3) fail in principle (as monstrosities). These three possibilities correspond in the rational order to (1) syllogistic argumentation that results in *scientia*, (2) dialectic, rhetoric, and poetry (in that order), and (3) sophistry. That Aquinas would see analogies between the kind of rational structure products of reason evince and the natural structures of the physical world should not be surprising to those familiar with his metaphysic.

⁴⁶ Passages establishing this are numerous (see Deferrari’s enumeration for *opus*). A good articulation of the general point appears in *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 3, ad 3: “Even in speculative matters there is something by way of work [*opus*]: e.g., the making of a syllogism or of a fitting speech, or the work of counting or measuring. Hence whatever habits are ordained to such like works of the speculative reason, are, by a kind of comparison, called arts indeed, but

Gathering together this all-too-short sketch of (what might be called) a Thomistic aesthetic, two points emerge. First, when a human maker crafts a work (physical or intellectual), the materials he uses—in the case of speculative works the concepts he has abstracted and then verbally expressed in an arranged whole—do not come from himself. As God supplies the natural substances that go into physical buildings and sustains these substances in being even after they have been arranged into an “accidental” unity, so the artist—pace the “art for art’s sake” school—does not whip ideas up out of a vacuum, but abstracts them from real experience of the world, reflects on them, and then creatively applies them to whatever product he is interested in making.

Umberto Eco points out that, on Aquinas’s account, the material elements from which a work of art are arranged into an accidental unity yet still retain their “emotive and significative potential,” only now within a set of relations to the whole.⁴⁷ A jeweler, for example, might have particular intentions in arranging diamonds in a necklace into a particular pattern for, let us say, his daughter. But we can imagine his daughter coming to appreciate and experience the product in ways her father did not imagine and then further passing it on to her daughter or someone else entirely, bringing forth any number of experiences of the necklace far beyond what the maker could have envisioned.⁴⁸ So too, it should not come as a surprise that one could, say, get any number of insights out of a Shakespeare play that were not present to the playwright’s mind when written. Consonant with this dynamic of a work’s potential to bear meaning through time, Aquinas makes a surprising statement in *De veritate*, in the midst of commenting on the status of the “Book of Life”: “Moreover, to proceed from a writer is not proper to a book insofar as it is a book, but insofar as it is an artifact; thus also a house is from a builder and a knife from a cutler.

‘liberal’ arts, in order to distinguish them from those arts that are ordained to works done by the body, which arts are, in a fashion, servile, inasmuch as the body is in servile subjection to the soul, and man, as regards his soul, is free [*liber*].”

⁴⁷ Eco, 178.

⁴⁸ The 1999 motion picture “The Red Violin” illustrates a similar point. In the movie, a seventeenth-century Italian craftsman amidst trying life circumstances makes a beautiful violin, which passes to a child prodigy in Vienna in the eighteenth century, then to a virtuoso performer in 1800s England, and then to a rebel music teacher in China during Mao Tse-Tung’s revolution, and ends up auctioned in Montreal in the present day.

But to represent things that are written in a book concerns the proper nature [*ratio*] of a book as such.”⁴⁹

Second, it might be urged in objection to this apparently neo-Gadamerian application of Aquinas that such an open-ended construal of textual meaning or aesthetic experience has nothing to do with what the product *is* intrinsically, namely, a discreet object the maker crafted in a particular way at a particular point in time. I will have something to say in a moment against an open-ended Gadamerian construal. For now, if we stick with the (analogous) hylemorphic analysis, we can inquire about “final cause.” And it emerges here that what formally constitutes any work of art is the *use* for which the maker meant it. The saw-maker precisely *intended* that his saw would be used in any number of ways he could not have foreseen. Shakespeare precisely *intended* his plays to be performed, presumably in any number of unforeseeable contexts far into the future. When authors compose written words, the very act of writing presumes—as Aquinas says—that words “represent” things, things and experiences that might bear dimensions of meaning far beyond the originally intended act of communication.⁵⁰ A Thomistic aesthetic along the lines developed here oddly seems to support a version of textual meaning close to the “death of the author” schools of recent notoriety.

But Aquinas also gives resources for anchoring the “meaning” of a work of art in the original intentions of the author. First, it should be obvious that the *figura* and the *materia* of a given artifact, both its structure and the particular elements that compose it, delimit the range of experience or meaning one can receive. One cannot simply get “any experience” out of any work of art. One cannot expect, for example, a fork to have the same aesthetic and emotive impact as a roller coaster.

⁴⁹ *De veritate*, q. 7, a. 2.

⁵⁰ An example here might be St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Though the letter betrays any number of practical concerns for the community (preparation for the apostle’s upcoming arrival, unity in the local church, etc.), he addresses a range of issues involving significant theological depth and complexity (status of the Old Covenant, nature of justification by faith, etc.). One can presume that St. Paul would not have begrudged the community if they had continued to reflect further, ponder, and explore the implications of the subject matter he set forth. This is not to downplay the importance of historical work to discover authorial intent (as will become clear in a moment in my argument). It is simply to affirm, from the Thomistic grounds I have proposed, a truth in Gadamer’s position that the subject matter of a text often reasonably elicits fruitful reflection that the original author may not have foreseen in full detail.

Second, Aquinas also seems to privilege the relationship a work has to its original maker: “A house is related essentially [*per se*],” he writes, “to the intellect of the architect, but accidentally [*per accidens*] to the intellect upon which it does not depend.”⁵¹ There is, in other words, an essential relation between the artistic intention of the maker and the product brought forth. Later users of the product can establish relations to it, but in an accidental way that somehow depends on the original act. Aquinas even uses the language of truth on this specific point: “A house is said to be true,” he says, “that expresses the likeness of the form in the architect’s mind; and words are said to be true so far as they are the signs of truth in the intellect.”⁵² “True” is used here as a transcendental, as coextensive with being, in this case analogically rooted in how things in nature reflect their respective species in the divine mind. Nevertheless, his comment would seem to privilege the intentions of the maker who crafted a product, even as other parties establish “accidental” relationships to its “truth.” I have perhaps now opened up more questions in this sketch than can possibly be resolved. Nevertheless, I will now draw some provisional conclusions about the application of this Thomistic model to contemporary hermeneutical questions.

Conclusion

I began by noting that both the theological question of the literal sense and the hermeneutical question over meaning in a text encounter a similar tension around the two poles of authorial intention, on the one hand, and text-centered mediation of meaning, on the other. Aquinas’s hylemorphism, as analogously applied to works of art, enables us to see, first, that such tension is no surprise.

It becomes conceivable to consider the “essence” of a work of art as a locus of meaning both structured and fluid. “Essence”—as with any talk of “form” or “matter” in reference to accidental compositions—is, of course, employed analogously here. Since a work of art is an accidental composition, however, one can ask what the subject is “in which” the accidental forms inhere. If the *figura* is the principle of such a work’s unity and structure, and its *materia* comprises the physical or intellectual elements out of which it is made, then what is the, not *essence* strictly speaking, but—for lack of a better word—“quasi-essence” that could govern legitimate construal of meaning? And

⁵¹ ST I, q. 16, a. 1, resp.

⁵² Ibid.

here the four causes help us to see how any text, any work of art, will be *both* dependent on natural substances gathered from nature (or, more broadly, human experiences set forth in verbal discourse) and arranged into a particular shape, *and* dependent on the formal intentions of the maker in bringing forth the work. Since every work of art is composed from *materia* (physical or not) that retains significative capacity even after put in relation to a whole, and since the artificer specifically intends the work to be used in a variety of contexts, in principle, an unlimited depth of meaning may unfold through time as each receiver or community experiences and applies the work in varying circumstances. This dynamic obviously accords well with a Gadamerian hermeneutic.

On the other hand, not only will the specific *figura* of a work set limits regarding what can possibly be experienced through it, but, for Aquinas, there will also be a primacy to the original moment of that work's production. Hirsch's concerns seem addressed when Aquinas says that every artifact is related *per se* to the mind of the maker and *per accidens* to later users, and moreover that the primary reference for the "truth" of the work resides in the *per se* relation it has to its maker's mind at the moment of production, on which all *per accidens* relations are dependent. We can imagine, in short, a community unfolding depths of meaning in a work that may not have been in the immediate consciousness of the maker, but organically arise out of the formal determinations set by him, one of which is precisely that the product will be used, experienced, and reflected on through time.

Certainly the kind of use for which the work is intended is vital. Historical and literary methods that seek to uncover the genre of a text, for example, would bear directly on the parameters of meaning possible to construe. While the *dispositio* of the work "as regards the proposed end" is anchored in the original moment of production, what Hirsch calls drawing out legitimate "implications" of a text would seem to grant implicitly what Gadamer emphasizes more one-sidedly, to wit, a depth of meaning exceeding the original author's consciousness that can unfold through time.

I noted earlier in Aquinas's articulation of the *per se* versus the *per accidens* relations established in reference to a work of art that the latter "somehow depend" on the former. Just *how* is, of course, the whole difficulty. One can imagine certain implications, or "further meanings," legitimately and organically arising from the formal determinations set by the original author. Or contrariwise, one can ima-

gine certain attempted implications going beyond the original intentions. And now is an opportune time to return to the question of the literal sense.

Raymond Brown's concession that the "literal" and "more-than-literal" senses are, in practice, "not separable categories"⁵³ speaks to the heart of a difficulty that, in the case of Scripture, becomes not only philosophical but theological. Scripture's inspired character, its dual authorship by God and human beings, complicates the matter in a way evident in the history of biblical interpretation. Christopher Ocker, for example, has demonstrated in detail the way later medieval biblical interpreters, in contrast to the earlier Victorine school, began to construe rather far-fetched theological implications in the literal sense.⁵⁴ On the other hand, Church documents do not seem to exclude from the discernment of the literal sense the inspired character of the scriptural text, that is, meanings God might have intended through the human author. The literal and spiritual senses are distinct, though intimately and mysteriously related, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and other sources have asserted.⁵⁵ But how does one discern, not only what the human author may have directly intended—a task contemporary hermeneutics has shown to be problematic enough—but what God may or may not have intended "literally" through the human author?

Without claiming here to totally resolve such a question, the Thomistic model I have proposed does establish, in fairly straightforward metaphysical terms, certain key parameters. The original

⁵³ See note 12 above.

⁵⁴ Whereas the Victorine School, Ocker argues, tailored Augustine's distinction in *De doctrina christiana* between "natural" and "conventional" signs to a schema that drew a cleaner line between the "literal" and "spiritual" senses, later medievals began to blur the line (Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 31ff). The Dominican Nicholas Gorran (d. 1295), for example, thought the "letter" of the episode of Abraham's binding of Isaac included Abraham having a vision of Christ's passion and that Moses understood the burning bush as foreshadowing the virgin birth, the birth of the Church, the Church's welfare despite tribulation, and the suffering of a just man burning with love (ibid., 43–48). John Baconthorpe (d. 1347) believed that the "doctors" of the Old Testament chose *Elohim* (a plural Hebrew noun) to convey the unity of God's essence and the plurality of his persons. Johannes Klenkok (d. 1347), Nicolau Eimeric (d. 1399), and Meister Eckhart (d. ca. 1328) also display an effort to theologically explicate the literal sense in a way only tenuously connected with the text itself (ibid., 59–64).

⁵⁵ See note 4 above.

moment of production sets a formal determination to the meaning of the text—what I have imperfectly called its “quasi-essence”—a meaning that the original author yet intends to represent realities that can be assimilated and reflected on by later audiences. To draw out some possible implications of this model, let us consider two contemporary examples of biblical interpretation where exegesis and the theological reflection of confessional traditions seem to be at odds.

Both Judaism and Christianity have traditionally held that Genesis 1:1 affirms, among other things, God’s creation of the world *ex nihilo*. But contemporary exegesis has largely rejected this interpretation—at least as present in the text itself—on grammatical, syntactical, contextual, and historical grounds.⁵⁶ So too, the Christian tradition (Western, at least) has held since St. Augustine that Romans 5:12 affirms the doctrine of original sin, spreading “by propagation, not by imitation.”⁵⁷ But exegetes point out that the original Vulgate phrase out of which Augustine developed his doctrine was misleading at best and that it is very unlikely Paul had in mind what Augustine later developed.⁵⁸

The interpretive model I have proposed allows us to say without blushing that both exegetes and theologians working from confessional traditions may be legitimately construing meaning from the same text. The exegete closely analyzes the grammar, syntax, redaction history, original historical circumstances, and all that might assist in recon-

⁵⁶ The absence of an article from “beginning” in verse 1, the possible circumstantial construal of the first clause (“when God created”), the fact that the Hebrew phrase often translated “formless and void” (*tohu wabohu*) does not indicate absolute nothingness, and comparison with creation myths from surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures have all contributed to this conclusion. See Mark Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 43–59; and Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), esp. 47ff.

⁵⁷ *Council of Trent*, session 5; see Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible, 4th ed. (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1974), 111.

⁵⁸ The critical issue is the translation of the Greek phrase “*eph’ hō*,” which the Vulgate loosely renders “*in quo*.” See N.T. Wright, *Romans*, New Interpreter’s Bible 10 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 525–527. For a more detailed grammatical analysis, see Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible Series 33 (New York: Doubleday: 1993), 411–417. For a recent historical overview of the concept of original sin with detailed critique of Augustine’s theology, see John E. Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

structing the original author's intentions and audience. That, on these grounds, Paul did not have in mind Augustine's doctrine of original sin, or that the Hebrew author of the first line of the book of Genesis did not have consciously in mind the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, would not necessarily mitigate against either of these ideas organically arising out of the text as deeper understanding of the original affirmations is sought through time. Even if all Paul had in mind was that "all have in fact sinned" (rather than somehow inherited it), or if the Hebrew author was using the imagery of formless pre-existing matter that God shapes into creation, these primary affirmations could conceivably be pointing to metaphysical and theological realities that later confessional traditions unfold in deeper and more elaborate ways, though neither less true than nor inconsistent with the original affirmations.⁵⁹

These are complex questions, and I certainly cannot here resolve what would "count" as a legitimate implication or not. The inspired character of the text necessarily implies dimensions of meaning precluding easy solutions. The point of the model is that a control for meaning is provided in the original formal intentions of the author, without denigrating or excluding as less true or unimportant possible later construals, provided they are developing the essential meaning of the original affirmation and not simply projecting any meaning whatever into it. A simpler way of putting the question might be: would one be able to present the later doctrine to the original author and he reply, "Yes, that is what I was talking about," or at least, "Yes, that follows from what I was affirming"? It should also be clear that these issues are closely related to the theological concept of "doctrinal development." On the one hand, it is granted that later developments

⁵⁹ For example, there is certainly tension and difference between the two statements "all have actually sinned" and "all sinned in Adam," or between "creation from nothing" and "creation from pre-existing matter." On the other hand, there is no necessary inconsistency between the two statements "all sinned in Adam" and "all have actually sinned." The latter is not excluded by the assertion of the former, even if the former asserts more than the latter. The two assertions about Gen 1:1 perhaps involve greater divergence, but here literary device and the imperfect understanding of the author might be invoked without prejudice to the reality pointed to—God's creation of the world—which comes to be more fully understood in later developments. By way of contrast, any number of certainly illegitimate construals can be imagined, for example, to assert that, in saying "all sinned," Paul actually meant "none have sinned," or that, by asserting God's shaping of matter into creation, the author was really making a statement of how God himself is a man-made invention.

must be rooted in the primary affirmations of earlier statements; but at the same time, it is hoped that doctrine not be artificially or rigidly limited to the conscious and explicit intentions of the earlier or original articulations.

To bring the inquiry full circle, one way of putting the crucial question underneath the idea of the *sensus literalis* is this: is later theological development of the meaning of a scriptural text related to the task of exegesis intrinsically or extrinsically? A Hirschian model, as well as much historical critical methodology, seems to come down on the side of “extrinsic relation”—exegesis proper is an affair of construing original meaning by more or less scientific means, explicitly attempting to prescind from the application of “significance” to later audiences. A purely Gadamerian model would probably not concern itself with the relation between original and later meanings in the first place—later developments are all one has, since every interpreter is inextricably historically situated within a tradition. The model I propose here sees both emphases as vital to construing the “primary meaning,” or *sensus literalis*. If you will, where Hirsch emphasizes what the *author* means and Gadamer emphasizes *what* the author means, this model reveals the intrinsic relation between the two, since any artistic creation is given its formal structure by the maker, and yet, in the case of an intellectual work, that structure contains within it significative dimensions that are necessarily complex, inviting deeper reflection and understanding through time. The work is *per se* related to the mind of the author, and yet, “to *represent* things that are written in a book concerns the proper nature of a book as such.”⁶⁰

If the *sensus literalis* through the history of biblical interpretation has undergone significant shifts in meaning, then Aquinas’s hylemorphic system, analogously applied to a work of art in its formal and material determinations, may well be able to assist theologians in understanding how the sense that is supposed to be the foundation of exegesis and theological reflection could be understood today in terms historically responsible, literarily rich, and theologically informed. NEV

⁶⁰ *De veritate*, q. 7, a. 2. (emphasis mine).