

Faith and Interpretation: Religious Belief as an Epistemic and Hermeneutic Concept in Neo- -Pragmatist Philosophy and Literary Theory

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Introduction: divination and interpretation

In his essay titled “Deep Interpretation,” Arthur C. Danto evokes an ancient Greek practice of divination called *dia kledon*, “exercised upon the casual utterances of men” (53), which took place in the following way: a “message-seeker pressed a coin into the hand of a certain statue of Hermes, whispered his query in the idol’s ear, blocked his own ears—and the answer would be contained in the first human words he heard upon unblocking them”(53). Quite understandably, however, these coded words would require deciphering, “supposing, as altogether likely, the words did not transparently reveal the message . . . And an interpreter as middleman would be called upon to map interpretandum onto interpretands” (53-54). The “middleman,” thus, poses as an envoy to Hermes insofar as his task is to mediate between immortal gods and ordinary mortal humans, which provides an apt analogy of the metaphysical moment inherent to all acts of interpretation: the contingent appearance must be stripped away so that the divine essence can be revealed. The practice of the *kledon*, however, also points up an inescapable *pragmatic* element in the interpretive process, since the divine emanation must be mapped onto the most mundane human endeavors, such as solving financial difficulties, smoothing out feud in the family, or tackling illicit love affairs. In fact, the interpretive process never transcends the profane space of the marketplace, a site for transactions in more senses than one, where the accidentally overheard scraps of conversation are converted into eloquent wisdoms in exchange for a few coins. In their own right, neither the bystander (the one whose contingent words are being interpreted), nor the interpreter has any claim to divine authority, yet the proverbial Greek citizen seeking advice must maintain a firm belief that all of these contingencies graduate to the level of metaphysical emanation sanctified by some divine intent. This is how the opposing forces of metaphysics and pragmatism converge under the banner of faith in the marketplace of ancient Athens.

Danto’s account of the *kledon* is a suitable starting point for the inquiries of the present study inasmuch as it offers a succinct narrative of the interrelatedness of the three key notions on which my discussion focuses: faith, pragmatism, and

interpretation. In my usage of “faith,” I will draw upon religious belief as a model, but the notion will be used in a broader sense to denote unconditional belief implicit in such epistemologically conceived terms as “premise,” “axiom,” or “unexamined interpretive assumption.” These terms suggest that even in a rational inquiry there are certain basic factors, some first principles which are regarded as unquestioned points of reference, about which there is undivided consensus in a given community. Taken in this broader sense, we can move beyond the commonplace understanding of faith as the opposing term to reason, knowledge, and epistemology.

My purpose in what follows is to explore the epistemological and interpretive functions of faith in a specifically pragmatist context in three steps: first, I will offer a brief overview of various philosophical attempts to accommodate faith (mostly meant in a religious sense) within the realm of epistemology; second, I will focus on classical pragmatist (William James) and neo-pragmatist (Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish) strategies aimed at dissolving the dichotomy between faith and reason and argue that the apparently emancipatory gesture can only be executed at the expense of depriving faith of its metaphysical properties; third, I will discuss the function of faith as a necessary component of interpretive processes through Stanley Fish’s theories of literary interpretation. In the closing section, I will return to a brief analysis of Danto’s account of the *kledon* to provide a framework for drawing some general conclusions.

The epistemology of faith: from realism to neo-pragmatism

It is a commonly accepted view that the major difference between faith and reason lies in the fact that while the latter is supposed to serve as the foundation of knowledge, the former needs no preliminary founding principle: the sheer fact of holding a certain faith is sufficient to constitute the foundation of that faith. Hence, faith does not seem to belong in the realm of epistemology, for even though one may want to possess a theory of one’s knowledge, it is less likely that one would want to formulate a theory of one’s faith. The very distinction between faith and knowledge, however, is itself an epistemological gesture, which inevitably subsumes faith under the rule of reason. Kevin Hart remarks that before the Age of Reason, the ontological and epistemological functions of God were not treated as separate, as God was the “*fons et origo* of all that is, and . . . the guarantor of determinate meaning” (29). A sharp differentiation between faith and knowledge is the legacy of Enlightenment philosophy, a prominent representative of which was Immanuel Kant, who held the view that certain postulates that are “necessary to the meaning of moral experience, lay not within but outside knowledge”

(Thayer 17). Hence the Kantian solution: “I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*” (quoted in Thayer 17; emphasis in original). This Kantian “denial,” however, does not undermine the privileged status of knowledge, for the gesture of “making room” results in depriving faith (or God) of its sovereign right to guarantee determinate meaning, dividing the cognitive space into stable objects of knowledge and articles of unconditional faith. This epistemological predicament is allegorized by the biblical story of the Fall, which caused a split between sign and meaning precisely because of the knowledge Adam and Eve acquired through their transgression. Thus, when Hart contends that it is “only after the Fall that a theology is needed” (6), we need only substitute “Enlightenment” for “Fall” to turn the allegory into a historically valid statement. The Enlightenment’s celebration of reason as the foundation of all knowledge forced theology into a defensive position, which therefore turned into a discourse whose *raison d’être* was to validate faith in accordance with the tenets of “realist” epistemology. For this reason, the discourse on faith has never really been able to break free from the realm of epistemology, and its discursive practices remained derivative of those of traditional (objectivist, realist, positivist) epistemology.

The essence of realist epistemology (or epistemological realism) is most concisely captured by G. E. Moore, who explained the relationship between truth and beliefs as follows: “To say that [a] belief is true is to say that there is in the Universe *a* fact to which it corresponds, and to say that it is false is to say that there is *not* in the Universe any fact to which it corresponds” (277). Moore made this statement in his 1910-11 Morley lectures, and at that time this realist account of truth was vying for prominence with the coherence theory of knowledge put forward by staunch idealists like F. H. Bradley and Harold Joachim, and William James’s pragmatic account of truth as an “expedient in our way of thinking” (Michaels “Saving” 775-76). The counter-arguments against realism were later extended to include questions about discourses (literature, philosophy, or religion) in which the truth of statements cannot be verified in terms of correspondence to reality. As a response to such counter-arguments, I. A. Richards, in his 1930 essay, “Belief,” came up with an apparently useful differentiation between “verifiable belief” and “imaginative assent,” defining the latter as not being “subject to the laws of thought” (qtd. In Michaels 777) unlike verifiable beliefs. However, as Walter Benn Michaels points out, the distinction “turns out to be a version of the more familiar [Platonic] distinction between true knowledge and mere belief” (778). Thus, from the point of view of epistemological realism, beliefs are anomalous factors which, at best, do not further, and, at worst, might hinder our objective perception of the world.

On closer inspection, however, the postulation of an objectively existing world that can always prove our beliefs right or wrong is analogous to the postulation

of an almighty and omniscient deity. Both “the real world” and God function as unassailable authorities when knowledge-claims are to be validated, and neither the epistemological realist nor the religious believer would acknowledge that “reality” and God are both constructions, albeit of different sorts and in different ways. The most significant difference from an epistemological perspective is that the authority (God) that could adjudicate between conflicting beliefs is always absent, thus the believer has to transcend the dichotomies true/false or right/wrong when his or her belief in God has to be justified. In other words, one’s belief in God’s existence is not a matter of being right or wrong about some objective state of affairs.

In his seminal essay, “The Will to Believe” (1896), William James shows an acute awareness of this property of religious beliefs, and so he does his best to detach faith from traditional considerations of epistemology: “We feel, too,” he contends “as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our active good-will [i.e. not reason], as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way” (476). On the other hand, the one who approaches faith through reason and logic, risks never experiencing it: “one who should shut himself up in snarling logicity and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity to make the gods’ acquaintance” (476). James’s claims already harbor the germs of the more general pragmatist argument that the “religious hypothesis” is not a matter of metaphysical involvement with a power higher than ourselves, but that of a choice of cognitive disposition (even a negative one), and what motivates this choice is the typical pragmatist notion of usefulness. This culminates in a statement James would make eleven years after “The Will to Believe:”

On pragmatic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, [it] is true. Now whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it certainly does work, and that the problem is to build it out and determine it so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths. (*Pragmatism* 618).

The active verbs “build out” and “determine” suggest human agency as opposed to either the metaphysical or the positivist understanding of faith, where the former takes faith to be a given (or a gift), while the latter wishes to force it into dichotomies of verifiability (true/false, real/imaginary/right/wrong, etc.).

Richard Rorty approves James’s attempt to free religious faith from positivist restrictions, but he also criticizes his predecessor for still holding on to the distinction between the “cognitive” and the “non-cognitive” (or between belief and desire). He laments that “James accepts exactly what he should reject: the idea

that the mind is divided neatly down the middle into intellect and passion, and the idea that possible topics of discussion are divided neatly into the cognitive and the noncognitive ones” (“Religious Faith” 155). Rorty insists that “the only point of having beliefs in the first place is to gratify desires” (153), whereby he hopes to blur the “useless” distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive content. Furthermore, he favors the “pragmatist doctrine that beliefs have content only by virtue of inferential relations to other beliefs” (159), from which one can argue for the intersubjective nature of beliefs, counteracting the objectivist claims of realist epistemology. Beliefs can be seen as forming a web of inferential relations through a continuous process of justification by invoking other beliefs that are momentarily not called upon to be justified. The process is evidently language-bound, but Rorty warns against the “unpragmatic” mistake of looking upon language as a medium of representation for beliefs. Rorty thinks this was the mistake positivists made, which left them perplexed when faced with the representational value of religious belief. He expressly dismisses the positivist notion that “the sentences used to express religious belief are typically not hooked up to the rest of language in the right inferential way, and hence can express only pseudobeliefs” (151), but he concedes that formulating a thoroughly pragmatist view of the issue is not entirely unproblematic either. If the intersubjective justification of beliefs takes place in the form of communal practices, “what becomes of intersubjectivity,” Rorty asks, “once we admit that there is no communal practice of justification—no shared language game—which gives religious statements their content?” (159). Rorty sees the solution of dealing with unjustifiable beliefs (like those in incarnation or resurrection) in treating those beliefs as translated into utterances relatable to various “patterns of behavior, even when we cannot . . . fix . . . the place of such utterances in a network of inferential relations” (160).

This solution, however, does not account for the conceivable problem of invoking unjustifiable religious beliefs in justifying secular ones. The problem is that labeling certain beliefs as “unjustifiable” is a covert reiteration of the positivist notion of “pseudo-belief,” for this view implicitly denies explanatory (inferential, logical) value to religious beliefs, and, thereby, retains the cognitive-noncognitive (belief/desire, reason/faith) dichotomy that it seeks to discard. Placing religious beliefs outside the web of inferential relations would be to deny the fact that religious people do appeal to articles of faith for instance in interpretive debates about the meaning of biblical passages, by means of which they wish to put forth some ultimate argument that decides the debate in their favor. Nevertheless, even religious believers engaged in such debates must rely on epistemological notions like “validity,” “truth,” “rightness” or “wrongness” when defending their positions. These notions, however, can only be invoked in a dispute if the disputants are in

agreement about the rules of the language game in which they are deployed, and these rules seem to be dictated by epistemology, not religion.¹ Thus, when faith is to be defended against rational counter-arguments, the holder of the faith cannot but phrase his or her defense in *rational* epistemological terms, which leads to the paradoxical situation that the religious believer has to rely on the vocabulary of his or her opponent to undermine the validity of that same vocabulary. The validating processes of faith and reason, therefore, seem inextricably intertwined on more levels than one.

Further levels of this inextricability can be explored through the relevant writings of Stanley Fish. Similarly to Rorty, Fish also rejects the opposition traditional epistemology sets up between faith and reason (or knowledge), but he places more emphasis on the hermeneutic aspects of both, arguing that both involve interpretive arguments. Fish outright claims that “[t]here is no opposition . . . between knowledge by faith and knowledge by reason” (“Why” 245), for both faith in a deity and reason presuppose certain “first principles” which enable one’s participation in a given discourse, and determine the route (and, to some extent, the outcome) of the given argument. As a consequence, whatever discourse (religious or secular, foundationalist or anti-foundationalist) one represents, the first principles one acts upon cannot be submitted to a rational validation of their correctness as it is presupposed by epistemological realism. One of Fish’s most powerful claims is that one’s “consciousness must be grounded in an originary act of faith—a stipulation of basic value—from which determinations of right and wrong, relevant and irrelevant, real and unreal will then follow” (“Why” 247). According to Fish, it is unthinkable to posit “rational criteria that are themselves hostage to no belief in particular” (247). Thus, rational inquiry is no less enabled by a set of unquestioned tenets than religious faith.

It would be a mistake, however, to gloss over the differences between the two modes of thinking. In fact, Fish himself can be seen as doing just that when he differentiates between knowing by evidence and knowing by faith, and concludes that “on the level of epistemology both are the same” (245). He also adds, however, that his argument does not aim to “debunk rationality in favor of faith but to say that rationality and faith go together in an indissoluble package: you can’t

1 This is, in fact, what the notion of epistemology has been understood to signify. See Rorty’s succinct formulation: “The dominating notion of epistemology is that to be rational . . . we need to be able to find agreement with other human beings. To construct an epistemology is to find the maximum amount of common ground with others. The assumption that an epistemology can be constructed is the assumption that such common ground exists” (*Philosophy* 316). Rorty’s anti-foundationalism consists mainly in his disbelief in “‘knowledge’ as something about which there ought to be a ‘theory’ and which has ‘foundations’” (*Philosophy* 7).

have one without the other” (“Why” 255). In fact, the package is so indissoluble that the criteria according to which one notion could be granted priority over the other are never obvious to discern. The problem is not unlike that of the Greek citizen in Danto’s example, for the *kledon* acquires divine authorization through human interpretation, which has to proceed along communally accepted norms of reasoning so as to be accepted as a convincing godly message. At the same time, the very notion of “godly message” is a presupposition (a first principle) enabled by the citizen’s faith. It is, however, not at all obvious whether faith precedes and paves the way for an acceptable interpretation, or it is a function of rational interpretive reasoning.

Surprisingly enough, this latter claim is not alien to religious believers, to which Fish’s exchange with Richard Neuhaus, an ordained Catholic priest, adequately testifies. In the above-quoted essay (“Why Can’t We All Just Get Along”), Fish argues that the conflict between faith and rationality is, in fact, a conflict between two rationalities which can never be solved on a common ground, for, obviously, what counts as evidence for one of the disputants will not count as evidence for the other, and vice versa (255). He also claims that “to ask a religious person to rephrase his claims in more mainstream terms [i.e., acceptable in a secular community] is to ask that person to cut himself off from the very source of his conviction and to become in effect the opposite of what he is, to become secular” (254). Fish thinks religious people often do this, and claims that it is an erroneous strategy on their part, for they abandon their own vocabulary and play the language game of their secular opponents, which is diametrically opposed to their interests as religious believers. In his view, “a person of religious conviction should not want to enter the marketplace of ideas but to shut it down, at least insofar as it presumes to determine matters that he believes have been determined by God and faith” (250).

Fish might be correct in a general sense, but a more detailed examination of his reasoning could reveal some contradictions. First, he states that there is no difference between knowledge by faith and knowledge by reason, for they both involve certain articles of faith or first principles, so faith and reason remain indissolubly intertwined. Then, he goes on to claim that rational reasoning and reasoning by faith will never stand on a common ground, thus it is a highly futile attempt, on both parts, to engage each other in conversation, for it can result only in the unfortunate dissolution of faith in the discourse of rationality. Therefore, Fish is simultaneously right and wrong when he concludes that the best possible outcome for the religious person would be to silence the dissenters, to shut down the marketplace of ideas. He is right insofar as shutting down the marketplace of ideas may mean the triumph of religious conviction, but he is wrong inasmuch as it is through this very marketplace that religious conviction can be given a hearing. In other words, there is no other choice

for the religious believer but to *argue* with whatever communal means available, even if those means are antithetical to his or her convictions.

This compulsion to argue, surprisingly, leads Neuhaus to defend rational reasoning, and to deny that rationality and faith cannot stand on a common ground. He invokes Augustine's *The Usefulness of Believing* to support his argument, saying:

Augustine makes the case that belief is necessary for understanding. He explains in great detail to his unbelieving interlocutor the reasonable case for believing. It is clear that Augustine and his interlocutor share a common "a priori" in what they mean by reason and reasons. The argument is that belief is necessary to understanding—in everyday life, in science, in friendship, and in matters religious—and why belief is necessary is itself rationally explicable. (29)

He then goes on to quote Augustine as saying: "No one believes anything unless he first thought it believable. Everything which is believed should be believed after thought has preceded. Not everyone who thinks believes, since many think in order not to believe; but everybody who believes thinks" (29). Neuhaus also finds it important to emphasize that Augustine was firmly opposed to the "fideistic" view of faith as arbitrary which is "not supported by and cannot appeal to an a priori about what is reasonable" (29). But why is it so important for Neuhaus to prove faith to be based on rational premises, and defensible through rational argument?

The motivation behind his endeavor might be to demonstrate that religion can and should participate in the prevailing language game of liberal societies, the rules of which rest on rationalist premises. In his desperate attempt to prove his point, Neuhaus's engages in a rather tautological argument, claiming that if Christians and liberals "have systems of reasoning that have nothing in common, we could not call them both 'systems of reasoning.' To call them systems of reasoning is to assert that they have in common the fact that they both belong to the genus called 'systems of reasoning'—which of course they do" (28). The contention can be paraphrased in the following circular statement: "Systems of reasoning are what they are *because* we call them by that name." This circularity appropriately describes the whole problem at hand: what enables faith is a common rationality which, in turn, has to be suppressed when one has to testify to one's belief in "phenomena" that are unverifiable through rational inquiry and inexplicable by rational argument (resurrection, virgin birth, etc.). As Fish puts it: for the religious believer "the absence of a rational explanation is just the point, one that, far from challenging the faith, confirms it" ("Faith" 268). This confirmation, however, can occur only at the expense of abandoning the rational principles without which,

according to Augustine and Neuhaus, faith would not be possible. Consequently, they have to disconfirm reason so as to confirm faith and vice versa so that faith and reason are constantly and simultaneously enabling and disabling each other and this circular movement comes to define them both.

Needless to say, however, that the “perception” (much rather fabrication) of this paradoxical circularity is also, and to a great extent, a function of first principles, and on the believer’s part the paradox can be undone, or, rather, pre-empted by the simple interpretive move to claim rationality to be god-given (just like everything else in the world). Thus, the tables are turned immediately: it is not the discourse of faith that gets annexed by rationality, but vice versa, rationality—as a divine auxiliary—comes to the rescue of faith, if it needs to be defended in a debate. Neuhaus eventually makes this very point as an ultimate argument against Fish, but the argumentative pattern he has maneuvered himself into allows him no non-circular exit out of his line of reasoning:

However partial our knowledge, and however stumbling our ability to communicate, we finally do all participate in one discourse, the one Logos of the mind of God. This gives the Christian confidence that he can enter into a conversation with the non-Christian . . . Therefore, when Christians in conversation with non-Christians “rephrase” what they want to say, they are not necessarily surrendering to the opposition. The reason and language of the non-Christian, when rightly exercised, is ordered to the same truth. The Christian therefore tries in various ways to enter into the reason and language of non-Christians in order to help reorder them to truth. (30)

Neuhaus’s argument at this point has run its full course and this last passage leaves us with two important points to be noted. First, he makes the case for the existence of a (God-given) common ground on which believers and non-believers can co-exist. Yet, he phrases his argument in such a way that it becomes a perfect exemplification of Fish’s claim to the effect that the reasoning of the believer and the non-believer can never be brought to converge. What Neuhaus, in effect, comes to formulate is the *par excellence* foundationalist assertion that—however circuitously and mildly he tries to put it—truth is (like it or not) on his side. And, in fact, there is nothing else he could say; this is the only conclusion his faith allows him to come to, otherwise it would not deserve the designation *faith*. The point finally has to be driven home so that even the slightest semblance of relativization is avoided. Fish sees this very clearly when he contends: “Religious discourse . . . cannot be unconcerned with the substantive worth and veracity of its assertions, which are in fact *presupposed*, and presupposed too is the urgency of proclaiming

those assertions—the good news—to a world asked to receive them as the whole and necessary truth” (“Why” 252). And indeed, the believer cannot *not* assert the truth: for him or her it is not a matter of claiming supremacy in an epistemological debate, but, rather, that of a moral imperative.

The second point to be noted has to do with Neuhaus’s claim that we all participate in the divine discourse of the Logos, which enables Christians and non-Christians to comprehend each other, implies that rationality can be seen as part of the divine Logos, whose etymological root meaning can also be understood as *ratio* in the sense of “reasoning.” This entails the argument that rationality—as, indeed, *all* discourses—has always already belonged in the realm of religion. Augustine quite clearly points this out when he maintains that “the validity of logical sequences is not a thing devised by men, but is observed and noted by them . . . ; for it exists eternally in the reason of things, and has its origin with God” (*Christian Doctrine* 734). It follows, then, that reason and logic are divine attributes rather than human inventions, so rational reasoning can be understood as God’s language. Thus, what Fish regards as “rephrasing,” is, for Neuhaus, just a rhetorical turn deployed in a language he and his fellow-Christians never ceased to possess.

Moreover, their ultimate goal is to eventually bring all human beings to use this language in the proper way, to be “reordered” to truth. In the absence of divine epiphanies, “reordering” can be achieved by means of rhetorical tactics, which should pose no problem for the believer, since the terms in which one casts one’s argument are merely the medium through which the one immutable truth of God is conveyed. Thus, the aim of this persuasion is not to convince the disbeliever through the persuasive force of a logical argument, but to see through the representation to truth.

Nonetheless, there is a disconcerting between the “original” truth to be represented and the medium of representation, which is the language of rational argument. The Aristotelian model of rational argument (whether deployed by religious believers or staunch rationalists) starts from certain first premises, follows a deductive route, and ends in a syllogistic conclusion which is presented as a necessary outcome of the argument. For the religious believer who attempts to reorder his or her disbelieving peer to faith, this necessary outcome is the ineluctable truth of God’s existence, which has to be presented as a “logical” consequence of his or her argument; the process appears to be linear, whereas it is, again, circular. As Neuhaus’s example also testifies, the logical route is followed only up to the point where the syllogism is to be presented as an ineluctable entailment, yet what really happens is a quick jump back to square one, to the very premise we started from, namely that God’s will governs all, or as Neuhaus puts it, we all participate in the divine Logos. The conclusion to his line of reasoning (which, Neuhaus insists, has been “rational”) has, in fact, never

been in doubt, thus the need for strict logical reasoning has been rendered moot. If one's belief in the divine origin of *anything* has been secured, we no longer need logical argument as there is no longer any doubt that needs dispelling. But if only those who are convinced can see anything as of divine origin, what is the point in convincing the ones who are already convinced? In an ideal scenario for the religious, the sequential steps of a logical argument would be replaced by the instantaneous perception of the full presence of divinity. This perception, however, would be far from being the result of a step-by-step logical argument at the end of which one gets through to divine truth, but, conversely, the argument can be convincing only to those who do not question this truth in the first place. It seems that faith persists with or without any argument being deployed.

This conclusion also entails that there is no argument that could ever seriously challenge one's faith from *outside*, which Fish quite eloquently explicates in his reply to Neuhaus ("Faith" 268). The more important implication is that faith functions as a key to reading signs in such a way that those signs will contribute to the affirmation of the articles of one's faith—in short, one's faith functions as an interpretive program. This insight is central to Fish's theory of interpretation, in which he repeatedly draws upon theological analogies in explicating his position. One of these instances can be seen when he cites Augustine as saying: "to the healthy and pure internal eye He [God] is everywhere." This Augustinian claim adequately illustrates Fish's point: "He is everywhere not as the result of an interpretive act self-consciously performed on data otherwise available, but as the result of an interpretive act performed at so deep a level that it is indistinguishable from consciousness itself" ("Normal" 272). In the section that follows, I will discuss the consequences and mechanism of this interpretive program through focusing on Fish's theory of reading and interpretation.

Faith as an interpretive program in Stanley Fish's literary theory

The pivotal notion of Fish's theory of interpretation is that of the "interpretive community," which he introduces in an essay titled "Interpreting the *Variorum*." He argues that

[i]nterpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading . . . but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than . . . the other way round. (171)

The argument is typically phrased in Fish's constructivist terms, and he repeatedly comes to make this same point in various forms in his later work. What is more important for us in this context, is that preceding the passage in which the term "interpretive community" appears, Fish invokes Augustine's "rule of faith" from his *On Christian Doctrine* as a paradigmatic interpretive program, one that—he claims—can still serve to illuminate the mechanisms of exegetical practices. Fish paraphrases the rule of faith as follows: "everything in the Scriptures, and indeed in the world when properly read, points to (bears the meaning of) God's love for us and our answering responsibility to love our fellow creatures for His sake" ("Interpreting" 170). Then, Fish goes on to quote in fragments the famous Augustinian interpretive tenet that secures the success of any reading:²

[W]e must also pay heed to that which tells us not to take a literal form of speech as if it were figurative. In the first place, then, we must show the way to find out whether a phrase is literal or figurative. And the way is certainly as follows: Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as figurative . . . Accordingly, in regard to figurative expressions, a rule such as the following will be observed, to carefully turn over in our minds and meditate upon what we read till an interpretation be found that tends to establish the reign of love. (744, 746-47)³

This method is unailing: there should be no obscure or recalcitrant passage in the Scriptures which thus could not be made proper sense of—all it requires for its appropriate functioning is immitigable faith on the interpreter's part. Fish claims this interpretive rule to be operative in contemporary readings as well, so much so, that he adds: "Whatever one may think of this interpretive program, its success and ease of execution are attested to by centuries of Christian exegesis. It is my contention that any interpretive program, any set of interpretive strategies, can have a similar success although few have been as spectacularly successful as this one" (170).

2 Although the translation available to me is different from the one Fish cites, I use it nevertheless so that the passage can be quoted in full.

3 Fish paraphrases it as follows (I italicize the words he quotes from Augustine): "if only you should come upon something which does not at first seem to bear this [godly] meaning, that does not '*literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith,*' you should take it '*to be figurative*' and proceed to scrutinize it '*until an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is found*'" ("Interpreting" 170).

The claim is somewhat preposterous insofar as it flies in the face of theories which operate under the assumption that interpretation is a matter of careful reasoning rather than blind faith. Interpretive acts, like those performed in literary criticism, are traditionally seen as committed to the epistemological program of providing as accurate a representation of what is “truly” in the text as is humanly possible. Such a program is obviously inconceivable without positing axiomatic elements in a text to which the critic can appeal in validating his or her interpretive claims. E.D. Hirsch famously insists on authorial intention as such an axiomatic element, arguing that “it [authorial intention] is the only practical norm for a cognitive discipline of interpretation” (7). Monroe Beardsley, though abandoning authorial meaning as an aesthetically rewarding criterion for interpretation, still insists that interpretations “must be *in principle* capable of being shown to be true or false” (37; emphasis in original). Richard Shusterman observes that “the elusive notion of authorial intention paradoxically offers the security of objective truth and convergence in literary interpretation . . . , while at the same time providing the security that this objective truth or meaning cannot be conclusively demonstrated once and for all, thereby ensuring the continued demand for interpretation” (84-85).

Shusterman’s contention is reminiscent of the silence of the gods, which necessitates and perpetuates interpretation when the divine intention calls for interpretation. Conclusive validation in interpretation is always a problem, but this fact does not necessarily discredit the critic’s work. The critic, after all, can pose in a role not unlike that of the “middleman” in Danto’s example of the *kledon*. Robert M. Adams describes the critic’s role in strikingly similar terms, saying that the critic is a “persuader, an intermediary between the object and the eye which divides its focus between the object and his critique. In one direction, he has to convince his reader that by seeing the object as his critique presents it, he will be seeing accurately, seeing what is ‘really there’” (203). Thus, in most cases, the reader of the given critical interpretation has to suspend his or her potential disbelief and have faith in the critic’s ability to perceive patterns in the text that ordinary readers fail to see.

Once we adopt an anti-foundationalist view, however, this neat epistemological pattern is seen as illusory, for what the reader perceives as “evidence” is predicated upon his or her previous beliefs, and so the patterns emerging will be determined not by an independent object (the text), but by the individual belief system of the readers. As Adams puts it: one cannot see evidence “unless one presumes they exist; if one presumes they exist, one tends to see only the evidence,” that is, “unless one has a hypothesis, one sees nothing but blur and confusion; if one has a hypothesis, one tends to become an advocate of it, at the expense of one’s role as a judge” (205). Fish makes the case even more poignantly: “it [the evidence] is always a function of what it is to be evidence for, and it is never independently available

. . ., [t]hat is, the interpretation determines what will count as evidence for it, and the evidence is able to be picked out only because the interpretation has *already* been assumed” (“Normal” 272; emphasis in original). It seems, therefore, that the critic has to pose as appealing to the reader’s rational faculties, but, in fact, it is his or her faith that must be captured.

Fish readily embraces this view and puts it to work in his “strong constructivist” approach to readers and texts. He holds that if the success of an interpretation greatly depends on the reader’s pre-structured faith, the reader is no longer just a passive recipient of the critic’s wisdom. This is what undermines the endeavors of what he calls “formalist-positivist analyses” (“Interpreting” 152), which seek to find confirmation of their interpretive assumptions by appealing to the text itself for evidence. For Fish, there is no such thing as “the text itself” independent of the interpretive moves which the reader sets out to perform on it. The formalist-positivist analysis presupposes a spatial model of reading, while Fish’s model is temporal: the reading, Fish holds, does not serve to explicate already in-place, determinate meanings, but rather the reading is what *constitutes* the text. To ward off the frequently mounted charge of relativism, Fish stipulates that each interpretive community places constraints on interpretability, and no individual reading can ever break totally free from these constraints. The reader’s response is never individually formulated but, instead, is a function of a set of assumptions prevailing in a given interpretive community:

Thus while it is true to say that we create poetry . . ., we create it through interpretive strategies that are finally not our own but have their source in a publicly available system of intelligibility. Insofar as the system (in this case a literary system) constrains us, it also fashions us, furnishing us with categories of understanding, with which we in turn fashion the entities to which we can point. (“How” 332)

Questioning the constraining system is, of course, possible, but the act of questioning will be no less a function of other assumptions unavailable for critical evaluation. As Fish puts it:

[D]oubting is not something one does outside of the assumptions that enable one’s consciousness; rather, doubting, like any other mental activity, is something that one does *within* a set of assumptions that cannot at the same time be the object of doubt. . . . The project of radical doubt can never outrun the necessity of being situated; in order to doubt *everything*, including the ground one stands on, one must stand somewhere else,

and that somewhere else will then be the ground on which one stands. (“Demonstration” 360; emphasis in original)

This argument might be superficially appealing even to foundationalists, for Fish can be understood as outright stating that there is no situation in which one does not stand on some kind of a ground, that is, there is not a moment in one’s life when one does not hold a certain faith. Accordingly, Fish also dismisses relativism as “a position one can entertain, [but] it is not a position one can occupy. No one can *be* a relativist,” he says, “because no one can achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions which would result in their being no more authoritative *for him* than the beliefs and assumptions held by others” (“Is There” 319; emphasis in original). This is straightforward reasoning, and it offers a comprehensive meta-theoretical explication on how interpretative processes operate.

Nonetheless, Fish’s theory raises a number of complex theoretical questions. On the one hand, Fish does not claim to have created a meta-theory capable of accurately representing interpretation *as such*, so in principle his is just one of the competing theories in the marketplace of ideas. On the other hand, Fish’s generalizing claims make his position look very much like a meta-theory which, in principle, is suitable for describing all other theories. Fish therefore cannot avoid the semblance that he is aspiring to attain a privileged epistemological position whose existence he denies.

By postulating the authority of interpretive communities as a general rule, Fish has a *carte-blanc* theory on his hands, one that can be applied to any critical/theoretical approach without having to formulate specific arguments about (or against) those approaches. It suffices to “merely” point out that a particular reading has been determined by interpretive assumptions and constraints prevailing in the given interpretive community, rather than by what is to be “found” in the text. Thus, when A.S.P. Woodhouse or Douglas Bush assume that their reading of Milton’s twentieth sonnet (Fish’s example) is correct by virtue of being faithful to the intrinsic meaning of the text, the anti-foundationalist meta-theorist need only point out that their notion of intrinsic meaning is but an illusion nurtured by their unexamined interpretive assumptions. However, the formalist could easily turn the tables on the anti-foundationalist and rightfully counter that Fish’s position is no less enabled by a set of interpretive assumptions, thus being no more authoritative (even by its own standards) than their formalist stance, which is grounded in “objective evidence” taken from the text—and the debate would proceed in this circular, self-perpetuating fashion ever after. And if we take Fish’s theoretical tenets to be applicable to his own theoretical position, will there remain anything else than *faith* that he can rely on when trying to defend his position?

Fish is certainly not unaware of the fact that he has argued himself into a corner: “I am assuming, it is the article of my faith,” he contends “that a reader will always execute some set of interpretive strategies and therefore perform some succession of interpretive acts” (“Interpreting” 169). Fish’s preoccupation with the role of faith in his theoretical disposition is further evidenced in an interview in which recalls that when he was a young teacher of writing and composition, his exam in every course consisted in asking “the students to relate two sentences to each other and to the materials of the course” (Olson 293). The first sentence was a quotation from J. Robert Oppenheimer: “Style is the deference that action pays to uncertainty.” Fish “took that to mean that in a world without certain foundations for action, you avoid the Scylla of prideful self-assertion, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of paralysis, on the other hand, by stepping out provisionally with a sense of limitation, with a sense of style” (Olson 98). The other quotation was taken from Hebrews Eleven, the epistle of “faith in action”: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” which Fish interpreted for his students as the “classically theological version of Oppenheimer’s statement,” adding that “I think there is *nothing* in my work that couldn’t be generated from those two assertions and their interactions” (Olson 293; emphasis in original).

The quotation from Hebrews is a succinct but nonetheless efficacious account of the paradoxical nature of faith, which could very well be the reason why Fish has found it so appealing. That which can only be “hoped for” does not (yet) have substance, and that which is unperceivable cannot be evidenced. The sentence is not merely a maxim that warns non-believers not to confuse faith with knowledge, and look for substance and evidence where there is none to be found. Instead, it can be read as saying that faith constitutes its own substance and evidence without the need for ascertainment based on external factors, much like we have seen in the arguments of St. Augustine and Richard Neuhaus. The quotation by Oppenheimer, however, signifies the distinctly anti-foundationalist component of Fish’s thinking. It can be interpreted in the context of Fish’s work as saying that even though in the absence of absolute foundations no utterance can be made with immitigable certainty, “style”—the way in which we fashion our conduct both linguistically and ethically—will determine the truth or rightness of our actions, not some transcendental truth emanating from some kind of metaphysical reality or from a deity. As Fish reflects in an essay, his intention using these quotation was for his students

to see that while the moral life cannot be anchored in a perspicuous and uncontroversial rule, golden or otherwise, we must nevertheless respond to its pressures; and indeed it is only *because* the moral life rests on a base

of nothing more than its own interpretations that it can have a content . . .
The uncertainty of which Oppenheimer and Saint Paul speak is not a defect
of our situation but the very ground and possibility of meaningful action.
("Milton" 272)

Thus, we can conclude that while faith of some kind in an anti-foundationalist context is not denied the right to be the foundation of moral action, scientific inquiry, or interpretive practices, it is itself a function of "style"—a rhetorical construct, an interpretation, a social or cultural practice, a pattern of behavior, a course of actions, etc.—rather than a self-constitutive foundation of absolute truth

Conclusion: revisiting the *kledon*

Similar to Fish in St. Augustine's exegetic guidelines, Danto sees in the *kledon* an early iteration of a general interpretive principle insofar as "the form of interpretation they exemplify play a considerable role in modern hermeneutic theory" in such a way that "when in saying *a* a speaker says *b* . . ., but where the ordinary structures for understanding *a* would not disclose to the hearer that *b* is also being said: nor is the speaker at all aware that he is saying *b*, meaning as he does only to be saying *a*" (54). But what sort of authority can guarantee that the transposition of *a* into *b* has been executed correctly? In other words, on what epistemic grounds can one present a valid argument for the "*b*-ness" of *a*? In the absence of faith, there is no reassuring answer to these questions. Instead of a guarantee of certainty, one finds a scheme of intricate interdependences: without interpretation, the message of the gods, after all, is just contingent small talk, while interpretation without divine authorization is mere phantasm. Epistemologically speaking, there is a lot at stake, for the mortal human being has to find some way of ascertaining that he or she deciphers the right meaning from the message. As long as the gods remain silent, however, the divine word will stand in need of interpretation. It is precisely the absence of divine emanation that necessitates interpretation in the first place. Thus, sacred word and profane interpretation have to gain validation from one another in such a way that an endless back-and-forth transaction of power gets underway: the act of interpretation confers authority on the message by acknowledging its divine origin, which, in its turn, gets projected back on the interpretation. Each argumentative turn the interpretation henceforth takes will appeal for validation to the divine authority it itself has posited—and it can go on *ad infinitum*. Divine utterance and human understanding are caught up

in a constant and inevitable process of mutual empowering and validation, which amounts to a circular movement where all (divine as well as human) criteria of validity are shifting continuously.

Although this reasoning and the whole of my argument above can hardly explain all aspects of faith, my attempts have been directed at highlighting a certain epistemological ambivalence inherent to the notion. On the one hand, faith begs several epistemologically related questions about its foundation, validity, structure, etc. On the other hand, faith is often defined as a mental state which resists rational explication. The question of how to locate validating authority typically emerges in an epistemologically-charged or theoretical context, whereas the holder of a given faith would never think of posing it, for his or her faith is predicated upon the assumption that such questions should not arise in the first place. Sheer unconditional faith suffices to dispel any incidental doubt: where the secular epistemologist sees a representational anomaly, a paradox to be solved, circumvented or merely to be pointed out, the believer sees an exchange between mortal humans and the deity, which requires no more epistemological grounding or validation for the religious believer than what is already implicated by his or her faith.

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