

## UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETATION

A distinction is sometimes made between the teaching of a text *as it is* and the one *as is interpreted* by some one. This distinction seems to amount to the distinction between *understanding* of a text and its *interpretation*. But to maintain it is to hold that we can understand the teaching of a text as it is without being required to interpret the text, or that interpretation is not at all involved in the understanding of a text. I propose to show in this paper that this position cannot be seriously maintained. In other words I shall advocate the view that understanding of a text does involve its interpretation.

Some important questions arise in this context. What is it to understand a text? Is there any difference between the meaning and the teaching of a text? What is interpretation of a text? What is the nature of traditional interpretation? What is a right interpretation? How to determine the rightness or faithfulness of an interpretation? and so on. The answers to these would bring out the necessity of interpretation for understanding the teaching of a text.

To understand a text, some one may say, is to understand its meaning. But the word 'meaning' is quite vague, especially in the context of a text as a whole. It is true that sometimes a word is taken to be the ultimate meaningful unit of language and hence we speak of meanings of words and have dictionaries. In a communication situation, however, we *use* words in combination so as to express what is technically called a complete thought. And this is a 'sentence' which really is the ultimate meaningful unit of language from the point of view of communication. A sentence may be said to be the organic unity of words such that words merge their identity in it and are, hence, to be understood only in its setting or context. To understand an isolated word is to know its meaning (or meanings) as fossilised in dictionaries; but to understand the meaning of a sentence is to understand the 'thought' expressed by it, where 'thought' stands for whatever the user or the author of the sentence intends to communicate

to the readers through it – a thought, a feeling or an intention. Words acquire their active meanings, so to say, only in the context of the sentence of which they form parts. However, what needs to be remembered is that what is true of words is also true of sentences themselves in respect of their meanings. When a sentence occurs as a part of a group of sentences which as a whole expresses some ‘thought’, its meaning needs to be understood only in the context of the whole of the group, that is, in relation to the other sentences of the group. A text is usually structurally divided into parts, chapters, sections and paragraphs. Semantically, it is found to be divided into subjects, topics, sub-topics and points. There are, in a text, statements of views, expositions, explanations, justifications, arguments and so on, often centering round some dominant theme or theory which it is the purpose of the text as a whole to propound. This dominant view or conceptual whole forms the central ‘thought’ of the text which semantically governs our understanding even of the sentences in it. This ‘central thought’ which the author intends to express and communicate through the text as a whole constitutes the *teaching* of the text. To understand the meaning of a text is really to understand its teaching. And to understand the meanings of sentences in a text is to understand the particular ‘thoughts’ expressed by them in relation to one another and to the ‘teaching’ of the text.

Now, it is true that to understand the real purport<sup>1</sup> of a text is to understand its ‘teaching’ or ‘thought’ which its author *intends* to communicate. But, if we distinguish between the *intended meaning* of a text and its *understood meaning* and call the former its ‘teaching’, then the crucial problem is how to understand the *intended meaning* (or ‘teaching’) of a text? Strictly speaking, the true purport of the teaching, as it is, of a text is known only to the author of the text. (In the case of a confused writer even this cannot be guaranteed!) For others, the only access to it is the text itself through which it is expressed. There is very often a gap between the ‘teaching’ of a text and our understanding of it. This is what we call misunderstanding or partial understanding. It is the permanent possibility of such a ‘gap’ or ‘misunderstanding’ that lends support to the distinction, mentioned in the beginning of this paper, between the teaching of a text as it is and the one as interpreted.

The root of such misunderstandings lies firstly in the nature of language itself. Had the words had fixed, unchanging meanings, or had it been possible to *use* them for the same fixed purpose in a language, the matter of understanding them would have been much simpler; in fact, there would have been neither misunderstanding nor any problem about them. But the matter is much more complex than it appears to be at first sight. We have problem in understanding a text if the words used are ambiguous, or the views expressed are not clear. The matter is further complicated if the text to be understood is on a specialised subject. We need to know in such cases the technical terminology, phraseology etc. besides the ordinary knowledge of language. Further, the students of language distinguish between at least two kinds of meaning viz. Literal meaning (Vācyārtha) and suggested meaning (Vyañgyārtha). The latter goes beyond the former. There are a number of other ways like symbolisms, allegories, parables and fables etc. of going beyond literal meaning for determining which grammar, etymology etc. are useful. A text, again, may either be direct or indirect (i. e. suggestive) in its expression. The paradigm of a language which is absolutely clear, unambiguous and direct in its communication of 'thought' may be regarded as *ideal language* and the language of the state-laws is usually supposed to come closest to it. Even then, we know that the same laws are quoted in support by the pleaders of both the plaintiff and the defendant. The ideal language is perhaps destined to be either an ideal only or else a thoughtless (contentless) formal skeleton communicating nothing. As an example of suggestive language one may mention parables and fables. I think, it is here that the difference between understanding of the *literal meaning* of a text and that of its *thought* becomes evident. Vishnugupta of the Pañcatantra could not have been able to make the dullards of princes wise by telling them merely cock and bull stories! What is conveyed through them is something different. The literal meaning of the Pañcatantra would give you the stories but not the *thought* which the author intends to communicate through them.

The problem is how to understand the 'teaching' or 'thought' of a text? In the case of those texts which fairly clearly and directly express their 'thoughts' or 'teachings', the problem is

not so acute; but in the case of texts which are not clear, or use symbolisms, or again express the 'thought' suggestively and indirectly, or which use words in technical and special senses, or which contain 'teachings' which are at least apparently diverse and contradictory, or which are ancient and use the modes of language which are not current, or the like, it is very much so. In case of any text whatever, what we have to do, for understanding its 'teaching', is to take recourse to what is called *interpretation*<sup>2</sup>.

In order to understand the true purport of a text, we are required to interpret not only sentences but even words which express concepts that are central to its teaching. I shall illustrate this point with the help of an example. In the *Īśāvāsya* upaniṣad the words *Vidyā* and *Avidyā* occur. Now, what is one to understand by these words in the context of the text? Their literal meanings are *knowledge* and *ignorance*. But to know this is not sufficient to understand the text. In the light of the whole text, therefore, they are interpreted as meaning *Ātmajñāna* and 'Karma' respectively. By no stretch of imagination can *Avidyā* be taken, by itself, to mean *Karma*. The context of the upaniṣad, however, almost forces this interpretation on us.

The necessity of interpretation is more obvious in the case of texts which are ambiguous or vague, or which use symbolic language and/or archaic expressions. The very fact that one system of Indian Philosophy—*Mīmāṃsā*—came into being to lay down the principles of proper interpretation of the Vedas<sup>3</sup> for understanding their true purport, is more than sufficient to convince us of this necessity. From this point of view, to understand a text is to interpret it properly. 'Interpretation' here means 'genuine interpretation' which follows a method like the one described earlier<sup>4</sup> and has the purpose of understanding the true purport of the text. It may be noted that the term 'interpretation' stands for both the method of interpreting a text and the resultant understanding of it. Unfortunately, 'interpretation' has come to acquire yet another sense because of the way some commentators of ancient texts have used it for their own purpose. Here, interpretation is used mostly to defend a particular understanding of a text which has been traditionally followed. Tradition rather than the text becomes decisive. What happens, some times, in the

cases of such tradition-defending interpretations is that the text is twisted or the context ignored etc. to suit the traditional interpretation. This is done mostly in the face of criticisms from counter traditional interpretations of the same text. In extreme cases, the purpose of interpretation becomes to *see one's own meaning* in the text rather than to discover *the meaning* which the author intends to convey. We shall do well, therefore, to examine the nature of 'traditional interpretation' a little more closely.

Granting that *interpretation* has been historically used (misused!) in this way, let us see if this is a sufficient ground for contrasting *genuine interpretation* with *traditional interpretation*. This is important because it is in the context of traditional interpretations that the distinction, with which we started, between the teaching of a text as it exists in the text and the teaching as interpreted, becomes most relevant.

Now, the question we have to ask is, must the purpose of a traditional interpretation, qua traditional, be to read one's own view or meaning into the text. In other words, cannot a traditional interpretation be genuine? Those who attack tradition would tell us not to answer this question theoretically but historically. And then they would give a number of examples of traditional interpretations of ancient texts where the texts are interpreted to suit interpreters' views of the texts. Granting for the sake of the argument that historically there have been interpretations of ancient texts, like the Upaniṣads and the Gītā, which tend to uphold tradition even at the cost of the texts, can we say that a traditional interpretation, as traditional, must do this and so can never be genuine?

The defenders of tradition would say that tradition alone helps us in understanding the real purport of texts. In other words, they would claim not only that traditional interpretation is genuine but also that it alone is genuine and correct. This amounts to saying that an interpretation is genuine *because* it is traditional. Thus, we have two opposed views based on the same ground viz. that an interpretation is genuine because it is traditional and that an interpretation is not genuine because it is traditional. I think that both these views are the results of the same mistaken principle, namely that the genuine-

ness or otherwise, of an interpretation depends merely on its being traditional, while in fact, it depends on the proper application of the scientific method of interpretation with a view to discovering the true purport of the text.

We may further try to bring the nature of traditional interpretation into clearer relief. We must remember that a tradition of interpretations does not come from the blue all of a sudden. There is some founder of the tradition who is the original commentator or interpreter of a text. In course of time, his interpretation of the text finds favour and acceptance with other thinkers and a following comes into being. The followers do not simply repeat or translate the founder's interpretation but clarify it, explain it, and if necessary, also introduce minor modifications in it. This process of the development of a tradition can be historically described. If so, and if we have no doubt about the intellectual capacities of the followers, then obviously we cannot charge them of being *blind* followers. Positively, this means that they have judged the founder's interpretation to be genuine and right in the light of their own understanding of the text and then accepted it for furtherance. I do not want to suggest that every follower does this. I want only to point out that this possibility cannot be ignored, and that we cannot declare that all the followers of a tradition are blind. Acceptance of another's views which are judged to be true or right need not be prohibited. If this is true of a follower, then it goes without saying that the founder might have interpreted the text genuinely, with a purpose to understand its true purport, he being himself out of the tradition. Moreover, a traditional interpretation, being an *interpretation*, cannot be said to be a purely imaginary or independent, original work; it must be based on the text itself. From this it should be evident that a traditional interpretation *can be* genuine and need not necessarily foist one's meaning or view on the text.

However, having said this, we cannot deny the possibility that a text can be used in support of one's own views independently arrived at. But, even here, only that text can be taken help of whose teaching is basically similar to one's own views. The differences are then either ignored or explained away or else are so inter-

puted as to be shown to be no differences at all. In such cases, 'foisting' meaning or views on the text is possible. This may, however, be said to be only a *special use of interpretation* and not the essential nature of it. Moreover, it would be difficult to say that this kind of use is peculiar only to traditional interpretations. It is available to all. But even in such cases, it would be unfair, and even risky, to attribute motives to an interpreter by saying that he is not really, genuinely, interpreting the text, but is using it for his own purpose. It is unfair because he might not be having that motive, and it is risky because it is almost impossible to prove that he has this kind of motive. It would be more reasonable, therefore, to tackle the basic problem of the rightness of an interpretation.

If we try to look for the practical situation in which all these questions arise, we see that they arise only where there are differing interpretations of the same text. Had there been only one interpretation, or had there been no difference between the conclusions of the available interpretations in regard to its teaching, the problems discussed earlier would not have arisen. In the face of differing, sometimes even opposed, interpretations, it becomes necessary to determine which one of them is correct. I have already described a *genuine* interpretation as one which uses a method of interpretation properly and intends to determine the true purport of a text. But then, an interpretation's being genuine is not the guarantee of its being correct. All the differing interpretations could be genuine, while only one of them can be correct. Hence the problem of determining the correct interpretation in such a situation becomes highly pertinent. A comparative study is necessary for solving this problem.

The real difficulty arises when the text itself lends support to more than one interpretation. This is possible in the case of a text which contains, diverse, and sometimes, (at least apparently) inconsistent teachings. In such cases it is very difficult to maintain that one interpretation emphasising one teaching of the text is right, and the other emphasising another teaching is altogether wrong. What is possible to say is that both are only *partially correct*. If there is a third interpretation that satisfactorily resolves the apparent inconsistency in the teachings of the text, it would prove to be more acceptable than the

other two. In almost all the cases of texts having diverse interpretations, we find that there is at least some evidence in the text that supports each one of them. Consider the famous example of the Bhagavadgītā of which there are at least three understandings, or interpretations, called Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jñāna Yoga, all of which find ample support in the text. It would be more appropriate, therefore, if we understand the concept of *correctness* (or *rightness*) of an interpretation in terms of its *faithfulness* to the text. And what we can and have to do for determining the 'faithfulness' of an interpretation, is to see whether a scientific method of interpretation is properly applied or not, whether all the relevant factors are taken into account or not. If this is found to have been done, we can judge the interpretation in question to be faithful. Applying the same procedure we can judge one interpretation to be more faithful than another, or to be the most faithful, in a comparative manner. But it should be remembered that this procedure itself involves interpretation of some kind.

If, however, even after following this procedure, we judge more than one interpretation of a text to be equally faithful, as in the case of the Gītā again, then the question remains as to which one of them is to be accepted as *the right* one. I think, the search for an interpretation, or understanding, which is *the right one* is misdirected. We may judge at the most its faithfulness; but in the face of more than one faithful interpretation of the same text, acceptance of one of them becomes a matter of individual preference.

To conclude, the present paper has sought to show that there is a complex inter-relationship between 'understanding' and 'interpretation' especially in the case of conceptually poly-valent texts. The main concern of the analysis has been to bring out one particular aspect of this inter-relationship. It may be said that 'understanding' in the context of complex texts has two foci—the grasp of meanings and the articulation and structuring of these meanings in the form of a connected conceptual whole. The grasp of meanings constitutes 'understanding' as ordinarily conceived; but in the case of conceptually complex texts, it is suggested that this mode of 'understanding' is to be supplemented by the grasp of the structuring of meanings into a conceptual whole. And it



is this particular structuring that I refer to as the 'teaching' of a text. Now, the 'teaching' of a text is, I have suggested, accessible only by way of what is usually called 'interpretation.' Hence the claim of the paper that 'interpretation' functions as a constitutive element in 'understanding'.

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#### NOTES

1. Vakturicchā tātparyam.

2. The Indian thinkers, especially the Mīmāṃsakas, have laid down one such scientific method of interpretation. According to them, for determining the true purport of a text one has to take into consideration its six features, namely, (1) the introduction and conclusion together; (2) the 'thought' or 'thoughts' repeated and emphasised through out the text; (3) the originality and distinctiveness of 'thought', language, and method of expression; (4) the purpose of the text mentioned by the author; (5) the objects of praise (or blame) and hyperbolic expressions; and, what is important, (6) the arguments and examples used to support and explain the 'thought'. With the help of such a method there is a fairly good chance of arriving at a faithful and possibly true understanding of the 'teaching' of a text. It should be noted that such a method may serve as a method of justification also.

3. In fact what are called the 'Ṣaḍaṅgas' (six organs) of the Vedas, viz. Śikṣā (Phonetics), Kalpa (Code of rituals), Vyākaraṇa (Grammar), Nirukta (Etymology or Vedic Lexicon) Chanda (Prosody) and Jyotiṣa (Astronomy) are all to be used to understand the teachings of the Vedas.

4. See Note 2.

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