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DIVINE DISCOURSE

Philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks

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CHAPTER II
Interpreting the mediating human discourse:
the first hermeneutic

Interpretation, on the expressionist view of discourse characteristic of
the Romantics, traverses the process of discourse in reverse. Whereas
speakers start from inner life and then form and implement a plan for
producing externalizations expressive of that inner life, interpreters
start from the externalizations and proceed by inference to the inner
life of which those were, by intent, expressive.

It's an elegant picture; but misleading. The essence of discourse lies
not in the relation of expression holding between inner life and outer
signs, but in the relation of counting as holding between a generating act
performed in a certain situation, and the speech act generated by that
act performed in that situation. The goal of interpretation, correspond­
ingly, is to discover what counts as what. The discourser takes up a
normative stance in the public domain by way of performing some
publicly perceptible action.

Nonetheless, the Romantics had their eye on something real. Typi­
cally there's something that the discourser wants to say, some
speech action he wants to perform; his desire to do that may or may
not be motivated by the desire to express some inner state. To perform
that speech action, he has to causally bring about (or a deputy of his
has to causally bring about) some action which will count-generate that
speech action. In the case in which he speaks in his own name, he
performs and then implements an action-plan; he causally brings about
some action which he believes will count-generate the speech action on
which he has his eye. If all goes well on both sides, the interpreter, in
discerning what counts as what, will perforce discern the content of
that implemented action plan; and typically the sequence of her
discernment will reverse the sequence of its formation: the discourser
started with a speech action he wanted to perform and then settled on
an action he thought might count-generate it; the interpreter starts
with that latter action and tries to discern what speech action might be
count-generated thereby. But everything may not go well, even on the
discourser's side. What he causally brings about may not count as what
he thought it would count as - not count as the speech action that he
intended to perform. Or it may count as quite a bit more than he had
in mind; and with that more, he may be less than happy.

We have established that authorial-discourse interpretation is, in
general, a legitimate mode of interpretation. So the question now
before us is this: how, on what I have called the traditional practice, do
we go about interpreting the Christian Bible for divine discourse?
Before we set out, though, let me call attention to a striking feature of
how the Bible is used in the Christian community: the Bible has not
been filed away. Christians keep on reading it, and doing other things
with it. Not just the novices in each generation, but those who have
read it from childhood up. The same is true for the Hebrew Bible in
Judaism and for the Koran in Islam.

Why is that? If it's an instrument of divine discourse, or alternatively,
a medium of divine revelation, why don't those who have discerned
what is thereby said or revealed move on to other things? Not move on
to things other than the content of the discourse or revelation; that's
eminently worth keeping in mind. But move on to other things than
the medium. Normally when something of importance is said or
revealed to us, we don't keep coming back to the instrument of
discourse or the medium of revelation; the instrument or medium has
done its work and we move on. Why this endless returning to the
Bible?

If one saw no way of improving on this way of saying what God said,
or on this way of communicating what God revealed, then of course it
would be important to keep on introducing new members of the
community to the Bible. But why do the old ones keep coming back?
And as to unimprovability: don't our pastors and Bible interpreters and
theologians in fact tacitly assume that the medium can be improved
on? Don't they assume that, all in all, the Bible's way of accomplishing
the discourse or communicating the revelation is rather difficult and
obscure, that, nonetheless, if one works at it one can see what is said
and can state it more clearly, and that they have in fact done this? But
if so, why not make do with the clarification wrested from the text?
Why endlessly return to the text from which the clarification was
wrested?

What seems to me the right answer to this question has two parts;
and it's especially the second part of the answer that we must keep in
mind, lest we inflate the significance of our inquiry. The first part is
that the community assumes, by its practice, that no matter how
successful prior interpretations, additional discernment is always pos­
sible; the activity of discerning the divine discourse is forever
incomplete. It is that in two ways. For one thing, I cannot in general just assume
that what God said to me in my situation, or to my group in our
situation, by way of this text is exactly the same as what God said to
other earlier readers and interpreters in their situations. But if there is
indeed a rich diversity in the particularity of what God said to different
people by way of authoring this text, then those different people have
to try to discern that. Secondly, the fact that interpretation is forever
incomplete is grounded in the subtlety of the text as well as in the
diversity of what was said to whom. Sometimes we're stymied in our
attempts at interpretation; often our interpretations get it wrong. The
Bible is a rich and subtle letter from a friend of ours to a group of us.
Over and over when we come back to it, whether as individuals or as a
group, with the question in mind of what the friend was saying, we are
rewarded with new insight. In part that is because each of us at a
particular stage in our lives is cognitively privileged with respect to
certain facets of reality and cognitively underprivileged with respect to
others. If one has lived in luxury all one's life, certain aspects of the
biblical text will almost certainly escape one's attention; if one has lived
under oppression, certain aspects will jump out.

The other part of the answer is that the community assumes, by its
practice, that the significance of the Bible goes beyond its being a
instrument of divine discourse. The community assumes a surplus of
significance for the Bible. For one thing, the words and the worlds
projected prove worth contemplating in their own right; there is an art
of biblical narrative, an art of biblical poetics, and fascinating reso­
nances among the parts of the text and the worlds. Furthermore, the
church down through the ages has found itself drawn to using the
words of Scripture for its own discourse: it speaks its own praise and
lament in the words of the psalms, it speaks its own blessings in the
words of Paul, it speaks its own hopes in the words of Revelation. But
thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the church has wanted to be so
formed by the very phrases and images of scripture, the narratives and
songs, the preachments and visions, that it sees reality and imagines
possibilities through those phrases and images, through those narratives
and songs, through those preachments and visions. A poem is a piece
of discourse; and a good poem is rich and subtle in the discourse of
which it is the instrument. But a good poem is more than that, much more than that, more than a subtle instrument of rich discourse; it is discourse with a surplus of significance. It provides stuff for our meditation, offers words for our voice, gives form to our consciousness, shapes our interpretation of life and reality. After Shakespeare, many are those for whom the world's a stage and all the men and women, merely players.

Opening assumptions

To get our inquiry going, we have to make some assumptions. First, that the books of the Bible did not come about by God directly producing inscriptions on parchment but by human beings doing so. Second, that by way of doing so, those human beings were themselves performing acts of discourse; they were not just writing words down. And third, that God's discourse is a function not just of those human acts of inscription but of those human acts of discourse generated by those human acts of inscription. To know what God was saying, we have to know more than just the Hebrew and Greek text; we have to know what was being said with those texts — what was being said with them by whatever human beings authorized them in their present form to count as their discourse.

And one more assumption: in our earlier discussion on the many modes of discourse, I distinguished two ways in which it may come about that one person's discourse counts as another person's discourse. One of those I called deputation. If one person is deputized to speak in the name of another, then the deputy's discourse counts as the other person's discourse. The other I called appropriation. If one person appropriates another's discourse by such words as “I agree with that” or “that speaks for me too” or “I second that,” then the appropriated discourse counts as the appropriator's discourse. That particular practice of biblical interpretation on which I am focusing my attention, in these discussions on interpretation, is that practice which takes the Christian Bible as a whole to be an instrument of divine discourse; for the sake of convenience, I have called it, the traditional practice. In my discussion I am going to assume that, given the extraordinary diversity of the biblical text, the best model for those who engage in the traditional practice to use as they think about the way in which God is the author of scripture is the appropriation model.

There can be no doubt, of course, that within the totality of the appropriated discourse which constitutes the Bible, some of it is prophetic, and hence deputation, discourse — as is some of the discourse reported by the biblical writers. But it's not at all plausible to think of all of it as that — to think of the Psalms, for example, as prophetic discourse, or the book of Esther, or the Song of Songs. Of course it would be bizarre to think of God as just finding these books lying about and deciding to appropriate them; the appropriation model calls for supplementation with some doctrine of inspiration. But what's worth noting is that, on this way of thinking of the matter, a doctrine of inspiration really is a supplement. However these books came about, the crucial fact is that God appropriates that discourse in such a way that those speakings now mediate God's speaking.

Given these assumptions, how do we go about interpreting the text so as to discern God's discourse? Let me say, before I set out, that I have found Richard Swinburne's recent book, Revelation, extremely helpful in thinking about these matters — far and away the most helpful book around. The structure of my proposal will be different at many points from the structure Swinburne proposes — some of those differences, though by no means all of them, the consequence of the fact that Swinburne is discussing divine revelation whereas I am discussing divine discourse. But whatever the differences, Swinburne's discussion marks a signal contribution to our understanding of these issues.

Beginning with the appropriated human discourse

If the goal of our interpretation is to discern the divine discourse mediated by the appropriated human discourse, we begin our interpretation by trying to discern that appropriated human discourse. We begin by trying to discern the noematic and designative content of the illocutionary act, and the illocutionary stance taken toward that content. If I appropriate someone else's discourse by saying some such words as, “Those are my sentiments as well,” then the attempt to figure out what I was saying thereby must begin by figuring out the illocutionary stance and content of that discourse which I appropriated. When one person speaks by appropriating another person's discourse, then that appropriated discourse anchors everything. Possibly it was on this fact that Karl Barth had his eye when he argued that the freedom of God would be compromised if scripture were an instrument of divine discourse.
What follows is that the work of scholars who open up to us a better grasp of what the human authors of Scripture were saying is of indispensable importance for the discernment of divine discourse. This declaration will cause alarm in some quarters. It appears to place the sophisticated reader of Scripture and the divine discourse of which that Scripture is the medium a mass of intimidating scholarship; he can't get from here to there without going through all that.

The alarm can be alleviated somewhat. A good deal of the scholarship I have in mind is not some looming intimidating barrier confronting the ordinary reader. It is almost invisible to him or her; it finds its manifestation in the flow of new and better modern language translations. Secondly, given the new translations, the ordinary reader can get the drift of many passages of Scripture without much in the way of additional help from scholars. And thirdly, I have spoken only about discerning the human discourse of Scripture; I have not spoken about discerning the divine discourse in the human discourse. Nonetheless, whether or not the principle evokes alarm, the “logic” of the situation makes it inescapable. And the practice of the church down through the ages makes clear that it has recognized this.

What should be added is that we are not talking here about all cases of God saying something by way of some part of the biblical text, but only about God saying something by way of authoring the biblical text as a whole, understanding that authoring as consisting in the appropriation of prior human discourse. To use terminology which I employed earlier: we are talking about the discernment of authorial discourse, rather than the discernment of presentational discourse. It may help to recall the example I used earlier of presentational discourse, viz., that which brought about the conversion of St. Antony. Antony, you will recall, happened to be present in church when the passage from St. Matthew about the rich young man was read. Upon hearing the words of Jesus as reported by Matthew, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me,” Antony found himself convinced that God had spoken to him then and there, telling him to give away his possessions.

Now suppose that on some later occasion Antony had undertaken to study with care this passage from St. Matthew and had concluded that Jesus was speaking metaphorically when he said “sell your possessions.” Suppose further that Antony had been right in that conclusion. It seems to me about as clear as anything can be that he would not have been right, that Jesus was speaking literally. But let us suppose, for the sake of our example, that Jesus had been speaking metaphorically. Would it follow that God did not on that occasion say to Antony what Antony took God as saying to him? Alternatively, would it follow that Antony now had a reason for seriously reconsidering whether God had said that?

I think not. For Antony was presented with a case of divine presentational discourse, rather than divine authorial discourse. It doesn't really matter what Jesus meant by those words, nor what Matthew took Jesus as meaning. It was by way of that lector’s locutionary act of uttering those words that God performed the illocutionary act of speaking to Antony. It was not divine discourse mediated by human discourse, but divine discourse mediated by human location.

What is before us for consideration here, though, is not cases such as these of God presenting someone with some passage from Scripture, but the case of God authoring the Bible as a whole by appropriating all that human discourse which the human authors of the various parts of the text used their texts to perform. For this, interpreting the text for divine discourse must begin by interpreting the text for human discourse, trying to discern the illocutionary stance and content thereof.

How does someone do that? Since this is not a text on hermeneutics, I shall have to content myself with describing the main features of what seems to me the appropriate procedure — though even here, there will be plenty of points which are controversial.

**Discerning the noematic content of the appropriated discourse**

A central part of the totality of what we want to discern is the noematic content of the discourse. To do that, we begin with the meanings of the sentences in whatever be the language in use. The anchor of the appropriating divine discourse is the human appropriated discourse; and one of the main anchors of the human discourse is the meanings of the sentences used.

I assume that the well-formed sentences of a language do have meanings. We, who are taught to use an extant language, don’t have to do something to give a well-formed sentence a meaning; it comes with that. And if we don’t already know that meaning, there are ways of finding out — though naturally our use of those ways doesn’t always
yield success. Let it be added that many sentences in any natural language have more than one meaning.

What about sentences containing proper names; do they have meanings? One sometimes hears philosophers arguing that sentences containing proper names don’t have meanings because the proper names don’t have meanings; and arguing for that, in turn, by claiming that one can’t find the meaning of a proper name by looking it up in a dictionary. Now there might be other reasons for dictionaries not giving the meanings of proper names than that proper names don’t have meanings; for this argument to be compelling, that possibility would have to be eliminated. But in fact the claim is mistaken. I open at random the dictionary I have at hand and find at the top of the right-hand column on the right-hand page this entry: “Narbonne: A town in southern France; pop. 32,000. Ancient Narbo Martius.”

But “Narbonne,” it may be said, is a very uncommon proper name; what about, say, the name “John”? Well, for this my dictionary has several entries, thirteen as a matter of fact – though for some of the thirteen, “John” is treated as part of a longer name, such as “John III” and “John Barleycorn.” Pretty clearly the makers of this dictionary were thinking of the character-sequence J-o-h-n as the character sequence of many different words, each of those words having its own meaning; and the reason they don’t give all those words with their meanings is that it would be impossible to do so. They content themselves with giving the meanings of those proper names whose bearers they judge to be most significant for their readers.

Possibly there was some naivete in the thinking of those who composed the dictionary I have at hand; perhaps they had never read Mill, Frege, and Kripke on proper names. But then again, maybe they had; it may be that a good deal of informed and sophisticated thought had gone into their decision to handle proper names in this way. The proper analysis of the workings of proper names remains a highly controverted matter among philosophers; and one can imagine an intelligent line of thought eventuating in the practice adopted by those who composed the dictionary I have at hand. In any case, it will speed things up, and do no harm, if we do think of proper names as having meanings; and it won’t much matter whether we think, as my dictionary makers were thinking, of a huge number of different names “John,” each with its own meaning but all sharing the same character-sequence J-o-h-n, or if we think of there being just one proper name, “John,” highly ambiguous as to meaning. Purely for the sake of convenience, I will think and speak in the latter way.

We want to get to the noematic content of the discourse. And we start, I said, with the meaning, or the meanings, of the sentences used. What do we do then? Suppose that each of the sentences used has just one meaning. Then we take the noematic content of the discourse to be the meaning of the sentence, unless we have good reason for doing otherwise. There are those – John Searle is an example – who would describe our practice in the following way: we take the speaker’s utterance meaning to be the sentence meaning. I strongly prefer not talking about speaker’s meaning, confining the word “meaning” to something that sentences have; and then talking about the noematic (and designative) content of the speaker’s illocutionary act.

So once again: the base line from which we operate is that of reckoning people as having said what their sentences mean – in other words, reckoning them as having spoken literally, strictly and directly so. In the most fundamental sense of the words, that’s what it is to speak in strict and direct literal fashion: to say what one’s sentence means. We reckon people as speaking in strict and direct literal fashion unless we have good reason for not doing so. If someone performs an act of discourse by uttering the sentence “The bell is on the cat,” then, since his sentence means that the bell is on the cat, we conclude that that’s what he said, that that’s the noematic content of his illocutionary act – unless we have good reason for not doing so.

What do we do if the sentence has several meanings? We consider the possibilities: the possibility that the noematic content of his discourse is meaning A of the sentence, the possibility that it is meaning B of the sentence, the possibility that it is meaning C of the sentence, and so on. And then, in the light of all we believe, we settle on that one which is the noematic content of the speech act that we judge to have the greatest likelihood of being the one that he intended to perform with this sentence. Unless, in the light of all we believe, we judge it unlikely that he intended to perform any speech act of which one of those sentential meanings is the noematic content. In the most straightforward case, the speaker tells us which meaning of the sentence is the relevant one, and does so with an unambiguous sentence.

The theme, of the interpreter forming judgments as to the speech actions that the discoursor is likely and unlikely to have intended and not intended to perform, is going to turn up repeatedly in my discussion of
attention one recurrent theme, that of what the discourser intended to say. But I should highlight one facet of how I am thinking of tropes. It will be easier if I formulate my point in terms of metaphors, though I mean the point to apply to all the tropes.¹

I hold that literality and metaphoricity are a matter of use rather than of meaning. Thus I side with Searle and Davidson in my understanding of tropes, against the majority.² A well-formed sentence of a language has a meaning, or perhaps several. Not a literal meaning, nor a metaphorical meaning, nor an ironic meaning; just a meaning. Nor does a sentence have one meaning relative to one context and another meaning relative to another context – with perhaps one of those literal and the other, metaphorical. It always has just the meaning that it has per se. What differs from occasion to occasion is not the meaning of the sentence but the noematic content of what is said by using the sentence. We can use it literally, strictly, and directly; we do so when, by uttering it in a certain circumstance, we perform an illocutionary act whose noematic content is the meaning (or one of the meanings) of the sentence. But we can also use it metaphorically. For me to use it metaphorically, it must have a meaning and I must know that meaning; the metaphoricity of my use inheres in a certain relationship between the meaning of the sentence and the noematic content of what I say. To explain that relationship is the central challenge which a theory of metaphor tries to meet and overcome. Such a theory, on my view, would take as its underlying framework, that sentences do not acquire metaphorical meanings but are put to metaphorical uses.

Some of those writers who see literality and metaphoricity as a matter of meanings rather than as a matter of uses, work out this view by attributing literal and metaphorical meanings to the tokens of sentences rather than to the sentences themselves. They hold that well-formed sentences – that is, sentence-types – have a meaning in the language; that, in addition, sentence-tokens have meanings; and that it is at the level of sentence-tokens that we can distinguish literal meaning, metaphorical meaning, ironic meaning, and so on. Richard Swinburne is an example. This is what he says in one place:

a token sentence "I shut the sheep in the pen" could have a meaning other than the normal meaning of the type sentence: for example, in a fairy story about sheep being shut in a giant fountain-pen. Context (of paragraph, speaker, hearer, and environment) selects among the normal meanings of type sentences and may give to a token sentence a meaning other than a normal meaning. A token sentence must be presumed to have among its possible

how interpretation proceeds; let me postpone, until later, commenting on this theme as such.

Suppose we conclude that the discourser is not speaking literally in strict and direct fashion – that the noematic content of his discourse is not to be identified with any of the meanings of his sentence. What do we do then? We consider the possibility that he is speaking literally but not strictly – that he is speaking loosely. Especially we who are philosophers constantly make the judgment, as we interpret texts, that the writer was speaking loosely at a certain point; we do so on the basis of our judgment that the discourser didn’t intend to say quite what his sentence means. Often it’s clear to us what he wanted to say instead; so sometimes we count his inscription of the sentence as a loose way of saying that. Sometimes writers themselves tell us that they will be speaking loosely; to speak strictly would be too cumbersome, too infelicitous, or whatever.

Or we consider the possibility that the discourser is speaking literally but not directly – speaking with indirection. “Could you pass the salt” says someone at table. We know that he didn’t want to say what that sentence means – that that was not his intention. In fact it’s as clear as anything could be what speech action it is that he did want to perform. So we count his utterance of that sentence as a performance of that speech action. He has performed it indirectly, by indirection. Typically it’s the wish to avoid bluntness, the desire to be circumspect, polite, coy, or sensitive to the addressee’s feelings, that leads us to speak with indirection.

Or we consider the possibility that he was speaking non-literally – tropically, as I shall call it. It seems unlikely to us that he intended to say any of the things he would have to be reckoned as saying if he were speaking literally – be it strict or loose, be it direct or indirect. So we consider the possibility that he is using one or more words in the sentence as a trope – as metaphor, as hyperbole, as irony, as metonymy, as synecdoche, as personification, or whatever. With the various possible tropic uses in mind, and recalling our beliefs about his intentions, we run through such possibilities as occur to us, settling finally on that noematic content which the linguistic practice allows to be said in this tropic fashion, and which, of all the possibilities, he is most likely to have wanted to say – and wanted to say in this fashion.

It is no part of my aim here to develop an account of the workings of the various literary tropes. My aim is rather to describe the main lines of how interpretation proceeds, and then to single out for special
meanings the one which makes it a natural thing to say in the context, if with all other meanings it is not. This may be because only so would it be relevant to the subject of the conversation; or otherwise it would be obviously (to the speaker and hearer) false. If with two or more meanings the sentence is a natural thing to say in the context, whereas with all other meanings it is not, then it is ambiguous between interpretations with the former senses.

The main question to be faced by someone who wishes to follow the strategy Swinburne adopts here, of attributing meanings of diverse types to sentence-tokens, is the question: what is a meaning of a sentence-token. We come to hermeneutical reflections with a concept of sentence meaning. The concept of sentence-token meaning, by contrast, is a philosopher's artifact. It would be easy to explain Swinburne's notion of the metaphorical meaning of sentence-tokens in terms of the conceptuality with which I am working. It would go thus: consider a case of someone performing some illocutionary act by inscribing some sentence which is such that the person used the sentence metaphorically; then the metaphorical meaning of the sentence-token produced by that action of inscribing is the noematic content of the illocutionary act. But Swinburne wouldn't accept this as his explanation of the concept of the metaphorical meaning of sentence-tokens, since he wants to make the notion of sentences and sentence-tokens expressing propositional (noematic) content basic, rather than parasitic on the notion of the noematic content of illocutionary acts.

What do we do if none of the above strategies works out? We conclude that some sort of malfunction has taken place. That the speaker mis-spoke himself, absent-mindedly saying "Locke" when all the while he meant to say "Hume." Or that he was operating under some mis-apprehension: he thought he knew the meaning of "serendipity" when clearly he didn't; he kept on referring to the man in the corner as the man drinking the martini when in fact the man was drinking Perrier. Or that he really didn't succeed in saying anything - didn't succeed in performing any illocutionary act.

In the outline I have offered of the strategy we follow for interpreting human discourse, I have several times claimed the decisive relevance of the interpreter's beliefs concerning the illocutionary actions that the discoursor was likely and not likely to have wanted and not wanted to perform with that locutionary act in that situation. Appeals to authorial intention have received such a bad press in our century that most readers will probably boggle at this point. So let me take a moment to reflect on the matter further.

John Searle, in his discussion of metaphor, suggests that to arrive at a metaphorical interpretation of some remark, one must apply in succession three strategies. The first is the one of concern to me here. Searle describes it thus: the interpreter “must have some strategy for determining whether or not he has to seek a metaphorical interpretation of the utterance in the first place” (114). Searle's description of this strategy is then as follows:

Suppose [the interpreter] hears the utterance, “Sam is a pig.” He knows that that cannot be literally true, that the utterance, if he tries to take it literally, is radically defective. And, indeed, such definiteness is a feature of nearly all of the examples that we have considered so far. The defects which cue the hearer may be obvious falsehood, semantic nonsense, violations of the rules of speech acts, or violations of conversational principles of communication. This suggests a strategy that underlies the first step: Where the utterance is defective if taken literally, look for an utterance meaning that differs from sentence meaning. (114)

Searle adds that “This is not the only strategy on which a hearer can tell that an utterance probably has a metaphorical meaning, but it is by far the most common ... But it is certainly not a necessary condition of a metaphorical utterance that it be in any way defective if construed literally. Disraeli might have said metaphorically, 'I have climbed to the top of the greasy pole,' though he had in fact climbed to the top of a greasy pole.

But surely this cannot be right, as it stands. People all the time do actually say things that hearers or readers judge to be defective, seriously defective: patent falsehoods, irrelevant comments, points that scarcely need to be made, and so forth. Surely the reason that the patent falsehood, the irrelevant comment, the point that scarcely needs to be made, prods us into looking for some interpretation other than the strict and direct literal, is that we believe that the strict and direct literal interpretation gives us something that he would not have wanted to say - would not have intended to say - on this occasion in this way. Our basis for that judgment may be very direct; the speaker may announce that he is not speaking literally. But usually we have to make inferences from whatever knowledge is available to us. Searle's last example, about Disraeli, makes the point especially clearly. The reason we would take Disraeli's remark to be a metaphorical comment about his rise to the Prime Ministership is our conviction that he wouldn't have intended on this occasion to say that there was a greasy pole to whose top he had managed to climb - even if there was such a pole.

Or consider part of the passage already quoted from Swinburne:
"A token sentence must be presumed to have among its possible meanings the one which makes it a natural thing to say in the context, if with all other meanings it is not. This may be because only so would it be relevant to the subject of the conversation; or because otherwise it would be obviously (to the speaker and hearer) false." We look, says Swinburne, for an interpretation of the person's remark which makes it "a natural thing to say in the context"; and the irrelevance or obvious falseness of the remark as interpreted literally prods us into looking for some other than literal interpretation. As Swinburne recognizes, the issue is not what would be natural for me to say in the context, but what would be natural for the person speaking to say in the context. But "what would be natural to say" has to be parsed as meaning: what that person would be likely to have intended and not intended to say, in this way on this occasion. Whether or not his remark is natural or unnatural in some other sense, or whether he thinks it is, is not relevant. In some sense of "natural," asserting that \( P \) may be a very unnatural thing for him to say and he may realize that it is. Yet we may recognize that is exactly what he intended to say with those words; and that if we construe them metaphorically, that's exactly what we interpret him as saying. That, then, is the relevant consideration.

It follows that interpreters cannot operate without beliefs about the discourser; specifically, beliefs as to the relative probability of the discourser intending and not intending to say one thing and another. If I have no beliefs as to what you're likely and unlikely to be intending to say, then I must refrain from interpreting your utterances. But no matter who you are, I will have such beliefs; for you are a human being. Sometimes beliefs of such generality won't get me very far, however. Then I may have to concede that, even though I understand the language you are using, I can't figure out what you said.

Where do we get our beliefs as to what some speaker is likely and unlikely to have intended and not intended to say? Some of them we bring with us to the particular episode of discourse which we are interpreting. "Given what I have long known about Victor, it's most implausible to suppose that he intended to say, with those words, that his father was a liar." Others are beliefs concerning what is true of the speaker in the context of his discourse; they are, then, acquired from our knowledge of that. Partly the linguistic context consisting of other things the person has recently said: "Given that Victor had already said that the car was out of gas, it's not very plausible to suppose that, in saying what he did, he intended to ask her to start up the motor." In the case of texts, the genre of the text is often an important clue. But also, features of the non-linguistic context: "Given that she was standing right in front of him, it's implausible to suppose that in saying what he did, it was his intention to ask where she was."

The role of authorial intention

These reflections, about the role of judgments concerning the discourser's intentions in the process of interpretation, induce the following perplexity: if it is our aim to discern the illocutionary actions which the discourser did perform, why bother with what he intended to perform? Haven't we inadvertently slid back into the confusion between intending to perform some action, on the one hand, and, on the other, intentionally performing some action, or performing some intentional action? If I want to know, say, whether Amy set on the tea water, I don't ask whether she intended to set on the tea water, but whether she did in fact perform the intentional action of setting on the tea water. Why isn't the same true here, when we are dealing with speech actions? If discoursing is, as I have argued, the acquisition of a normative standing in the public domain by the performance of an action which is itself publicly perceptible, how could the discourser's intention to acquire such-and-such a normative standing be relevant to our determination of what normative standing, if any, he did acquire? Is there not, perhaps, something deeply askew in the whole conceptuality we have developed?

I think the resolution of this perplexity goes along the following lines: the person who is discoursing by using a certain natural language is operating a certain system for saying things. If that system were such that every well-formed sentence of the language had just one meaning, were such that no discrepancy was allowed between the noematic content of one's illocutionary act and the meaning of the sentence one used, and were such that the only relevant feature of the generating act was the inscribing or uttering of a sentence, then appeals to what the author intended to say would have no place in the process of interpreting what he did say; if he intended to say \( q \), whereas the meaning of the sentence he used is \( r \), then if he said anything, he said \( r \), and that's the end of the matter. 5

But that's exactly how our natural languages do not work. Many well-formed sentences have multiple meanings; and in addition, to learn to use the language is to learn to use sentences in other ways than literally.
It's as if the user of a natural language had before him a vast board on which the well-formed sentences of the language are all arrayed. From each sentence, various paths go out: from sentence S, the path which consists of using S (directly and strictly) literally with meaning M, the path which consists of using S (directly and strictly) literally with meaning N, the path which consists of using S indirectly literally with meaning M, the path which consists of using S with meaning M metaphorically, and so forth. Whenever a person wishes to use the language to say something (and doesn’t want to speak ambiguously), he must not only select a sentence but must also select a path leading from that sentence. Sometimes he has options: a variety of different combinations of sentences and paths will give him the noematic content that he wants.

Each of the paths going out from a sentence has a gate at the entrance. Once the person utters a sentence and selects a meaning thereof, one gate will automatically open – viz., the gate leading to the (strict and direct) literal usage of that sentence with that meaning. The exception is that some genres are such that if he is discoursing in that genre, then one of the non-literal gates is the one that automatically opens up. So if that’s not the path he wants, he must close that automatically opened gate and open another.

Now you and I, to discern what he said, must not only know what sentence he used, along with various features of the context of utterance, but must also know what gate he opened (or left opened) to a path leading from the sentence he uttered or inscribed. Sometimes he will tell us. He will explain in which sense he is using the word “bear,” he will state that now he is speaking literally. But he can’t make such explanations for everything; in particular, he can’t keep on making them for his explanations. So we operate with two general presumptions, and the speaker knows that we do: we presume that he is speaking literally – and then directly so, with more or less strictness. Or for certain distinct genres of discourse, we presume that he is discoursing in accord with the conventions of that genre. We continue in these presumptions until something turns up to disturb the presumption – something which makes us suspect, for a certain sentence, that the speaker closed the gate which was automatically open and opened up another. Then we do our best to infer which gate he opened up instead. And a prominent role in these inferences is played by beliefs we have as to which illocutionary action he probably would have wanted to perform with that sentence in that situation, and which ones he probably would not have wanted to perform.

Starting from the sentence he used, we reflect that the path of strict and direct literal use of that sentence with meaning M would lead to such-and-such speech action. But we judge it most unlikely that when he chose to use that sentence, it was that speech action that he wanted to perform; so we conclude that he must have closed the gate that opens to the path of strict and direct literal use with meaning M, and opened up another. Or we judge that it was probably so-and-so that he wanted to say, and that he probably wanted to say it with indirection; so he must have closed the gate which leads to strict and direct literal usage, and opened the one that leads to indirect literal usage.

So our interest as authorial-discourse interpreters is indeed in what the speaker said – not in what he intended to say, but in what he did say, if anything. But saying is an intentional action. And more importantly, we have to know how he was operating, or trying to operate, the system. Given all those distinct meaning- and usage-paths going out from each sentence, we have to know which path he was using, or trying to use. And in coming to know that, a crucial role is played by our beliefs as to which plan of action for saying something he probably implemented, and which ones he probably did not implement. He, in turn, if he wants to communicate, must take account of which interpretations we are likely to put on his words; he must, in that way and for that reason, take expected audience reaction into account.6

**Discerning illocutionary stance and designative content**

We have now spent a good deal of time on the topic of how we go about discerning noematic content; our remarks on illocutionary stance and designative content will, accordingly, have to be very brief. The main clues to illocutionary stance are carried by the moods of our sentences: declarative, interrogative, optative, and so forth. But literary genre also carries clues; in our culture, to be told that a piece of prose is a novel is to be told that the illocutionary stance of most of the discourse therein is fictive. Here too, though, linguistic clues are neither sufficient nor decisive; the determination of stance requires the use of considerations about what it is likely that the discourser intended, in ways similar to those outlined in our discussion of the determination of noematic content.
I have assumed that for the determination of noematic content, the only considerations relevant are considerations about the meanings of sentences, considerations about tropic uses established in the linguistic culture, and considerations of probability and improbability as to what the discoursers had and didn’t have as his intention to say. The determination of designative content is very different. To discover what the discoursers referred to, and what he predicated of the entities referred to, one must, with noematic content in mind, exit the meanings and tropes of language and the action-plans of discoursers and enter the real world so as to discover which entity if any the definite descriptions designate, which time the tenses designate, which persons the personal pronouns designate. Here, non-linguistic features of the context of utterance are decisively important. Two people utter the sentence "My queen is dead." Both speak literally; so that given the assumption that this sentence has only one meaning the noematic content of the two illocutionary acts is the same. But the one predicates of the Dutch queen that she is dead; the other predicates of the English queen that she is dead. The designative content of the illocutionary acts is different. It is that because one speaker is Dutch and the other is English.

Let me close with a disavowal. What I have said may well have given the impression that, when discourse is well-formed, then the discoursers have a clear and distinct apprehension of the noematic content of their discourse; and that, as a consequence, there is a definite answer to the question as to whether something does or doesn’t belong to that content. We the interpreters may not know that answer; but it’s there for the finding out. For I said that in the well-formed case, discoursing-by-inscribing and discoursing-by-uttering are the implementation of an action-plan on the part of the discoursers: the speaker intended to say that, and intended to utter that, and intended to say that by uttering that. And I said that, in trying to find out the noematic content of what someone said, we operate on the principle that she said what her sentence means, unless, in the light of whatever evidence is available to us, it is implausible to suppose that that is what she wanted to say. Then we run through the other things that the linguistic practice in question allows one to say with this sentence; and pick that one, from all those, that she is most likely to have wanted to say in this situation, with some usage other than the strict and direct literal. Unless, in the light of the evidence available to us, it is implausible to suppose that she wanted to say any of those either. Then we go for a fall-back option and attribute some defect to her attempt at discourse.

But what it is that a speaker wants to say, and what it is that a speaker does say, will sometimes be relatively indeterminate. Or may have a richness of content which she herself only dimly apprehends. This dimness of apprehension may itself come in degrees: some parts she sees yet more dimly than others. As she probes deeper and deeper into the depths of that, she will come across things she wasn’t even aware of having said – and things she’s not sure whether or not she did say. Especially is this true when we speak metaphorically. When reflecting on one’s own metaphorical speech, one sometimes has the sense of learning what one said – be it with delight or dismay.
CHAPTER 12

Interpreting for the mediated divine discourse:
the second hermeneutic

Suppose one has discerned the human authorial discourse of the biblical writings. How does one then move on, as the traditional practice assumes one must, to discern the mediated divine discourse? And let me say, once more, that to understand how the Bible as a whole, with its extraordinary diversity of texts, could be an instrument of God’s discourse, I am working with the appropriation model; different models would yield a somewhat different answer to our question.

It would, in my judgment, be a mistake to move on too quickly. Perhaps even those who read while running can get something out of Plato’s Republic, and Dante’s Divine Comedy. But the experience down through the ages of those who participate in Western culture is that these works repay repeated and close reading; subtleties and profundities never noticed when we read as we run come to light when we meditate on these works. Surely we must suppose the same for God’s book; we must suppose that God’s book requires and rewards close attention to what its human authors wrote. For it is by way of that, that God discourses. The truly dazzling contributions which critics have made in recent years to our understanding of biblical narrative and poetry have mainly come from those who disavowed any explicit theological concerns. Their contributions are nonetheless of inestimable worth for those who do read for theological concerns ~ more specifically, for those who read to discern the speech of God. Only by attending to the details does it become likely that one is oneself interpreted by the text ~ or by that One who is the author of the text.1

Here is also the place to remark that, even when considering the Bible as God’s one book, one might well have other “interpretative” interests than discerning the divine discourse. One might be interested in applying to our contemporary situation what God said by way of authoring scripture; traditionally, that was called tropological interpretation. Or one might be interested in what might be called simile interpretation: using one part of the world projected by the biblical writers as an image for describing another part: “As Moses raised the serpent in the wilderness, so God raised Christ ...” In his book, Discerning the Mystery, Andrew Louth includes a chapter on biblical interpretation which he calls “Return to Allegory.” Unfortunately, a sizeable number of rather different phenomena are lumped together by Louth under the rubric of “allegory,” with next to no attempt at differentiation. But when one scrutinizes the examples of so-called “allegorical interpretation” that he culls from traditional exegesis, one sees that most of them are of this “as X, so also Y” pattern. “A good example,” he says, of allegorical interpretation can be found in interpretations of the narrative of our Lady’s Visitation of Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting, the baby John the Baptist, still in her womb, leaps for joy. Max Thurian comments: “John the Baptist is like David who danced and leapt with joy before the Ark of the covenant at the entering-in of Jerusalem ... the Son of God in Mary produces in her a kind of messianic exaltation, even as the sacred presence in the Ark calls King David to dance and tumble with joy.”2

Thirdly, one might be interested in typological interpretation ~ which, as I indicated earlier, is a species of extrapolation. Extrapolation consists of determining what else would be the case, if what some writer projects by way of his or her text were the case. You and I tend to confine ourselves to the use of logical and causal principles in answering this question. But suppose one believed that there are not only causal relations among entities in the world, but also relations of natural signification: that things have been so created as to signify other things. Then in fleshing out the projected world of a work, beyond what is specified and suggested, one would find it natural to point out some of the signification relations that hold among the entities in the world. And that was what typology, traditionally understood, was concerned with.3

How to interpret for appropriating divine discourse

My concern here, however, is how we discern the divine discourse. Suppose we have figured out the meanings of the sentences of the biblical text and what the authors of the various parts of that text said
by authoring those parts; how do we get from there to the appropriating divine discourse? Let us once again start by reflecting on the human case. Suppose that I appropriate your discourse-by-inscription for my own discourse. How does an interpreter go about figuring out what I have said — figuring out the stance and content of my appropriating discourse?

The most fundamental principle, I submit, is this: the interpreter takes the stance and content of my appropriating discourse to be that of your appropriated discourse, unless there is good reason to do otherwise — such “good reason to do otherwise” consisting, at bottom, of its being improbable, on the evidence available, that by my appropriation in this situation, I would have wanted to say that and only that. At those points where the interpreter does have good reason to do otherwise, he proceeds by selecting the illocutionary stance and content which have the highest probability of being what I intended to say in this way. If the most probable of those is nonetheless improbable, then he adopts some such fall-back option as that I didn’t really appropriate that discourse but only appeared to do so, that in appropriating it I said something I never intended to say, that I misunderstood the discourse I appropriated or that he has misunderstood the appropriated discourse.

This, I say, is how interpretation proceeds when one human being appropriates the discourse-by-inscription of another human. I see no reason to think that it proceeds differently when it is God who appropriates the discourse-by-inscription of some human being — except that some of the fall-back options are excluded. God does not unwittingly say things God never intended to say, nor does God misunderstand the discourse God appropriates!

It follows that we do our interpreting for divine discourse with convictions in two hands: in one hand, our convictions as to the stance and content of the appropriated discourse and the meanings of the sentences used;4 in the other, our convictions concerning the probabilities and improbabilities of what God would have been intending to say by appropriating this particular discourse-by-inscription.

One of the most important contributions of Swinburne’s discussion in Revelation is his emphatic reminder that it was part of the traditional practice of Christians to regard the Bible as one book — not as approximately sixty-six books published together in one binding but as one book with approximately sixty-six clearly distinguished parts.5 An implication of this, given the framework within which Swinburne conducts his discussion, is that the literary unit relevant for determining the meaning of a token sentence from, say, the Gospel of Matthew, is not just the text of Matthew, and certainly not some small pericope from Matthew, but the text of the whole Bible. I have my doubts, expressed in the preceding chapter, about the wisdom of ascribing meaning to token sentences, as I have my doubts, expressed yet earlier, about the wisdom of introducing the notion of context-relative meanings of sentences and of then ascribing meanings to sentences in-context. Nonetheless, Swinburne’s point has its close analogue in the conceptuality which I have been using and developing for understanding the traditional practice of interpreting for divine discourse.

Suppose someone remarks, “You’ll get what I want to say if you take what Ruth said just now along with what she said yesterday,” or alternatively, “You’ll get what I want to say if you take what Ruth said just now along with what Michelle said.” Then, to discern the appropriating discourse, we have to consider those two pieces of appropriated discourse together, as a unit. So too, to discern what God is saying by way of the Bible, we have to take these sixty-six or so biblical books together. For some purposes it’s relevant to take the book of Isaiah as one complete text; perhaps there are also purposes for which it’s relevant to take so-called First Isaiah as a complete text, so-called Second Isaiah as another, and so forth. But to discern God’s discourse, we have to treat the text of Isaiah as no more than part of a much larger book, the Bible.

The situation is not that for a sentence occurring in so-called Second Isaiah, there is one thing which is its meaning all by itself, perhaps another thing which is its meaning in the text of Second Isaiah, perhaps another which is its meaning in the text of Isaiah, perhaps another which is its meaning in the text of the Old Testament, and perhaps yet one more thing which is its meaning in the text of the Bible. The situation is rather this: when the instrument of someone’s discourse is an extended text, the evidence to be considered by an interpreter in trying to determine what that person said with one sentence of his text has to include the fact that his saying something with this sentence is only part of an extended discourse of which the text as a whole is the medium. We the interpreters have to juggle tentative interpretations of the parts of the text until we arrive at the best interpretation of the total text — at that interpretation which has the highest probability of being the totality of what he intended to say with this total text. (Unless that interpretation is such that it's improb-
able that he would have intended to say that; then we adopt some fallback option.) And in particular: when someone appropriates for his own the discourse-by-inscription of others, we as interpreters have to interpret parts of what he appropriated in the light of the totality of what he appropriated, whether that be just one sentence and what was said thereby, or a whole text, or several texts by a single person, or several texts by several different persons.

There's a strand of radical Protestantism which would protest vigorously what I said above, that we do our interpreting for divine discourse with convictions in two hands - in one, convictions as to the human discourse and meanings of the sentences used, in the other, convictions as to what God would and wouldn't have intended to say by appropriating this totality of discourse and location. That strand would insist that interpretation for divine discourse must be interpretation with one hand: no convictions about God are to be employed in the practice of interpretation which do not themselves emerge from interpreting the human location and discourse of the Bible. Perhaps the simplest and most decisive way of seeing that this cannot be correct is the following: in our interpretations, we make use of the conviction that God speaks consistently. If we didn't, then even the fact that one's tentative interpretation of two parts of the biblical text has the implication that God's discourse was contradictory would be no reason for not adopting that interpretation. Indeed, so fundamental and pervasive is our use of this conviction in our practice of interpretation that we rarely notice we are using it. But if we didn't bring this conviction to the practice of interpretation, rather than waiting until it emerged from the practice, we couldn’t take even the first steps in the practice of interpreting for divine discourse. For suppose we approached the text with a truly open mind as to whether God's discourse is contradictory, and then read in the text the sentence, “I, God, do not contradict myself.” How are we to interpret that very sentence? If we already believed that God does not contradict Godself, then we would interpret it literally, and rightly so - unless something in the context indicated that the sentence was being used in an unusual fashion. But if we had no view on the matter of God's consistency, we would be without good reason to adopt either a literal or non-literal interpretation, say, an ironic interpretation. We couldn't adopt any interpretation; we would be stymied.

That God does not speak in contradictions is both the most fundamental and the least controversial of the prior convictions about God’s nature and purposes that the church, down through the ages, has used for interpreting for divine discourse. To get a better notion of the role of such prior convictions, let me cite two or three others which, while not entirely non-controversial, have none the less been prominent in the tradition. One is formulated by Augustine in a famous passage from his de doctrina Christiana:

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. Purity of life has reference to the love of God and one's neighbor; soundness of doctrine to the knowledge of God and one’s neighbor. (III,10,14)

The idea is this: we are considering whether so-and-so is something that God said by way of a certain part of the appropriated discourse-by-inscription. If God’s saying that would not conduce to our love of God and neighbor, or if its content is incompatible with Christian doctrine, then it follows that God did not say that. Accordingly, if we the interpreters believe, on careful reflection, that it would not so conduce or is thus incompatible, we are to conclude that God did not say that. It was pretty much accepted Christian doctrine in Augustine’s day that God does not have emotions; accordingly, in his own interpretations of Scripture Augustine concluded, using the principle of interpretation enunciated, that the use in Scripture of the language of emotions about God must be interpreted metaphorically - as must, for the same reason, all language which implies change in God.

Almost certainly Augustine, when speaking of “doctrine” in the passage quoted, had Christian doctrine in mind - official church teaching. God does not assert anything inconsistent with that, the unspoken reason being that Christian doctrine is true. But most if not all Christian interpreters, including Augustine, have operated with a much broader principle concerning the truth and falsehood of divine discourse than this. They have said or assumed that we are not to interpret God as asserting falsehood of any sort, on the ground that God, unlike human beings, does not and would not assert a falsehood. In the words of John Locke, “Whatever God hath revealed, is certainly true; no doubt can be made of it” (Essay iv, xviii, 10).

Thirdly, convictions as to God’s purpose in speaking to us by way of Scripture have also been used in conducting interpretation A common
formulation of one such conviction is that God speaks to us only on
matters of faith and morals. If our tentative interpretation of some
passage has the consequence that God would have spoken on some
matter other than faith and morals, we are, on this principle, to
conclude that God did not say that.

Whether or not these particular principles concerning God’s nature
and purposes are entirely correct is, of course, a legitimate topic
for debate; but appeal to some such principles, so I have argued, is
indispensable if one is to interpret for divine discourse. At the same
time, it’s no doubt natural for Christians to feel wary of making use of
such principles as these in the practice of interpreting for divine
discourse – and for Jews and Muslims to feel so as well. Divine
discourse threatens to become a wax nose molded in the image of our
own beliefs. I will discuss this worry in the next chapter.

Structure of the relation between appropriated discourse and
appropriating divine discourse

In the meanwhile, let us imagine that we have been engaged in the
practice of interpreting the human discourse of the Bible for the
mediated divine discourse, that we are well along in the process, and
that we now take a moment to catch our breath and survey the path
we have been led to take from the mediating human discourse to
the mediated divine discourse. The following question comes to
mind: at those points where we have found ourselves forced to
depart from the baseline of construing the stance and content of
God’s discourse to be that of the human discourse, how is God’s
discourse related to the locutions and discourse of the human
authors which mediated it? We should shy away from the expecta­
tion of ever formulating a set of informative generalizations which
catch all the cases; the relationships are much too subtle for that.
But some persistent patterns there will be.

For one thing, it will often be the case that to arrive at the correct
rhetorico-conceptual structure of the divine discourse, we had to alter system­
atically that of the mediating human discourse. What I have in mind
can best be explained with an example. In the 9th verse of his letter to
the Romans, Paul says that “God, whom I serve with my spirit by
announcing the gospel of his Son, is his witness.” By inscribing these
words, Paul said that God, whom he serves with his spirit by announc­ing the
gospel of God’s Son, is his witness. But we cannot suppose that God, by way

The psalmist is hymning God’s majesty, strength, and steadfast­ness;
that’s his main point in this psalm. He does so by citing what he
regards as manifestations of these attributes. In particular, he remarks
that God has “established” the world in such a way that it will never be
moved; he sees this as an example of God’s steadfastness. What is
coming to the surface here, of course, is the geocentric cosmology
widely shared among the peoples of antiquity. The author expresses
this cosmology in his discourse; it’s part of what he actually says – part
of the content of his discourse. But as a matter of fact the earth is moved, and we all believe that it is; it rotates on its axis, revolves around the sun, and moves with the solar system as a whole through space. So God can't be saying here that the earth is immobile. But the main point of the discourse of this Psalm, once we make the appropriate alteration of rhetorical structure, is that God is worthy of being hymned for majesty, strength, and steadfastness. So we attribute that main point to God, and discard the psalmist's particular way of making the point as of purely human significance.

Let me construct a somewhat different example of the same general point—that sometimes it will be the main point of the human author that we attribute to God (perhaps after suitable alteration of rhetorical structure), while leaving behind the human author's way of making that point. The psalmist actually says that the Lord "has established the world; it shall never be moved," though only as part of his way of hymning God. Suppose that he had instead written this: "The Lord, who has established the earth so that it shall never be moved," though only as part of his way of hymning God. Suppose that he had instead written this: "The Lord, who has established the earth so that it shall never be moved," though only as part of his way of hymning God. Suppose that he had instead written this: "The Lord, who has established the earth so that it shall never be moved, is from everlasting." Then the psalmist's belief, that the Lord has established the earth so that it shall never be moved, functions somewhat differently in his discourse. Rather than the content of the belief being something that he asserts as part of his way of hymning God, it's incorporated into his way of purportedly referring to God. God is purportedly referred to as the Lord who has established the earth so that it shall never be moved; and the logical predicate, "is from everlasting," is then predicated of him. But as a matter of fact, nothing satisfies the description, "The Lord who has established the earth so that it shall never be moved."

What is to be done with such a case? Well, the crucial question to raise when a person uses a referring expression, with the aim of referring to something, is whether in context he thereby expresses a cognitive grip on some entity which is firm enough for him to have beliefs about that entity, to make assertions about that entity, and so forth. And often it will be the case that a referring expression, even though it incorporates a certain amount of error, does express such a cognitive grip. "That large elm tree must be diseased, since it's losing its leaves," I say, pointing to a large tree up the street. But it's not an elm; it's a sycamore. In spite of my error, my cognitive grip on that large sycamore up the street was firm enough for me to have referred to it, and to have predicated of it the property of being such that it must be diseased, since it's losing its leaves. Furthermore, the main point of my discourse was to predicate that property of that tree; my main point was to affirm the designative content of my discourse. Though the noematic content of my discourse incorporated an error, my performing an illocutionary act with that noematic content was only my way of accomplishing my principle aim of performing an illocutionary act with that designative content.

So too, then, for our devised example, "The Lord, who has established the earth so that it shall never be moved, is from everlasting." Though the noematic content of this assertion would incorporate an error, nonetheless the psalmist would surely have predicated of God the property of being everlasting; that would have been the designative content of his discourse. And it would have been the affirmation of that designative content that was the main point of his discourse. The affirmation of that is what we attribute to God; some (not all) of the noematic content is left behind.

Thirdly, sometimes the relation between the divine discourse, and the discourse-by-inscription of the human author, is that though the human writer has spoken literally, God, as it were, has spoken tropically. That is to say, the noematic content of what the human author says is identical with the meaning of his sentence, whereas the noematic content of what God says is not identical with the meaning of the sentence. To get from the sentence used to the noematic content of God's discourse, we have to construe some of the words in the sentence as being used as tropes.

This happens less often than one would initially suppose; for in our interpretation of the human discourse-by-inscription, we will already have concluded that a good deal of the human discourse was not literal. In such cases, the phenomenon in question, of God speaking tropically where the human writer spoke literally, does not arise. For example, I take it as beyond doubt that the human writers were speaking metaphorically when they spoke of the eyes and ears and limbs of God.

But what about their application of the language of emotions to God? Were they speaking literally then? I rather think they were. If so, then if we follow the tradition of the church in insisting that such language about God must be construed metaphorically, we do have a case of the human author using the sentence literally whereas God uses it metaphorically. But let us consider a more obvious and dramatic example, one familiar to everyone: Psalm 137. The psalm opens with the moving lament:
By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

But then it closes with these words:

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

I find it difficult to believe that the human author of these last two sentences was not using them literally, not saying just what those words mean: out of angry grief speaking a blessing on those who would take Babylonian infants and smash them against rocks. But the church has rarely if ever concluded that, with these words, God was speaking that blessing. It has taken God to be expressing opposition to whatever opposes God’s reign; and to get to that, it has always construed these words tropically, as a metaphor cluster.

We are supposing ourselves to have discerned a good deal of the divine discourse of scripture; and we are now looking back over the course we have taken so as to spy some general patterns in the relation between, on the one hand, the human locutions and discourse from which we began, and, on the other hand, the content and stance of the divine discourse which we have arrived at. Let me now call attention to a fourth such pattern.

The fundamental phenomenon, when we human beings speak for ourselves instead of either deputizing another to speak in our name or appropriating the discourse of another, is that by performing some locutionary act we perform some illocutionary act – our producing or presenting tokens of words counts as our performing some act of discourse, some speech act. More precisely, this is the fundamental phenomenon when words are the medium; words need not of course be the medium. But it also happens rather often that by performing one illocutionary action we perform another illocutionary action – that by saying one thing, we say another thing, that one of our acts of discourse counts as another of our acts of discourse. The prophet Nathan, by telling King David a story about a rich man taking the lamb of a poor man, accused David of stealing the wife of a poor man. Aesop, by telling a story about asses and grasshoppers, propounded the moral that one man’s meat is another man’s poison. Jesus, by telling a parable about a sower, instructed his hearers about various kinds of receptivity to the word of God. Bunyan, by telling a story about a man’s mundane travels, propounded an allegory about the soul’s progress. And so forth; the examples are legion.

Let us have a name for this phenomenon of one act of discourse on the part of a person counting as another act of discourse on the part of that person. Let us call it transitive discourse. And if we need to pick out one or the other of the two acts of discourse, we can speak of discourse-generating discourse and of discourse-generated discourse. Parables and allegories are common forms of transitive discourse; but so too is telling a story to propound a moral or make a point, if that is not already captured under the concept of parable.

The concept of transitive discourse, as I have introduced it, is such that the concept is exemplified only if two acts of discourse, related in such a way that one generates the other, are both performed by the same person. But consider the various genres of transitive discourse, parables and allegories being the most commonly recognized. It’s obvious that when one person deputizes or appropriates the discourse of another, the stance and noematic content of the deputized or appropriated discourse may be related to that of the deputizing or appropriating discourse in exactly the way characteristic of a parable or allegory. So let us revise our concept of transitive discourse by decreeing that it also applies to such double-author cases as these. In such cases, the two discourses making up a parable or allegory are divided between two different persons.

The application to the matter at hand is obvious: rather often when we pair off the illocutionary stance and noematic content of some piece of appropriated biblical discourse, with those of the appropriating divine discourse, we have an example of transitive discourse: parable, allegory, or whatever. If both of the two discourses comprising the parable or allegory are present in the human discourse, then, if God appropriates that discourse as a whole, they will also both be present within the divine discourse. But if so, then it will also automatically be the case that one half of the human transitive discourse (the discourse-generating half) and one half of the divine transitive discourse (the
discourse-generated half) will together constitute a transitive discourse. Perhaps the Old Testament book of Jonah gives us an example; it does so if the human author told the story of Jonah as a parable and if God does so as well.

The more interesting cases of transitive discourse divided between human and divine discoursers occur, however, when the appropriated human discourse is not itself transitive discourse. Perhaps the Old Testament Song of Songs will serve as an example. Read on its own it sounds, to my ear anyway, like a love song "pure and simple" – if one can speak of a song so rich and evocative as "simple"! The characteristics of paradigmatic parable and allegory seem missing. Possibly it was nonetheless written to make a point or propound a moral – some of our contemporary novels seem to function like that even though they lack the characteristics of paradigmatic parable. But if so, the clues seem to me entirely lacking. Nonetheless, Judaism and Christianity have both traditionally interpreted the text allegorically. Suppose that we go along with this tradition when interpreting the Song of Songs as part of the discourse which God has appropriated. Then only when we pair off the appropriated human discourse with the appropriating divine discourse do we get the allegory; the allegorizing discourse belongs to the divine author, the allegORIZED discourse, to the human author. We don’t take the human author to have been speaking of the love of God for the Church; and we don’t take God to be speaking that sensuous love song which is the Song of Songs all by itself. We don’t take God to be saying,

Sustain me with raisins,
refresh me with apples;
for I am faint with love.

I think almost everyone would concede that biblical narrative as a whole fits under this category of transitive discourse. Possibly there are some “fundamentalists,” so-called, who hold that the biblical author was doing nothing else than narrating the story in declarative mood, claiming that this is how things went; and that, in appropriating it, God also was doing nothing else. But most readers have felt that these stories were being told to make a point; and certainly most of those who have interpreted these stories as part of divinely appropriated discourse have believed that God appropriated them to make a point – whether or not the human authors were making a point in telling them, and if so, whether or not God’s point is the same as that of the human authors. The intensely controverted question has rather been how much of these narratives the human authors were presenting as true, and how much (if any) God was presenting as true. In a later chapter I propose discussing in some detail this matter of the illocutionary stance of the biblical narratives. Here let it simply be noted that the fact that a narrative is told to make a point – that it is one half of a piece of transitive discourse, the discourse-generating half – does not imply that it is not also presented as true, not also asserted. Once upon a time it was customary for historians to use their historical narrations to teach lessons. Perhaps it’s still customary; perhaps the clues to didactic intent in our contemporary historians are just more subtle.

Lastly, rather often there is a relation of specificity/generality between the noematic content of the appropriated human discourse and that of the appropriating divine discourse. The point can again best be explained by considering an example. Let me take a passage which happens to be one whose interpretation has been the source of much controversy in recent years. In the second chapter of the first letter to Timothy we find the sentence, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.” One question to consider is how we are to interpret the human discourse here. Was the writer saying, in effect, that in situations of the sort he is addressing, women are to keep silent in the assemblies of the church; or was he saying, in effect, that at all times and places women are to keep silent? The more important question, though, is what God was saying with this passage. Suppose we come to the view that though the writer of this letter was speaking in the name of God, and though, by his writing what he did, God was saying to the people addressed that women should be silent in their assemblies, nonetheless God, by appropriating this passage along with the whole of the biblical text and discourse for God’s own discourse, was not saying that women in all church assemblies everywhere should be silent. It does not follow that we then discard this passage as being of purely limited significance. Instead one considers first whether perhaps by way of this passage God is issuing to all of us a deeper and more general point, whose application in that particular kind of situation yielded the injunction that women be silent, but whose application in our situation yields a rather different injunction.

Up to this point I have been speaking as if whatever God says by way of appropriating the discourse-by-inscription of the biblical writers is said by God to one and all. But there is no reason at all to suppose
that that is true. Even without transitive discourse entering the picture, we human beings sometimes say several distinct things by uttering or inscribing one sentence; and those several distinct things sometimes — though not always — are said to distinct persons. There is every reason to suppose the same for divine discourse, every reason to suppose that God's discourse is in this way rich in its diversity.

Of course, since God, unlike human beings, remains alive and active, the question What was God saying to us today by way of authoring this passage of Scripture? is easily confused with the question, What is God saying to us today by way of confronting us with this passage of Scripture? In homiletical and devotional situations the Church and its members typically ask, What does God say to us by way of this passage? That formulation is ambiguous as between the two questions; the Church doesn't distinguish, and it usually doesn't make any difference that it doesn't distinguish. The distinction is more important for theory than for practice.

These, then, are some of the patterns to be spied in the relation between the mediating locutions and discourse of the human authors of the Bible, and the mediated divine discourse. I do not claim that they are all of the patterns; I claim only that they are among the most prominent.

How to decide which pattern to use

A question which comes naturally to mind when one sees the five patterns arrayed before one — supplemented by whichever others one discerns and finds worth singling out for attention — is how to decide when to follow which pattern. I introduced my discussion of these patterns by inviting us to imagine ourselves well along in the activity of interpreting for divine discourse, and then looking back to see which patterns had emerged in the results. But the fact that these patterns had emerged implies that we had at various points along the way decided to interpret in accord with one of these patterns rather than another. How did we make those decisions?

I judge that the question arises most acutely when we have to decide whether to interpret a certain passage tropically so as to arrive at God's discourse, or to apply the main point/ancillary point distinction and then assign the main point to God and leave behind the ancillary point as of purely human significance. For example, why not give a metaphorical interpretation to that line from Psalm 93,