March 2016

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Margolis Joseph

Recommended Citation

Joseph, Margolis. 2016. "Ouverture and Closure in Interpretive Contexts." *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 36, (2): pp.5-19. https://tsla.researchcommons.org/journal/vol36/iss2/15

Ouverture and Closure in Interpretive Contexts

Joseph Margolis

Abstract：I posit as polar extremes of interpretative practice the well-known model of closure Dante reports as guiding or governing medieval literature and the opposed model of acknowledging different degrees and kinds of openness somewhat differently supported by Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes, that suggest the limiting considerations of "the only possible right way" and the increasing tolerance and scatter, characteristic of our time, of contingently contrived responses and associations that convey a sense of relevance but are prepared to dispense with distinctions of any strong methodological sort. Contemporary interpretation, particularly in the arts, tends increasingly to favor openness; accordingly, the artworld itself tends to accommodate artworks (installations, happenings, conceptual art, for instance) that invite open interpretations suited to evolving notions of what counts as art works. It is also true, of course, that interpretation in different fields (in history, the law, the stock market, medical diagnosis, psychoanalysis) needs to answer to professional interests that require adhering to a distinct sense of evidentiary relevance (closure). In all of these cases, the sense of rigor of interpretative practice seems to be guided by our sense of the meaningful order of parts of the entire intelligible world that we draw from in fashioning pertinent kinds of interpretations regarding what falls within the middle range between the two extremes. I offer no more than an initial scan of this changing practice, with an eye to attempting a closer analysis of its notable diversity.

Keywords：Barthes； closure； Dante； Eco； interpretation； openness； persons； Weber

Author：**Joseph Margolis** is currently Laura H. Carnell Professor of Philosophy at Temple University (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA). His most recent book, *Toward a Metaphysics of Culture* (London：Routledge, 2016) has been recently released. His Venetian Lectures, "Three Paradoxes of Personhood," delivered in Venice, June 2016, will be published shortly in Italian translation. His research centers on the theory of the human person and the human world across the main lines of contemporary philosophy. Email：josephmargolis455@hotmail.com

标　题：阐释语境中的开与闭

摘　要：但丁声称指导或支配中世纪文学的是封闭模式,而艾科和罗兰·巴特则持相反意见,支持不同程度上的开放模式,本文将这两种模式假定为阐释实践中的两极。此两极暗示着对两种情形的有限思考,一方面思考"唯一可能的正确方法",另一方面思考我们时代特有的对偶然刻意的回应与联想日渐增长的宽容和分散,这些回应与联想传达了一种相关性,但随时又会免除任何强势方法论梳理中的区隔。当代的阐释,尤其在艺术领域,越来越倾向于开放式,因此艺术界本身也就更倾向于那些更易于开放性阐释的艺术作品(例如,装置艺术、发生艺术、观念艺术)。当然,(诸如历史、法律、股票交易所、心理分析等)不同领域的阐释也需要对专业利益负责,这些利益就要求阐释要有一种具有证据相关性的学科独特意识(封闭性)。总而言之,我们对整个可知世界各部分的有意义排序似乎引导着阐释实践的活力。本文只是对这一不断变化的实践进行了初步扫描,希望能够对其多样性进行进一步分析。

关键词：罗兰·巴特； 封闭； 但丁； 艾科； 阐释； 开放性； 人称； 韦伯

作　者：约瑟夫·马戈里斯,美国坦普尔大学哲学教授,研究重点是当代哲学主流下的人类世界与人类个体的理论,最新著作《走向文化形而上学》(2016 年)最近刚由 Routledge 出版。电子邮箱:josephmargolis 455@ hotmail. com

I begin unsatisfactorily.

I'm very much taken with a paradox affecting the validity of interpretation, wherever interpretation rightly applies. Of course, it applies everywhere in the human world: the commanding creatures of that world — ourselves of course — appear to have ordained long ago that the whole of nature must fall within the ken of their interpretive and explanatory powers. We may as well say that interpretation extends at least as far as the reach of language, so long as we agree that language makes possible more complex forms of non-verbal expression that the merely verbal cannot quite translate or signify or replace perspicuously (the " lingual " forms of expression, as I call them: already familiar in painting, music, dance, action and behavior, manufacture and creation, and much more, all performatively separable from speech, which may then in their own right serve to interpret something further, including speech itself).

If so, then interpretation may appear to be even more inclusive than language; although whether language adequately interprets language may be as uncertain as the interpretation of lingual and mixed specimens — assertoric discourse, for instance, confidently interpreting Mallarmé's " Un coup de dès" or perhaps the simplest of William Blake's poems, or the opening lines of the Dao for that matter. We should then begin to wonder whether we had a clear idea of the right rules of interpretation or of what to count as interpretive validity itself. (I, for one, concede that the verbal has its own lingual side.)

If, however, interpretation may or must be held responsible for whatever it claims, under the usual working conditions, then it must be governed or guided (it would appear) by rulesof some kind; but if it extends as far as language (where language extends, bilingually, to incorporate the resources of every language and where every language admits the lingual), then any set of would-be local rules will in time be breached without any by your leave. In that case, it may indeed seem that no rules are strictly

possible. To formulate a rule would then be seen to be already halfway to surpassing it. Furthermore, in a world like our contemporary world, human life tends to be viewed as historied, forever changing, yet effectively enabled by prevailing practices. Accordingly, to be bound to the seeming rules of this or that practice will be seen to be already halfway to stalemate as well. Is there, then, a reasonable middle ground between the oppression of continually superseded rules and the threatening chaos of an absence of rules altogether, suited to the entire play of interpretation?

I think there is. I think it must be the tolerable pace of practice thus informed: the sheer customary, the *sittlich*, the enabling normative as it accommodates societal change. Nevertheless, you are likely to ask yourself: How could anything so lax serve as a suitable rule? The answer seems straightforward: for one thing, there's nothing else that could serve (or serve as well); for another, we construe the continuum of our evolving practices to be the running instantiation of our habituated rules; *and*, for a third, we invoke interpretation (to vouchsafe continuity) even when we're persuaded that the practice of interpretation needs to be explicitly reconciled (from time to time) with our swifter conceptions of laggard practice.

If you say that's plainly not enough, I'll say that's all there is: a seemingly "higher," critical or more active function of the *sittlich*, drawn to venture and confirm the correction of a relatively inert *sittlich*: that's to say, whatever in its own time risks appearing inapt, increasingly out of touch with the practices it guides or monitors, that the customary deems worth saving and is inclined to believe may, when rightly altered, be embraced by the customary "again." You may balk here at so many small equivocations. But the argument will have moved beyond its previously apparent premises.

I'm quite aware, as you must be, that I've provided no more than an awkward version of the self-referential paradoxes of cognitive claims and the understanding of meanings. But if I were tempted to

escape to philosophical safety, I would begin by affirming that there is no way to demonstrate any principled distinction between a transcendental appraisal of the adequacy of our *sittlich* norms and a form of sociological reportage that agree, together, provisionally, to share the normative force of the *sittlich* itself. I'm quite content to treat the paradox as resolved, *if* modest skepticism and modest knowledge are benignly compatible, *if* the apparent *aporia* is *sui generis*, never a matter of first-order inquiry, and *if* competing accounts of interpretation may pursue their contests within the shadow of such concessions, without ever needing to return to them. I find a clue here to a fresh theory of interpretation that's worth rescuing.

I

There can't, I say, be any exemplary, paradigmatic, prototypical, essential poem(s) or novel(s), in the sense in which other would-be specimens could assuredly confirm their bona fides by displaying their "adequate resemblance" to any such standard referent(s); although, to be sure, the history of literature — effectively, the same history that exposes its pretension there — often contrives one or another such conception and relies on it for compelling forms of valid interpretation. I see no reason to reject such practices out of hand, but I also see no plausibility in holding that "understanding" literature (and other interpretables) presupposes a fixed order of conceptual constraints within the boundaries of which, alone, what we generally call interpretation can make valid claims regarding the objectivity or truth-like standing of its familiar judgments.

Umberto Eco reminds us of Dante's slim summary (in Dante's so-called thirteenth letter) of a canonical medieval poetics that advances a conception of the rules ensuring a true meaning (or interpretation) of Scriptures, applied quite strictly to poetry and the figurative arts, which carefully distinguishes literal, allegorical, moral, and anagog-

ical senses or modes of reading suitable texts. Eco provides the sense in which the account *could* make room for modern notions of the "openness" of interpretation — hence, also, the openness of literary works themselves — where we rightly distinguish between the mere persuasiveness of such "possibilities" — never to be confused (on causal grounds) as actually constituting the true "meaning" (or part of the meaning) of eligible texts — *and the force of* the "true meaning" — the right interpretation of their genuinely constituting sentences and figures: as, according to Eco's reading of Dante, by viewing texts in "*the only possible right way*" (Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work" 5 – 6). Eco summarizes the methodological instruction of such a system — in which the reader "must always follow rules that entail a rigid univocality" — in the following terms:

> The meaning of allegorical figures and emblems which the medieval reader is likely to encounter is already prescribed by its encyclopedias, bestiaries, and lapidaries. Any symbolism is objectively defined and organized into a system. Understanding this poetics of the necessary and the universal is an ordered cosmos, a hierarchy of essences and laws which poetic discourse can clarify at several levels, but which each individual must understand in the only possible way, the one determined by the creative logos. (Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work" 6)

That's to say: God informs his poets and his physicists — and ordinarily literate folk who need to be suitably advised.

I read the statements of near-contemporary theorists of poetry — Beardsle, Riffaterre, and Hirsch, for instance — as standing in the wake of such a poetics, though none of this particular trio pretends that the interpretational "system" he supports is the same as Dante's or is discernibly valid in Dante's ontological space — suitably

entrenched in one or another accessible culture — ready for the taking, as among suitably informed poets, literary critics, and readers. They may appear to approach such a presumption (on evidentiary grounds that actually distinguish one from another and all three from Dante). They offer attractive constructions of their own (under more modest auspices), though not without realist ambitions of a more worldly sort. (Each believes his interpretative rationale is the right one.)

Eco does not mention any of the three, but each provides a two-tier conception of how to distinguish between something answering to a merely "plausible" but strictly invalid interpretation of a text and a "correct" reading that nevertheless departs from the presumption of drawing on the "creative logos" (God's vantage). Eco's point is not that the medieval model is "more limited than the *many* possible [interpretive] solutions of a contemporary 'open' work but that it is a different vision of the world which lies under these different aesthetic experiences" (Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work" 7). He's right, of course, though the wording, "aesthetic experience," suggests a precision that gives one pause. Modern systems of the open sort tend to emphasize the historied and constructed nature of such visions rather than their ontological or theological fixity.

But it's *there* that we find the nagging puzzle. Because, once we yield to contingent history (with Roland Barthes and Eco: Barthes speaks of "*ouverture*") — where the medieval model loses its special authority as it becomes doctrinal and contentious — Eco's own commitment to "openness" (*opera aperta*) will have to explain just whether and how he might support the objectivity of interpretation while accommodating the forms of openness *he* happens to favor, or how we might defend a degree of interpretive tolerance beyond even the Barthesian notion of *ouverture*. Beyond *S/Z*, for instance, which certainly exceeds the intent of Lévi-Strauss's canonical purpose in his own "Ouverture" to *The Raw and the Cooked*, and in overturning what Eco

offers as Points 1 and 3 of his summary of "the differences between [Francophone] structuralist thinking[as in Lévi-Strauss] and 'serial thought' [a term Eco takes from Lévi-Strauss but effectively applies to such putative Italian-leaning avant-garde composers as KarlheinzStockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio, and, more quarrelsomely, the Gruppo 63 (to which Eco himself once belonged) or the French avant-garde, among whom Eco pointedly includes Barthes, because of Barthes's admittedly close affiliation with Lévi-Strauss's structuralism]" (Eco, "The Death of the Gruppo 63" 245 – 46).[①] Nevertheless, there's more that a touch of the haphazard in Barthes's "codes" meant (somehow) to duplicate his reading of Balzac's story.

Eco's contrast is entirely apposite, though its local attributions remain open to considerable (even if no more than minor) disputes:

> [According to French structuralism, Eco holds,] all communication is valid to the extent that its message is decodable by reference back to a preestablished code [...] [that] can[itself] be traced from one code back to another toward a single unique code, the first [being] the only real structure of all communication, of all languages, all cultural operations and levels of signification. (Eco, "The Death of the Gruppo 63" 245)

There's a presupposition there that seems to unite Lévi-Strauss and Dante and to make both Barthes and Eco uneasy. There's also a lingering worry in Eco that Barthes may have remained too close to the structuralist schema. It's true enough that Lévi-Straus was tempted, in the Amazon, to suppose that, in searching for the Nambikwara, he was getting closer to the *ur*-code of natural language itself. If Eco or Barthes had supposed that was possible, he would have been a Straussian medievalist! But, then, relative to Eco's limited evidence (at the time of writing), Barthes may have

appeared, uneasily, to be just such a creature.

The difference Eco explicates centers on the slim idea that "seriality is dialectic thought, intellection of the diachronic rather than the synchronic": that is, that, read in the serial way, "all messages call into question their code" (where codes are normally grasped as historied and polyvalent) (Eco, "The Death of the Gruppo 63" 245 – 46). Effectively, modern interpretation theory construes the Tower of Babel as the source of human freedom and creativity: which is to say, *if* there *is* no God, or *if* revelations are ultimately Delphic (however in need of a proper interpretation), or *if* the human primate *has* no earthly niche in which to thrive in some recognizably normal, species-specific way. The medievalists were right to infer that to provide a final canon of conduct and interpretation was to confess a final Revelation. By the same logic, mere openness or *ouverture* signifies the absence of any discoverable norms of valid interpretation. In fact, the "codes" of Barthes's analysis of *Sarrasine* are genuinely instructive, without revealing any structure of the structuralist sort. (It was never Barthes's intention to return to structuralism.) Nevertheless, *ouverture* is meant to be the rejection of "structure" (fixed structure, whether ontological or methodological).

I think we may safely separate late Barthes from canonical Lévi-Strauss: seriality is at least the denial of structuralist closure, the affirmation of historied creativity, a willingness to treat interpretative validity as thoroughly constructive, contingent, culturally inventive, not settled by reference to any final ontological fixity. It would not be unfair, therefore, to read Barthes's post-structuralist writings as accommodating just what Eco takes to be the bolder option of the serialists. For instance, in a very brief paper, "From Science to Literature" (the opening piece of his *The Rustle of Language*), Barthes says quite straightforwardly: "the role of literature is to *represent* actively to the scientific institution just what it rejects, that is, the sovereignty of language" (Barthes 10). But this,

precisely, overturns the ontologically adequate closure of Dante's reckoning as well as Lévi-Strauss's. Language need not be "sovereign" in the structuralist's way, to count as the primary site of interpretation. On the contrary, it's the open "polyvalence" of language (as Barthes might say) that provides a clue to the modern practice of interpretation. But I concede that neither Eco nor Barthes supplies an adequate account of what, specifically, interpretive openness requires. (They've made an important fresh start, but we must press further.)

The lesson I support here is simply that we must acknowledge a complex continuum of possible conceptions of interpretation, once we abandon the idea of there being any single, original, adequate, fixed, unique, authoritative, all-encompassing, self-confirming code by which to understand *any* "true" text correctly. Both Eco and Barthes, I suggest, feature the creativity of literature and, by parity of reasoning, the creative work of every "art" and every effort to understand or interpret the output of any art or practice (including the sciences, statutory law, history, sacred texts, and ordinary discourse). The *ouverture* of literature — effectively, the openness of every practice that invites interpretation — is now regarded, *faute de mieux*, as the historied effect of *our* own artifactual standing, *our* post-Darwinian transformation, *our* personhood, our *ouverture*! There's the better clue to what's missing in Eco and Barthes — and Wittgenstein — if I may anticipate another clue.

There is no prospect of returning to traditional fixities here: enlanguaged, *we* are never less than the idiolectic voices of our societal *Bildung*. But to say that much is to acknowledge the unresolved question of what sort of interpretive rigor could possibly fit the threatening scatter of *ouverture* itself. Here, theory joins hands with the post-Kantian fortunes of philosophy. Because the entire trajectory of the Western world, coursing down from Parmenides to Kant and Husserl (say), and from there to our own day — notably among the post-

structuralists，the pragmatists，the post-Tractarian Wittgensteinians，the Nietzscheans，skeptics about ontological and societal invariance — has at long last come to favor flux over fixity：in effect，has come to favor the historied world. ② My own contention has it that we need an entirely fresh conception of the legibility of human culture. (The extension of interpretation is，in effect，the extension of the enlanguaged world.) In a word，the puzzle about the openness of interpretation is the same puzzle as that of the *ouverture* of the human.

If I may put the point paradoxically — perhaps too quickly：the late developments of poetry are as difficult to reconcile with the paleontological instincts that probably led to the gradual invention of true language as are the late developments of philosophy and logic and the natural sciences. Wittgenstein was surely right in acknowledging (courageously，I should add) that the functionality of one's home language must be closer to the practical needs of animal communication than to the triumphal closure of the *Tractatus*：but he was dead wrong in thinking that to review language and philosophy through the lens of the simplest language-games could possibly account for what he himself regards as near-perfect pitch effecting the "uses" of words even in complex "games," or to justify abandoning philosophy as largely misguided in disorganizing the other's efficiency. What Hamlet "says" is not what Shakespeare "says" in "uttering" what Hamlet says：there's no instinctual rule (there couldn't be) that links the two reliably. Nevertheless, we must link them — we must learn to link them, improvisationally if necessary — if we mean to understand ourselves and what we say or utter verbally or lingually. Think of reading Beckett's novels or Celan's poetry — or Melville or Eliot or Yeats，for that matter. We cannot possibly do without considerable interpretive skills.

But *what* it is we're *doing* when we interpret a poem or a stretch of history or the cathedral at Amiens or the stratifications at Olduvai Gorge is *not* clear — if we're thinking, for instance, of how such a practice bears on the distinction between the natural and the human sciences or the relationship between ordinary conversation and the resources of the special languages of physics. I want to suggest that interpretation remains closely allied with the distinctive resources of common discourse，even where it is also applicable in the space of the special sciences；whereas the special languages of physics inevitably suppose (mistakenly，as I view the matter) that they are *rivals* of our home language and will in time displace it (as along causal and reductionistic lines). The meander of these reflections is intended in part to prepare the ground for a fresh (and surprising) clue in the effort to explain what it is to interpret anything suitably identified in the human world — now. I find the clue latent (yet obscure) in Dante，Eco，Barthes，and Wittgenstein：hence，I advise you here，too brusquely perhaps，that I find it，suddenly，immensely clarified in Max Weber's heterodoxies regarding the unity of science question. I also find it necessary to approach Weber's innovations by way of a Darwinian and post-Darwinian detour. Bear with me，please.

Even our *lebensformlich* instincts，it seems，are thoroughly historied and artifactual. Philosophy，poetry，science，and ordinary practice are all part of the same accommodating culture，but they are as much continually and diversely reinvented as they are instinctively remembered. It's the constant creativity of speech and thought — *and* the problematic recovery of context and intention，*and* the absence of any assuredly legible unitary conception of the human world，*and* similar deficitsregarding the grasp of our own and others' thought and behavior — that accounts for the insuperable openness and complexity of interpretation. The ordinary fluencies of speech and societal practice oftenprove immenselymore baffling，though not merely or primarily as a consequence of philosophical meddling (as Wittgenstein more than suggests). We have only to ponder the plain fact that both Marx and Freud puzzled over the often

alien import of the most intimate and familiar patterns of thought and behavior. Wittgenstein, I'm afraid, is regressive here, possibly even an opponent of *ouverture*. He's obviously reluctant to accommodate the pace of accelerating history.

II

If we say, with Eco, that the medieval poetics Dante mentions pictures a completely "closed" universe, then it would also be apt to say (in that same spirit) that whatever humans produce, utter, create, *as* rationally or spiritually *thus*-informed, rightly and intentionally represents *that* ordered world *mimetically*. If so, then interpretation — however diminished by the deeper *ouverture* of enlanguaged life (perhaps better: differently construed), and however it may be confined to the world of Becoming (perhaps better: liberated, having grasped the import of the openness of human life) — may always be read in accord with that reassuring, possibly vacant all-purpose verbal formula, "man is the measure." Perhaps; but, surely, our way of picturing the world will have greatly changed from Dante's time to Darwin's and beyond. And a society (like ours), densely and diversely committed to the written word and packaged messages over face-to-face conversation, will require ever more advanced, rather than merely primitive, interpretative skills.

Dante's poetics cannot but lose standing when read in accord with the current import of the formula now before us, which easily accommodates Protagoras and Vico as well as Kant and the authority of Scripture: man, the informed poet or informed reader of poetry, remains the "measure" of poetry (whether in accord with Dante or Eco); but Eco must explain whether *he* has merely turned his mind to a lesser option within the span of Dante's vision or has actually replaced that canon or ontology with a more radical option informed by post-Darwinian thought at least. On adopting the more daring "modern" reading, the logic of the medieval rule

appears to dwindle to no more than a recognizable convention or ideology of sorts — at any distance from its loyal following.

Language, art, political order, the formulated laws of nature, the norms of human life and judgment might then be conceded to be no more than human constructions (possibly ad hoc). *Mimesis*, read in the strictest way, would no longer be viewed as confirmable; yet, suitably diminished, in a world that admitted "open works" and an altogether different ontology, the formula would remain serviceable enough. We would still speak of truth-claims, valid interpretations of meaning, directives for right conduct and the like. We might, however, also begin to treat interpretation as more nearly "instrumental," "practical," "constructed," "pragmatic," or, reflecting changes in what our conception of what a person is, *expressive* primarily of historied interests, human tastes, contingent convictions, conventions and the like. I see in this a tendency to veer in the direction of Max Weber's endorsement of the *sittlich*. (I shall come back to that.)

In any event, we would have become aware of a significant lacuna in our contemporary theories of interpretive meaning. We would need to strike a compromise between skepticism and conjectured readings; we would abandon the idea of any uniquely correct reading of a poem or a history; we would begin to treat diverse or opposed interpretations as potentially compatible constructions of some sort; we would be drawn to explain our invented "system" of truth and truth-claims and the historied nature of our interpretive powers; we would become more hospitable to idiosyncratic and idiolectic interpretive responses and would require a greater tolerance of interpretive scatter. But what would suit us then? I suggest: the widest, deepest, most tolerant forms of openness consistent with our conception of persons, all the known resources of interpretation's disciplinary history, and all archival and technologically accessible forms of communicative exchange.

By "openness" or "*ouverture*," I should add, I mean both a tolerance for a continually enlarged or altered diversity of admissible interpretations of given texts（and of possible sources of interpretation）and a corresponding increase in our tolerance for the diversity and scatter of would-be interpretable things （and the sources by which interpretable things are created and produced）. "Openness," then, is the engine by which the *sittlich* normative gains a corrective role with respect to what history exposes as having, potentially, become irreversibly inert. （Here, I definitely side with Weber, against Wittgenstein. ）

I'm prepared to offer *part* of an answer, now, to what to count as an adequate picture of interpretation in general. （I cannot afford more than the barest sketch. ）I mean：an answer to meet the needs of all sectors of interpretative practice, whatever their differences may be. Generically, then, not（yet） differentially, since I concede at once that the interpretation of poetry, history, statutory law, sacred Scripture *are*（in the large）very different undertakings. I'm persuaded that there can only be one way to proceed, *if* we seek a common ground for all such practices：namely, by advancing a theory of the human being as interpretive agent. But that's already the only way to understand the difference between the "Dantean" mimetic rule and anything like Eco's free-standing theory of "open works." For, if the latter were no more than a kindly tolerance permitted within the boundaries of the first, it would also be a kindly failure.

The openness doctrine must, then, displace the medieval canon and all other relatively "closed systems," if it is to succeed at all — even if it （then）authorizes a conditional recuperation（rightly labeled！）of a Christian or Marxist or Freudian interpretative rule. The medieval canon and that of the open work answer to very different "worlds" and very different conceptions of the human being's powers of understanding confined within its appointed world.

I begin with a heterodox counter-Darwinian proposal, an empirical conjecture that I find entirely convincing；though, to be sure, it may be too extreme a claim to count on easy acceptance. It may be the most extreme claim possible of its kind； nevertheless, readers may discover that even if they begin to approach my theory from a distance — and then reject its actual claim — they may still be favorably drawn to something akin to the theory of interpretation it subtends. I find that entirely plausible, given the noticeably strong attraction of the openness thesis and the familiar carelessness displayed in many efforts to define the pertinent powers of the interpreting agent. In fact, interpretation always appears arbitrary when its claims to validity are detached from its evolutionary moorings：it must at least be able to answer the strenuous questions prompted by post-Darwinian discoveries regarding the evolution of the human primate and the human person.

I begin then with the paleoanthropological evidence of the original invention, mastery, and societal transmission（over an immensity of time）of the formative phases of true language itself（what I call "external *Bildung*"）, the evolutionary story of which cannot be satisfactorily confined in Darwinian or biological terms. The very same process is serially and successfully iterated in the historically encultured rearing（"internal *Bildung*"）of successive generations of languageless（infant） primates（*Homo sapiens sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis*, with which *Homo sapiens* has successfully interbred during an interval ending about 100,000 years ago）.

I claim that the invention and mastery of language is essentially the same process as that of the formation of the human person；that persons may be fairly characterized as artifactual hybrid transforms of the primate members of the species, spontaneously effected through the self-transforming process of learning a first language. That feat alone yields a grand run of stunningly advanced new forms of intelligence and sensibility that appear nowhere else among the primates or other advanced animals

(unless in the barest possible incipient way).
Notably, the transformation features just those interior, reflexive, reportorial, creative abilities most intimately involved in the rational, expressive, productive, and thoroughly public societal life of humans. Everything that belongs to that transformed world invites and requires interpretation; hence, interpretation is primarily discursive (or, where it is not confined to the merely verbal, it is certainly linguistically grounded and enabled — it functions "lingually," as I recommend we say, as, notably, in painting, music, and dance).[③]

Accordingly, I treat *persons* as *hybrid* creatures requiring the entwined evolution of biological and cultural processes, whose distinctive functionality — culturally learned competences, practices, histories, achievements — cannot be explained solely or chiefly in biological terms. Furthermore, the oddities and peculiarities of the evolutionary biology of humans — most notably, their completely lacking anything like an early instinct for survival, as well as anything resembling the usual *Umwelt* or ecological niche (essential in the evolution of the higher animals) within which they may be seen to thrive best or characteristically — a pair of facts that utterly stalemates Darwinism and, most significantly, the prospect of any natural validation of moral and higher "agentive" norms.

The evolution of human beings makes no sense without reference to their formation as persons but that formation cannot be said to depend on any salient behavioral instinct for survival. I take that fact to be decisive regarding the need for, and development of, interpretative skills: *a fortiori*, regarding the extraordinary variety of the forms of human life. Neither the human primate nor the person occupies any telically recognizable "place" in the natural world, which strongly suggests that the human preoccupation with establishing the objective validity of agentive norms (of any kind) cannot be more than *sittlich*, though not for that reason incapable of some sort of rational defense. The discrepancy between human history and human

ideals speaks for itself.

I have, now, isolated two closely linked evolutionary facts of the greatest importance to our topic: one, that the human primate and person exhibits nothing that could count as defining a natural *telos* for the species, in terms of which to formulate either the true agentive norms of human life (moral, political, educative, religious, civilizational) or the true criteria for interpreting interpretable things, without falling back to already culturally and diversely entrenched preferences among insufficiently convergent, artifactual patterns of societal life; the other, that, although the home languages of sizable societies are remarkably effective and flexible in nearly all sorts of chance encounters, random groups, diverse patterns of linguistic mastery and individual purpose and intention, the success of ordinary speech and conversation clearly favors a high tolerance for ambiguity, equivocation, error, indeterminacy, inferential guesses, and interpretive skill, and is manifested in decidedly *mongrel* ways, which also require interpretive skills, shifting quickly and accurately (as we must) among the very different "logics," so to say, of large, sudden, unmarked changes of conceptual orientation.

The general pattern seems to be one of testing our tolerance for reduced precision and detail and related economies, without inducing actual failure or too great a loss of information or sense of relevance and coherence. My point is that, on both scores, the compensating skill of the most ordinary forms of discourse cannot fail to be essentially interpretive.

By "mongrel," I should add, I mean, particularly, the skillful use of conversational segues, without any apparent need to alert participating speakers explicitly, when altered topics, logics, vocabularies, conceptual channels and related distinctions of any scope or precision are started, ended, assigned different weights, in unmarked ways; without any discernible loss of comprehension or aptness of response. Here, for instance, speakers switch, swiftly and without warning, from, say,

causal to interpretive to motivational discourse when, as it may be argued, the actual "logics" of these different modes of explanatory and *verstehende* discourse are, even in principle, not entirely clearly defined and yet distinctly prone to generate incommensurabilities among the idioms invoked. I take this to confirm the extraordinary complexity and flexibility of interpretation, to provide further evidence against Wittgenstein's unhelpful (but extremely influential) thesis, and to confirm that the evolution of the human distinctly favors *ouverture* over closure respecting the adequacy of our theories of interpretation.

III

At long last, I say again that there's a very simple, surprisingly straightforward answer to the question how to secure a reasonably high level of precision, accuracy, pertinence, and systematicity in interpretive work construed generically, across the board, despite switching from the model of a closed world to one that favors open works — in accord with the discussion of Dante's and Eco's executive convictions. The key rests with our way of collecting interpretable things within the space of what I've called the "mongrel" use of ordinary discourse, governed and guided by an emboldened account of *sittlich* norms.

Wittgenstein was remarkably perceptive in noticing that hard-won philosophical categories — painstakingly fashioned to define what we mean by, say, "exists" or "real," or "known" or "certain" or "believed" or the like — do not really jibe with their presumeduse within the fluencies of ordinary (mongrel) discourse. But that's not because philosophical distinctions have no real function in ordinary discourse, or because our grasp (there) of the "uses" of words is, instinctively, nearly "perfect." Rather, it's because we've *learned* to use such distinctions effectively, in daringly spare, even conceptually and logically "degenerate" ways, very skillfully indeed, productively — for what, quite

loosely, but not inaccurately, we call our "practical" purposes — without producing chronic breakdown or disaster and despite not having *ever* articulated any sufficiently determinate analysis of the "true" meaning or use of such terms.

Here, the very idea of the autonomy of interpretive explanation (*Verstehen*), as opposed to explanations under strict causal laws (*Erklären*) signifies the functional adequacy of ordinary discourse (however mongrel) and, contrary-wise, the more than merely probable infelicity of its carefully defined constative uses in terms favored, for instance, by the materialist bent of our theories of the physical sciences (say, the unity of science program). You begin to see the sense in which the rejection of reductionism, strong programs of materialist translation, theories of meaning cast in causal terms and causality cast in strict nomological terms, the primacy of the unity of science model, the constructability of a "value-free" science or scientific language — the rejection of all such maneuvers — are distinctly congruent with the rise of the theory that the human sciences are primarily interpretive or that their causal (or, better, motivational) concerns (interpretively and intent-ionally qualified) cannot be expected to meet the rigors of causal explanation alleged to obtain among the physical sciences, or to support the verdict that their "objectivity" must be more "imputational" than empirically confirmed in the strongest realist sense — perhaps no more than "heuristically" objective. Here, I've already deliberately intruded (possibly prematurely) some of the telltale marks of Max Weber's account of the prospects of a general theory of a science of interpretation.

Ordinary discourse has discovered that the conceptually insouciant ("mongrel") use of lang-uage, which may be explored philosophically whenever it suits us, *can* nevertheless function successfully (with hardly more than a promissory note about completing such an analysis). It's not that we have no need of such distinctions (or that they are all misguided) but rather that we can "use"

them without demonstrating the validity of our usage. It's as if their rules were tacitly embedded in our habitual practices and need not ever be made explicit there. I construe the easy way in which we slip, for instance, between causal, interpretive, and motivational discourse — very possibly the most important commingled "explanatory" options operative in "mongrel" discourse — when we are perfectly aware that the conceptual relationships among their uses are almost never more than muddled — to confirm that we "understand" them even when we cannot show that we do. I take that to apply as well to the openness of interpretation and human life itself. In fact, the openness of the first accommodates the openness of the second, and the openness of the second tends to be prompted by the openness of the first.

I've stumbled by chance into a huge puzzle of enormous importance, which I cannot possibly address in any sustained way here — a space of language (as I've already hinted) that I find effectively disputed between Wittgenstein and Max Weber. I'll venture a description, however technically inaccurate (though still useful), of its functionality, which bears on my resolution of the interpretation question. Which applies to "open works," in a sense that borrows from both Eco and Barthes but exceeds the import of the narrowly selected specimens of both the Italianate serialists and the Francophone structuralists, whom Eco pits against one another. Neither Eco nor Barthes quite comes to terms with the full challenge of "openness" or "*ouverture.*" Both are unsure of what fills the empty space of openness. There's the gap. There's the gap that *Weber*, almost alone among like-minded figures, begins (as I see matters) to fill!

The puzzle I spy concerns the sharing of a vocabulary (and more) between what I've been speaking of as one's home language, common speech, conversation, ordinary discourse, and the like — usually said to answer to our running values and interests, most often unrehearsed, spontaneously apt, relatively unguarded, more "practical" than

"theoretical," the source (somehow) of the formation and use of technically specialized "languages" (say, in the sciences, law, philosophy, and elsewhere) that cannot strictly translate the vocabulary of our lowly home language but are conceded to be able to replace, without let, their verbal counterparts for special purposes — *and* an all-encompassing "technical" language (or languages) of the second sort, said to be "theoretical" in whatever regard tends to favor the primacy of the descriptive and explanatory (often reductionist) work of the physical sciences. (Interpretation's purpose effectively blocks reductionism: that is an important consequence of Weber's theory.)

This is a much-contested matter of course, which manifests itself, strategically, in the context of distinguishing between the natural and human sciences; although this way of reading the matter would be completely unacceptable to the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*. In any case, it is in the sense of this loosely conceived contrast that I've characterized the play of ordinary language as functioning, successfully, in a "mongrel" way (a characterization not intended to be prejudicial to the technical concerns of either Wittgenstein or Weber) — a choice of epithet Weber himself might have replaced with his own term, "heuristic," because of his intended use of the larger puzzle in the service of providing an accurate account of what he calls the "cultural sciences."

It's here that Weber admits the ineluctable presence of human interests and "values" in the articulation of the cultural sciences — and the improbability of escaping their influence even among the natural sciences; although Weber himself insists that the linkage is, effectively, "external" (that is, separable). That is certainly problematic; but it's also essential to Weber's account of his most original methodological innovation: his invention or construction of "ideal-type" predicates (answering to our contingent interests, never strictly confirmable empirically, "heuristically" objective with regard to our experienced world, and the engine of the

distinctly interpretive discipline that distinguishes the cultural sciences from the natural sciences, with or without further causal or motivational concerns.④

I read Weber, then, as advancing a theory of the social or cultural sciences as a theory of interpretation, a theory whose "objectivity" lies in affording a "psychologically" or "subjectively" compelling clarification of the meaning of concrete, immediately experienced events:

> ideal-typical generic concepts [Weber affirms] [...] are pure mental constructs, the relationship of which to the empirical reality of the immediately given is problematical in every individual case. (Natanson 409)

One wonders what Weber could possibly mean here: the world of "open works" seems still too vacant and too alien.

My formulation does not quite capture Weber's extraordinary ingenuity (and professional courage) in introducing his ideal-types. It's a notion that completely baffled partisans of the unity-of-science reading of the human sciences, figures like Carl Hempel and Ernest Nagel for instance, who construe Weber's effort as no more than an incompetent approximation to a rigorous search for redescriptions (or interpretations) of (let us say) mongrel accounts of whatever transpires in the human world that might lead to formulating and applying proper causal laws to the data of the human sciences themselves. Weber could not be more straightforward in opposing such a reading. His ideal-types are always complex notions, salient to anyone familiar with this or that sector of public life, the discussion of which straddles ordinary conversation and professional efforts at interpreting and explaining such familiar phenomena: notions like "capitalism, "Christianity," "imperialism," "marginal utility," acquisitive impulse," "church," "sect," "city economy," "'handicraft' system," and so on. Stated in the simplest terms, what Weber actually

does is recover and refashion concepts drawn from ordinary discourse so that they may now be seen to facilitate a perspicuous interpretation of a run of (real) phenomena that we usually associate (in however scattered a way) with such notions.

Weber never intended to capitulate to the primacy of the physical sciences:

> An ideal type[he says] is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent, *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct (*Gedankenbild*). In its conceptual purity, the mental construct (*Gedankenbild*) cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a *utopia* [...] a conceptual construct which is neither historical reality nor even the "true" reality. [...] It has the significance of a purely ideal *limiting* concept with which the real situation or action is *compared* and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components [...] by application of the category of objective possibility. (Natanson 393, 399)

I take this to be an apt analogue of the "narratological" (interpretive) strategy invoked by Hayden White in explicating the interpretation of history.⑤ (White does not address Weber here.)

You may indeed begin to catch the depth and complexity of what I take to be Weber's rather magisterial notion of the ideal-type, if you consider that the unity-of-science people, not unlike Ernst Cassirer and Hilary Putnam (read as loyal Kantians, at different "distances" from Kant himself) tend to be unable to relinquish the regulative function of the *Grenzbegriff*, whereas Weber, precisely, is bent on

yielding to the historied (therefore, ad hoc or arbitrary or contingently risked, deliberately contrived, passingly contexted, thoroughly heuristic), even throw-away device, once the sense of the intended comparison is effectively shared. Symptomatically, White has difficulty in distinguishing the fictional from the historied, whereas Weber regards the ideal-type *as* deliberately constructed (heuristically or fictionally) *as* an instrument *for purposes of* historied comparison.

The point is that Weber salvages the uniqueness of the human sciences — against the hegemony of the unity conception — by defining the unique "science" of interpretation and, thereupon, the "imputational" causality of the historical past and the interpretive function of sociology itself — where the entire order of the human or "cultural" sciences depends on the "*heuristic*" (but still "objective") standing of his "ideal-types," which, as Weber shows, could not possibly be read as endorsing the presumed hegemony of the universal laws of physical nature (applied to the cultural world), or the pretension that the objectivity of the human sciences was tantamount in any way to the reaffirmation of the realism of the physical sciences.

We need not follow Weber in the sprawl of his own argument. He's made a compelling start on a general theory of interpretation; and he's done so in a way — unwittingly perhaps — that shows us how to fill in an account of the structured resources needed by the openness thesis in its most unrestricted form (well beyond Eco and Barthes), so as to allow us to speak favorably of the interpretation of "open works," in comparison with the apparent authority of the medievalist's and Lévi-Strauss's versions of closure. I should perhaps add that contemporary physics is quite close to admissions akin to the openness of poetry and the other arts, in theorizing about the validity of explanatory theories, except for the decisive difference of physics' incomparable predictive power, which is much too impressive to be overridden. Physics has its own form of *ouverture*,

however, in that there are no liens on explanatory theory other than those bearing on gains in prediction and enough systematic coherence to account for our predictive powers. Prediction and the question of causal explanation under covering laws have no comparable role to play among the human sciences; so that the abandonment of *ontological* closure seems to be a much more consequential loss in the encultured human world than it actually is.

The nerve of Weber's innovation is simplicity itself: an ideal-type is not a fiction but a heuristic invention intended to facilitate comparisons among actual events or states of affairs (*and* imagined or imaginary instances) that yield a compelling sense of the meaning or significance of such phenomena — in effect, one or another heuristic interpretation of actual phenomena (among other, possibly competing, interpretations). If they support further causal or motivational accounts, then fine. But ideal-type descriptions are never accurate or literally true or actually confirmed. They are meant to be no more than perspicuous, in the sense that the best of them fixes (for its advocates) the imputedly "objective" meaning of *actual events* that we *relate*, interpretively, with the specimen instances the ideal-type is said to illuminate. An important part of the *theory* of interpretation, then, is to explain what accounts for the perceived validity of one such interpretation or another. The first step in Weber's account is to canvass the discourse and behavior of interested and engaged persons and societies and to *guess* at a perspicuous ideal-type (a "mental construct," as Weber says) that might strike competent discussants convincingly. Here I think of how the theory of tragedy develops, over centuries, intensionally and extensionally (and diversely and changeably), and begins to yield a more or less confirmed sense (heuristically or imputationally) of what a "tragedy is." You begin to see, here, how misleading it is to think of essential definitions, changeless and ahistorical interpretations, intolerance regarding alternative interpretations that, on a bivalent theory of truth, produce inconsistent or

incompatible readings of the "same" phenomena (but need not be thus construed).

Once you grasp this much of Weber's strategy, you grasp the sense in which the natural and human sciences depend on the distinctive work of one another (in different ways), the agency of the same creature in both, *and* the clear sense in which interpretation as a general discipline must be more closely committed to the analytic skills of ordinary discourse and the human sciences than to those of the physical sciences (even where interpretation applies to the latter). It strongly suggests, for instance, the greater plausibility of construing the natural sciences as idealized restrictions of the more fundamental skills of the human sciences vis-à-vis the plausibility of picturing the human sciences and ordinary discourse as (somehow) deformations of the primary "realism" of the technical languages of the physical sciences.

It's but a step from there to the finding that there is no dearth of resources in constructing "valid" interpretations *anywhere*, under the diverse conditions that qualify any and all the sectors of interest in which interpretation functions — no lacuna of any kind. Consider dictionaries, for example, which afford various complex archives of the central vocabularies of known languages and their "usual" or "admissible" usage — together with the archives of as much of the most memorable uses of such vocabularies as may have been collected, together with the opinions of qualified discussants of whatever is thought to have contributed to the creation, interpretation, appraisal, and influence of such creations and uses. All of this shows once again the primacy and adequacy of the *sittlich* picture of interpretation. Viewed this way, Dante's canon is itself an idealized and restricted selection of norms drawn from something not unlike a Weberian "ideal-type" (though very differently construed). Think, for instance, of the inclusion or exclusion of goliardic verse in interpreting the spirit of medieval poetry, or of including or excluding the painting, sculpture, and architecture of the pre-

Columbian Meso-American world in attempting to interpret the spirit of the history of art globally construed.

Interpretive openness, I'm inclined to say, follows the openness of the forms of human life itself; but the narratives of interpretive criticism, whether in political history, the arts, or religion tends, understandably but futilely, to favor conceptual closure. The point is to come to see that there are two distinct but inseparable processes here —and that the openness of interpreting art or history is inexorably dependent on the openness of interpreting (and living) human life itself.

Notes

① See, also, Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work" 1 −5.

② See, for instance, my own argument leading to this conclusion, in Margolis.

③ The essential argument regarding persons and the enlanguaged or encultured world of persons may be found in Margolis, Chs. 1 −2. I must leave space enough here for a strategic innovation regarding interpretation. But the reasonableness of my entire conjecture requires, I concede, a much fuller statement than I could possibly afford here.

④ Weber's conception of science is extremely complex. I'm not persuaded that it's entirely coherent as a theory. It does seem to me, however, to abide by the main features of what I've called the mongrel use of ordinary language. The principal statement of Weber's theory of ideal-type "constructions" may be found in Weber. It's been reprinted in an extremely useful collection, Natanson. The entire essay repays close reading, but the briefest formulation of the theory (much contested) appears, in Natanson 404 −09.

⑤ For a sense of Nagel's and Hempel's general treatment of *verstehende* sociology and Weber's strategy in particular, see Nagel and Hempel. See, also, for an instructive comparison, White.

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