

Authorial Meaning and Significance: Revisiting the Hermeneutic Theory of E.D. Hirsch

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Abstract

E. D. Hirsch Jr. is an indispensable hermeneutic thinker. He is an advocate of objective hermeneutics and authorial intent and thus critiques the reader-response interpretive theories. In defence of the author, he vehemently criticises the reader-response theories' arguments for the banishment of the author and proposes valid reasons to retrieve the relevance of the author's original meaning. To address the objectivity of the author's intention and the subjectivity of interpretation, Hirsch proposes his idea of meaning and significance.

The distinction between meaning and significance plays a crucial role in attacking relativism of interpretive theories that disregard the possibility of objectivity and validity of authorial meaning in interpretation. By asserting that meaning is fixed and what changes is its significance to readers, Hirsch maintains the objectivity, validity, and authority of the author in the interpretive process. He insists that interpretation is a cognitive process. Thus, Hirsch's theory of meaning and significance forms the cornerstone of his hermeneutic philosophy and reflects his broader commitment to objectivity in interpretation. While recognising that texts yield new significance over time, he claims that valid interpretation must be grounded in the reconstruction of the author's original meaning. In this way, Hirsch's objective hermeneutics is unique and different in many respects. Thus, the paper revisits the key aspects of his hermeneutics and its implications.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Hirsch, Text, Author's meaning, Interpretation, banishment of the author, private and public meaning

Introduction

Imagine that you are watching a movie with your friends or family; the experience and meaning one gets from the movie are definitely not the same for everyone. Now think

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about a situation when you are at a traffic signal and you see the red light, through which you know that you must immediately stop the vehicle. Everybody else at the signal will also stop the vehicle, because you all know what the red signal means. What would be the decisive aspect that makes this difference in these two situations? In the first context it is obvious that the meaning is subjective, and in the second one, the meaning is objective. This subjective/objective dichotomy has always been a crucial problem in philosophical investigations, especially when it comes to the process of interpretation. That is why hermeneutics becomes a vital part of philosophy.

How does someone interpret a meaning? Is every interpretation the same? Can we say that some interpretations are correct and some are incorrect? What is the criterion for interpretation? These questions are the foundation of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is one of the significant movements of 20th century continental philosophy that deals with nature, rules, techniques, and methods of interpretation and understanding. Some hermeneutic philosophers argue that the correct interpretation is the understanding of what the author has originally meant, whereas for some others, there is semantic autonomy that places text as the centre of the interpretive process. According to some others, the reader is the determining factor of meaning. How someone determines the correct meaning is, therefore, a decisive question in the hermeneutic discourses.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Emilio Betti are some of the thinkers who claim that the authorial intention is the criterion for correct interpretation. On the other hand, thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer assert that interpretation is a fusion of horizons that includes the horizons of the text and the reader, and the text is independent of both the author and the reader. Eric Donald Hirsch Jr, a comparatively recent contributor to the field of hermeneutics, an American philosopher, educationist and literary critic, emphasises that the author's meaning is the only norm for interpretation and argues for objectivity in the interpretive process. He focuses on the discussions on interpretation and understanding, after the publication of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. This led to the publication of his magnum opus, *Validity in Interpretation* (1967). It is one of the seminal works in the field of hermeneutics.

Hirsch is an advocate of objective interpretation, and thus he focuses on the validity in interpretation. For him, meaning is determinate and stable, rather than fluid or subjective. Therefore, Hirsch's main argument is that interpretation should aim for authorial intention, that is, the goal of interpretation is to understand what the author intends to convey. He argues that interpretation should be guided by a respect for the author's intention, rather than imposing the interpreter's subjective meaning on the text. This proposes one of the central themes of his hermeneutics, viz. the distinction between meaning and significance.

In Defence of the Author

Hirsch follows Emilio Bettiⁱ in classifying different types of interpretation, namely re-

cognitive, presentational, and normative. They discuss the historical and literary texts, dramatic and musical texts, and finally legal and religious texts, respectively. Someone cannot read a literary work as she reads a religious text. This is so fundamental to Hirsch's hermeneutics. Among them, re-cognitive understanding is the real task of the interpretive process. Re-cognitive interpretation is the cognition of the cognised meaning of the author. The validity of an interpretation lies in the re-cognition of the intended meaning of the author. "All valid interpretation of every sort is founded on the re-cognition of what an author meant" (Hirsch, *Validity* 16). The other two are actually the application of re-cognitive interpretation.

The authors' intent is the sole principle for the validity of interpretation. There are two stages in an interpretive process, according to Hirsch, namely guessing and validation. Interpretation begins with the guessing of the original meaning. However, he is not particularly invested in making a detailed analysis of what he meant by the idea of guessing. According to him, "there are no methods for making guesses, no rules for generating insights" (203). Nevertheless, guessing always points at the meaning of the text, which is actually the author's intention. The second stage is called validation, which has certain rules and principles and is grounded in understanding the linguistic and cultural context of the author. The task of hermeneutics is validation. It fosters the most feasible interpretation.

Hirsch analyses two normative ideals of meaning – the best meaning and the author's meaning. By best meaning, he means validity and aesthetic richness.ⁱⁱ If the best meaning is not related to the meaning of the author, then it is related to the critic's meaning. Because, if it is not what the original author intends, then it is the critic's meaning, which is obviously the intention of the critic or the reader. In this sense, the meaning always has an author. If the reader offers a new meaning, then she becomes the author of that meaning. Thus, whatever the case, the best meaning is always the author's meaning. That is, nobody can banish the authorial intention as the criterion of interpretation as ultimately there is nothing authorless.

The only universally sharable norm for an interpretation is nothing but the author's meaning. Because, the construction of a new meaning of a text must have an author – be it a reader or a critic. In this sense, there are several authors, each with a dominance over the text. This makes the authority of the text manifold, which questions the semantic autonomy of the text. The meaning of the text is the meaning of the author or the reader. It says nothing beyond what it means. That is, the textual meaning is not independent of its author or interpreter. The text has nothing to say until the meaning is construed. Nevertheless, it is hard to reproduce the intention of the author since everyone is different. "If a text means what it says, then it means nothing in particular. Its saying has no determinate existence but must be the saying of the author or a reader" (13).

Thus, Hirsch emphasises that the meaning of a text is what the author means, and he condemns the theories that neglect this crucial part and argue for semantic autonomy.

Semantic autonomy, which ascribes an independent status to the text, has always been a decisive and debatable concept in philosophical and literary deliberations. "The theory of semantic autonomy forced itself into such unsatisfactory, ad hoc formulations because in its zeal to banish the author it ignored the fact that meaning is an affair of consciousness not of words" (4). For Hirsch, if one agrees with the semantic autonomy, then she cannot resolve the differences in interpretations. Every interpretation becomes valid and plausible. This makes interpretation relativistic. Therefore, he vehemently criticises the banishment of the author.

Against the Banishment of the Author

Hirsch accuses literary theories of considering the textual meaning as independent of the author and describing the best poetry as something which is impersonal and independent. He insists that it is the task of a cultural historian to bring back the relevance of the author's meaning which has been banished for decades. According to him, those who proclaim that the text has a semantic autonomy and is independent of the author assert their stance on some fundamental arguments, namely, 1). The authorial meaning is inaccessible: 2). The author's intention may not be conveyed accurately: 3). The author's meaning is always changing. These arguments make the understanding of the author's intention irrelevant and infeasible.

Hirsch precisely analyses these three significant arguments of literary criticism and hermeneutic theories that underline the banishment of the author's intention in interpretation, and he explains how they overlook the relevance of original meaning. He puts forward counterarguments against them and insists on the need for objective interpretation.

The Reproduction of Author's Meaning

The first and foremost argument against the author's intention as the criterion for interpretation is that it is inaccessible. Hirsch addresses this argument and admits that nobody can ever know what the other has intended with certainty. The inner experiences and meanings of the author are obviously different from those of the interpreter. However, this does not mean that the author's meaning is inaccessible. For Hirsch, the impossibility of certainty and the impossibility of understanding are different. One may not attain certainty in interpretation, but understanding of the meaning is possible. "It is a logical mistake to confuse the impossibility of certainty in understanding with the impossibility of understanding. It is a similar, though more subtle, mistake to identify knowledge with certainty" (17). Therefore, the author's meaning cannot be understood with utmost certainty. Thus, Hirsch does not argue for certainty in interpretation. It is a futile attempt, according to him. Instead, the problem is whether correct understanding is possible.

According to Hirsch, verbal meaning can be considered the intentional object, which is the will of the author. "Verbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs" (31). Meaning must be determinate. However, determinacy is not certain or unambiguous. It is an attribute of sharability of meaning without which communication and validity would be impossible. It means self-identity. That is, what is willed is a type. A type is a class that includes more than one individual and is confined through which one can understand or determine whether an individual is a member of the type or not. "Now verbal meaning can be defined more particularly as a willed type which an author expresses by linguistic symbols and which can be understood by another through those symbols" (49).

Then the question is, whether one can understand the verbal meaning of the author? According to Hirsch, the author writes something on the belief that her verbal meanings are accessible to the reader. As far as the interpreter is concerned, the accessibility to the intended meaning of the author is more important than the accessibility to the certainty. "An interpretation that states the verbal meaning of a text cannot claim certainty but must be validated" (Schmidt 137). The interpreter must reconstruct the subjective stance of the author. The author's meaning is a universally valid norm for interpretation. It is reproducible, and it is a means for understanding the problem of implication.

Hirsch uses the words reproducibility and shareability somewhat synonymously. It means that the verbal meaning has something to be reproduced. "Reproducibility is a quality of verbal meaning that makes interpretation possible: if meaning were not reproducible, it could not be actualized by someone else and therefore could not be understood or interpreted" (Hirsch, *Validity* 44). Here he follows Schleiermacher, who argues that correct interpretation is the understanding of author's meaning and it can be understood through two different methods – the grammatical method and the psychological method.ⁱⁱⁱ "The problem in interpretation is that whether we can understand, that is, reproduce, the verbal meaning that the author has willed. Hirsch follows the ideas of Schleiermacher and Dilthey in this respect" (Schmidt 135).

Two persons are involved in the process of textual interpretation – the author and the reader. The meaning that is articulated by the reader is either the shared meaning with the author's intention or it exclusively belongs to the reader. The text has no independent meaning. "For if the meaning of a text is not the author's, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning" (Hirsch, *Validity* 4). The interpreter herself forms the object of interpretation. She determines the aim and purpose of her interpretation. Here an important observation should be considered that the author herself becomes an interpreter sometimes. However, there are differences in the mental states between the author as an interpreter and the reader. An interpreter possesses different experiences,

thoughts, feelings and attitudes from those of the author.

Therefore, as far as Hirsch is concerned, the original meaning can be reproduced through linguistic symbols and historical evidence, even though the interpreter is uncertain about the intention of the author. He “admits that we cannot know with certainty what the author actually willed, but must reconstruct this meaning on the basis of linguistic signs and other evidence” (Schmidt135).

However, the accessibility to the original meaning itself is problematic. How can one know and understand something from the past, especially when the context of the author or the text cannot be determined. Then the only thing one can do is to refer to other books, authors, and historical records of the same period in order to understand the author’s background. This is also a problem as they cannot assure objectivity regarding the author’s intention. It can also be noted that Hirsch gives less significance to the changing nature of language. Language plays a crucial role in understanding the author’s intention and background. Language is not static. It changes over time. Hence, the linguistic context of the interpreter is decisive in understanding the linguistic background of the text she reads. Therefore, accessibility to the author’s meaning is actually a matter of possibility since it cannot be guaranteed.

Author’s Failure to Convey Meaning

The second argument against the authorial meaning is that the author may fail to convey what she means. Hirsch opposes this argument by asserting that it is not necessary that the author must excel at articulating what she intends to convey. “The author’s desire to communicate a particular meaning is not necessarily the same as his success in doing so” (Hirsch, *Validity* 11).

Usually, the understanding of the intention of the author is considered as not comprehensive. The meanings that one can convey are limited. The whole meaning that a person possesses may not be conveyed precisely. That is, a text does not carry the whole meaning an author intended. However, in Hirsch’s opinion, this is not a decisive factor. It is not necessary to identify the textual meaning with all the meanings possessed by an author. There are meanings that the author does not want to convey. The words convey only the verbal meanings. The meanings beyond the words are not sharable, or they cannot be shared with others. The interpretation deals with the sharable meanings, not all the meanings of the author. Hirsch argues that “many of my sharable meanings are meanings which I am not directly thinking of at all. They are so-called unconscious meanings” (18).

Sometimes, the interpreter can understand the hidden meanings which the author has never intended. However, the distortion of meaning which is not intended by the author is nothing but misunderstanding. The interpreters may determine the meaning of the text by falsifying the meaning of the author. That means the author conveys the meaning that she does not mean or want to. How is this possible? Here, Hirsch insists that “It is not

possible to mean what one does not mean, though it is very possible to mean what one is not conscious of meaning, that is the entire issue in the argument based on authorial ignorance." (22) That is, the author does not convey what she actually has not intended, but she conveys what she is not aware of. This is what Hirsch calls the authorial ignorance.

Hence, those who do not believe that the understanding of the intention of the author is a principle for deriving the textual meaning criticise this ignorance. This ignorance of the author is of many kinds. Some meanings may have different and more implications than the author intends. This means that the interpreter can understand the subject matter that the author discusses, not the author. In *Validity in Interpretation*, Hirsch proposes the example of Kant and Plato. Kant argues that he can understand the concept of the *Ideas* of Plato better than Plato himself. He believes that the doctrine of *Ideas* has different dimensions than what Plato articulated. Kant does not understand the meaning of Plato better, but the subject matter of Plato's analysis (19).

Another form of authorial ignorance can be seen in the difference between the early draft of the text and the final output. Through the analysis of this difference, one can understand that there are differences of meanings in the early draft and the final text; that is, the author has changed the earlier meaning. Does this mean that the author herself is not stable in maintaining her own meaning?

Possibility of a Change of Meaning by the Author

The third and the most pertinent argument against the authorial intention is that the author herself may change her own meaning. Those who believe in reader-response theory argue that the author changes her meaning over time and from reading to reading, and thus meaning can never be fixed or reproduced. If we accept that the meaning of a text changes from reading to reading, it will inevitably expel the author's authority. For Hirsch, this has no theoretical interest, as these assumptions are subjective in nature. Nevertheless, he points out that it is obvious that the meaning, opinion, thoughts, perspectives, and judgements of the author, like those of everybody else, change over time. However, this change actually occurs in the relationship of the author to the text, not in what the text means.

What is important, according to Hirsch, is that in fact, when theorists claim that the author's understanding of her own textual meaning may change, they point toward the experience that the author undergoes when she rereads her text. "The phenomenon of changing authorial responses is important because it illustrates the difference between textual meaning and what is loosely termed a 'response' to it" (7). The author may respond to her own work in a different way when she rereads it. Hirsch does not deny this. He asserts that "Instead of seeming beautiful, profound, or brilliant, the work seemed misguided. Trivial, and false, and its meaning was no longer that the author wished to convey" (7).

The author knows that her understanding of her own meaning may vary and change. Sometimes, she may forget what she meant and explain the meaning differently at different times. The author also changes and revises her opinion and meaning when she realises that there are disagreements with her earlier thoughts. For example, Wittgenstein changes his own earlier view on language in the later work. Even if the author has changed the original meaning, it is impossible to know that unless the author herself tells us. For Hirsch, this hardly happens, because, when the author realises that her understanding of the meaning of her own text has changed, she normally revises the earlier meaning and effectively conveys the new meaning.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the original textual meaning has changed. Instead of that, it is the opinion of the author that has changed. Even then, one cannot deny the fact that the new meaning can be compared to the original meaning, that is, when the author rejects the original meaning and chooses the new one, actually the meaning does not change, it remains the same. For Hirsch, “an author’s original meaning cannot change – even for himself, though it can certainly be repudiated” (9). Here, the interpreter must decide which of the meanings is important for her at the moment. In fact, the meaning of a text is constant. What changes is the author’s attitude. Even though the relevance and meaning of the text to its author changes, the textual meaning is constant. It is here that the distinction between the meaning and significance becomes relevant. Change in meaning actually implies the change in significance, according to Hirsch.

Meaning and Significance

To understand the author’s intention is sometimes difficult, yet it is the goal of interpretation. According to Hirsch, “the object of interpretation is no automatic given, but a task that the interpreter sets himself. He decides what he wants to actualize and what purpose his actualization should achieve” (25). Here comes the importance of meaning and significance. Meaning must be distinguished from its significance. Thus, Hirsch makes a fundamental distinction between meaning which he defines as the author’s intended message at the time of writing, and significance, which refers to how this meaning relates to various contexts and readers. Meaning, that is, verbal meaning, is the willed and shared type or “what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence” (8). Significance is “a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable” (8).

According to Hirsch, meaning is what the author intended to convey through the text whereas significance is the relationship of that meaning to something or someone. “*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable” (8). This distinction is overlooked in hermeneutics as far as Hirsch is concerned.

Hirsch insists that meaning is stable, determinate, and fixed in the author's linguistic and historical situation; it does not change once the text is completed. On the contrary, significance is altering and dependent on the perspective of the reader or the context. "Hirsch assumes that there is stable, unchanging object of investigation in interpretation, which is the author's 'meaning' as opposed to what Hirsch terms the changing 'significance' of the text as part of a changing world" (Malpas 429). That is, the significance of the text may change, not its meaning. "It is not the meaning of the text which changes, but its significance to the author" (Hirsch, *Validity* 8). Meaning is fixed. Hirsch insists that if the meaning of a text changes, then there will never be a valid interpretation. Hence, what changes is the significance of the text, not the meaning.

Hirsch claims that meaning and subject matter are different. The author's meaning can be expressed in different words by different readers. However, this does not mean that they understand the original meaning differently; instead, it is conveyed in different words. "Significance always entails a relationship between what is in a man's verbal meaning and what is outside it, even when that relationship pertains to the author himself or to his subject matter" (63). He asserts that the original meaning of a text remains constant. Nevertheless, its significance may change over time or with different readers. In this way, significance is a kind of hermeneutic application of meaning. Hirsch "explains that 'meaning' (reference) is concerned with knowledge, and that 'significance' is concerned with value. 'Value', he goes on, 'is value-for-people. And this value changes'" (Simms 140).

Meaning must be understood objectively, while it is the significance that determines the interpreter's choice of words to present the meaning. "It is true that the significance of a text for one person is not altogether the same as for another, because the men themselves and therefore their personal relationships to a particular verbal meaning are different" (Hirsch, *Validity* 39). "If a reader cannot distinguish between what someone's text means and what it means to himself, then obviously for such a reader the distinction could have no empirical confirmation" (39).

Meaning and significance are closely linked to understanding and judgement, respectively. Meaning is something that can be understood, and significance is something that can be judged. "Understanding" is a matter of submission, according to Hirsch. He suggests we take the word quite literally, that is, in understanding we 'stand under' what is to be understood. Hirsch objects to any treatment of understanding as constructivist. 'Judgment' is of a different order. In judging, one acts independently and on one's own authority – like a judge" (Keane 513).

For Hirsch, meaning is a matter of consciousness and not of physical signs and consciousness is a personal affair. There is no meaning outside consciousness. "A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. There is no magic land of meanings outside human consciousness" (Hirsch, *Validity* 4). Hirsch accepts that the author's meaning and the

interpreter's meanings are certainly different, because both of them have different mental acts. This makes the interpreter misunderstand the author. According to Hirsch, "Since consciousness can isolate part of itself, the interpreter can reconstruct the author's intended meaning without incorporating her own beliefs." (Schmidt 141)

Private and Public Meaning

Here, Hirsch focuses on the public and private aspects of textual meaning. The private aspect implies the subjective meaning of the author. The unreproduced experience of meaning is different from the unreproduced meaning. "Meaning experiences are private, but they are not meanings" (Hirsch, *Validity* 16). Even if there is only one person who relies on interpretation of a text, then the textual meaning becomes public. So, the important question that Hirsch asks is whether the author originally intends the public meaning. The meaning of the author is public if the interpreter is able to understand and convey it. Thus, it is self-contradictory to argue that the intended meaning of the author is private, if anyone accepts this interpretation.

When the meaning of the author is somewhat different from what the public interpreted, then this public consensus makes the meaning of the author extraneous. Then there is no place for validity or invalidity of interpretation. The meaning of the text is a public matter. The public consensus makes the belief that the intention of the author is irrelevant and the meaning of the text is public property. Here, Hirsch asks a crucial question: if the public consensus constitutes the meaning of the text, then how do disagreements occur there? In this case, what does the public meaning mean? Who are the people who disagree with the public consensus?

Public meaning is the result of public consensus, which is not backed by the author's meaning. This, in fact, is a logical error, as far as Hirsch is concerned. For him, public consensus does not exist. Public meaning is something which is construed from a text by the so-called general community. In fact, there is no such general opinion regarding something; rather, only a majority exists. Hence, the public meaning is nothing but the meaning of the majority, not the meaning of the entire community. "Any meaning which two or more members of the public construe is *ipso facto* within the public norms that govern language and its interpretation" (13). Through this, Hirsch denies the idea that language has its own independent and autonomous status or that linguistic signs do not convey their own meaning. However, it is true that textual meaning is language-bound and hence, the genre of a text is an important aspect of its significance.

The Genre – A Significant Factor

A determinate meaning is expressed through a linguistic expression which is a shared type. This is called 'genre', according to Hirsch. "All understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound." (76). He identifies genre with the hermeneutic circle. Hermeneutic circle means a circular relationship between the parts and whole. According

to it, the parts can be understood through the whole and the whole is understood only through the parts. The parts provide a preliminary idea of the whole. Likewise, the interpreter must make a guess about the meaning which makes a grounding for interpretation. This is guided by the genre. Hirsch does not offer a classification of genres like thriller, tragedy, fantasy, or literary, philosophical, or historical text. For him, genre is a normative principle. Nevertheless, when interpreting a text, the interpreter has to identify what kind of text it is. The recognition of genre helps the interpreter envision the whole and thereby understand the parts. Hirsch calls this intrinsic genre which is a shared one between the author and the reader. "Interpretation begins with a guess about the intrinsic genre to which the text belongs. This guess is the interpretive hypothesis" (Schmidt 137).

Genre is inseparably connected to the authorial meaning. The author always strives to make a genre-framework for her work and expects the readers to recognise it. Thus, genre shapes understanding. Hirsch's argument is that if we consider what the text says is more important than what the author has originally meant, then every reading of a text is valid. It is meaningless to describe the nature of a text as interesting, sensitive, or anything of that sort. Therefore, the context, style and genre can influence the author's final meaning and hence they have a pivotal role in forming the text. "From the genre the interpreter must then discover the particular meaning the author intended by the particular manner in which he determined the genre by his use of linguistic symbols" (136).

The interpretation of each genre has a different set of norms, style, tools, and intentions. If the interpreter fails to identify the correct genre, she is more likely to misunderstand the author's intention. For example, reading a historical essay as a serious philosophical treatise leads to interpretive error. The concept of genre can be understood easily when the interpretation goes badly, according to Hirsch. Furthermore, the preliminary recognition of genre is a guesswork and it is provisional. Hence, he asserts that whenever the interpreter realises that her genre-identification is incorrect, she must revise it. Hirsch opines "that an interpreter's preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands and that this remains the case unless and until that generic conception is altered" (Hirsch, *Validity* 74). Thus, genre is important to understand the text.

For Hirsch, genre is actually a methodological tool to reproduce the author's meaning. Genre is considered as a tool for interpretation. Hirsch calls it a heuristic tool which is necessary for determining and stabilising meaning. Genre is a normative structure. It provides the rules and norms governing how a text communicates. Identifying genre narrows down the plausible meanings. Therefore, genre is a heuristic tool as well as a criterion for validity of interpretation.

However, according to critics, genre is not a pre-fixed or pre-determined idea. Rather, it is dynamic which evolves over time. Identifying and fixing a text's genre limits its scope. Furthermore, when Hirsch emphasises that the genre can be revised, it in fact means the

textual meaning can also be revised. He considers it as a misinterpretation, but actually it is the process of interpretation.

Hirsch accuses the thinkers who argue for semantic autonomy of neglecting the crucial distinction between meaning and significance, which has been the cause of undesirable misunderstanding in the history of hermeneutics. This fact, according to him, is forgotten in many of the interpretive theories, especially that of Gadamer. Hirsch accuses Gadamer of neglecting this difference between meaning and significance. Nevertheless, in his latest essay, Hirsch revisits the idea of meaning and significance in which “he acknowledges that he had not earlier confronted the ‘futurity of intention’ which produces a paradox for the theory that a text can be taken to represent a fixed meaning” (Hirsch, *Aims*205). The author cannot foresee the future of her intention. Hirsch then acknowledges that his hermeneutics is closer to that of Gadamer than he previously believed. According to him, “Gadamer was right to say that application can be part of meaning” (214).

Thus, Hirsch’s theory of meaning and significance forms the cornerstone of his hermeneutic philosophy and reflects his broader commitment to objectivity in interpretation. While recognising that texts yield new significance over time, he claims that valid interpretation must be grounded in the reconstruction of the author’s original meaning. This poses a challenge to Hirsch’s objective interpretation. That is, if uncovering the original intention of the author is the only purpose of interpretation, then what is the role of the creativity of the reader? As Gadamer has stated that understanding is historically and linguistically situated. Focusing only on the author’s meaning limits the reader’s response and thereby the possibilities and diversity of interpretation. It makes the interpretative process rigid and obstinate. Hirsch ignores that different and multiple interpretations enhance the prospects of meaning.

When Hirsch argues that meaning is fixed and what changes is its significance to the reader, he in fact neglects that the changing significance constitutes the relevance of the reader in the interpretative process. He admits that the significance of the text changes. Significance reframes textual meaning. They influence each other. That means, interpretation incorporates both the author’s meaning and text’s significance. This is a challenge to his own claim for objectivity.

Conclusion

E. D. Hirsch’s hermeneutics emphasises the significance of authorial intention as the foundation of valid textual interpretation. It questions the indeterminacy of meaning which is a salient feature of reader-response theory. This is rooted in his distinction between meaning and significance. For Hirsch, the role of the interpreter is not to construct a meaning but to reproduce it through historical, linguistic, and contextual analysis and thereby provide an objective validity and foundation to interpretation without which it would be ensnared in relativism. Hence, his real concern is epistemic, as he considers interpretation as a cognitive process.

Hirsch strives to establish a clear and objective criterion for interpretation by substantiating that the aim of the interpretive process is to reconstruct the meaning of the author. He clearly differentiates the authenticity and implication of a text through distinguishing between meaning and significance. This eradicates ambiguity and shows the importance of the validity of an interpretation. Thus, Hirsch' theory is undeniably feasible in the interpretation of legal and historical discourse, as they require objective validity.

At the same time, what Hirsch does is to make the interpretive process too rigorous by asserting that the sole criterion for interpretation is the author's willed meaning. This overlooked the reader's horizon. Furthermore, the problem with considering meaning as constant and significance as changing is that this changing significance is the reason one cannot regard the author's intention as the sole criterion of interpretation. Nevertheless, in defence of the author's willed meaning, Hirsch is an indispensable challenger of those who believe in the death of the author.

Notes

[i] Emilio Betti is an Italian Jurist and philosopher who emphasises that interpretation must be objective and author's intention must be the criterion of understanding in his essay, *General Hermeneutics*.

[ii] Hirsch pointed out this on page 5 of *Validity in Interpretation* as a footnote.

[iii] Schleiermacher has explained two methods of interpretation – the grammatical and the psychological. The grammatical method deals with the understanding of the author's intention through the linguistic signs and symbols, whereas the psychological method focuses on the subjective thoughts and experiences of the author.

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