

Beyond the Normative/Descriptive Divide: Hermeneutics and Narrativity

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Defining hermeneutics has always been difficult. Surely, this comes as no surprise. Hermes himself, the divine messenger for whom hermeneutics is named, was notoriously hard to pin down. “The first of all postmen,” Hermes’ famous winged sandals allow him to bring word to gods and mortals from Zeus; he carries messages across thresholds, translates between worlds and beings, and traffics in multiple meanings.¹ Hermes is simultaneously more and less than a faithful postman. Dubbed “companion of the dark night,” Hermes is a trickster who travels at twilight (*Homeric Hymns* 4:290). The complex, contradictory traditions embodied in the mythical Hermes remind us that the nexus of issues at the center of hermeneutics – (mis)understanding and meaning, (mis)interpretation and perception, (mis)representation and translation – has always been unstable, always hard to define.

This is not for lack of trying. Consider the following definitions. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the progenitor of the modern discipline of hermeneutics, defined the field as “the art of understanding,” and differentiated between *subtilitas explicandi* (exactness of explication) and *subtilitas intelligendi* (exactness of understanding).² Later, Hans-Georg Gadamer, following his mentor Martin Heidegger, advanced the more expansive view that hermeneutics concerns the conditions of possibility that enable or hinder understanding; for Gadamer, hermeneutics properly aims “not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place.”³ Consequently, for Gadamer, the borders of hermeneutics as a discipline are amorphous:

The hermeneutic aspect itself cannot remain limited to the hermeneutic sciences of art and history, nor to intercourse with ‘texts,’ [...]. The universality of the hermeneutic problem, already recognized by Schleiermacher,

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- 1 Caputo, John, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington 1987, 160.
 - 2 Schleiermacher, Friedrich, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman, Missoula (MT) 1977, 96.
 - 3 Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method* [1960], 2nd rev. ed. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, New York 1989, 295.

has to do with the universe of the reasonable, that is, with anything and everything about which human beings can seek to reach agreement.⁴

Another giant in the modern hermeneutical tradition, Paul Ricoeur, defines hermeneutics as “the theory of the rules that preside over an exegesis – that is, over the interpretation of a particular text, or of a group of signs that may be viewed as a text.”⁵

My purpose in this chapter is not to construct an historical account of definitional disagreements about hermeneutics (those are readily available elsewhere),⁶ but rather, to consider a distinction that has survived in various iterations throughout centuries of hermeneutical debate: that between *descriptive hermeneutics* and *normative hermeneutics*. According to the traditional dichotomy, descriptive hermeneutics (often called philosophical hermeneutics) aims to explicate the “what is” of interpretation. If we were physicians, descriptive hermeneutics would be our diagnosis – our description of the processes involved in actual meaning-making; like the physician offering a diagnostic assessment of a disease, we would self-consciously eschew value judgments about those processes. Normative hermeneutics, on the other hand, concerns “what ought to be.” If we were physicians, this would be our prescription – our judgments about the proper procedures that should govern interpretation; like the physician advocating a specific medical procedure or treatment plan, we would offer explicit value judgments about the ends to which interpretation aspires.

Of course, many scholars today would ascribe to a more nuanced view than that of a pure, absolute dichotomy between descriptive and normative approaches. Individual thinkers have developed their discussions of this and related dichotomies in different directions, variously engaging with, critiquing, and/or nuancing David Hume’s ought/is dichotomy, or the Kantian distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. The hermeneutical theories of figures like Habermas, Gadamer, and Ricoeur recognize – albeit differently from one another – various ways that normativity and description are intertwined. The intricacies of such treatments require no retracing here.⁷ It is enough, for

4 Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David Linge, Berkeley 1976, 180.

5 Ricoeur, Paul, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage, New Haven 1970, 8.

6 E.g.: Dilthey, Wilhelm, *The Rise of Hermeneutics*, trans. Fredric Jameson, in: *New Literary History* 3 (1972), 229-244; Palmer, Richard, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, Evanston (Ill.) 1969.

7 A useful overview can be found in: Putnam, Hilary, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, Cambridge (MA) 2002.

our purposes, to recognize that nuanced discussions notwithstanding, the normative/descriptive distinction remains both persistent and powerful.

What interests me is scholars' respective postures toward and assessments of these different forms of hermeneutical discourse. Across the scholarly landscape, in diverse corners of the humanities, one finds widely discrepant evaluations of the normative/descriptive distinction. On the one hand, critics in certain circles criticize and reject any distinction at all between neutral, value-free, objective description and value-driven, judgment-based normativity. Such scholars, influenced by postmodern intellectual movements (e.g., critical theory, poststructuralism, deconstruction, etc.), and following in the hermeneutical tradition of Gadamer and Ricoeur, consider all hermeneutics to be inherently, inescapably normative, because all language limits and enables understanding through dialogical exchange (Gadamer's "fusion of horizons"). These critics accept as axiomatic truth that interpretation *depends on* normative assumptions and *advances* normative aims.

On the other hand, the claim that all interpretation is normative remains virtually heretical in other circles. E.D. Hirsch, for example, insists on a theoretical and practical distinction between hermeneutical *canons* (which are based on normative judgments) and hermeneutical *principles* (which are based on describable facts).⁸ The aim for these interpreters is, as Shaun Gallagher puts it, to "reproduce the meaning or intention of the author by following well-defined hermeneutical canons that guide reading."⁹ Hirsch responds to Heidegger's view that all human understanding is historically conditioned (and that therefore, accurate reconstructions of the past are impossible) by insisting that the latter is a "metaphysical position," and must "be isolated from the analytical dimension of hermeneutics."¹⁰

To take the discussion one step further, many scholars who adhere to a strict normative/descriptive divide are convinced that normativity is not just distinct from description, but that it is *negative* – to be entirely avoided in scholarly discourse. What accounts for this discrepancy between those who consider all hermeneutics to be normative and those who reject normativity as negative? Carl Olson writes that "an academic field cannot discern its way without being able to know its historical development in some kind of narrative way."¹¹

8 Hirsch, Eric D., *The Aims of Interpretation*, Chicago 1976, 75.

9 Gallagher, Shaun, *Hermeneutics and Education*, New York 1992, 9.

10 Hirsch, Eric D., *Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics*, in: *New Literary History* 3 (1972), 2, 245-261, 251.

11 Olson, Carl, Introduction, in: Olson, Carl (Ed.), *Theory and Method in The Study of Religion: A Selection of Critical Readings*, Belmont (CA) 2003, 1-14, 12.

Hermeneutics – indeed, *die Geisteswissenschaften* more broadly – cannot discern a way forward without taking a careful, critical look back.

The first part of my chapter is therefore devoted to a looking back, a consideration of how we got this particular critical narrative, that “normativity is negative.” In short, my argument is that the “normativity is negative” perspective remains influential because multiple overlapping binaries are intricately woven into particular disciplinary narratives about what we are doing when we engage in interpretation; the conflation of these multiple binaries rhetorically undergirds and legitimates the assessment of normativity as negative. Additionally, I contend that normativity itself becomes a discursive construction that scholars use rhetorically (and ironically) to legitimate their own normative views. In the second half of the chapter, I propose that the concept of narrativity can be a useful alternative to the normative/descriptive dichotomy when considering hermeneutics. In that section, I refer to the story of Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke (10.38-42) as my exemplary text.

First, let me offer a specification, a caveat, and an invitation. The specification is that I am interested in the rhetoricity of ancient narratives and the critical narratives we produce about them. My area of expertise is Biblical Studies, and within that, New Testament and Ancient Christian history (disciplines that are entirely bound up with the historical development of the German hermeneutical tradition, though that is a topic for another time and place).¹² Personally, therefore, I am primarily preoccupied with hermeneutical questions about ancient narratives and the cultures that gave rise to them. At the same time, however, there is certainly resonance with the questions and concerns of those who study hermeneutics from an analytic philosophical perspective and/or vis-à-vis contemporary texts and contexts.

The caveat is this: There are long and complicated genealogies and complex disciplinary dynamics behind all of the oppositions touched upon below that I do not have space to delineate. I realize that naming how these oppositions work in my field may appear reductionistic, but given that this volume is intentionally interdisciplinary, I judge doing so worth the risk. In light of the above specification and caveat, I invite readers in fields outside of Bible, Religion, and/or Theology to consider the following discussion a disciplinary case study that illustrates my larger contention about normativity as a discursive

12 There are many treatments of biblical interpretation in light of philosophical hermeneutics. See, e.g., Porter, Stanley/Stovell, Beth, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, Downers Grove 2012; Thiselton, Anthony, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, Grand Rapids 2009; Porter, Stanley, *What Difference Does Hermeneutics Make? Hermeneutical Theory Applied*, in: *Pastoral Journal* 27 (2010), 1-50.

construction, and to consider whether, *mututis mutandis*, my claims might also apply in other disciplinary contexts.

A Look Back: “Normativity is Negative”

Philosopher Tom Lewis writes of the normativity/description binary vis-à-vis another much-contested divide – that between theology and religious studies:

[A] crucial background assumption – sometimes stated but often not – is that whereas theologians make normative claims, religious studies scholars should *refrain from doing so*. Rather, scholars in religious studies should distinguish themselves from theologians precisely by striving for some type of distance, neutrality, or objectivity in relation to their subject matter, where this is understood to entail analysis regarding what is rather than claims about what ought to be.¹³

Further, Lewis notes, these dichotomies are commonly conflated with a distinction between faith and reason, where faith refers to community-specific beliefs that are based on unquestioned and unquestionable authorities (e.g., Scripture or Church tradition), and reason is based on tested or empirically verifiable claims. Lewis summarizes this view: “[N]ormative claims related to religion are fundamentally a matter of faith, where faith is juxtaposed with reason.”¹⁴

In part, the normative/descriptive, theology/religious studies, faith/reason divides can be traced to a hermeneutical paradigm shift that occurred with the rise of modern biblical scholarship during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Hans Frei traces meticulously in the *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, biblical narratives during that time came to be considered as *either* historically accurate references to factual persons and events (the domain of Religious Studies), *or* as theologically-motivated claims (and therefore, mythical in the Aristotelian sense of *μῦθος*, or narrative constructedness).¹⁵ As Frei forcefully insists, however, narrative meaning is:

13 Lewis, Thomas, *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion – and Vice Versa*, Oxford 2015, 45.

14 Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters*, 45.

15 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 50a4.

not *illustrated* (as though it were an intellectually presubstisting or pre-conceived archetype or ideal essence) but *constituted* through the mutual, specific determination of agents, speech, social context, and circumstances that form the indispensable narrative web.¹⁶

The two hermeneutical choices presented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries limited critics' interpretative range and, according to Frei, ultimately skewed their understanding.

A common corollary to this historical/theological interpretive divide was a strict temporal divide: history is that which concerns the past and theology concerns the "here and now." For much of the twentieth century, Krister Stendahl's distinction between "what the text meant" and "what the text means" simply remained unquestioned,¹⁷ and hardly an eyebrow was raised when Yale theologian George Lindbeck tied Stendahl's temporal distinction to a disciplinary one, writing that: "History interprets what the text meant, and theology what it means."¹⁸ In other words, interpretive, temporal, and disciplinary dichotomies become elided in a growing mountain of cumulative associations: anachronistic is opposed to historical *and* value-driven is opposed to fact-driven *and* subjective is opposed to neutral, and on and on.

In an era governed by the view that "science and science alone" is "the measure of reality, knowledge, and truth,"¹⁹ it is not difficult to see how certain constellations of associations could become ideologically conflated with each other and opposed to others. In my American context, this results in a fraught (typically caricatured) opposition between Religious Studies as concerned with history, description, and fact, and Theology as concerned with evaluative judgments, faith, and contemporary concerns. These associations form normative scholarly ideologies that are powerful in part because they are never merely abstract. Normative narratives – even critical scholarly narratives – are always experiential, embodied, practiced and performed; as such, they are also always grounded in material conditions and relations of power, which

16 Frei, Hans, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Haven 1974, 280.

17 Stendahl, Krister, Art. Biblical Theology, Contemporary, in: Crim, Keith (Ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, Nashville 1962, 418-432.

18 Lindbeck, George, *The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation*, in: Green, Garrett (Ed.), *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, Philadelphia 1987, 161-178, 162.

19 Bernstein, Richard J., *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Oxford 1983, 46.

themselves come into existence in and through the webbed networks of social institutions (Althusser's "state apparatus").

Institutionally (and thus, economically), higher education in the United States reinforces the normative narratives sketched above because the landscape is so clearly divided between confessional Christian universities, Divinity Schools, and seminaries (on the one hand) – which are associated with *religious* or *theological* education, and secular religious studies departments (on the other hand) – which are associated with education *about* religion. This tends to be true also of publishing entities. Of course, there is good historical reason for this: In 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court offered the famous *Schempp* ruling, which distinguished between *religious* education and education *about* religion, and expressly banned the former from public academic discourse.²⁰ Religious education remains, for many Americans, synonymous with proselytization.

In institutions outside the U.S., of course, different versions of such territorial disputes appear; in Europe, for instance, programs labeled "Theology" typically divide faculties between Protestant and Catholic (though in practice, the implications of this division are quite variable). Despite institutional and disciplinary particularities, similar postures toward normativity are evident: Normativity, in many different contexts, is considered private, subjective, and unscholarly, while in contrast, description is equated with disinterested scholarly neutrality.

Yet, the oppositions themselves are not innate to – or necessary in – our considerations of hermeneutics. Rather, they constitute normative narratives that arise out of and are appropriated in specific communities. Variations of multiple binaries become coupled or elided in the "normative is negative" narrative, and are then marshaled rhetorically in scholarly territorial disputes. The result is that the very concept of "normativity" becomes a discursive construction used rhetorically by scholars of otherwise incompatible views toward the very same end. For many, this functions to legitimate the belief that *their* interpretive strategies come from an unbiased non-place (and are, therefore, the only right ways of reading), whereas *others'* ways of reading are normative, biased, and therefore wrong. To put this another way: "Normativity is negative" is a narrative that is used (ironically) to legitimate normative views.

We can see normativity as a discursive construction more clearly if we consider the fact that the very same assumptive elisions are found on both sides of the divides they create. What I mean is this: already, we have considered how some (especially American) scholars of religion conceive of theology

20 Abington School District v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

as biased/subjective/faith-based/irrational *and* religious studies as neutral/objective/fact-based/reason-driven. But consider the fact that there are also scholars who conceive of *theology* as neutral/objective/fact-driven/reason-based and *religious studies* as biased/subjective/value- or position-driven. I am struck by the extent to which both sides disown bias; both claim neutrality for themselves, while charging others with “doing normativity.” In other words, *on both sides* of the theology/religious studies divide, we find those who claim (or aim) to reflect reality by describing “what is” (or for historians, “what was”), *and on both sides* of the theology/religious studies divide, we find those who charge others with trying (speciously) to shape reality by advancing normative claims about “what ought to be.” The recent rise of *secular studies* over and against the normativity that secular theorists consider endemic to *religious studies* demonstrates further the rhetorical power of negative normativity as a discursive construction.

Developments in critical thought over the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including the rise of historical consciousness and the so-called “linguistic turn” in the humanities more broadly, have underscored the problems with the above dualisms and respective elisions. Before highlighting just a few of these developments, it may be helpful to underscore an important clarification made by Hilary Putnam. Drawing on John Dewey’s antidualism, Putnam rightly insists that a “distinction is not a dichotomy.”²¹ While distinctions can be valid and useful, they become problematic when categories are reified and taken as strict and inviolable dualisms.

There are a number of reasons the oppositions mentioned above are not best conceived as dualisms. One is that, as many scholars have pointed out, an absolute distinction between history and theology is *not*, in fact, *historical*. That binary problematically renders history atheological and theology ahistorical. History is saturated throughout with theological negotiations, and conversely, contemporary theological discussions are determined by particular historical (re)constructions. The perception that history is objective and theology subjective cannot stand, either. Even the most ardent German historicists did not conceive of *Verstehen* as wholly *objective*; according to figures like Droysen, *Verstehen* is possible through textual interpretation, which itself depends on a *subjective* cross-cultural, transhistorical empathizing with the historical Other.

Furthermore, scholars in many different fields (not only theologians) make normative prescriptive claims about what “ought to be,” entirely apart from religious or theological convictions. Martha Nussbaum, for example, a self-described “neo-Stoic,” advocates the revival of ancient virtues in contemporary

21 Putnam, *The Collapse*, 3.

society, though she does not do so from a religious perspective; presuming universal definitions of *eudaimonia* (which she renders “flourishing”), Nussbaum renders those definitions normative for all humans.²² Neither is normativity solely about morality or ethics. Jonathan Dancy begins his edited collection, *Normativity*, by making just this point:

Our “ought” here is not particularly a moral ought, nor even just a practical ought. [...] For the notion of value (good and bad) is held to be as normative as the notion of the right.²³

Normativity is capacious, involving many kinds of evaluative judgment.

As noted at the outset, definitions of hermeneutics abound. However, all agree on a basic level that hermeneutics has something to do with interpretation, or meaning-making. As such, hermeneutics is fundamentally concerned with various kinds of normativity. Reflecting on the popular 1980s slogan, “Meaning is normative,” Allan Gibbard writes:

What I mean determines oughts. The crux of the slogan that meaning is normative, then, might lie in another slogan: that *means* implies *ought*. [...] normative judgments are ‘ought’ judgments. They are judgments that are, as Wilfrid Sellars put it, “fraught with ought”. They are judgments that move within the “space of reasons”. They are “oughty.”²⁴

Conversely, “oughts” also determine meaning. As reader-response critics like Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish have highlighted, the nature of interpretation is not given; meaning-making is always shaped by the socio-culturally shaped normative practices of social groups (Fish’s “interpretive communities”). We often do not recognize that this is the case, however, because these forms of normativity remain implicit.

To echo Putnam, dichotomies like the normative/descriptive divide “have corrupted our thinking about both ethical reasoning and description of the world, not least of all by preventing us from seeing how evaluation and description are interwoven and interdependent.”²⁵ On the one hand, as Habermas insists, overt evaluatives have *both* descriptive and normative dimensions. On

22 Among Nussbaum’s many related works, see: *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Chicago 2001.

23 Dancy, Jonathan, Editor’s Introduction, in: Dancy, Jonathan (Ed.), *Normativity*, Oxford 2000, vii. See also Wedgwood, Ralph, *The Nature of Normativity*, Oxford 2007.

24 Gibbard, Allan, *Meaning and Normativity*, Oxford 2012, 10.

25 Putnam, *The Collapse*, 3.

the other hand, even when we purport to offer only a descriptive hermeneutic, we cannot help but make normative (that is, evaluative, “oughty”) judgments about such basic matters as what about interpretation calls for explanation or description, or what vocabulary and categories to use when we describe interpretive processes. The story that normativity is negative (while neutral objectivity is positive) is powerful. But because interpreters are themselves embedded within interpretive contexts, it proves untenable.

Where shall we go instead?

A Look Ahead: Narrativity and Hermeneutics

Narratives play a powerful role in a myriad of hermeneutical matters, including meaning, power structures, communication, and cultural knowledge. That scholars are now theorizing about narrative in fields as diverse as ecology, economics, education, psychology, and medicine attests to growing recognition of this fact.²⁶ The rest of this chapter explores the ways in which the notion of narrativity can provide a useful heuristic category for considering normativity vis-à-vis hermeneutics.

Like hermeneutics, narrative is notoriously difficult to define. Some scholars declare that, “Whatever you say and think about a certain time or place becomes a narrative in its own right.”²⁷ Others point to narrative as a form of knowing; the word itself derives from the Sanskrit root *gna* (“know”), which also yields the Greek *ginōskō* (“I know”), the Latin *gnarus* (“knowing/skillful”), and the French *narrare* (“to tell/relate”). Walter Fisher famously affirmed the “Narrative Paradigm” as a form of knowing in its own right (as opposed to mere aesthetic packaging of rational discourse).²⁸ For some, then, narrative is the means by which individuals and societies structure, interpret, and reflect human experience. To use Wendy Doniger’s description, “Human experience is inherently narrative; this is our primary way of organizing and giving coherence to our lives.”²⁹ The notion of narrativity to which I appeal here *gestures toward*

26 A small sample of these diverse disciplines includes: Hunter, Kathryn Montgomery, *Doctors’ Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge*, Princeton (NJ) 1991; Freedman, Jill/Combs, Gene, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*, New York 1996; Prickett, Stephen, *Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700–1999*, Cambridge 2002; Geelan, David, *Weaving Narrative Nets to Capture Classrooms: Multimethod Qualitative Approaches for Educational Research*, Norwell (MA) 2003.

27 Herman, Luc/Vervaeck Bart, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, Lincoln 2005, 1.

28 Fisher, Walter, *Toward a Logic of Good Reasons*, in: *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64 (1978), 376–384.

29 Doniger, Wendy, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, New York 1998, 56.

the universality and validity of narrative as a form of knowing, but is actually more limited. By narrativity, I mean the most fundamental characteristics that constitute a narrative: plot, point of view, setting, and characterization.³⁰

I commend narrativity as an alternative to a dualistic normative versus descriptive hermeneutics paradigm for several reasons. One is that narrative cuts across the very terms of the oppositions highlighted above. Narrative's felicitous functioning is normative in both descriptive and prescriptive ways. Narratives reflect reality (i.e., they represent "what is" or "what was") and, concomitantly, narratives shape reality (i.e., they influence "what ought to be"). Narratives also cut across temporal divides: as far as we can tell, narratives are everywhere, in every culture, from every time and place. Hayden White has famously called narrative a "metacode, a human universal."³¹ Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck agree: "No single period or society can do without narratives. [...] From the oldest myths and legends to postmodern fabulation, narration has always been central."³²

Bringing the notion of narrativity to our considerations of hermeneutics illuminates specific ways in which so-called descriptive hermeneutics can be normative. We are making normative choices when, for example, we decide who or what to include or occlude in our account of hermeneutical processes; the causes to which we attribute interpretive events or experiences; where we begin and end our accounts; and the sequence in which we will explain how interpretation works. Not only that, but we choose the vocabulary with which we will tell the tale, and vocabulary includes not only denotations, but also connotations. My point here is analogous to the argument advanced by postmodern historiographers like Hayden White, who have made the normativity of the descriptive task especially clear with respect to how we conceive of and write history as narrative.

The notion of narrativity also draws productive attention to the implicit dimensions of normativity – that is, where interpretive normativities are not stated, but implied. While normative judgments can be variously located along a spectrum between explicit and implicit, I would argue that the space of the implicit is actually where the most powerful rhetorical work gets done. Narrative helps us understand this because, while narrative is persuasive, the way it works rhetorically tends to be more implicit than explicit. Consider, for

30 Contemporary narratologists still debate what constitutes a narrative, though most agree that these formative aspects of story are indispensable to an adequate definition.

31 White, Hayden, *The Value of Narrativity*, in: Mitchell, William J. T. (Ed.), *On Narrative*, Chicago 1981, 1-24, 2.

32 Herman/Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, 1.

example, the difference between linear arguments, which call for critical distance and rational assessment, and narrative, which invites identification with characters and immersion in a storyline. Bruce Krajewski, reflecting on this dynamic, writes that when you encounter a narrative,

you are receiving an invitation to undergo an imaginative variation of your ego. The Looking Glass beckons Alice to move, to enter. She is not to remain outside, staring at herself in the Looking Glass. Her task is to stop seeing only herself, to lose herself by stepping through the mirror.³³

Social psychologists refer to this absorption as “narrative transportation,” and they have observed that an engrossed audience is less likely to devise critical, rational arguments against a story’s implicit rhetorical claims; in other words, narrative’s immersive capacity increases its persuasive potential.³⁴ Furthermore, narrative’s rhetorical functions are not merely personal or individualistic; narrative establishes and perpetuates the unique social identity of “the community that tells and retells the story.”³⁵

The persuasive power of narrative transportation, and narrative normativity’s location in the space of the implicit, make disavowals of normativity so ethically dangerous. Normativity without critical inquiry is precisely what turns ideology (often: theology) into tyranny. It is an abdication of ethical responsibility for one’s own role in interpretation. Why should scholars relinquish normative discourse about hermeneutics to those who abdicate ethical responsibility? I believe it is part of our responsibility as scholars to make explicit the implicit normativities of narratives – and I mean this with respect to the normativities of the materials we study (for me, ancient narratives like those in the New Testament) *and* with respect to the normativities implied by the critical narratives we produce about them today.

This requires critical reflexivity – that is, self-conscious metatheoretical examination of and reflection on our own and others’ hermeneutical practices:

Research texts like any others, are to be read and re-read, not as representations (accurate or flawed) of the world, but as contested claims to speak

33 Krajewski, Bruce, *Traveling with Hermes: Hermeneutics and Rhetoric*, Amherst 1992, 10.

34 Green, Melanie/Brock, Timothy, *The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives*, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79 (2000), 701-721. The literature on narrative immersion is extensive.

35 Ricœur, Paul, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, Minneapolis 1995, 241, 243.

“the truth” about the world, constituted in the play of disciplines of the social. Research writing, in this model, *becomes narrative work*.³⁶

This reflexive hermeneutical “narrative work,” moreover, leads to deeper understanding. To draw on Ricœur, “Every hermeneutic is explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others.”³⁷ In the fields of biblical studies/theology/religion, normativity without critical reflexivity is what enables many religious practitioners (and, I would add, many of their critics) to run unchecked (even if unwittingly) toward nefarious ends. This should serve as a salutary reminder of why attending to the normative dimensions of hermeneutics really does matter.

Interpreting Normative Narratives: A Case Study

Let me illustrate the above with a story:

Once, there were two sisters. One was always talking, always busy, characterized by emotional and verbal excess. The other was composed, quiet, restrained. A man came along who affirmed the quiet sister's comportment, and in doing so, effectively rejected the other sister's expressive excess.

Perhaps you recognize this. It is a summary of a pericope about the sisters Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke (10.38-42). The Lukan account is brief: the man, Jesus, enters their home. Martha, the “busy” sister, is “distracted by many tasks” (10.40), while Mary, the restrained one, sits at Jesus’ feet to “listen to his word” (10.39). Martha complains, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” (10.40) Jesus responds that Mary – the silent, listening sister – “has chosen the better part” (10.42).

Those who study and teach narratives like this one, which are considered by so many to be holy, authoritative, divinely-ordained *Scripture* cannot ignore the very serious ethical implications of what is at stake for real people in real communities interpreting these narratives as normative. Biases about the Bible mean that religious readers over the centuries have received the narrative of Mary and Martha as normative (in the sense that the story is a guide for proper behavior) because it is found in the Christian canon.

36 Fox, Nicholas, *Beyond Health: Postmodernism and Embodiment*, London 1999, 180.

37 Ricœur, Paul, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, trans. Don Ihde, Evanston (Ill.) 1974, 17.

Interpreters have not, however, always drawn the same conclusions about the normative implications of this sisterly contrast. By far, the most common reading has been that Jesus is reprimanding Martha for being distracted, and affirming Mary for listening to the Lord. But feminists and other critics have complicated that take on the narrative's normativity. On the one hand, some, situating the story in its first-century *Sitz im Leben*, consider Luke's inclusion of a sister-centered story at all to be progressive; Luke's Synoptic counterparts, for example, have no parallel to this scene. Some consider Jesus' response to be counter-culturally liberating toward women, since he does not tell Mary to help serve, as one might expect in patriarchal first-century Mediterranean culture. Furthermore, these readers would say, Mary's silent seated posture depicts her like a male student learning at a Rabbi's feet – which would have been unusual for a woman at that time.

Feminist counter-readings offer yet another assessment of the normative implications of this narrative: rescuing "busy" Martha from the margins, these readers declare that Jesus' rebuke is unfair; he chastises Martha when she simply is trying to be hospitable. Not only that, these readers point out, but Martha is scolded after speaking boldly as a confident woman, whereas Mary is praised for listening silently to a man. The normative (and from this perspective, unethical) implication of this reading is that all women should listen respectfully, in silence, to all men.

These divergent readings derive from different hermeneutical practices and assumptions about the universality or particularity of human experience. Adjudicating between them becomes especially difficult, though, because there often exists a significant disconnect between people's normative approaches to so-called "secular" literature and their customary ways of reading canonical sacred texts. Often, the very same interpreters who would embrace multiple potential meanings or varying hermeneutical postures in a literature class (for a number of complicated reasons) resist hermeneutical flexibility regarding the Bible.

Again, let me illustrate with a story:

Once, there were two sisters. One was always talking, always busy, characterized by emotional and verbal excess. The other was composed, quiet, restrained. A man came along who affirmed the quiet sister's comportment, and in doing so, effectively rejected the other sister's expressive excess.

Is this the same story? In a sense, it is not. Because this time, I was summarizing the story of sisters Marianne and Elinor Dashwood in Jane Austen's nineteenth-century novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. Certainly, nonbiblical literature

is normative. Austen's novels clearly have devotees; the constant stream of film remakes and fan fiction – “Austen mania” – attests to ongoing obsession with her narratives. Scholarly assessments of *Sense and Sensibility* continue to evolve, as well. And yet, no interpretive communities of which I am aware consider *Sense and Sensibility* to be a divine mandate regarding the proper place for women. To my knowledge, no one makes normative, authoritative claims about God and humanity based on Marianne and Elinor. This illustrates by contrast how crucial it is that scholars attend to the complex questions raised by interpretation of texts that are considered by so many “not as classics, nor even as sacred texts, but as Scripture,” and therefore, as “the revelation of God.”³⁸

To summarize the above section, attending to narrativity – and, importantly, to the (often implicit) *rhetoricity* of narrative – brings into sharp relief the following three observations:

1. Normative narratives do different kinds of rhetorical work in different contexts.
2. Much of that rhetorical work takes place in what I am calling the space of the implicit.
3. Much is at stake for readers when interpreting narratives that they consider to be divine revelation.

Narrativity also offers the benefit of an altogether different approach to considering hermeneutics – one that reverses the typical methodological direction of hermeneutical inquiry by beginning with a narrative itself.

Narrative Theorizing: Re-Reading Mary and Martha

In *A Glance Beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity*, narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan describes her approach this way:

[This work] is not an application of a theoretical hypothesis to works of literature or a corroboration of the hypothesis by them, nor [...] only an analogy between conceptual and novelistic grapplings with the same

38 Tracy, David, Writing, in: Taylor, Mark C. (Ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago 1998, 383-394, 383.

issues. Rather, I endeavor to theorize through literature, to use the novels as, in some sense, the source of theory.³⁹

She justifies this methodological reversal by noting that, "Literature has its own ways of 'thinking' about conceptual problems, and theory can only benefit from integrating these alternative modes of knowing."⁴⁰ In this section, I proceed from a similar starting point with respect to narrative's unique "mode of knowing." Doing so can render the familiar unfamiliar (to invoke a common theme from the hermeneutical tradition). What might we see anew if we read the familiar New Testament story of Mary and Martha on a metatheoretical level as a reflection on hermeneutics – that is, as a narrative account that dramatizes the problematics of meaning-making, normativity, and authoritative interpretation?

To begin with, we might observe that the dialogue in the story begins with a question – Martha's indignant, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" (10.40) As indicated by Gadamer's hermeneutical circle, interpretation arises in the ongoing interplay between an interpreter's unique historical situation and tradition (itself the accumulation of previous interpretations). Martha's question stems from her normative judgments of Mary as shirking her duties; as with all interpretation, Martha's assessment depends on an entire repertoire of unspoken, culturally-formed normative views – that is, tradition, brought to bear on her concrete circumstance.⁴¹ Whether Martha draws on specific first-century assumptions about gender, hospitality, familial life, or something else, we cannot know. What we *can* say, however, is that the form of her question and her subsequent directive ("do you not care ...? Tell her to help me," 10.40) functions implicitly as a request for Jesus to affirm, or authorize, her interpretation. "Is" and "ought" collide in this narrative moment, constituting and constraining one another.

It is not insignificant that this story is set in Mary and Martha's home, or *oikos*. The concept of *oikonomia* held a privileged place in ancient hermeneutical theorizing. Closely associated with the rhetorical canon of *dispositio*, the order or arrangement of an argument, *oikonomia* evoked notions of organic unity and familiarity, or accommodation (*sunoikeyioun*). In both *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, Aristotle uses language from the domestic sphere, or *oikeia*, to

39 Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith, *A Glance Beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity*, Columbus 1996, 1.

40 *Ibid.*, 3.

41 See, e.g., Rumelhart, David E., *Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition*, in: Spiro, Rand J. et al. (Ed.), *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension*, Hillsdale (NJ) 1980, 33-58.

commend metaphors with which an audience would be familiar, since they facilitate understanding (e.g., *Rhet.* 3.2.12; 3.11.5-6; *Poet.* 21.15).

At the same time, Aristotle avers, metaphors should not be “too obvious” (*Rhet.* 3.11.5) or “far-fetched” (*Rhet.* 3.2.12); both familiarity and estrangement play crucial roles in effective composition and interpretation. Many ancient theorists and practitioners of rhetoric echoed Aristotle, further developing the dialectic between understanding and misunderstanding, clarity and obscurity, familiarity and strangeness, that has always typified hermeneutical endeavors. Gadamer draws on this longstanding ancient tradition, referring to Socrates’ use of *oikeion* (that which pertains to the *oikos*) in his description of hermeneutics as a “tension-laden relationship.”⁴² In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer situates hermeneutics “on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness.”⁴³ It is there, in “this in-between” that we find “the true locus of hermeneutics.”⁴⁴

And it is there, in the “in-between” of Mary and Martha’s *oikia* that this dialogic exchange unfolds. Notice the extent to which Jesus renders the familiar strange for Martha. When Martha asks Jesus to affirm her normative assumptions, and Jesus responds by saying Mary “has chosen the better part,” and it “will not be taken from her” (10.42), he effectively defamiliarizes Martha’s familiar, assumed understanding. In so doing, Jesus advances an alternative normative interpretation – one that makes strange and thereby implicitly challenges the schemata upon which Martha had drawn in order to make sense of the situation.

The normativities at play here are layered and complex. On the level of the story, Jesus judges Martha’s meaning-making as mistaken. That is, his correction identifies her interpretation as a *mis*understanding – of Mary, of the situation, and of herself. With that, the story ends. Jesus has the last word in the story – literally. So-called “curtain lines” such as these carry great weight in the telling of a story: as soon as Jesus speaks them, the curtain falls on the scene and the audience is left to ponder the implications. We have, then, two sets of normative judgments in view: those of the characters, and those of the audience. At this point, focus shifts from the former to the latter.

On the one hand, the narrative discourse casts Jesus as the true hermeneut, the one who interprets rightly and thereby shifts the frame(s) of reference that make interpretation possible. In the rhetoric of the narrative, that is, Jesus’ interpretive “ought” wins out. This is, in part, due to Jesus’ depiction

42 Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith, New Haven 1980, 18.

43 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295.

44 *Ibid.*

as authoritative interpreter thus far in Luke's Gospel: the reliable narrator has already established this element of Jesus' characterization before he enters Mary and Martha's home. The sequential dynamics of narrative meaning-making add force to this progressive picture, priming the audience to interpret Jesus' interpretation in this scene as the correct one.

On the other hand, different audiences will assess Jesus' interpretative judgments according to their own normative commitments within their unique interpretive horizons, as was evident in biblical scholars' varying ethical assessments of the story mentioned above. Audiences may find, depending on a number of factors (including the characters with whom they intuitively identify), that they are, to echo Gadamer, "pulled up short by the text."⁴⁵ They might find, for example, that like Martha, the presuppositions and conceptual frames that constitute their own condition of knowing (Heidegger's *Vorgriff*) are put into question and ultimately transformed as a result of the interpretive event.

Hermeneutics and Narrativity: Concluding Thoughts

In the end, one might ask, whose normativity prevails? Martha's? Mary's and Jesus'? The author(s)' of the Gospel? A first – or twenty-first – century reader's? This brings us back full circle to the definitional dualism with which we began: normativity versus description. The very question of whose interpretive "ought" *ought* to win out problematically, paradoxically presupposes that a non-normative, unambiguous single meaning is possible. I have argued that when it comes to hermeneutics, this normativity/description dualism is both unhelpful and obfuscatory; ironically, normativity often functions as a discursive construction with which critics do normative kinds of work.

I have also argued that the notion of narrativity offers a more robust conceptual paradigm through which to consider the complexities inherent to hermeneutics. This should come as no surprise if we return again to the figure of Hermes. We only know of this swift-footed messenger god from the mythical narratives about him. Further, those stories depict Hermes as one who defies categories. Son of the god Zeus and the nymph Maia, Hermes was born of border-crossings; in him, heaven and earth comeingle. As an adult, he travels freely between heaven, earth, and the underworld, communing and communicating outside the otherwise normative boundaries that structure the Greek mythical world.

45 Ibid., 268.

Of course, as discussed above, in the real world, the consequences of normative narratives are hardly mythical. They are instead wide-reaching and profound, and all the more so when the narratives that are being interpreted are considered by so many to be sacred Scripture. As such, it is incumbent on scholars to make *explicit* the often *implicit* ways in which narratives work rhetorically, as well as the often unacknowledged ways in which the scholarly self is a hermeneutical self – a self that interprets and interrogates the normative narratives of the past, of texts, of cultures and traditions, and of ourselves.

Scholars of hermeneutics will do well to attend closely to narrative theories, which offer alternative modes of understanding how humans come to understand. As Martin Kreiswirth writes: “[W]e must strive to know what’s happening in the telling, where it’s happening, what it claims, and what it does. We must come to learn what the stakes are when we (merely) tell someone else that something happened.”⁴⁶

Too much is at stake to do otherwise.

46 Kreiswirth, Martin, Merely Telling Stories?: Narrative and Knowledge in the Human Sciences, in: *Poetics Today* 21 (2002), 2, 293-318, 316.