Chapter 1. Scripture and Semiotics: C. S. Peirce *after* Peter Ochs

Any account of Scriptural Reasoning must begin with Peter Ochs's engagement with the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. First, a few words about Peirce's biography; second, a few words about who Ochs is.

Charles Sanders Peirce seemed to be an odd human being. He was the son of a Harvard mathematician Benjamin Peirce, and Charles attended Harvard as both an undergraduate and graduate student. His father changed the spelling of their name from "Purse" to "Peirce" without changing the pronunciation because "Purse" was too feminine of a name. Charles was a member of the now famous "Metaphysical Club" where he talked law, politics, and science with William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Chauncey Wright, and others. James and Peirce maintained a deep, if not strange, friendship throughout their lives. Charles left his first wife in order to marry a prostitute, and he had trouble keeping a job. He taught philosophy at Johns Hopkins University but did not teach there for long. He was a bitter person, and this bitterness seemed to have driven him to write and write and write in the rural setting of Milford, Pennsylvania. He struggled with human relationships, but he changed the course of the history of Western philosophy with his philosophical systems known as semiotics and three-valued logic. Charles died in 1914.[1]

Personality-wise, Peter Ochs is very far from being like his favorite philosopher. Ochs is charitable, gracious, kind—and spends most of his time thinking about community service

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[1] Joseph Brent's biography remains both engaging and reliable; see Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce*, (Indiana University Press, 1993).

projects and teaching. The journalist Jeffrey W. Bailey captures Ochs's personality and spirit

quite accurately:

> [EXT]Ochs is one of the Jewish founders of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, a professor of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia, and a primary impetus behind SR's development. At the meeting [that Bailey attended], he [Ochs] talks about the possibilities for an "Abrahamic theo-politics", and the group questions him as to the role Scriptural Reasoning might play. His friendly manner belies an intellectual intensity, and after each of his rapidly-delivered answers, he says to his questioner, "But what do *you* think?" He seems determined to make things conversational, and positively lights up when someone disagrees with him. He talks about his hope that new ways of religious reasoning among people of faith might emerge. "People assume that problems among religious groups arise out of religious differences. So, to bring such groups together, they try to avoid religion altogether and turn to some supposedly shared interest, like economic development," he says. "Our assumption is the opposite: that religious people like each other because they *are* religious. They are moved by piety, discipline, and love of God to pursue similar ends and find solutions."[2][/EXT]

Ochs has his undergraduate degree and his PhD from Yale University, with an additional

master's degrees from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He was a doctoral

student of John Smith, one of the few specialists in American Philosophy who taught at Yale in

the latter half of the 20th century. Ochs taught at Drew University in New Jersey before

becoming the Edgar Bronfmann Chair of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia

(UVa). He is married to Vanessa Ochs, also an established author and scholar within Jewish

Studies, and they have two daughters together.

As I said in the Introduction, Ochs was my doctoral adviser—known, professionally, as a

doktervater. After finishing my own master's degree in Christian theology and ethics, I decided

that I wanted to study American Philosophy and set myself up to teach and write on American

Philosophy and the philosophy of religion. In addition to Ochs's presence, UVa offers a PhD in

Philosophical Theology—which is as close as American universities get to allowing students to

do a PhD in philosophy of religion. UVa was my first choice for PhD programs, but Ochs was

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[2] Bailey, "New Models for Religion in Public: Inter-Faith Friendship and the Politics of Scriptural Reasoning," in *The Christian Century*, 123 (2006), 36.

serving as a Visiting Professor in the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University the year that I

applied to UVa. Additionally, I never met Ochs before applying to UVa but had read his big

purple book (as his students call it): *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture*. After

arriving at UVa in Fall 2005 (with a spouse, 7 months pregnant), I finally met Professor Ochs

and enrolled in his course on Peirce, pragmatism, and quantum theory. I knew I was in the right

place for my doctoral work because of this class![3] As a doctoral adviser, Professor Ochs was

severely challenging yet equally encouraging and inspiring. Once he agreed to mentor me, I

never doubted his confidence and trust in me as a scholar.

  While I went to UVa to study American Philosophy with Professor Ochs, I ended up

spending much of my time doing and practicing Scriptural Reasoning. Now, Ochs is known

more as the founder of Scriptural Reasoning than he is as one of the most creative and innovative

interpreters of Peirce's philosophy. Eventually, David Ford and Peter Ochs named me as the

General Editor for the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*—and I have served in that role for over

ten years.

  In my mind, I write this companion in my role as the General Editor of the *Journal of

Scriptural Reasoning* more than in my role as a philosophy professor at a Midwestern liberal arts

college. Of course, these roles remain complementary. In this first chapter, for instance, I sound

like a philosophy professor explaining technical theories in non-technical ways—to the best of

my ability. The goal of this chapter, therefore, concerns the ways in which Ochs employs and

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[3] That semester, my first at UVa, I had perhaps the three best courses I had for all of my doctoral course work:
Professor Ochs's class on Peirce, pragmatism, and quantum theory (philosophy of science); Professor Larry
Bouchard's "Drama and Narrative Theory" (a class in aesthetics that laid the foundation for my first book on
narrative); and Professor Robert Jenson's (the famous Lutheran theologian) "Kant and his Kin"—a class on modern
philosophy of religion where we read and studied religious writings by Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher,
Samuel Coleridge, Horace Bushnell, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The other two courses I took with Professor Ochs
during my time at UVa were the following: "American Pragmatism and Medieval Philosophy" and "Postliberalism."

engages with the thought of Peirce resulting in making Peirce's pragmatism and semiotics the most obvious foundation for the practice of Scriptural Reasoning.

[A]Why Scripture?

In it is not typical for a philosopher like Ochs to take such an interest in Scripture—the canonical books of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. I detect two motivations for Ochs's interest in Scripture: one based upon his reading of Peirce's pragmatism and another based upon his commitment to Judaism. These come together in his formulation(s) for the practice of SR.

[B]Why Scripture? The Pragmatist Answer

Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture remains Ochs's most important book, and in that work Ochs outlines three ways in which Peirce's philosophy leads us (philosophers) back to the Christian scriptures. First, what Ochs calls "the agency of Scripture" in Peirce's thinking: "Peirce calls graph writing 'scripture', as in 'scribing a graph', and names the two persons who collaborate on the graph the *graphist* and the *interpreter*."[4] Before Peirce arrives at the *particularity of Christian Scripture*, he thinks through the *general meaning of the word "Scripture"*: a graph inscribed by someone and for someone else.

Second, Peirce envisioned a philosophical community analogous to the ecclesial community—which Peirce called "the great catholic church."[5] Like the "great catholic church," according to Ochs, Peirce sought for the philosophical community to make their scripture Scripture. Peirce envisioned, in Ochs's word, certain

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[4] Ochs, PPLS, 207.

[5] Peirce, ???

[EXT]communities of philosophers who identify their scripture with Scripture, or the Bible. They read Scripture as the prototypical narrative of how certain musers…were stimulated by their observations of human suffering to undertake corrective-and-diagrammatic inquiries that terminate…in the musers' dialogues with God.[6][/EXT]

This represents Peirce's move from the general meaning of scripture to the particular use of Christian Scripture. Communities need texts that function as graphs, in Peirce's sense of the word. For a certain community of philosophers, the Christian canon ought to have this function or play this role. The reason that Christian Scriptures should have this function or play this role concerns how it models—"prototypical narrative"—putting identifications of human suffering in relationship with "dialogues with God." Within philosophy, identifying human suffering belongs to the areas of aesthetics (Aristotle's *Poetics*) and/or ethics (Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*) while "dialogues with God" belongs to ethics (Plato's *Euthyphro*) and/or the philosophy of religion (Plato's *Laws*). The works in parenthesis pinpoint foundational texts for how human suffering relates to the study of aesthetics and ethics and how "dialogues with God" relates to the study of ethics and philosophy of religion. The Christian Bible models how all of these connect to each other and provides an object of study that brings together and unite philosophers interested in the relationship between human suffering, speaking about God, and talking to God.

Third, Peirce moves beyond the claim that the Christian Bible serves as merely a model. According to Ochs, Peirce "illustrates how a philosopher actually graphs God's attributes…[and] illustrates how *communities of scriptural philosophers* actually graph God's attributes of compassion-and-correction."[7] The Christian Scriptures offer a particular graph of God's attributes, and Ochs's words of "compassion" and "correction" can be replaced with a plethora

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[6] Ochs, PPLS, 287.

[7] Ochs, PPLS, 290.

of synonyms. From my own tradition of Lutheranism,[8] we would say Law ("correction") and Gospel ("compassion"). Others might substitute love and justice: love for compassion and justice for correction.[9] Still others might see "compassion" as equivalent to the categories of grace or mercy whereas "correction" as equivalent with "judgment" and "wrath." The point is that Ochs seems right about this in relation to how God is presented—how the New Testament authors graph their "dialogues with God"—in the Christian Scriptures. For Peirce, certain communities of philosophers ought to take these divine attributes as normative for their enquiries into aesthetics, ethics, and the philosophy of religion. My use of the word normative shifts Peirce's thinking away from treating Christian Scripture as a *model for enquiry* into how the New Testament sets *standards for thinking for enquiries* within aesthetics, ethics, and the philosophy of religion.

What does this mean for SR? Straightforwardly, it means that Ochs's invention of the practice of SR became his way to invent a philosophical community of enquirers who take the New Testament—and added to the New Testament the *Tanakh* and the Qur'an—as normative for conversations concerning aesthetics, ethics, and the philosophy of religion. While not all scriptural reasoners are trained as philosophers, all scriptural reasoners participate in this Peircean-inspired philosophical community that bases itself on how God is graphed through Scripture.

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[8] Readers ought to know that I am an odd duck, both professionally and religiously. I am not considered a scholar of Lutheran theology or Lutheranism, but I am a practicing Lutheran—and, most importantly for my everyday life, I am married to a Lutheran Deaconess whose spiritual life is much richer and more serious than my own. Because of my work with Ochs and four years of teaching Jewish ethics at the College of William & Mary, some might consider me a scholar of Jewish philosophy (see Goodson, *Strength of Mind*, chapter 3). Academic designations might be useful for CVs, but they simply should capture what one enjoys to read and teach.

[9] Another course I took at UVa, which has formed my teaching and writing beyond measure, was Professor Jim Childress's "Love and Justice" (Spring 2007).

[B]Why Scripture? The Jewish Answer

It might seem obvious to say that Ochs's commitment to Judaism leads him to take Scripture seriously, but the post-liberal part of Ochs's thinking means that he finds he must "return to Scripture" after its "eclipse" within Jewish philosophy and Judaism. In order to avoid the fallacy of hasty generalization, in this section I will talk about Jewish philosophy specifically rather than Judaism in general. Ochs's "An Introduction to Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation" outlines his own Jewish "return to Scripture."[10]

Ochs follows Hans Frei's (one of his undergraduate teachers from Yale) diagnoses of how modern philosophy slowly "eclipsed" biblical narratives.[11] Within modern philosophy, Frei blames Baruch Spinoza and John Locke and others.[12] Ochs seems agreeable to this diagnosis. Frei emphasizes modern philosophy's impact on Christian theology, and Ochs makes the same claim for Jewish philosophy. Ochs writes, for instance, "the argument of both Jewish and Christian postcritical interpreters is that modern scholars have reduced biblical interpretation to the terms of a dyadic semiotic that lacks warrant in the biblical texts."[13] This reduction led to making Jewish Scriptures—the *Tanakh*—so unhelpful and uninteresting that, within Jewish philosophy, it became a hurdle to overcome rather than a source of wisdom to continually draw from.

This "return to Scripture" involves what I mean in this companion by the terms post-liberal and post-liberalism.[14] By "returning to Scripture" after the liberalism of modernity, which

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[10] See Ochs, PSI, 3-53.

[11] See Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, need page number.

[12] See Goodson, *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues*, chapters 1-4.

[13] Ochs, PSI, 38.

slowly "eclipses" the narratives of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, post-liberalism in this context does not have to mean anti-liberalism or ant-modernity but, rather, a particular failure or result of liberalism within modernity to make biblical narratives so unhelpful and uninteresting that both citizens and scholars lose a significant source of wisdom for their everyday lives and scholarly pursuits. Ochs seeks his contribution to the tradition of Jewish philosophy to serve as a "return to Scripture" in relation to the tendency within Jewish philosophy, after Spinoza, to take a reductive—and, therefore, problematic—approach to the *Tanakh*.

[A]Peirce, Hermeneutics, and Semiotics

As I intend this companion to serve the purpose of a philosophical introduction to the practice of SR, I stop at this point and follow the path of what it means to treat Peirce's semiotics as a theory of interpretation (hermeneutics). I navigate Ochs's understanding and use of Peirce's semiotics as a hermeneutics in relation to other treatments of Peirce's semiotics as a theory of interpretation. Like Ochs, other scholars connect Peirce's semiotics with a hermeneutics of Scripture. However, some scholars see in Peirce's semiotics a more general hermeneutic. In this section, therefore, I achieve two important goals—which I state as colloquially as possible. First, I demonstrate that Ochs is not crazy to see in Peirce's work the potential for a hermeneutic that requires people reading stuff together. Second, I offer a different route than thinking in terms of a "Bible study" for why a practice like SR might be needed. In what follows, I outline the ways in which three other thinkers see in Peirce's semiotics a theory of interpretation: the famous Italian philosopher Umberto Eco, literary theorist William Elford Rogers (and a friend of mine), and Ochs's former colleague at Drew University Robert Corrington. In addition to what I claimed as

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[14] In this companion, I align myself with Gary Slater's take on the role of post-liberalism in Ochs's thinking: "Reflecting its postliberal influence, the sources for guidance in Scriptural Reasoning lie in its communal, historically situated traditions" (Slater, NCMRI, 123).

the accomplishments of this section, this section gives readers a stronger sense of Peirce's semiotics than what I have offered thus far in this chapter.

[B]Scriptural Reasoning *after* Umberto Eco

Umberto Eco might be famous for writing novels such as *The Name of the Rose*, but he also writes a lot on Charles Sanders Peirce's philosophy. I focus on one of his books where Peirce is the main intellectual character: *The Limits of Interpretation*. Although he never references the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, his development of Peirce's semiotics as a kind of hermeneutics reflects several features of SR.

In Peirce's semiotics, Eco finds an interpretation theory that avoids particular problems within both medieval and modern theories of interpretation. I reconstruct his argument in five points. First, Eco claims, "any act of interpretation is a dialectic between openness and form, initiative on the part of the interpreter and contextual pressure."[15] Medieval theories of interpretation tend to prioritize "form" over "openness," and modern theories of interpretation tend to prioritize "openness" over "form." Peirce's semiotics requires both: "a dialectic between openness and form." This "dialectic between openness and form" becomes a necessary feature of SR, where participants must be open to the text and to other interpreters. Additionally, SR only works if the interpretations offered have a substantial form to them. Within SR, being open to the text and to others does not mean being "nice" to other participants. It means, instead, that participants need to articulate substantial interpretations (what Eco means by "form") that are received by others with a kind of "openness" that leads to in-depth engagements with one another rather than mere agreement.

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[15] Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 21.

Second, Eco identifies the problems he sees in both medieval and modern theories of interpretation. He writes,

[EXT]Medieval interpreters were wrong in taking the world as a univocal text; modern interpreters are wrong in taking every text as an unshaped world. Texts are the human way to reduce the world to a manageable format, open to an intersubjective interpretive discourse. Which means that, when symbols are inserted into a text, there is…no way to decide which interpretation is the 'good' one, but it is still possible to decide, on the basis of the context, which one is due, not to an effort of understanding 'that' text, but rather to a hallucinatory response on the part of the addressee.[16][/EXT]

The problem with medieval theories of interpretation concerns how they encourage a singular meaning, both within texts and within the world. The problem with modern theories of interpretation involves an assumption of humanism: texts remain "unshaped" until human reason molds them (think Kant's *First Critique*). Peirce's semiotics ought to be understood as a system that offers the ability to affirm (a) texts do have some inherent meaning; (b) the meaning of texts is not univocal, and interpreters give texts multiple meanings in addition to the inherent meaning; and (c) human rationality contributes to the meaning of texts and even shapes certain texts, but this process is best described as "semiotic" precisely because human reason shapes texts while texts simultaneously shape human reason as well. For Peirce, semiosis requires reciprocity.

In the context of the practice of SR, this means that engagements around scriptural passages ought to involve an exercise of constant questioning. Participant A offers an interpretation about Genesis 1.1; this interpretation might add to the meaning of Genesis 1.1, or it might be a "hallucinatory response" to the sense of Genesis 1; participant B, therefore, raises a question or set of questions that helps both participant A and the other participants in the SR study group determine if said interpretation ought to be judged as contributory or hallucinatory— not in line with the sense of Genesis 1. Yes, our interpretations add to and contribute the

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[16] Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 21.

meaning of Genesis 1.1; the sense of Genesis 1.1 also forms, informs, and shapes the ways in which our rational faculty gains the ability to even offer an interpretation of Genesis 1.1.

Third, Eco learns from Peirce's semiotics what it means to come to an "agreement" about the meaning of a text. He writes,

[EXT][T]o reach an agreement about the nature of a given text does not mean either (a) that the interpreters must trace back to the original intention of the author or (b) that such a text must have a unique and final meaning. There are 'open' texts that support multiple interpretations, and any common agreement about them ought to concern…their open nature and the textual strategies that make them work that way.[17][/EXT]

Medieval theories of interpretation regard agreement about the meaning of texts as the goal of interpretation whereas modern theories of interpretation aim for making texts agree with human rationality. According to Eco, Peirce's semiotics shifts both of these hermeneutical goals. Yes, we can reach agreement about texts; the agreement, however, does not concern the meaning of texts but "their open nature." Yes, human rationality relates to interpreting texts. Texts, however, do not need to be read to conform to human rationality; rather, human rationality aids and instructs us in learning how to "support multiple interpretations" of those texts.

Eco's development of Peirce's semiotics as a theory of interpretation speaks to a difficulty within SR that, sometimes, makes both "conservatives" and "liberals" skeptical of the practice.[18] "Conservatives" tend to avoid or critique the practice of SR because of the need for agreement about the "open nature" of scriptural passages. Usually, SR practitioners respond to this criticism by saying: *only during the practice of SR do we need to make this agreement*. In other words, SR asks of participants only for a pretend-agreement about the "open nature" of texts for the purposes of SR sessions. "Liberals" tend to be annoyed by the practice of SR

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[17] Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 41.

[18] I use these labels for heuristic and introductory purposes—my intent does not involve perpetuating a bad and unhelpful binary that negatively impacts all of us on a daily basis.

because strict SR practitioners bluntly challenge any and all interpretations of scriptural passages that make those passages sound "modern" or "progressive." In other words, some SR practitioners see it as their mission to constantly and directly challenge the modern (in Eco's sense of the word) tendency of aiming to make texts agree with the tenets of human rationality.

Fourth, Eco introduces the role of Peirce's concept of "musement" in his semiotics. Eco writes,

> [EXT][E]ven though the interpreters cannot decide which interpretation is the privileged one, they can agree on the fact that certain interpretations are not contextually legitimated. Thus, even though using a text as a playground for implementing unlimited semiosis, they can agree that at certain moments the 'play of musement' can transitorily stop by producing a consensual judgment.[19][/EXT]

Eco emphasizes how texts impact readers. In Peirce's semiotics, texts read readers as much as readers read texts! This reciprocity between reading texts and being read by texts is how Eco applies Pierce's recommendation of playful thinking—"musement"—to the process of interpretation. Readers should allow themselves to be playful with texts, and this playfulness occurs in the process of reading texts and being read by texts.

Semiosis encourages and requires "musement" as a means to "producing a consensual judgment." According to SR practitioners and theorists, the practice of SR does not lead to "consensus" in judgments about the meaning of texts. Within SR, therefore, Peircean "musement" is not treated as a means to "producing a consensual judgment." (Later in this chapter, I argue that we find a tension between "musement" and "pragmatism" in Ochs's description and expectations for SR.)

Eco's fifth and final point captures an aspect of SR that can be taken as both liberating yet frustrating. In Eco's words: "it is very difficult to decide whether a given interpretation is a

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[19] Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 41-42.

good one, [but] it is…always possible to decide whether it is a bad one."[20] This certainly

describes a facet of SR in the sense that there are no agreed upon standards of judgment within

SR: would an interpretation be judged as "good" because it conforms to doctrines within a

particular religious tradition or methods within academic biblical studies? SR allows neither of

these to function as absolute standards. If an interpretation seems to make no sense in relation to

the scriptural passage that everyone has in front of them, then such an interpretation can be

deemed as "bad" within the conversational engagements nurtured by SR.

Although Eco does not connect Peirce's semiotics with interpreting sacred texts, I

conclude that his development of Peirce's semiotics as a theory of interpretation offers helpful

insights for better understanding the practice of SR and how SR practitioners engage with

scriptural passages. At the very least, for purposes of this companion, Eco gives us ways in

which Peirce's semiotics—and SR as a practice following Peirce's semiotics—can be understood

as an alternative to both medieval and modern theories of interpretation. Eco's development of

Peirce's semiotics into a theory if interpretation demonstrates that Ochs's use of Peirce as the

foundational thinker for the practice of SR comes with merit and precedence.

[B]Scriptural Reasoning *after* William Rogers

William Rogers makes Peirce the "hero" of his book on "textual hermeneutics as an

ascetic discipline." Rogers's book is wonderfully titled *Interpreting Interpretation*! Rogers's

argument helps identify both the communal-aspect and future-orientation of SR. Rogers achieves

this by focusing on the textuality of Peirce's semiotics.

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[20] Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 42.

First, Rogers's use of the phrase "ascetic discipline" means that interpretation never should be seen or understood as an individual practice. A Peircean-based hermeneutics becomes an "ascetic discipline" in the sense that interpretation always involves the priority of a community over individual rationality. SR puts into practice this notion of "ascetic discipline" by ensuring that scriptural passages are always read together, within community, so that the individual rationality of a singular person does not take precedence within the process of interpretation.

Second, Rogers compares Peirce's semiotics and the practice of "textual interpretation" within literary studies. He writes,

> [EXT]Peirce talks about the explanation that necessarily belongs to every sign. There is "some explanation or argument or other context, showing how—upon what system or for what reason—the Sign represents the Object".… In textual interpretation the interpretive statement is a sign of—that is, stands for—the text.… Peirce suggests that there is some explicit or implicit set of interconnected rules…for moving from the significant features of the text to the interpretive statement. I can "argue for" or "support" my interpretation, in other words, by explaining the principles on which I have connected the features of the text to the features of my interpretive statement. This system of rules and principles is what I am calling the *interpretive system*. To apply an interpretive system means precisely to take something into the chain of significance, to take it as a sign, or as a *word* in the broad sense that Peirce uses when he says that the word or sign a person uses *is* the person.[21][/EXT]

In Peirce's argument for "the explanation that necessarily belongs to every sign," Rogers finds a set of rules for getting from "significant features of the text" to an "interpretive statement." An "*interpretive system*" can be referenced that enables an interpreter of a text to defend their particular interpretation of that text with an explanation of rules for interpretation. To reference this "*interpretive system*" for defending a particular interpretation is to envelope a sign or a word into a system of signs and words.

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[21] Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 20-21.

Third, Rogers defends his position for the *textuality* of the world by making the case that Peirce's interpretation theory is a "textual hermeneutics." Rogers writes,

[EXT][I]f Peirce's categories can themselves be articulated in linguistic terms, then a step will have been taken toward understanding what the world looks like from the perspective of textual hermeneutics—how things, in short, can be like words. From the perspective of textual hermeneutics, to see the world as text means to break down in the interpretation the opposition of words and things.[22][/EXT]

Some interpretation theories state an opposition between "words and things." In Peirce's semiotics, however, this opposition gets broken down. This opposition is broken down in Peirce's semiotics theory because Peirce treats "things…like words."

Finally, Rogers emphasizes the "future" aspect of Peirce's interpretation theory.

[EXT]By Peirce's theory of semiosis, interpreting means connecting one sign (or chain of signs) with another, according to some principle or set of principles. That is, I produce an interpretive statement about a text according to some interpretive system. But by the infinitely replicative nature of semiosis, my interpretive statement is now susceptible to being taken up in another interpretive statement, and so on. In fact, according to Peirce, my interpretive statement is only virtually a sign of the text. It can become a sign only insofar as it has the potential to be taken up in an infinitely self-replicating chain of signs that directs itself toward the perfected knowledge of an indefinitely future community.[23][/EXT]

Because the process of semiotics—called semiosis—is "infinitely replicative," interpretive statements are enveloped into other interpretive statements and enveloped into other interpretive statements and so on. This is all an interpretive statement can do for Peirce: become a sign of the text and infinitely replicate itself. This "infinitely self-replicating chain of signs" involves a teleological drive toward a definite "future community." This "future community," for Peirce, is the time and place where knowledge gets "perfected." The *telos* of Peirce's semiotics is that of "perfected knowledge" in a "future community."

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[22] Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 29.

[23] Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 166.

Ochs thinks of SR groups as embodying and signifying—not in full but in part—this Peircean notion of a perfected future community. The histories of relations between Christians, Jews, and Muslims has been determined by conflict, hopelessness, and violence. SR repairs these historical relationships—not only by putting Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the same room together for a definite period of time—but also by turning members of these traditions into a particular and peculiar kind of community: a community of scriptural interpreters engaged in semiotic process.

Peirce's Hermeneutics & Semiotics at Drew University

Prior to 1994, both Robert Corrington and Peter Ochs were professors at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. Both Corrington and Ochs spent time developing Peirce's semiotics into a theory of interpretation. In this section, I compare and contrast their developments on this question.

First, Peirce's semiotics leads to a communal hermeneutics. Corrington claims, "Peirce's semiotics gave him the tools for developing a hermeneutics and for showing its relation to the community of interpreters. Initially we can define semiotics as the systematic study of those items in experience known as signs."[24] Corrington defines semiotics as the study of what is found "in experience known as signs." According to Corrington, "Peirce…restricted the realm of signs to the realm of thought. That is, he argued that all thought must exist in signs, but that which lies outside of thought need not be a sign."[25] All thinking, for Peirce, is semiotic in the sense that in order for thought to be thought it necessarily involves signs. This relates to

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[24] Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 2.

[25] Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 2.

hermeneutics because it involves a "community of interpreters"—a community that attempts to offer a system for interpreting "experience."

Second, knowledge of the self requires an act of interpretation. In Corrington's words: "A sign refers to an object (denotation) in some way (connotation) and to some thought (interpretant)"—which means, "when we look into ourselves we must follow this general threefold pattern. We see our self in some respect, and our seeing produces an interpretant or thought about the self."[26] The "self" is only intelligible within a triadic relationship: an unexamined "self," an experience of the "self," and an interpretation or "thought" produced about the "self." Therefore, even to know one's self requires interpretation: to know one's seld involves being in an interpretive relationship with oneself. An interpretation of oneself has to be produced in order for there to be a conception or understanding of the "self" at all.

Third, signs are not for the sake of themselves but rather for the interpreter to interpret. Corrington claims, "Signs…are always signs for someone, namely, an interpreter. The interpreter has the function of interpreting the given sign to another. Thus we can see how signs can be understood only within the complex structures of a community."[27] Semiotics not only requires *interpretation* but also requires *interpreters*; in Peirce's semiotics, *interpretation* always involves an *interpreter*. Semiotics, though, does not allow for an individuated interpreter but rather requires a complex communal structure. Interpretation takes place with other interpreters in this complex communal structure.

Fourth, Corrington compares Peirce's semiotics with Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermenutics. He writes,

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[26] Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 11.

[27] Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 14.

[EXT]Peirce went beyond the earlier hermeneutic formulation of Schleiermacher by insisting that the expressions of language do not reveal a substantive self-consciousness with one determinate, if evolving nature. We do not necessarily know the "author better than he knew himself," as it is unclear just what ontological status the self would have. Peirce…came to see the self in semiotic terms and thus raised the problem of self-identity to new levels of complexity and interest. Yet, like Schleiermacher, [Peirce] believed that our external expressions are a fair indication of our internal nature, however complex that nature may be.[28][/EXT]

Corrington's move here contains similarities with Eco's argument that Peirce's semiotics modern theories of interpretation.

Schleiermacher famously argues that, in the hermeneutic process, an interpreter of a text is able to come to know the author better than the author knew herself/himself. Peirce's semiotics questions such a claim—not because Peirce thinks it wrong but, rather, because it lacks real substance. Interpreters come to know the mind of the author only through the interpretive process. The author comes to know herself/himself the same way that others come to know her/him: through the process of interpretation. Both Peirce and Schleiermacher agree that interpretation is required for knowledge, which involves the claim that there is no internal privileged access that a person has to herself/himself.

Lastly, concerning Corrington's interpretation of Peirce, the scientific community serves as the best model for what Peirce means by "communal" in his semiotics. Corrington explains,

[EXT]Knowledge, which itself is based on signs, can be won only when the individual identifies with the life of the community. For Peirce, the ideal model for the perfect community is the community of science. The scientific community is a self-corrective domain of free inquiry into the semiotic structures of objects and events. The community renews itself by placing all inferences under the skeptical eye of the researchers, who are dedicated to the search for counterexamples. The community has the teleological drive toward the ideal future in which scientific knowledge is secure and based on general metaphysical principles such as that of *agape-ism*.[29][/EXT]

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[28] Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 14.

[29] Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 15.

The scientific community serves as the ideal community and the ideal model for communal-thinking because it is "self-corrective" and continually "renews itself" through "the skeptical eye of…researchers." Also, the scientific community is "teleological" in that it thinks *forward* to an "ideal future" when "scientific knowledge is secure" and has proper "metaphysical principles" in place. Therefore, both the scientific community and the teleological drive toward the future are necessary parts of Peirce's semiotics because they serve as Peirce's "ideals" in his semiotics.

Corrington's interpretation of Peirce offers a good picture of what a theory of interpretation looks like based upon Peirce's philosophy of science, pragmatism, and semiotics. According to Corrington, Peirce's semiotics involves the necessity of interpretation for thought and understanding, as well for knowledge of the self. Corrington does not focus on the interpretation of *texts* per se but, rather, how semiotics itself can be understood as an *interpretive process*. The "ideals" of this interpretive process involve the scientific community as a model for communal interpretation and the teleological drive toward the future.

Robert Corrington's former colleague and the founder of the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, Peter Ochs, does not offer the same kind of interpretation theory based on Peirce's semiotics that Corrington does. My claim is not that they are contradictory or even contrary theories but, rather, they differ in emphasis: whereas Corrington focuses on how Peirce's semiotics is an *interpretive process* in general, Ochs stresses how Peirce's semiotics serves as a *scriptural or textual interpretive process* in particular.

What Corrington and Ochs share, however, concerns Peirce's philosophy of science. According to Ochs, Peirce's interpretation theory ought to be considered "a *hermeneutical science*":

> [EXT]Peirce is, perhaps uniquely, both "experimentalist" and "reflexive philosopher" or "logician".… [T]his logic…entail[s] some reflection on actual practices of scientific behavior. Logic may play a normative role, but it is not foundational: it is an interpretive

science, or…a *hermeneutical science.…* In Peirce's terms, a hermeneutical science is a semiotic activity that displays the immediate interpretants of certain symbols; Peirce's semiotics provides a more precise and thus more helpful vocabulary for this science than do the varieties of Continental and now also American "hermeneutics."[30]**[/EXT]**

Peirce's "hermeneutical science" involves the activity of showing "the immediate interpretants of certain symbols." Because of the precision of Peirce's "hermeneutical science," Ochs judges it as a better interpretation theory than Continental theories and other American theories of interpretation.

Ochs's primary analysis of Peirce's hermeneutics comes into play in his reading of Peirce's essay, "What Pragmatism Is."[31] Ochs points out that Peirce's essay begins with Peirce talking about "who *he* is" and identifies himself "with a certain type of person, defining that type through its typical actions, and then examining the logical tendencies displayed in those actions."[32] Peirce says that he is an "experimentalist," which involves being shaped by life in the laboratory and, because of such a formation, being blind "to any metaphysically unexperienced "physical reality" beyond the experimental result."[33] Peirce offers two names of other possible "experimentalist" thinkers in the history of philosophy: Bishop George Berkeley and Immanuel Kant—both philosophical idealists but in different forms. According to Ochs, Peirce's move here shows that he sees himself as both "experimentalist" and "reflexive philosopher" or "logician."[34] Peirce's formation in the laboratory carries over to his "hermeneutics." He, therefore, has "a

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[30] Ochs, PPLS, 166.

[31] See Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," http://www.iupui.edu/~arisbe/menu/library/bycsp/whatis/whatpragis.htm

[32] Ochs, PPLS, 166.

[33] Ochs, PPLS, 166.

[34] Ochs, PPLS, 166.

hermeneutical science" because it is a "hermeneutics" grounded in both experimentalism and logic.

Peirce's semiotics involves *textuality*, according to Ochs, because of the emphasis on the limits of knowing a metaphysical reality "beyond the experimental result." For Ochs, this conviction formed in the laboratory carries over as a conviction about how texts *work*. Peirce does not deny a metaphysical reality; Peirce denies how much individual knowers can know reality. Likewise with reading texts: in reading texts, a careful reader does not necessarily deny a metaphysical reality outside of the text; rather, a careful (scientific) reader remains within the limitations determined by that particular text. Because of these limitations, a reader who bases interpretation on "experimentalism" and "logic" knows not to go or move beyond the boundaries set by the text. Hence, within Scriptural Reasoning, participants often say: (a) do not go beyond the words in front of us, or (b) let's not speculate about what seems out of the reach of this particular passage.

The next move Ochs makes involves going from textuality in general to Scripture in particular. Ochs recognizes how Peirce bases his pragmatism on Scripture—specifically Jesus' logical rule found in the Gospels—and says that Peirce intends for this to function in ways more than mere proof-texting the Bible to persuade an American audience. According to Ochs, Peirce intends for his pragmatism to invite readers to return again and again to the Christian Scriptures for guidance in relation to logic, semiotics, and science. As a scholar who primarily studies American Philosophy, I see and think of SR mostly in this vein: as a way to put into practice Peirce's encouragement and recommendation that pragmatists return again and again to the Christian Scriptures for guidance concerning logic, semiotics, and science. In this sense, Ochs's Scriptural Reasoning project fills a void within American Philosophy since the death of Peirce:

no practices have developed—within American Philosophy—that allow and invite scholars within American Philosophy to study, think through, and utilize the Christian Scriptures. SR qualifies as a Peircean hermeneutic because it involves (1) interpreting within a community (by definition, SR cannot be practiced as an individual), (2) teleological hopes for the future (peace-building among members of traditions who have histories of violence toward one another), and (3) turning to Scripture for guidance and wisdom in relation to logic, science, and semiotics (SR as a practice for cultivating wisdom will be developed in the next chapter).

[A]Scripture in the Practice of Scriptural Reasoning

The breadth of the previous section allowed me to demonstrate why Ochs is not crazy to find in Peirce's semiotics a theory of how to and why we should interpret Scripture. Oftentimes, when we hear the phrase interpreting Scripture we think of it as an individual activity. In the previous section, however, we learned Peirce thinks of reading as a communal activity. This insight gives us a sense of how a scholar of Peirce's philosophy, like Ochs is, might invent a practice of reading together. This Peircean practice is called Scriptural Reasoning,[35] and I conclude this chapter by going from breadth to depth: more depth into answering the question, why Scripture?

Why Scripture? This is the question I hear most when talking to people about the practice of Scriptural Reasoning. In his most recent book, Ochs offers a one-sentence answer to this question: "Scriptural Reasoning acquires its name from a conspicuous practice in Abrahamic

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[35] I could also ask why Scriptural Reasoning? The best and most brief answer to this question is Gary Slater's: "Hence the reference to *Scriptural* reasoning in the movement's name, which bears on two distinctive features of Ochs's work: the centrality of the text, and the meaning of texts in relation to various readerships…. As for the meaning of the term "reasoning" in Scriptural Reasoning, this refers to the structures of interpretation that are revealed when the plain sense of Scripture *itself* appears unable to perform its task of repairing everyday problems" (Slater, NCMRI, 123).

traditions of turning to scriptural texts as a primary means of accessing the hearth of a given religious community."[36] The most basic answer to the question, why Scripture?, involves the recognition that to understand religious believers and communities, at some point one has to read and study the canon or texts that those believers and communities take as authoritative.[37]

However, Ochs also perceives the role of Scripture within SR as radically different than how two groups of people tend to view Scripture. On the one hand, religious believers tend to view Scripture as "their" authoritative text. On the other hand, academics tend to view Scripture as requiring a specific—sometimes singular—set of tools for interpreting. In relation to how religious believers view Scripture, the practice of Scriptural Reasoning requires *sharing* Scripture—making "my" texts available to the religious other—and *receiving* other texts as equally authoritative. In relation to how academics treat Scripture, the practice of Scriptural Reasoning allows the logic and meaning of Scripture to break-out of the academic limitations often put on it. In terms of orientation, religious believers can maintain the view that their Scriptures are "their" Scriptures but must learn how to share "their" Scripture and receive authoritative sacred texts from other religious traditions. In terms of the skills involved for interpreting Scripture, academic tools can be used but only alongside a plethora of other ways of interpreting, reading, and studying the canons of religious traditions.

What does it look like, in practice, to treat Scripture in the ways being described? Ochs claims,

> [EXT]SR tends to engage participants from very different and often antagonistic text traditions in increasingly binding relations as co-readers. When first entering an SR circle, traditionally religious participants tend to bring with a presumption of monovalence: that they know the

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[36] Ochs, RWV, 18.

[37] Gary Slater givers a clear answer to the question of 'why Scripture?': "Peter Ochs's Scriptural Reasoning [project] understands the logic of scriptural interpretation as a process of applying religious insights to their appropriate contexts, a process that is enhanced when members of different faith traditions interpret each other's sacred texts together" (Slater, NCMRI, 114).

meanings of individual of individual terms and verses in their traditional readings of Scripture and that, therefore, those who offer different meanings have misread their texts…. [M]onovalent reading accompanies both cool and hot, or stressful, relations among members of different religious groups and a cooling off of hot ones…. [SR] does not, however, imply any loosening of devotion to a traditional religion or to the authority of Scripture. To the contrary, it signals intimacy with Scripture and with those who share in reading Scripture: an intimacy that frees traditional readers to experiment, modestly, with Scripture's range of potential meaning so that, when the context of reading calls for decision or action, readers have greater trust that their context-specific decisions and commitments are guided by the most reliable readings.[38]**[/EXT]**

In terms of the practice of SR, Ochs gets a bit ahead of himself in this final sentence. The interpretations that arise in SR neither inevitably nor necessarily lead to making better decisions and performing rightful actions within the world. Rather, SR simply allows for and encourages multiple interpretations to be placed on the metaphorical table in order to entertain potential meanings of the scriptural passages located on the literal table of where the participants sit together.

Of course, Ochs eventually admits that he over-promised the results of SR in the previous paragraph. He corrects himself:

[EXT]The new space of SR nurtures…a secure environment in which few (five to ten) members of different traditions allow one another, within a discrete period of time in a discrete setting, to read scriptural excerpts independently of their implications for decision, commitment, or action. *There is no explicit discussion of this independence and no strictly shared assumption about how one's individual reading in SR compares with one's reading at home*…. SR works best when the topic I have…raised is not on the table as part of SR study. Such theorizing may in fact interrupt the modest intimacy of [SR], either by stimulating traditional fears or cooling the modest warmth that participants gradually feel toward one another within the group.[39]**[/EXT]**

In Ochs's reflections on SR, we find a real pragmatist struggle. On the one hand, Ochs wants to promise certain consequences of what the practice of SR will lead to for individual participants. On the other hand, such promises violate the emphasis on Scripture—individual passages for study—and the overall justification for SR: SR is a practice that is good in itself and not because

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[38] Ochs, RWV, 22.

[39] Ochs, RWV, 23.

it serves particular ends. Ochs's struggle displays and repeats two key features of Peirce's own pragmatism: an emphasis on potential conceptual and practical consequences (this is the side that pragmatism tends to be known for) and encouragement playfulness within thinking—especially within the philosophy of religion, religious traditions, and theological reasoning. In other words, when reflecting upon SR, Ochs struggles between musement (Peirce's word for playfulness) vs. pragmatism. This tension has created and led to many disagreements within the Society of Scriptural Reasoning concerning what SR is mostly about, which will come up throughout this companion.[40]

As a way to resolve this struggle, at one point, Ochs bluntly states that he wants to move on from it. He writes, "to understand SR more deeply, I think we should…think beyond the individual experience and discuss what it may mean for different traditions of language and meaning to interact one with the other."[41] The "more deeply" part involves Ochs shifting from pragmatism to musement. When Ochs thinks about SR strictly on terms of Peircean musement, he claims: within SR, the "*Scriptural text is the primary teacher*."[42] The text and texts are the primary object of study within SR, and these texts tend to be brief passages from the Scriptures of the Abrahamic traditions.[43]

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[40] One aspect of SR hat I do not discuss in this companion is Ochs's "1,000 Cities" project—which certainly depicts Ochs's pragmatist side (see Ochs, RWV, 150-204).

[41] Ochs, RWV, 23.

[42] Ochs, RWV, 25.

[43] This serves as a correction to the earlier claim that the purpose of SR is to learn about religious believers and communities; from the perspective of SR as musement, rather, the purpose of reading Scripture within the practice of SR is to read sacred texts in novel and playful ways (see Goodson, *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues*, chapter 5).

Part of the difficulty of SR is that there are not shared names of what to call these texts. What Jews call the *Tanakh*, Christians call the Old Testament. Biblical scholars use neither *Tanakh* nor Old Testament but refer to this collection as the Hebrew Bible. All three traditions call the New Testament "the New Testament," but those Christians who are hyperaware of the problem of supersessionism try to come up with other names—such as the Second Testament—when around Jews. American Christians know neither how to say nor spell Qur'an, and they tend to ask a lot of generic questions "about Islam" when doing SR with Muslims—instead of putting those questions on hold and focusing exclusively on the Qur'anic passage in front of them. SR faces even more difficulties when a singular person becomes responsible for selecting passages from all three canons—which should never be the case, but sometimes is the case when practicing SR within a university classroom or starting up a new group. Further difficulties arise with translations: should we include original languages; which translations should we use; what happens if participants bring in other translations inaccessible or unavailable to other participants? (I will return to this set of questions in the chapter, Focus on the Words!)

Despite all of these difficulties, Ochs is right to claim that the "*Scriptural text is the primary teacher*"[44] within the practice of SR. When the "*Scriptural text is the primary teacher*"[45] during the practice of SR, then "Scripture and reader meet each other at comparable depths."[46] Ochs talks about this depth by employing three different vocabularies, all of which make a comparable points and offer similar distinctions:

[EXT]From Peirce's Pragmatism: Depth Historiography and Pragmatic Reading

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[44] Ochs, RWV, 25.

[45] Ochs, RWV, 25.

[46] Ochs, RWV, 27.

From Rabbinic Judaism: *peshat* and *derash*

From Postliberal Christian Theology: *Sensus Literalis* and Spiritual Sense[47]**[/EXT]**

According to Ochs, SR allows for readers to engage with passages from the Scriptures on all of these levels. Usually, an SR session begins by highlighting what the specific tradition says is the plain sense of the passage being studied together—participants can decide to take that sense as authoritative, as a guide, or as an initial interpretation. Within a session of SR, then, readers move about between what seems to be "the meaning of the text in its…literary context" and possible deeper or surprising meanings of the passage.[48] In fact, after the traditional plain sense is offered by a participant, the next question that often arises within an SR session is: does someone want to start by saying what *surprises* them about this passage?

Within SR, the word 'surprise' functions analogously to how the word "wonder" operates within ancient and medieval philosophy. "Philosophy begins in wonder" has become a pedagogical cliché, but it remains quite the significant claim when understood in its original sources. First, in Plato's *Theaetetus*:

> **[EXT]**Socrates: I believe that you follow me, Theaetetus; for I suspect that you have thought of these questions before now.
>
> Theaetetus: Yes, Socrates, and I am amazed when I think of them; by the gods I am! And I want to know what on earth they mean; and there are times when my head quite swims with the contemplation of them.
>
> Socrates: I see, my dear Theaetetus…that you were a [true] philosopher, for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder. He was not a bad genealogist who said that Iris (the messenger of heaven) is the child of Thaumas (wonder).**[/EXT]**

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[47] Here, I follow Gary Slater's keen observation: "in Ochs's distinction plain-sense historiography and pragmatic historiography a replay of his [Ochs's] understandings of *peshat* and *derash*, and the sense in which one's explicit inquiries presuppose implicit guiding principles as central to the methodology of Scriptural Reasoning more generally" (Slater, NCMRI, 136). If we follow Slater's observation, but bring in Ochs's "

[48] Ochs, RWV, 25.

Second, in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle claims that philosophy begins in wonder because "wonder" is what makes human beings ask questions; without questions, there would be no philosophy. Third, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Thomas Aquinas furthers Aristotle's reasoning on the subject matter: "Because philosophy arises from awe, a philosopher is bound in his way to be a lover of myths and poetry. Poets and philosophers are alike in being big with wonder." SR attempts to foster this kind of wonder for reading passages from traditionally sacred texts, and the word SR practitioners tend to use for this is surprise: what surprises you from or in this passage? In philosophical terms, what aspect of this passage makes you wonder—and would you mind wondering aloud for a bit? Like Aristotle suggests, what surprises us in a passage might be best stated as a question. Like Thomas Aquinas defends, what surprises us in a passage might be best stated as a poetic part of the passage—a part of the passage that was neither read nor seen *as poetic* in previous readings of the same passage.

Ochs, however, envisions SR as achieving depth and wonder in the sense we find in Plato's *Theaetetus*. When Ochs says, "Scripture and reader meet each other at comparable depths,"[49] he means roughly that a "child of…wonder" meets a "messenger from heaven." Within Ochs's understanding of SR, the Abrahamic Scriptures represent "messenger[s] from heaven" whereas participants in SR should think of themselves as children of wonder. The significance of the question, does someone want to start by saying what *surprises* them about or in this passage?, cannot and should not be underappreciated or understated. What makes it hard to write about SR is that no one really knows what will happen after participants address this question. Yet, the remainder of this companion has to be committed to either describing what has happened in SR sessions—or, better, what SR practitioners have described—or to my own

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[49] Ochs, RWV, 27.

guesses about what might happen given what Jürgen Habermas calls the "ideal speech

situation."[50]

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[50] I do not defend Habermas's notion of an "ideal speech situation" (he no longer defends it either), so my point is that writing about SR is like thinking out loud about what SR looks like it my own "ideal…situation."