Friendship and Interpretation in Eberhard Bethge, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and John’s Gospel

Preston Parsons
Pembroke College, University of Cambridge

Abstract
Eberhard Bethge’s claim concerning his hermeneutical priority in the interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology, on account of his personal presence to Bonhoeffer, are strengthened through a reading of John’s Gospel. John’s Gospel contains a Christology and pneumatology that makes friendship a possible site of revelation, of both the friend and of God. This validates Bethge’s claims to friendship as a hermeneutical category. But Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in contrast to Bethge, forwards an approach to interpretation that values personal distance from a thinker and proximity to the text. This reading of Merleau-Ponty allows for an important move forward in Bonhoeffer interpretation that values Bethge’s lasting contribution, without the necessity of being limited by it. Reading Bethge, John’s Gospel, and Merleau-Ponty together lead to a claim for friendship as a category for generative theological interpretation that can be textually mediated.

Six years after the publication of Eberhard Bethge’s biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Bethge took an opportunity to defend his reading of Bonhoeffer’s theological legacy. Bonhoeffer’s references to “non-religious interpretation” had been used in support of Bultmann’s program of existential interpretation; John Robinson’s Honest to God used another slogan, this time “religionless Christianity,” to other ends; and in the US, Paul van Buren and William Hamilton were using

1 I owe special thanks to Noesis, a University of Cambridge graduate society, and to the Canadian Theological Society, for conversations that contributed to the essay as it appears here. Thanks also to Jon Mackenzie, who gave some very helpful feedback on an earlier draft.
Bonhoeffer in their Death-of-God theology, a movement that, as Bethge puts it, “had to do with extremely arbitrary developments whose consequences are untrustworthy in interpreting Bonhoeffer.” But Bethge knew Bonhoeffer, and this is the key to his defense of his own interpretation. So Bethge says: “To whom did he write? . . . Bonhoeffer did not send the letters and the outline of his manuscript to the world at large, nor even to his Church; he shared his thoughts with a theological friend in the Confessing Church. . . . what we have was addressed to a very limited circle of people who understood his intentions.”

This is not an uncontroversial hermeneutic claim for Bethge to make. Even Bonhoeffer wondered, in his poem “Who Am I?”, if he himself, or anyone else really knew him, but for one exception: “Whoever I am, thou knowest me; O God, I am thine!”

But Bethge does not stand alone in his hermeneutic confidence. In fact, this appeal to friendship is not uncommon in theological biography. Bethge is in the company of both Gregory of Nazianzus, who wrote a biographical encomium for Basil of Caesarea, and Possidius, Augustine’s first biographer. During the continuing dispute over the deity of the Holy Spirit in the late 4th century, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote a panegyric on the recently deceased Basil of Caesarea. Where Basil was not entirely clear, Gregory wanted to make him clearer. According to Gregory, Basil was his friend. Because they were friends, they held private conversations where Basil “eagerly confessed [the divinity of the Holy Spirit] . . . he made it more clear in his conversations with me, from whom he concealed nothing [on] the subject.” At the end of his biography of Augustine, Possidius similarly connects his understanding of Augustine’s theology with their friendship.

Bethge did not wonder, in the same way Bonhoeffer wondered, about how well a person can be known. Rather, there are some who do understand Bonhoeffer and his intentions, and they are Bonhoeffer’s friends in the Church, the ones who knew Bonhoeffer personally. What is of interest, however, is not Bethge’s hermeneutic claim. It is his association of epistemology and hermeneutics with
friendship. Friendship, according to Bethge, in a way reminiscent of his patristic forebears, offers a unique insight into both the life and the theology of his biographical subject. Bethge claims friendship as a mode of knowing another person in which one can speak to the shape of their theological thought, and the friend as the best interpreter of a person’s work.

But let’s compare this with statements made by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who needed to address a similar problem in his own way, in a different time, and about another thinker. In an essay about his interpretation of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty writes, paraphrasing Heidegger: “‘When we are considering a man’s thought,’ Heidegger says in effect, ‘the greater the work accomplished . . . the richer the unthought-of element in that work. That is, the richer is that which, through this work and through it alone, comes toward us as never yet thought of.’” This invocation of the unthought-of in Husserl, writes Merleau-Ponty, “will seem foolhardy on the part of someone who has known neither Husserl’s daily conversation nor his teaching.” The claim appears to be at odds with Bethge’s. For Merleau-Ponty, It is precisely in not being personally present to another that allows one to perceive what he calls “the articulations between things said.” What is at stake, however, is very similar to what was at stake for Bethge: what effect does personal presence have on interpretation? What Bethge sees as necessary to interpretation, Merleau-Ponty wants to exclude, but each want to do so in order to interpret another appropriately.

On one level, both claims are common-sensical. When you spend a great deal of time with another person, gain a good grasp on the way they think. Alternatively, if there was no way of interpreting the thought of another through texts, there would not be much work left for philosophers and theologians to do. My question, however, is whether we can read these claims as more than common-sensical, and my proposal is to develop more fully a theology of friendship through a reading of John’s gospel. This will lead me, on the one hand, to affirm Bethge’s claim that friendship does offer a particular way of knowing another that can reveal the person and something of God, but to question his assumption that this kind of knowing is limited to immediate presence. To claim the priority of immediate presence was helpful in the effort to keep the sloganeers at bay, but to say “I knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer” will not be sufficient to bring Bonhoeffer interpretation forward in the post-Bethge era of Bonhoeffer reception. This is where the things Merleau-Ponty has to say about the “unthought-of” in a thinker’s work—and the particular kind of generativity that can arise out of distance—becomes a key interpretive move.

10 This was, indeed, the translated title of a book of essays on Bonhoeffer by those who knew him: Ronald Gregor Smith and Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, eds., I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer (London: Fontana, 1973).
without losing sight of the constructive possibilities for friendship as a mode of interpretation. Bethge, by way of John’s Gospel, however, will press Merleau-Ponty in a distinctly moral direction. As such, reading Bethge and Merleau-Ponty together will provide a theological and philosophical foundation for the interpretive task of theological biography, and the task of theology more generally.

The first step, then, with the intention of giving some theological footing to Bethge’s invocation of friendship, is to look to John’s gospel. And, in John’s gospel, I begin with John 15:12-15, a short text about love, crucifixion, revelation, and friendship. The key question about this text, for the purposes of this article, is about duplication or repetition; and the first observation to make is that this passage illustrates the intermediate stage of one of John’s recurring structures of repetition, where the Father gives something to the Son, and the Son shares this with disciples (occasionally this structure includes the Spirit). But when Jesus uses general terms in 15:13, when he says that there is no greater love than a person laying down his life for his friends, he extends the possibility of repetition to the disciples themselves. The laying down of one’s life for one’s friends is something that is done by Jesus, and then by the disciples as well. The generality of the statement leaves room for both the original act and the improvisatory non-identical repetition of that act.11

But is revelation part of this non-identical repetition? In his commentary on John’s Gospel, Aquinas offers some direction as we look at the ways in which God, and a person, is made known in friendship. Aquinas, commenting on John 15:15, writes that a creaturely revelation of “the secrets of [the] heart” is the true sign of friendship, understanding the sharing of oneself to be a repetition of what Jesus is doing with the disciples, though the “secret” is different. Creaturely friendship is friendship much like the friendship between the Son and the disciples, but distinct in that a person shares with another person what is hidden in the heart, while the Son reveals his essence.12

On this reading, the repetition of friendship among the disciples is implied in Christ’s befriending of the disciples, but the mode and manner of that repetition is not straightforward, just as, for John, “laying down one’s life for one’s friends” is not a simple repetition of the crucifix-

11 I have taken this term from Ben Quash, referring to Peter Ochs’ description of what John Milbank means by “pleonasm,” which is “not so much excess verbiage as non-identical repetition, a creative repetition that is at the heart of generative, historical, language use.” See Ben Quash, Found Theology: History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 21.

12 Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 13-21; trans. F. Larcher and J. Weisheipl (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2010), 111. This is close to what is implied by more recent commentators, like J. Ramsay Michaels, who identify John’s connections between love, imitation, and revelation. See J. Ramsay Michaels, The Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 814.
ion. It is a non-identical improvisatory repetition that begins with the Father’s love for the Son, but is repeated in the Son’s love of the disciples, a friendship seen in the laying down of one’s life and bound with Christ’s revelation of the Father. What has been made known to the Son is made known to the disciples in friendship and sacrifice. The sacrifice is repeatable, but non-identical, bringing with it an analogous personal disclosure.

A far more controversial question is whether this non-identical repetition brings disclosure of God as well. This reading of John would certainly come into critical contact with Karl Barth and Ruldolf Bultmann. Barth, despite the fact that his work is so concerned with revelation, overlooks the significance of John 15:15, where friendship and revelation are embedded together. Rather than considering the possibility of a kind of revelation that is non-identically repeated—implied when friendship is described as revelatory and as sacrificial act for another modeled on the crucifixion, but not identically repeating the crucifixion—Barth’s doctrine of revelation is characterized by the word “only.” The Word of God, for example, meets us only in the twofold mediacy of Scripture and proclamation.  

Barth is not at all sympathetic to a kind of revelatory repetition in an ecclesiastical practice such as friendship, despite the Johannine association of the two in John 15:15. Barth will only say that Johannine friendship is unlike friendship as we know it. This is a fair point indeed. But, when Barth calls the threefold revelation of the Word of God an analogue of the doctrine of the triunity of God, the result is bound to be a certain kind of crystallization of revelation understood as such: as the Word of God, mediated only by Scripture and proclamation. Barth is, then, willing to think of revelation as a kind of repetition. For Barth, however, this is an identical repetition, apparently unaffected by its writtenness or spokenness. As we have seen, however, John’s gospel is more open to the possibility of revelation being non-identical, and, as we will see below, open to the possibility that this non-identical repetition is revelatory of God.

Bultmann’s concern arises with the conflation of vertical-divine friendships and horizontal-creaturely friendships. For Bultmann, there is a radical disjunction

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13 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, §4.4, 121.
14 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, §46.1, 329.
15 Barth, *CD* I/1, §4.2, 121. Arguably, by the time he comes to IV/3, Barth has developed his doctrine of revelation significantly. The criticism of Barth’s less than fulsome reading of John 15:15, however, is never rectified, and is a significant missed opportunity.
16 John Milbank, in his chapter “Pleonasm, Speech, and Writing,” referred to above, does speak in his own way on non-identical repetition, and the association we can make between what is spoken and what is written. Milbank is, for the most part, concerned with an argument for the theological significance of history as an event that is unfolding. His point, however, is well taken. For Milbank, there can be a superfluity of revelatory language that is not insignificant, and—in some agreement with Barth—the difference between the writtenness or spokenness of this language can certainly be overstated. See John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 55-83.
between the two. Recalling John 8:31-36, Bultmann writes that freedom in divine friendship is possible because of revelation. If the disciples continue in Jesus’s word they are truly disciples, they will know the truth, and the truth will make them free. So when the “descendants of Abraham” make the claim that they have never been slave to anyone, Jesus answers: “The slave does not continue in the house forever; the son continues for ever. So the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed . . . you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.” Receiving the word from the son, then, makes a person free, as we read in John 15. The Son speaks what he knows of the Father, and in doing so makes the disciples friends rather than slaves. Therefore, to be the friend of the son is to be free.\(^{17}\) Revelation frees the disciple and makes the disciple capable of becoming a friend of Jesus, but because of the directionality of this revelation, the disciple cannot call Jesus a friend. For Bultmann, this means that divine friendship is not characterized by mutuality, and this is different than creaturely friendship which is characterized by mutuality. The disciples’ “response to his love consists in the demonstration of the vitality of their faith, and the metaphor of bearing fruit is picked up again to make the point.”\(^{18}\) The fruit of faith, as a response to God’s loving revelation, can be shared mutually. But because revelation is vertical and directional by the nature of it coming from God and to the disciple, Bultmann does not say that revelation can establish horizontal friendships aside from sharing the faith that arises from that revelation.

Bultmann, however, is being increasingly contested on this point. Others are not so concerned with the directionality of revelation, and this is because they disagree with Bultmann on the incommensurability of mutuality and revelation, and therefore there is a creaturely ability to imitate the revelatory aspect of vertically oriented friendship. Thomas Brodie, for example, thinks that this sharing of knowledge includes “genuine mutuality” without excluding the possibility of a “divine plan.”\(^{19}\) Friendship, for Brodie, gives an inside knowledge, but this knowledge “is not any kind of arrogant private domain”. In this way, Brodie sees the vertical friendship between Jesus and the disciples as something that can be replicated horizontally because “the essence of the friendship is not in dominating knowledge but in a self-giving love.”\(^{20}\) Jesus’s mutuality with the disciples conditions the revelatory knowledge as something that cannot be dominating, but characterized by a giving and fruitful love. Luke Timothy Johnson sees the disciples’ knowledge

18 Ibid., 544-45.
20 Ibid., 484.
of what the Father has made known to Jesus as precisely the way the disciples can both do what Jesus commands and be friends rather than servants. The dominant feature of friendship-love is, for Johnson, “shared outlook” that can presumably be shared by Jesus and the disciples, as well as among the disciples.21

There are two consequences to Johnson’s argument. One is that divine friendship, as “shared outlook”, does not take seriously the significance of the difference between sharing an outlook and what is revealed of the Father by Jesus, nor the possibility of divine revelatory knowledge coming to light through the horizontally oriented friendship among the disciples. Shared outlook, however, as much as it is a feature of friendship in some ancient texts, does not have the same fullness of “all that I have heard from my Father.” And Brodie’s “divine plan” is a weak term indeed, especially when compared to Bultmann’s divine revelation. The cost of a commensurate horizontality is a verticality largely devoid of what might be a distinctively divine revelation of God’s self. It is the sharing of what Jesus knows of the Father that brings this friendship into being, rather than the sharing of an outlook or a plan. This is particularly true when this revelation is set beside the Old Testament exemplars of friendship with God. The revelation given to Moses and Abraham is far more than a “shared outlook” or a plan.

But there is an underlying pneumatological logic in John’s gospel, in contrast to Barth’s insistence on identicality, Bultmann’s insistence on verticality, and the lack of revelatory robustness of the contemporary interpreters mentioned above. It is a logic that speaks to a kind of divine revelation, shared by the disciples, driven into the future, and towards an act of generative interpretation. In John 16:13-15, the Spirit guides the disciples into truth, glorifying the Son by taking what belongs to the Son and giving it to the disciples. Craig Keener, for example, points out the parallels between John 15:15 and 16:13-15, and argues that the work of the Holy Spirit makes possible a divine, dynamic revelation that can be shared among and between the disciples, but in the church. This repetition of Jesus’s revelatory friendship with the disciples, now taking place among the disciples, refers back to the words and deeds of Jesus and yet extends them into the future. In this sense, divine revelatory friendship is not simply Christological but Trinitarian, maintaining the verticality of divine revelation alongside the pneumatic and ecclesial extension of this revelation. Just as Jesus heard and saw the Father (5:19-20; 8:38) his disciples would see and hear Jesus; and just as Jesus passed on what he hears (5:20, 8:26), the Spirit will now pass on to the disciples what he heard from Jesus (16:13):22 As Keener puts it, “John therefore portrays

friendship with Jesus as an intimate relationship with God and his agent, one that John believed was continuing in his own community.”23 At least with regard to revelation, this kind of pneumatology makes the vertical-divine, and the horizontal-creaturely axes difficult to distinguish. The verticality of the Son’s revelation of the Father continues to take place within the pneumatic community of disciples, according to the work of the Holy Spirit, but now dynamically instantiated apart from the precise words and bodily presence of Jesus. John associates this pneumatic revelation, at least in part, with friendship.

We can plausibly say, then, that creaturely friendship is the site where personal disclosure and divine revelation intersect, in an improvised repetition of the friendship between the Son and the disciples, and through a Holy Spirit that discloses the Father and the Son. The friend has unique personal knowledge of his or her subject, and carried with that personal knowledge is a particular insight into God. Bethge’s claim, then, that friendship offers insight into another is true; but on the terms I am developing here, more is happening than an amassing of data through proximity to the subject. Rather, creaturely friendship includes a personal revelation analogous to Jesus’s own revelation of all he has heard of the Father—the patristic insight of Aquinas—and a revelatory repetition takes place between creatures that is dependent upon the originary divine revelatory friendship of Christ with the disciples, itself already dependent on the love shared between the Father and the Son.24

So I have maximized Bethge’s epistemological statement, and we can affirm it, at least by way of this theological reading of John. Friendship is a kind of making-known where personal disclosure intersects with a theological revelation of God. But what of Bethge’s assumption that friendship, as immediate presence, is necessary for the fullest disclosure of the thought of another?

Merleau-Ponty, in an essay on Husserl and intersubjectivity, suggests one way for interpretation to be both faithful to its sources and legitimately generative. Merleau-Ponty argues for a middle ground between an “objective” history of philosophy, what he calls “literal reproduction,” and “meditation disguised as dialogue,” where the interpreter both asks the questions and gives the answers. This

23 Ibid., 1015.
24 While Aquinas succeeds in opening up the possibility of a creaturely friendship that is much like divine friendship, he does demur, in his commentary, from clearly saying that a friend might reveal something about God. But this difference is not absolute for Aquinas. For example, names of God, such as wise, or good, signify the divine substance, and can be predicated of God even though they are seen in the creature. These names, through creaturely representation, signify the divine essence analogously. Creatures, according to Aquinas, can indeed reveal something of God’s essence through analogical creaturely qualities. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Ia, Q. 13, Art. 2-6. This argument would need more detailed attention that I cannot offer here, but I think Aquinas could be read to say that the friend, as creature, can also make something known of God, and is perhaps particularly apt to do so.
middle ground is where “the philosopher we are speaking about and the philosopher who is speaking are present together, although it is not possible even in principle to decide at any given moment just what belongs to each.” For Merleau-Ponty, the reason we think interpretation is restricted to either “literal reproduction” or “inevitable distortion” is that we want to make inventories of what is present and not present in a person’s works. “But,” continues Merleau-Ponty, “this is to be deceived about his works and thought.”25 As Sean Dorrance Kelly puts it, “the main feature of this principle [for Merleau-Ponty] is that the seminal aspects of a thinker’s work are so close to him that he is incapable of articulating them himself. Nevertheless, these aspects pervade the work; give it its style, its sense, and its direction; and therefore belong to it essentially.”26 A thinker, in this sense, cannot always recognize where his or her own thought leads.

This is, for the most part, not particularly interesting or controversial. But the essay becomes most intriguing when Merleau-Ponty draws an analogy between interpretation and intersubjectivity, the pre-theoretical, pre-reflective, shared bodily engagement with the world, on which the theoretical is founded. In a clear reference to intersubjectivity and his interpretation of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty writes about that which is “wholly [Husserl’s] and yet opens out on something else.” Interpretation is not to possess the objects of his thought; it is to use them to mark out a realm to think about which we therefore are not yet thinking about. . . . There is no dilemma of objective interpretation or arbitrariness with respect to these articulations, since they are not objects of thought, since (like shadow and reflection) they would be destroyed by being subjected to analytic observation or taken out of context, and since we can be faithful to and find them only by thinking again.27

For Merleau-Ponty, just as we perceive the world, this perception being the foundation of theoretical articulation, so we read, discovering the unthought-of in the “articulations between things said.” The thinker is relying on what is unarticulated, but which leads to theoretical articulation. While a thinker may not be able to recognize where his or her thought might lead, an interpreter can inhabit this same realm, and make connections and articulate what the thinker never did.28

There is a question about personal presence to another, and if we are not care-

28 I am largely reliant on Sean Dorrance Kelly for this conclusion. See Kelly, “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty,” 102-103.
ful, Merleau-Ponty himself can mislead us because he relies on narratives of personal presence to describe intersubjectivity. One of Merleau-Ponty’s recurring descriptions of intersubjectivity, for example, is of two friends standing before a landscape. For Merleau-Ponty, this narrative is employed primarily in order to illustrate that our pre-reflective, and pre-linguistic, engagement with the world assumes that the world is one, and that we do not operate as if there is “a flow of private sensations in relation to my old sensations that are mediated through some interposed signs.”

Merleau-Ponty does not trigger for Paul (the recurring character in this short drama of perception) “some internal visions that are merely analogous to my own.” Instead, Merleau-Ponty’s gestures “invade Paul’s world, and guide his gaze.” For Merleau-Ponty, “we cannot account for the situation by saying that I see something in my own world and that I attempt, by sending verbal messages, to give rise to an analogous perception in the world of my friend.” The perception is not “analogous” because there “are not two numerically distinct worlds plus a mediating language which alone would bring us together.”

Our engagement with the world is for the most part pre-reflective, and conceptual knowledge is founded on the knowledge that comes, unreflectively, through this being-in-the-world, breaking down the mediational picture of knowledge that assumes a divide from interior knowledge and sensory input from the outside.

Interpretation works much the same way. A shared world is inhabited by two, but the world itself, in this case, is the thought-world of the thinker, articulated in interpretation but an articulation relying on what is largely shared and as yet unsaid. But the point here is not personal presence, but a pre-reflective experience of one world.

Merleau-Ponty addresses this potential confusion about personal presence, already nascent in his work in this landscape illustration, in his essay on Husserl. To assume the necessity of personal presence, as a way to have some kind of access to the completeness of the thought of another, is to falsely think that personal presence means access to thought at its completion, when it is actually presence to thought at its inception. To be personally present to Husserl would have been

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32 This is not only true of the thought world of a philosopher. For Merleau-Ponty, literature allows us to see the world anew, not simply illustrating intersubjectivity, but that literature, among other things, makes a world visible and an intersubjective event possible through the text itself. I owe this insight into Merleau-Ponty to Christina Chandler Andrews. See her doctoral thesis, “The Transfiguring Event: Phenomenological Readings of Ian McEwan’s Late Fiction” (Ph.D. diss., University of St Andrews, 2011), 18-29.
to be present at “the continuing birth of a way of thinking.” After Husserl’s death, however, the task was to recover the full meaning of his whole work, even if you knew him, and therefore to return to the writings and the text and to “rejoin him across [the] past.”33 More importantly, though, the advantage of textual proximity is that the literary output of a thinker has come to a close, the realm marked out, and an interpreter can more fully inhabit that landscape. But it would still be an error to think that because the realm is marked out, that this brings “completeness.” Rather, the as yet unthought-of still emerges out of this thought-landscape, just as the theoretical emerges out of the pre-theoretical. To read the works of a thinker, to inhabit that realm, to recognize hidden articulations, and to think the unthought-of in that person’s work, is to faithfully interpret, neither making inventories of the objects of thought nor effacing the thinker.

The danger of bad interpretation is not about presence or lack of presence precisely. It is to be confused about perception. Just as, for Merleau-Ponty, perception properly understood breaks down any claim to mediation between ourselves and the world, we also do not read in order to conjure internal images or objects of thought. To read in order to conjure inventories of images or objects of thought would be to misunderstand that perception—of the world we live in, or of the realm laid out for us by a thinker—is, in the first place, unarticulated, and that the unarticulated is the foundation of the articulated. What is at stake, then, is a recognition that what is articulated is not complete on its own, but that it is dependent upon a shared, unarticulated engagement with the world. The same is true for interpretation. It too is founded and dependent upon “hidden” articulations, and as such is incomplete without them. And this is where Bethge is at risk of making a false claim: that friendship-as-presence allows a near-complete, objective inventory of the thought of another, when that kind of knowing is more likely to be incomplete, dependent, and inceptive.

What Merleau-Ponty accomplishes for this project, then, is to destabilize Bethge’s claim to the primacy of immediate presence, and legitimizes a mode of interpretation that values personal distance and textual proximity. Distance is a help, not a hindrance, in recognizing that interpretation begins with hidden articulations, and proceeds to a thinking of what was unthought-of, because the unthought-of is too close to the thinker in question. If what I have said about friendship is true, however, I would not be so pessimistic about “daily conversation” as Merleau-Ponty. Granted, if an appeal to immediate contact with another leads to a false confidence in the friend’s complete access to the thought of the person in question, on the premise that the other already knows where their thought will lead, then we ought to beware. But it is precisely the quotidian, in the reading of

John’s gospel presented above, which is inalienable from abiding friendship. Therefore the making-known of a person, what the person may think about God, and—most suggestively—a revelation of God, can all tied to the quotidian as well, incomplete and dependent as this kind of revelation necessarily is.

What I have said here has three implications for the theological task more generally. Firstly: if personal disclosure coincides with a divine revelation when it is pneumatically mediated in the church, then biographical descriptions of personal relationships offer a richness to the theological task more generally. Theological biography offers the possibility of a richer account not only of the theologian in question. If personal revelation is bound to the revelation of God, reading biographical descriptions of friendships may, in some circumstances, offer a richer account of God as well.

Secondly, Merleau-Ponty draws our attention to the necessary incompleteness of a thinker’s work, properly understood. The task is not an inventory of thought, but to recognize that there are hidden articulations that can be discovered and articulated, and that this can be a way to faithfully, yet generatively, interpret the thought of another. This is not far, in many ways, from the Johannine possibility that friendship is a site of revelation, a pneumatically driven practice that can lead to the discovery of the as-yet-unsaid.

Thirdly, and most importantly, this kind of encounter with another, if it can be mediated textually, offers the possibility for friendship as a conceptual foundation for theological interpretation, and in so doing, opens Merleau-Ponty to the moral implications of his philosophy of interpretation. The theologian, and his or her way of thinking, through the text, is offered to the reader; and the reception of that offering can be characterized, or not characterized (as the case may be), by love. In the kind of hermeneutic suggested here, to be a good reader is to not press your subject toward your own ends. Rather, the textual encounter leads interpretation itself to be characterized by a friendship that has as its origin in God. To read may be to love, in its fullest Johannine, unitive sense. In this way, the task of interpretation is shaped by a certain kind of love, the laying down of ourselves that displaces us from the centre of the act of interpretation. It becomes, rather, a shared space of mutuality. This is where Merleau-Ponty’s “middle ground” is cast into the moral light of virtue, where “the philosopher we are speaking about and the philosopher who is speaking are present together,” where this unity is an act of mutual self-offering. This is not the laying aside our own insight, but rather an act of pneumatically charged interpretation.

And this is, indeed, what we see in an interpreter like Eberhard Bethge. After Bonhoeffer’s death, Bethge collects letters between Bonhoeffer and others, inserting himself into those conversations and interpreting them; he writes his magisterial biography, interpreting Bonhoeffer anew; and spends a lifetime ensur-
ing Bonhoeffer’s reception. Bethge is a man who lays down his life for the sake of Bonhoeffer, and what Bethge does illustrates a much grander theology of friendship than what he says about his hermeneutical priority. Rather, Bethge inhabits the landscape of Bonhoeffer’s thought, thinking the unthought-of in Bonhoeffer in ways unlike the sloganeers of “religionless Christianity” or the creative misuse of Bonhoeffer by the Death-of-God theologians. Bethge reads Bonhoeffer to think what was unthought-of on topics like post-holocaust Jewish-Christian relations, for example. As such, Bethge offers us an instance of a friendship that reveals a person, a world, a particular vision of God, and through that, particular insight into God and God’s work in the world—not only because we can read Bonhoeffer’s theology because of what Bethge did, and now ourselves inhabit the landscape of the Bonhoeffer-Bethge theological project, but because what Bethge does, for and with Bonhoeffer, reveals something of God, in Christ, the one who lays down his life for his friends.