The Book of Samuel and Its Response to Monarchy – An Introduction

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Needless to say, monarchy and more generally "power" (*Macht*), "authority" and "dominion" (*Herrschaft*) are among the key issues in the Book of Samuel. This volume is not the first one to analyze the Book of Samuel and its response to monarchy, and it certainly won't be the last.[1] The Book of Samuel has long been viewed as a "*Geschichtsbuch*"[2] of sorts, reflecting the emergence of monarchy in Israel and Judah.[3] But alongside this use, the Book of Samuel has also been understood as a treatise on political theory. According to Westermann, the phenomenon of the political emerges so strongly in the book's historical descriptions – of, for example, the institution of the monarchy and the succession to the throne – because the monarchy itself comprised a great new innovation in the early history of Israel and Judah.[4] Yet, as central as the monarchy is in the Book of Samuel, the book looks both forward and backward to periods in which Israel and Judah had no king. In much early biblical scholarship, researchers focused on 1 Sam 7–15 as the transition between the period of the Judges and the monarchic period. Today, many scholars attempt to reconstruct the legacy of the monarchy during the post-monarchic period, understanding that the final form of Samuel provides crucial documentation of later generations' reflection on the *failure* of the monarchy (see Ian D. Wilson, Remembering Kingship).[5] It is no sur-

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1 See e.g. Halbertal / Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics*. For a research overview on contemporary studies of Israelite political thought generally, see, e.g., Hamilton, *A Kingdom for a Stage*, 12–15. See also Oswald, *Staatstheorie im Alten Israel*, 10. The aim of his monograph is "den staatstheoretischen Charakter der alttestamentlichen Erzähltexte im Diskurs ihrer jeweiligen Abfassungszeit [...] herauszuarbeiten" (11).

2 See von Rad, "Typologische Auslegung des Alten Testaments," 23: "Das A.T. ist ein Geschichtsbuch". Von Rad, "Der Anfang der Geschichtsschreibung," 159, considered the Succession Narrative "als die älteste Form der altisraelitischen Geschichtsschreibung". See for the discussion, Blum, "Ein Anfang der Geschichtsschreibung?," 4-37. There is a very long ongoing discussion to what extent the Book of Samuel should be considered as "historiography" ("history") and to what extent they are "fiction" ("story"). See, e.g., Eynikel, "Introduction," 1–17.

3 See, e.g., Dietrich, "Staatsbildung und frühes Königtum in Israel," 189-202.

4 Westermann, "Zum Geschichtsverständnis des Alten Testaments," 612. "Das Phänomen des Politischen im eigentlichen Sinn tritt in der Thronfolgegeschichte so stark heraus, weil dies in der frühen Königszeit die große neue Entdeckung war."

5 See, e.g., Wilson, *Kingship and Memory in Ancient Judah*; Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel*. Several recent volumes point equally to this shift in perspective. See, e.g., Silverman / Waerzeggers, *Political Memory in and after the Persian Empire*, Edelman / Ben Zvi, *Leadership, Social Memory and Judean Discourse*.

prise, then, that Halbertal and Holmes have recently come to the conclusion that the Book of Samuel as a whole is a "profound work of political thought".[6]

We would offer, however, two significant caveats concerning this claim: First, nowhere does the Book of Samuel reflect specifically on the nature of monarchy in an abstract or theoretical way. The Book of Samuel contains different literary genres, such as stories, psalms, lists, etc., but provides no academic text on monarchy.[7] The closest approximation to a critical reflection on the monarchy comes in 1 Sam 8:11–17, but even the "custom of the king" is simply couched as a list of audacious displays of power the king will make; there is no explicit consideration of the institution's justification. Second, and relatedly, Western political thought remains strongly shaped by Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Constitutions*.[8] Sanders observes that political philosophers have tended to assume that the state is the only real political possibility. Typically, these philosophers have demonstrated both an inability to imagine alternative polities and a lack of vocabulary with which to talk about non-state political forms.[9] Sanders continues:

> Yet this slightly clichéd story may be more a symptom of gaps in our theory than in our texts. It has been hard to see ancient near eastern history and political thought outside a state perspective.[10]

The Book of Samuel unquestionably reflects both Iron-Age and Persian Period political concepts, but is what the Book of Samuel describes as "monarchy" really the same as what we conceive to be "monarchy" today? (see Hannes Bezzel, Der 'Saulidische Erbfolgekrieg' – Responses to Which Kind of Monarchy?).[11]

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6 Halbertal / Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics*, 1.

7 Hamilton, *A Kingdom for a Stage*, 3, concludes: "Nowhere does the Hebrew Bible spend time thinking about the nature of 'politics' in the abstract, a move that entered Western intellectual life only through Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Constitutions*."

8 For a detailed discussion, see Raaflaub, *Anfänge politischen Denkens in der Antike*.

9 Sanders, "From People to Public in the Iron Age Levant," 191, points to this lack of vocabulary, asking whether it is possible to "excavate" political theory.

10 Sanders, "From People to Public in the Iron Age Levant," 192. Recently, Sergi, "Israelite Identity and the Formation of Israelite Polities", has pointed to the retention of "kinship identity even during the monarchic period".

11 In the present volume, Bezzel correctly points to the fact that exegesis is not possible without presuppositions; this is, of course, a very general hermeneutical problem. See, e.g., Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presupposition Possible?" Or to formulate the problem with the words of Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283: "Research in the human sciences cannot regard itself as in an absolute antithesis to the way in which we, as historical beings, relate to the past. At any rate, our usual relationship to the past is not characterized by distancing and freeing ourselves from tradition. Rather, we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process – i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a kind of cognizance that our later historical judgment would hardly regard as a kind of knowledge but as the most ingenuous affinity with tradition."

Moreover, there is a gendered dynamic of monarchy that, until relatively recently, has gone unobserved – or, at least, undiscussed – in most political treatments. Namely, monarchy is usually connected to hierarchical, structured "male" dynastic power. This connection is normally implicit, and only with the rise of explicitly feminist methodologies has it been brought to the surface.[12] It is not the place of this volume to attempt to provide an overview of the range of possible "concepts"[13] of "monarchy" that could have influenced the Book of Samuel.[14] We would like to stress, however, that it is not sufficient to simply oppose the terms "monarchy" and "kingship" over against "tribal system" and "kinship", as though these concepts form a simple dichotomy. Instead, we propose the need to consider the various possibilities for conceptualizing the myriad and complex ways that other power structures interact with the monarchy (this complex interaction is sometimes described as "heterarchy"[15]). This requires again, different methods and approaches (e.g., both inductive and deductive) when analyzing the Book of Samuel (see HULISANI RAMANTSWANA, Tribal Contentions for the Throne: Reading 1 Samuel 1-8 through a Hermeneutic of Suspicion).[16]

In an attempt to leverage the diverse insights of the contributors to this volume, we would like to front two central considerations at the outset. Brief reflection on these two issues will help to guide the reader through this volume. First, several essays explore whether and in what sense the Book of Samuel should be considered to be a collection of texts illuminating different stages of the institutionalization of power rather than a monolithic treatise on the institution itself. Second, many of the essays included in this volume explore the degree to which the Book of Samuel itself functioned as a medium of power and an instrument of state- and identity-building. This artifact operated throughout

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12 Svärd, "Women, Power, and Heterarchy in Neo-Assyrian Palaces," 508, concludes: "Power has usually been understood as political power to command, originating from the king. It has been rarely taken into account that the definition of power influences research results. Understanding power as something obvious – either in structures of society or in 'powerful' individuals – directs attention to structural power, government and on actors that appear to be high in the social hierarchy."

13 See, e.g., Benno Landsberger, on "conceptual autonomy" in: Landsberger, *The Conceptual Autonomy of the Babylonian World*. See also, e.g., Schloen, *The House of the Father*, 8.

14 There are many attempts to explain the function and role of kingship in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East. One of the earliest studies was by Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, first published in 1948. See also Niemann, *Herrschaft, Königtum und Staat*; Sigrist, *Macht und Herrschaft*; Linke, *Das Charisma der Könige*; Hill / Jones / Morales, *Experiencing Power, Generating Authority*; Levin / Müller, *Herrschaftslegitimation in vorderorientalischen Reichen der Eisenzeit*.

15 Crumley, "Heterarchy and the Analysis of Complex Societies," 3: "The addition of the term heterarchy to the vocabulary of power relations reminds us that forms of order exist that were not exclusively hierarchical and that interactive elements in complex systems need to be permanently ranked relative to one another." See also Svärd, "Women, Power, and Heterarchy in Neo-Assyrian Palaces," 509-10.

16 See Neu, *Von der Anarchie zum Staat*; Sigrist / Neu, *Die Entstehung des Königtums.*

the following centuries to galvanize and foster both pro- and antimonarchic sentiments (e.g., as some kind of legitimation or commemoration).

1. The Book of Samuel as a Text Collection *about* Different Stages of the Institutionalization of Power

The Book of Samuel is obviously not an explicit, theoretical reflection on the politics of power consolidation, dynasty building, or the exercise of royal prerogatives. It is rather a "political narrative" recounting the institution and earliest days of the monarchy.[17] Nonetheless, this text collection may still be considered to be a very singular political reflection: the narrative does not presuppose a power inherent to the mortal actors – in the book's logic only Yhwh possesses such unassailable and enduring power. Instead, it describes human power as a "produced" reality. Although both Saul and David experience Yhwh's legitimation at various points in the book (1 Sam 9:1–10:16; 16:1–13), the hierarchies of power and political structures themselves are neither imposed by nature nor divinely ordained,[18] but rather the product of human activity. This insight, that power is not something certainly given, but something debatable, was declared as a discovery of the Greek polis by Popitz:

> This idea that social orders are the products of human agency is one of the incomprehensibly abrupt and radical discoveries of the Greek polis. If anything deserves to be called the 'idea of the political,' this does. It renders the overarching political ordering of collective human existence something open to fashioning and modifying. In this manner, the status quo is experienced from the distance suggested by the fact that it can be imagined differently. It is now viewed as a result of human capacity.[19]

The way the Book of Samuel narrates the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of "leaders" such as kings, generals, prophets, and priests – not to mention their success and misbehavior – includes precisely this reflection:

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17 See e.g. Wagner-Durand / Linke, "Why Study 'Narration'."

18 At least the early conception of the *human* nature of the monarchy in Samuel is very distinct theologically from the conception of God as a lawgiver in the Pentateuch capable of laying out social roles and functions (e.g., Deut 16:18–20; 17:14–20). We find, however, later additions strengthening the divine royal election; see, e.g., the so-called *Mitseins-Formel*, which states that Yhwh is with David and will save him from danger (1 Sam 16:18; 17:37; 18:12, 14, 28; 2 Sam 8:6, 14), along with the title נָגִיד and עֶבֶד Yhwh, both of which exhibit clear theological implications. For further discussion see e.g., Dietrich / Dietrich, "Zwischen Gott und Volk."

19 Popitz, *Phenomena of Power*, 2. Popitz (ibid., 4) concludes: "None of this affects the certainty that one *can* do things differently, and *can* do them better. One of the taken-for-granted premises of our understanding of power is the conviction that power is 'made' and can be remade otherwise than is now the case."

authority is not something given, but is rather seen as process, something which needs to be achieved and earned by the individual "leader", and which must be ratified by the community.[20] Although this discourse may not be made explicit, it rises to the surface in various passages, emerging subtly from various literary figures' speeches and actions in the more concrete setting of the story. Through these subtle glimpses into the characters' (and hence, the authors' and tradents') views, well-reasoned reflections on ancient Israel's political system burst forth through the interstices. For example, the elders' apparently innocent request for a king is deemed by Samuel not to be so innocent – he responds with a long list of the risks and disadvantages of monarchy as such (1 Sam 8:11–18). Entangled with this negative evaluation is the question concerning who should or should not be authorized to judge, given power to lead in war, and collect taxes. It is precisely the form of the narration that makes it possible to see power not as some abstract entity, but rather a very concrete imposition on the lives of the people.

The discourse on the legislation of power, the building of a monarchy, and the stages of the institutionalization of power cannot be limited only to 1 Sam 8. As a whole, the Book of Samuel documents the struggle for power and domination in very diverse forms. It also explores myriad related issues, such as the tensions between religious and state power (priests, prophets, and kings) – although the Book of Samuel does not promote hierocracy[21] in the same way as in the Priestly text of the Pentateuch. At the same time, the text traces subjects such as the powers exercised by "civil servants" – including influential generals such as Joab, and the sons of Zerujah generally (their rivalry with the king making David "powerless, even though anointed king"; 2 Sam 3:39aα; see also 2 Sam 16:10; 19:23)[22] – and "political advisors" (see, e.g., Hushai in 2 Sam 16:15–17:14; and the wise woman of Tekoa in 2 Sam 14:1–24).[23]

Further, the institutionalization of power in 1–2 Samuel is only inchoate; power is not yet depersonalized, nor is it formalized.[24] The stories in the Book of

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20 See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 201: "The only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people. Only where men live so close together that potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them, and the foundation of cities, which as city-states have remained paradigmatic for all Western political organization, is therefore indeed the most important material prerequisite for power."

21 See, e.g., Assmann, *Monotheism and Its Political Consequences*.

22 See, e.g., Kipfer, "David under Threat," 288-89.

23 See, e.g., Schücking-Jungblut, "Political Reasons," as well as Schücking-Jungblut, *Macht und Weisheit*.

24 These are two out of the three characteristics for an "Institutionalized power" according to Popitz, *Phenomena of Power*, 166: "'Institutionalized power' points to a process – the institutionalization process – within which, as a matter of first approximation, three tendencies assert themselves. First, an increasing *depersonalization* of the power relation. Power no longer stands or falls with the particular person who at the moment is in charge. It becomes progressively connected with determinate functions or positions of superpersonal character. Second, an increasing *formalization*. The exercise of power becomes more and more strongly oriented to

Samuel focus on power relations within the family structure. What happens in the royal family stands in direct connection to the monarchy (see ILSE MÜLLNER, Das Geschlecht der Politik. Familie und Herrschaft in der dynastischen Monarchie). Although the regularity of primogeniture cannot be proven in the Book of Samuel (nor in the ancient Near East generally), the power of the younger over the elder (see, e.g., David's promotion over his elder brother in 1 Sam 17:13–30) is a central literary motif (see also revenge and murder between brothers in 2 Sam 13:23–29). Finally, women play an active part in maintaining and securing power (see, e.g., the influence of the king's mother[25] and David's marriage policy[26]). It is quite remarkable how sensitive the stories are to different types of power relations, such as resistance and persuasion, and how they dissolve offender-victim structures.[27] The "private"[28] (e.g., sexual violence) is "political" and vice-versa (see, e.g., the parallel between 2 Sam 12:11b–12 and 2 Sam 16:22). There is one act which occurs repeatedly and makes this very obvious: The crying of the king is only in rare cases an expression of his personal grief; normally, it functions primarily as a means of political communication (THOMAS NAUMANN, "Der König weint" – Das öffentliche Weinen des Königs als Mittel politischer Kommunikation in alttestamentlichen Texten).

Royal power itself is questioned by putting the topic of threat so prominently at the center of the whole narrative in the Book of Samuel. Two poems, Hannah's prayer (1 Sam 2:1–10) and the Psalm in 2 Sam 22:1–51, essentially reflect on the divine transformation of power (see DAVID FIRTH, Hannah's Prayer as Hope for and Critique of Monarchy): God turns the powerful weak and makes the powerless strong (see, e.g., 1 Sam 2:7; 2 Sam 22:28). In the further course of the story, it is precisely this inversion of the order which plays the most important role, namely,

- the violent physical threat against the king's person (e.g., the people try to stone David in 1 Sam 30:6; and Shimei threatens David in 2 Sam 16:5–14);[29]
- the threat to the kingship through wars and enemy attacks (e.g., Saul and his sons are killed in battle in 1 Sam 31 – 2Sam 1; David is almost killed and finally saved by one of his heroes in 2 Sam 21:17)[30] and the revolts and rebellions (e.g., the stories of David as outlaw and *Ḫapirū*-leader destabilizing the

rules, procedures, rituals. [...] A third feature of the progressive institutionalization of power is the increasing integration of the power relation into overriding order."

25 See, e.g., Knauf, "The Queens' Story."

26 Marriage as a special variety of foreign policy, see Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy*, 210. Considering Abigail 1 Sam 25 and Bathsheba 2 Sam 11-12; 1 Kgs 1 it is maybe more appropriate to speak of the marriage plans of influential women.

27 See for the discussion Kipfer, "Batseba und Tamar in 2Sam 11-13."

28 This is, of course, again a very anachronistic "Behelfsterminologie".

29 The expression בקש נפש ("threaten one's life") is mentioned seven times in direct speech to indicate that David's life is in danger (1 Sam 19:2, 10; 20:1; 22:23; 25:29; 2 Sam 4:8; 16:11).

30 David is depicted as aggressor, but at the same time as being attacked; his own success is mostly overshadowed by Joab's victories. See Kipfer, *Der bedrohte David*, 92–97.

reign of Saul throughout 1 Sam 22:1–2; compare also Absalom's revolt in 2 Sam 15–19, Sheba's insurrection in 2 Sam 20, and Adonijah's claim to the throne in 1 Kgs 1–2, all of which threaten David's monarchy);[31]

- and last but not least, the threat that occurs through God's punishment (see the announcement of violence in 2 Sam 12:7b–12; famine in 2 Sam 21:1–14; and pestilence in 2 Sam 24:1–25).[32]

The Book of Samuel is certainly not a glorification of the early days of the monarchy, nor does it give a simple theological explanation for the various threats to and failures of the kingship – not the rebellions against the Davidic "dynasty",[33] and certainly no explicit thought is given to the end of Israel and Judah as kingdoms, first under the onslaught of the Assyrians and later the Babylonians. Nothing of this downfall of the monarchy is mentioned at all, even if subtle hints here and there might gesture at these events; for the most part, this consideration is relegated to the Book of Kings. Regardless of this ambivalent view with respect to the monarchy, the Book of Samuel should be recognized as an important political document that reflects on such weighty issues as power structures, access to power, and impotence and powerlessness. Interestingly, in wide swaths of the book it is the monarch – Saul or David respectively – who suffers an ignominious defeat, and it is not he himself who threatens others.

2. The Book of Samuel as a Medium of Power Communication and a Contribution to the Political Discourse Through the Centuries

Even if one does not follow us in claiming that the Book of Samuel is somehow a reflection on royal power and "monarchy", the reception history demonstrates that this is precisely how the Book of Samuel has been understood over the centuries. The Book of Samuel has been used as an instrument for power legitimation and delegitimating, as a toolkit to stabilize and destabilize political entities. The texts where used "for" and "against" monarchic structures[34] and had a huge impact on the political-philosophical discourse (see, e.g., Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi*; Philipp Melanchthon, *David proeliaturus*; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*;

31 The word קֶשֶׁר (conspiracy) is very important here; see 1 Sam 22:8, 13; 2 Sam 15:12, 31.

32 For an exegetical analysis see Kipfer, *Der bedrohte David*, 50–307; for an English summary see Kipfer, "David under Threat".

33 For the rebellions against the Davidic "dynasty", see, e.g., Kipfer, *Der bedrohte David*, 133–137.

34 1 Sam 8 was used in the quarrels over the primacy of *regnum* vis-à-vis *sacerdotium* by both parties; for a research overview see Kipfer, *Der bedrohte David*, 339 n. 163. Similarly, 1 Sam 24 and 26 were used as an argument to legitimize and delegitimize tyrannicide; for a research overview see Kipfer, *Der bedrohte David*, 340–341; and DeLapp, *The Reformed David(s)*.

Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*).[35] It is impossible to overestimate the huge influence the Book of Samuel has had on political treatises from antiquity to the early modern period. The Book of Samuel has been – of course alongside the influential Greek tradition – among the most important sources for theoretical reflection on politics through the centuries. The Book of Samuel thus comprises not only a collection of reflections on the monarchy, but has itself reshaped politics throughout history. It has been involved in the communication of power, both within a specific religious historical context and over a longer period time (see Sara Kipfer, Conquering all the Enemies West, East, South, and North). The Book of Samuel thus does not merely contain a story about a distant past, but has been used and reused to augment and challenge political discourse – explicitly or implicitly – until today.[36]

This reception history makes it even more obvious that the Book of Samuel contains stories that are polyvalent (*bedeutungsoffen*) and thus open to different interpretations. It has long been noted that the *Tendenzkritik* does fall short and the characters (figures) in the Book of Samuel cannot be so easily differentiated into "positive" and "negative" archetypes. Studies on the main and secondary figures have repeatedly come to the conclusion that the literary figures in the Book of Samuel demonstrate moral ambiguity and ambivalence.[37] This theme is present as well on a more general level throughout the whole story. The Book of Samuel cannot be reduced merely to apology, nor can it be circumscribed as a critique of monarchy or of specific kings. Rather, it should be seen as a mixture of all these impulses (see Benjamin J. M. Johnson, An Unapologetic Apology), and thus a narrative reflecting on power structures more broadly construed.[38]

Moreover, this reflection cannot be considered a static, monolithic presentation by the book's many authors and tradents. True, the book demonstrates that power is questionable and that the behavior of kings is civilizable – but these perceptions have undergone change over the course of time. Throughout the book's history of transmission, these changes have not been entirely covered over – rather, the sophisticated methods employed by a succession of editors have allowed brief glimpses of previous construals to irrupt through the cracks. Monarchy is therefore not something fixed once for all time, but is rather in process, continually changing and progressing (for a detailed study of these processes see Jeremy Hutton, A Pre-Deuteronomistic Narrative Underlying the "Antimonarchic Narrative" and Johannes Klein, Dynastiekritische Vorstellungen und das Königtum). This careful treatment of tradition in the Book of Samuel should be taken as an invitation to deal with different positions in an appreciative manner.

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35 See for more details Kipfer, *Der bedrohte David*, 317–319.

36 See, e.g., Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200, referring to the story of David and Goliath.

37 See, e.g., Dietrich, *Seitenblicke*; Bodner / Johnson, *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*.

38 For a research overview see Kipfer, *Der bedrohte David*, 42–49.

3. Conclusion

The Book of Samuel reflects a diverse response to monarchy. It is perhaps unremarkable that so many responses could be exhibited, since every subject of the Israelite monarchy undoubtedly had his or her own response. More remarkable, however, is the fact that this multiplicity of meanings was conserved through the processes of textual transmission and canonization. Despite its recognition as an "authoritative" religious text, the Book of Samuel remained open to different interpretations throughout the centuries and was used to both support and question monarchy.[39] The texts seem to be immune to political appropriation (*politische Vereinnahmung*) in a very distinctive way. The diversity of responses discernible in the book becomes even more remarkable if we are looking at identity constructions and othering (Regine Hunziker-Rodewald, Images *by* and Images *of* Philistia), and how features of the political landscape such as borders, centers, and peripheries have been constructed (Mahri Leonard Fleckmann, Ally or Enemy? Politics and Identity Construction).

Today, under the pretext of historical correctness, the Book of Samuel has sometimes been used for single-line interpretation. We see it, however, as our duty to conserve its variety of meaning potentials and to contribute to the ongoing discourse regarding the book's diverse voices. The polyvalence of the Book of Samuel and its reception history should not be covered over by a scientific sovereignty of interpretation ("*wissenschaftliche Deutungshoheit*") of any kind.

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[39] Multiplicity of meaning, however, is not arbitrary and should not prevent critical thinking and engaging with different research positions.

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