

Truth

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Modern hermeneuticians emphasize the interpretative nature of human thought and existence. The human being is symbol-producing, and its world is disclosed through language and culture. Language and culture differ across history and geographical areas. Does this mean that philosophy cannot accommodate a notion of truth? This question holds a central place in modern hermeneutics. In fact, the answers given to it place the various contributors to hermeneutic philosophy along a spectrum of positions ranging from a commitment to objectivity in interpretation to an acceptance of relativism and attempts to let go of the notion of truth altogether. However, while the hermeneutic tradition is far from being in unison in the responses offered to the question of truth, philosophers in this field agree that hermeneutics must involve an attempt to map the complex relationship between truth, on the one hand, and interpretation and understanding, on the other.

The responses triggered by this challenge can be divided into three main constellations that are, in turn, associated with (but not limited to) the eighteenth, the nineteenth, and the twentieth centuries. While this picture runs the risk of reducing the complexity of the positions involved, it has the advantage of staging hermeneutics as a set of competing theoretical stances, rather than a quasi-teleological development leading up to the contributions of our own time, be they of a phenomenological bent (Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and beyond) or a more pragmatist flavor (Richard Rorty).

In the wake of the Enlightenment, Johann Gottfried Herder makes the problem of understanding a central aspect of his definition of philosophy. This move is further developed in the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher and G. W. F. Hegel. In different ways, Herder, Schleiermacher, and Hegel discuss the challenge of understanding expressions that derive from culturally and historically near or distant periods. Yet, while emphasizing the cultural mediation of thought, they all view hermeneutics as shaped by an orientation toward true historical judgment. Further, they all see the search for historical truth as part of an ongoing realization of reason and humanity.

Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Nietzsche emphasize that our situatedness in culture makes it necessary to ask what truth is, in the first place. Meaning and values change over time. Thus, Dilthey and Nietzsche contemplate the role of the human sciences in a landscape of shifting historical and cultural horizons, arriving at quite different conclusions with respect to the possibility of truth and objectivity (the conditions under which true judgments can be passed).

In the period leading up to the Second World War, the quest for (scientific) truth and objectivity gave way to a search for authenticity and meaning. For Heidegger and Gadamer, truth concerns the way we lead our lives. This, in turn, inspires Rorty, though he approaches these issues from the context of Anglophone philosophy, to propose that the goal of philosophy is not truth but edification.

Each of these theoretical formations—the questions they ask and the responses they generate—will be spelled out in more detail in the following.

Truth within the Framework of Historicity

In the wake of Hans-Georg Gadamer's magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (1960; for English translation, see Gadamer 1994), hermeneutics and enlightenment are cast as mutually opposed. According to Gadamer, modern hermeneutics begins with the debate between Schleiermacher and Hegel over historical knowledge (Gadamer 1994, 164–171). In his view, hermeneutics emerges as a response to enlightenment rationalism and objectivism. Unfortunately, this picture is too simple. With the Scottish Enlightenment, the problems of historical change and cultural diversity had received significant philosophical attention. Shaftesbury and Hume's works in this field were swiftly translated and read in France and Germany (Kuhn 1987). In France, Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu, and others had wished to expand the horizon of historical work from a study of datable facts and events to the realm of practices, ideas, and mindsets. In Germany, Leibniz and other philosophers had placed China and Asian culture on the intellectual map, thus also occasioning questions concerning intercultural understanding. Finally, Johann Martin Chladenius, Georg-Friedrich Meier, and others had sought to expand hermeneutics from being a methodological aid to classicists and biblical scholars (i.e., scholars focusing on particular kinds of texts) to the field of interpretation as such (Bühler 1994). Herder's hermeneutics takes shape within the intersection of such enlightenment impulses.

At the center of Herder's work is the image of human life as symbolically oriented. The capacity for understanding, he emphasizes, is not an expression of nature (as standing under causal laws), but of our existence as free and spontaneous beings. Understanding takes place in and through symbolic production, history, and culture. Hence, our attempts at understanding, be they individual or collective, must have a historical dimension.

In being situated within a historical context, an interpreter always risks being prejudiced. However, nowhere is this risk greater than in the work of historians who deny the force of prejudices, thereby depriving themselves of the possibility of self-critique and reflection. Herder is particularly worried about how historians such as Voltaire and Winckelmann, in the name of an unchangeable humanity (be it defined in terms of rationality or beauty), favor a particular period or set of ideas (Herder 2002, 275, 283). Against such approaches, Herder emphasizes that the historical sciences ought to begin with the concrete works and data available to an interpreter, and develop procedures that move from the particular to the universal.

In Herder's view, the objectivity of historical and intercultural judgment rests with the interpreter's ability to grasp a work or expression in its own context. The notion of a fully adequate understanding serves as a regulative idea for historical scholarship, a standard by reference to which we can critically assess the validity of our hermeneutic endeavors. In this model, the understanding of the historical material rests with the gradual elimination of false beliefs and assumptions. In the field of history and culture, truth is not necessarily an either-or (either a judgment is true or false), but comes in degrees (a judgment can be more or less adequate than previous or alternative judgments). Interpretation is thus an ongoing enterprise. Further, for Herder, the interpretation of other cultures often brings an interpreter (and his or her readership) closer to true self-understanding in that it challenges prejudices and established systems of belief. An interpreter should not strive toward agreement with the original text

and its presentation of some subject matter, but must realize that works that originate from within other cultural schemes may present views that he or she does not approve of or deem true (Herder 1969, 193). This is different from Gadamer, who is adamant that understanding presupposes that the interpreter orients himself or herself toward the truth of a text or utterance (see Gadamer 1994, 287–288). Herder's notion of hermeneutic objectivity as a matter of overcoming prejudice is taken up by Schleiermacher.

Schleiermacher's legacy has been shaped by his critics, most notably Hegel and Gadamer. Hegel accuses Schleiermacher of subjectivizing religious truth, linking it back to the realm of feeling (Hegel 1987). Gadamer, on his side, is more interested in Schleiermacher's theory of interpretation, but reads his contribution, along the lines of Hegel's critique, as an effort to retrieve, via empathy and immediate recreation, an original, individual intention (Gadamer 1994, 165–169). In Gadamer's view, modern hermeneutics must overcome this paradigm of objective reconstruction. While Gadamer is right in seeing his own model as fundamentally different from that of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century hermeneutics, he is not right in claiming that Schleiermacher aestheticizes interpretation and reduces it to a matter of feeling and immediacy.

Like Herder (especially in his studies of the Old Testament; see Herder 1833), Schleiermacher relates to the hermeneutic tradition in philology and religious studies (Schleiermacher 1998). However, rather than being concerned with a practical solution to interpretative problems in these fields, he addresses the idea of a critical standard by which to assess interpretation at a general (universal) level. For Schleiermacher, all use of language (all production of symbols) calls for interpretation, albeit in different degrees. The challenges that face, say, a Bible scholar, are of the same nature as those we encounter in understanding everyday conversation (though the two are likely to vary in difficulty and seriousness). In this context, Schleiermacher's point is that hermeneutic activity, as a critical and scholarly enterprise, must be reflective. It must focus not only on the meaning of the text or utterance at stake, but also on the speech act, as well as the possible prejudices with which it, from the side of the interpreter, is approached.

For Schleiermacher, any effort to understand an utterance involves an attempt at contextualizing: Who is speaking and from what point of view? This also implies a notion of (authorial) intention, although not cast as a feeling or hidden thought. Rather, the intention of a work or an utterance—what is meant by it—is closely related to its original context (but cannot, for that reason, be reduced to it). The question as to what is meant by the cry “Long live the Republic!” will, for example, need to take into account questions such as whether this was uttered by a senator in ancient Rome, a French eighteenth-century revolutionary, or a defender of modern republicanism, *and* it will need to take into account whether the utterance is formed, say, as part of a satirical work of art, a serious political discussion, somewhere in between, or neither of the above. Schleiermacher's claim that an utterance should always be understood with reference to its context is combined with a sensitivity to style and individuality. This has led Peter Szondi, in an effort to challenge the ontological outlook of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics, to highlight romantic thought as particularly relevant to modernist literature and poetry (Szondi 1996, 95–115; Szondi 1995, 109–121).

Schleiermacher views hermeneutics as closely related to dialectics. Dialectics is the dialogical search for knowledge (Schleiermacher 1996, 4). Just as hermeneutics is an ongoing search for (objective) understanding of the utterances of others, so dialectics is a matter of approximation. In both cases, Schleiermacher insists that the ability to offer a reflective account of the conditions of possibility for these practices is a precondition for our pursuing them in a critical way. An interpreter should ask, at a first-order level, if he or she has reached true(r) judgment or understanding, but also probe, at a second-order level, what would count as true(r) judgment or understanding within the relevant field of inquiry.

Whereas Herder is concerned with the overcoming of prejudices in understanding, and Schleiermacher sheds light on the procedures of critical interpretation, Hegel puts forward a notion of truth as relating to the totality of the human being's self-understanding in the cultural and historical

realms. Four points seem particularly important for our understanding of Hegel's contribution to hermeneutics. First, he proposes that only that which is rational can be understood. This is different from Herder and Schleiermacher's suggestion that we can understand something without accepting it as rational. (Herder and Schleiermacher, however, would agree with Hegel that in order for something to be understood, an interpreter needs to be able to see how it could make sense within its context of origin.) Second, Hegel assumes that the full significance of a given historical period can only be obtained when it has come to an end, and no further development can take place. Third, Hegel emphasizes the continuity of historical development, so that, ultimately, understanding concerns the interpreter's own tradition and thus facilitates self-understanding. This is different from Herder's (and to some extent, Schleiermacher's) emphasis on cultural diversity and differing conceptual schemes (for a discussion of this point, see Forster 1998). Finally, Hegel argues that a complete understanding of human rationality and its development can only be given at the point at which history will bring no major shifts, that is, at the end of history. While Gadamer deems this a quasi-Cartesian element in Hegelian thought (see Gjesdal 2009, 119–155), others have emphasized how it follows from Hegel's focus on the totality of historical processes (Beiser 1993; McCarney 2000; Pinkard 2012).

Hegel's idea of a phenomenological truth has received much attention in the hermeneutic literature (for an account of the hermeneutic dimensions of Hegel's philosophy, see Redding 1996). There has, though, been less interest in his engagement with the details of interpretation and historical scholarship. In an early text on classical studies, Hegel argues that the understanding of ancient art and texts must be driven by a will to estrange oneself from one's own immediate world (Hegel 1971, 328). Likewise, his lectures on the philosophy of history betray a desire to portray history as it was (Hegel 1995, 45–49). These claims do not necessarily undercut the argument of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. They may, instead, be taken as an indication of how this work should be read, introducing, to use Gadamer's terminology, a dimension of "reconstruction" in Hegel's project of "integration."

From this point of view, Herder, Schleiermacher, and Hegel all represent a commitment to objectivity and truth in understanding, and present understanding as a critical-reflective enterprise.

Truth, Objectivity, and Ideology

In the wake of Herder's, Schleiermacher's, and Hegel's contributions to hermeneutics, a new problem emerges: if a human being is culturally situated and if the judgments we see as true may one day appear as prejudiced, does not this imply that the notions of objectivity and truth may prove historically relative? Dilthey and Nietzsche both respond to this question. They seek, albeit in different ways, to establish the historical-hermeneutic sciences as contributing to our critical reflection on the use and validity of traditional conceptions of truth and meaning. For Dilthey as well as Nietzsche, this is not simply a matter that concerns the academic standing of the humanities, but relates, in a more profound sense, to human existence and self-understanding.

Dilthey is the author of a series of incomplete works, and his position undergoes significant revisions (exactly how fundamental these revisions are turns out to be a matter of debate; see Lessing and Rodi 1984). As such, his work might be seen as an ongoing attempt at formulating the questions to which the human sciences represent an answer. He engages Mill's and Comte's attempts to ground the human sciences on a par with natural science (Bambach 1995, 137–140). And while aspiring to give a contemporary formulation of the foundations of the human sciences, Dilthey also expounds on the tradition from Herder, Schleiermacher, and Hegel (in addition to Kant and the neo-Kantians), so as to make it relevant to a theory of the humanities.

In Dilthey's view, the human sciences must be understood in terms of their engagement with works that stem from individual human beings who express life in a way that furthers and draws on culture

and history as domains in which meaning is constituted and kept alive (Dilthey 1989, 76). This, in turn, opens up a special interdependence of facts, laws, and values that does not exist in the natural sciences. In Dilthey's eyes, this interdependence can be recognized only in self-reflection (Dilthey 1989, 169). Hence, the truth at stake in the human sciences is not dependent on a given set of methods or procedures; nor can it be reduced to a set of judgments about given events or facts, but must also take into account why certain facts, events, and texts are seen as worthy of exploration in the first place.

Against this background, two problems ground Dilthey's approach to truth. First, how can human science be connected to inner experience (an area that has, traditionally, been seen as a domain of subjectivity rather than truth claims)? And how, further, can truth and objectivity be linked up with questions of intelligibility and meaning? These issues remain relevant as Dilthey, via his interaction with Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl, and others, keeps revising his philosophical platform.

Throughout his work, Dilthey argues that the humanities should seek to understand not only historical events, but also the works—artistic, historical, and philosophical—that are handed down by the tradition. Further, these should be understood as produced by and testifying to the feeling of life of a particular historical person or group. However, in Dilthey's view, there is no significant difference between these undertakings. Events and symbolic expressions are products of human intentions and desires, and must be understood as such. In this sense, the human sciences derive their legitimacy with reference to a dimension of meaning (rather than, say, regularity and laws). For Dilthey, this dimension of meaning is, so to speak, the imprint of human historicity. It establishes a condition for intersubjective understanding, but also for self-understanding, both in relation to the historical agent and in relation to the interpreter. Hence, while art and expressions of individuality are, in a sense, based in inner experience (Dilthey uses the term *Erlebnis*), they are, all the same, situated within a field of intersubjectively accessible meaning and interpretation. The interpreter seeks to reach the original *Erlebnis* to which the text gives voice, to reawaken a certain experience of the world, a certain outlook on the human condition, thereby expanding his or her horizon. In this way, a truth-oriented interpretation illuminates and makes explicit how a practice, event, or work is reflective of a particular (historically and culturally mediated) outlook. The truth at stake concerns the historical world, which in turn is only available as mediated through human experience and expression (see, for instance, Dilthey 1985, 223–228). Truth is not limited to some sort of correspondence between propositional content and a language-independent reality, but has to do with the disclosure of human meaning and existence as historical.

While Nietzsche's position is different from Dilthey's, he accepts the notion that history is of interest primarily as a field of human meaning production. For Nietzsche, however, this meaning is ultimately an expression of life (or even will to power). While Nietzsche has been seen as the precursor of relativism and deconstruction, his contribution to hermeneutics is far more complex than such a reading would indicate.

Following the reception of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872; English translation Nietzsche 1999), Nietzsche enters the discussion of truth, objectivity, and historical knowledge. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had aired his hopes for a nonsubjective art and linked this with a historical study that uncovered the roots of Western art in the Dionysian music of Greek tragedy, an aspect of tragedy that has been overlooked or even repressed by modern aesthetics and philosophy more generally. Contemporary classicists, however, were not convinced. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff claimed that Nietzsche's views were based in superficial philological work (Wilamowitz-Möllendorff 2000). Nietzsche thus moves on, in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," to reflect on the different approaches to history and the validity claims they generate (Nietzsche 2011, 57–125). In this context, he distinguishes between an antiquarian approach (which seeks to reconstruct the past on its own terms, thus failing to make it matter to the present), a monumental approach (which links historical scholarship with the ability to revive the glorious deeds of the past so as to inspire the present), and a critical approach

(which uncovers the historical preconditions for the concepts and practices through which we understand ourselves and the values with which we identify). Needless to say, Nietzsche prefers the critical approach and will explore different versions of it in “On Truth and Lying,” *The Gay Science* (1882), and, at a practical-interpretative level, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887).

In “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche provocatively describes truth as a “mobile army of metaphors,” a vestige of beliefs and illusions that have not been subject to critical scrutiny and evaluation (Nietzsche 1999, 139–154). In his view, the conventional notion of truth is anchored in a set of problematic metaphysical assumptions, most prominently the idea of correspondence between a proposition and the extra-linguistic world. In this spirit, Nietzsche claims, in *Human, All Too Human* (1878–1880), that it is not lies, but convictions that are the most dangerous enemies of truth. For Nietzsche, truth and truthfulness should ultimately merge in the ability of philosophy, art, and practice to further life. While Nietzsche, in this effort, might be seen as a perspectivist (suggesting that the way we see the world is relative to the position from which it is seen, yet more or less adequate judgments and observations about events, expressions, or objects can be made), he is still far from the relativist position on truth with which his name would sometimes be associated (a position that would altogether abandon the possibility of distinguishing truth from illusion).

Nietzsche’s contribution has had an afterlife in the work of philosophers like Michel Foucault (Foucault 1970, 342; see also Foucault 1984), Richard Rorty (Rorty 1982, 1999), and Bernard Williams (Williams 2006, 2004). His work would also influence Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s efforts to critique the notion of truth as representation and retrieve a more fundamental, hermeneutic understanding of truth as disclosure.

Truth as Disclosure and the Challenge of Living Truthfully

From the late 1910s, the young Martin Heidegger, at the time identifying as a student of Husserl, developed his position as a revolt against the very profession of philosophy (here he follows the sentiments aired in Nietzsche 2011, 125–195). Philosophy, Heidegger argues, has turned into a stifling game for academic busybodies; intellectual pursuits come second to self-positioning in the professional field (Heidegger 1999, 2001). In such an environment, Heidegger submits, genuine philosophical questions can no longer be asked. Hence, Heidegger’s teaching at the time critiques the profession and attempts to reintroduce a set of philosophical questions that have been long overlooked. Prominent among these is the self-investigation of *Dasein* (or “being there”): What does it mean to be a being for whom being is, emphatically, an issue (Heidegger 1996, 2–5)? In the period leading up to and including *Being and Time*, Heidegger believes that the way we conceive of truth must be related to how this most fundamental question of meaning is raised (indeed, truth is cast as “a fundamental existential,” Heidegger 1996, 273).

According to Heidegger, the question of Being has been rejected by the philosophical tradition. *Dasein* and its world are presented in terms of the dualism of mind and nature. As a consequence, reflection on truth has taken the form of asking how a judgment can represent the world as it is in itself (independently of this representation). Heidegger calls this propositional or assertoric truth (Heidegger 1996, 196–213). His point, in this context, is not to reject this notion of truth, but, rather, to ask whether this is all there is (Tugendhat 1996). Against what he takes to be the traditional model of truth, Heidegger proposes that, in order for propositional judgments to be passed, there needs to be a space of meaning in which judgment of such a kind makes sense in the first place. Heidegger addresses this as a matter of world-disclosure, which he leads back to *Dasein*’s way of being in the world. As he puts it in *Being and Time*: “The being of truth stands in a primordial connection with Da-sein. And only

because Da-sein exists as constituted by disclosedness (that is, by understanding) can something like being be understood, only so is an understanding of being possible at all" (Heidegger 1996, 211).

In the wake of *Being and Time*, Heidegger's philosophy undergoes a process of self-criticism. In *Being and Time*, the notion of truth is liberated from the idea of certainty and thoroughly detranscendentalized. From the 1930s onward, the question of truth is further radicalized. At this point, art plays an increasingly important role. In combining a dimension of materiality and nature (earth) with a reference to human practice and symbolic production (world), the work of art initiates a happening of truth. Whereas science, in Heidegger's mind, is "not an original happening of truth" (Heidegger 2002, 37), the work of art discloses a field of meaning in which truth (at the level of judgment) can take place. This, in turn, will be important for Gadamer, whose ambition, in *Truth and Method*, it is to develop a hermeneutic position that draws on and develops insights from Heidegger's early as well as late philosophy (see, for instance, Gadamer 1994, 262–264).

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer critiques the notion of transcendental subjectivity, whose truth-oriented practices culminate in a process of representing a mind-external world. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger still affiliated himself with the hermeneutic tradition and its discussion of understanding, interpretation, and assertion and the relationship between them (Heidegger 1996, 363–369). Later on, however, such references are few and far between, and in some texts Heidegger appears almost hostile to hermeneutic philosophers such as Dilthey (Heidegger 2002, 57–85). For Gadamer, by contrast, the hermeneutic tradition remains at the center of his work. In fact, the very notion of truth is, for him, not simply an issue that should be of concern to hermeneuticians, but, stronger still, one that hermeneutics is in a privileged position to illuminate. This follows from Gadamer's interest in the kind of truth (or truthfulness) that can be obtained through understanding engagement with tradition (see, for instance, Gadamer 1994, xxii–xxiii, 490–491).

In Gadamer's view, previous hermeneutic philosophers have been blinded by a Cartesian disinterest in the historicity of human existence and, as a consequence, have had a tendency to reduce understanding to a question of method and view its successful outcome as a matter of objectivity (Gadamer 1994, 173–242). Gadamer wants to go beyond this paradigm. In his view, it does injustice to the human sciences and alienates the interpreter from his or her historical existence and tradition. In the human sciences, we do not primarily study the texts or events of a past that is over with. They are, rather, disciplines through which the scholar gets a more emphatic understanding of the tradition of which he or she is a part: disciplines that further self-understanding. Hence, the truth arrived at, in these fields, is not merely cognitive (in the narrow sense of the word), but reaches deep into the sphere of practice and self-formation (*Bildung*) (Gadamer 1994, 9–19).

Gadamer wishes to explain the dynamics of understanding (and the related self-formation it generates). He emphasizes that eminent works of the tradition possess a kind of truth that transcends the critical-reflective scope of the individual interpreter. Such eminent works have been passed down from generation to generation and acquired a richness of meaning that lends them authority. Hence, there is an irreducible element of passivity in understanding. In order to illustrate this point, Gadamer refers to the work of the cultural anthropologist Johann Huizinga. In playing, Huizinga argues, the player must let go of her reflective consciousness and invest herself in the movement of the play. By analogy, the interpreter, in approaching eminent or classical works, must be open to be questioned by the work and its "mode[s] of being historical"—those of preservation (*Bewahrung*) and constantly proving itself (*Bewahrung*) (Gadamer 1994, 287). Only thus can the encounter with the eminent works of the tradition disclose the truth about human historical existence.

In the aftermath of *Truth and Method*, this aspect of Gadamer's theory has been subject to debate. While Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel have been positive in their attitude to Gadamer's hermeneutic turn, they have nonetheless pointed to what they view as a conservative acceptance of tradition in his philosophy. Tradition, they point out, does not simply offer occasions for self-understanding,

but also imposes ideological structures. Thus, a dimension of critical-reflective agency is needed in hermeneutics. Hermeneutics must retrieve its enlightenment legacy and focus not simply on truth, but also on questions of validity (See Apel and Habermas in Orminston and Schrift 1990 and Mueller-Vollmer 1989).

A different approach can be found in the work of Richard Rorty. For Rorty, the ultimate consequence of the hermeneutic turn is not a reintroduction of validity and reflective agency but, rather, a willingness to take the deep-seated interpretative dimension of human nature seriously to the extent that we altogether leave behind the very appeal to truth and celebrate, instead, a notion of dialogue and edification (Rorty 1980, 357–394). In this way, Rorty, while drawing on the insights of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer, espouses a philosophy of freedom and a liberation from the understanding of tradition as an ongoing, continuous development of rationality, Spirit, or Being.

Concluding Reflections

The tradition of philosophical hermeneutics does not offer a definitive answer to the question “What is truth?” and the inquiry into the relationship between truth and interpretation. Instead, it presents a number of ways in which this question can be asked and discusses the validity and relevance of some plausible responses. There is, in other words, no one hermeneutic position on truth, but, rather, an ongoing effort to formulate the questions of truth and interpretation in a philosophically sound and helpful way. As such, the hermeneutic discussion of truth should be of relevance not only to philosophers, but also to scholars and students within the wider spectrum of the social and human sciences.

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