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PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

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The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem (1966)

Why has the problem of language come to occupy the same central position in current philosophical discussions that the concept of thought, or "thought thinking itself," held in philosophy a century and a half ago? By answering this question, I shall try to give an answer indirectly to the central question of the modern age - a question posed for us by the existence of modern science. It is the question of how our natural view of the world - the experience of the world that we have as we simply live out our lives - is related to the unassailable and anonymous authority that confronts us in the pronouncements of science. Since the seventeenth century, the real task of philosophy has been to mediate this new employment of man's cognitive and constructive capacities with the totality of our experience of life. This task has found expression in a variety of ways, including our own generation's attempt to bring the topic of language to the center of philosophical concern. Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world. Hence we always have in view the pronouncements of the sciences, which are fixed in nonverbal signs. And our task is to reconnect the objective world of technology, which the sciences place at our disposal and discretion, with those fundamental
orders of our being that are neither arbitrary nor manipulable by us, but rather simply demand our respect.

I want to elucidate several phenomena in which the universality of this question becomes evident. I have called the point of view involved in this theme ‘hermeneutical,’ a term developed by Heidegger. Heidegger was continuing a perspective stemming originally from Protestant theology and transmitted into our own century by Wilhelm Dilthey.

What is hermeneutics? I would like to start from two experiences of alienation that we encounter in our concrete existence: the experience of alienation of the aesthetic consciousness and the experience of alienation of the historical consciousness. In both cases what I mean can be stated in a few words. The aesthetic consciousness realizes a possibility that as such we can neither deny nor diminish in its value, namely, that we relate ourselves, either negatively or affirmatively, to the quality of an artistic form. This statement means we are related in such a way that the judgment we make decides in the end regarding the expressive power and validity of what we judge. What we reject has nothing to say to us—or we reject it because it has nothing to say to us. This characterizes our relation to art in the broadest sense of the word, a sense that, as Hegel has shown, includes the entire religious world of the ancient Greeks, whose religion of beauty experienced the divine in concrete works of art that man creates in response to the gods. When it loses its original and unquestioned authority, this whole world of experience becomes alienated into an object of aesthetic judgment. At the same time, however, we must admit that the world of artistic tradition—the splendid contemporaneity that we gain through art with so many human worlds—is more than a mere object of our free acceptance or rejection. Is it not true that when a work of art has seized us it no longer leaves us the freedom to push it away from us once again and to accept or reject it on our own terms? And is it not also true that these artistic creations, which come down through the millennia, were not created for such aesthetic acceptance or rejection? No artist of the religiously vital cultures of the past ever produced his work of art with any other intention than that his creation should be received in terms of what it says and presents and that it should have its place in the world where men live together. The consciousness of art—the aesthetic consciousness—is always secondary to the immediate truth-claim that proceeds from the work of art itself. To this extent, when we judge a work of art on the basis of its aesthetic quality, something that is really much more intimately familiar to us is alienated. This alienation into aesthetic judgment always takes place when we have withdrawn ourselves and are no longer open to the immediate claim of that which grasps us. Thus one point of departure for my reflections in Truth and Method was that the aesthetic sovereignty that claims its rights in the experience of art represents an alienation when compared to the authentic experience that confronts us in the form of art itself.

About thirty years ago, this problem cropped up in a particularly distorted form when National Socialist politics of art, as a means to its own ends, tried to criticize formalism by arguing that art is bound to a people. Despite its misuse by the National Socialists, we cannot deny that the idea of art being bound to a people involves a real insight. A genuine artistic creation stands within a particular community, and such a community is always distinguishable from the cultured society that is informed and terrorized by art criticism.

The second mode of the experience of alienation is the historical consciousness—the noble and slowly perfected art of holding ourselves at a critical distance in dealing with witnesses to past life. Ranke’s celebrated description of this idea as the extinguishing of the individual provided a popular formula for the ideal of historical thinking: the historical consciousness has the task of understanding all the witnesses of a past time out of the spirit of that time, of extricating them from the preoccupations of our own present life, and of knowing, without moral smugness, the past as a human phenomenon. In his well-known essay The Use and Abuse of History, Nietzsche formulated the contradiction between this historical distancing and the immediate will to shape things that always cleaves to the present. And at the same time he exposed many of the consequences of what he called the “Alexandrian,” weakened form of the will, which is found in modern historical science. We might recall his indictment of
the weakness of evaluation that has befallen the modern mind because it has become so accustomed to considering things in ever different and changing lights that it is blinded and incapable of arriving at an opinion of its own regarding the objects it studies. It is unable to determine its own position vis-à-vis what confronts it. Nietzsche traces the value-blindness of historical objectivism back to the conflict between the alienated historical world and the life-powers of the present.

To be sure, Nietzsche is an ecstatic witness. But our actual experience of the historical consciousness in the last one hundred years has taught us most emphatically that there are serious difficulties involved in its claim to historical objectivity. Even in those masterworks of historical scholarship that seem to be the very consummation of the extinguishing of the individual demanded by Ranke, it is still an unquestioned principle of our scientific experience that we can classify these works with unfailing accuracy in terms of the political tendencies of the time in which they were written. When we read Mommsen’s *History of Rome*, we know who alone could have written it, that is, we can identify the political situation in which this historian organized the voices of the past in a meaningful way. We know it too in the case of Treitschke or of Sybel, to choose only a few prominent names from Prussian historiography. This clearly means, first of all, that the whole reality of historical experience does not find expression in the mastery of historical method. No one disputes the fact that controlling the prejudices of our own present to such an extent that we do not misunderstand the witnesses of the past is a valid aim, but obviously such control does not completely fulfill the task of understanding the past and its transmissions. Indeed, it could very well be that only *insignificant* things in historical scholarship permit us to approximate this ideal of totally extinguishing individuality, while the great productive achievements of scholarship always preserve something of the splendid magic of immediately mirroring the present in the past and the past in the present. Historical science, the second experience from which I begin, expresses only one part of our actual experience – our actual encounter with historical tradition – and it knows only an alienated form of this historical tradition.

We can contrast the hermeneutical consciousness with these examples of alienation as a more comprehensive possibility that we must develop. But, in the case of this hermeneutical consciousness also, our initial task must be to overcome the epistemological truncation by which the traditional “science of hermeneutics” has been absorbed into the idea of modern science. If we consider Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, for instance, we find his view of this discipline peculiarly restricted by the modern idea of science. Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics shows him to be a leading voice of historical romanticism. But at the same time, he kept the concern of the Christian theologian clearly in mind, intending his hermeneutics, as a general doctrine of the art of understanding, to be of value in the special work of interpreting Scripture. Schleiermacher defined hermeneutics as the art of avoiding misunderstanding. To exclude by controlled, methodical consideration whatever is alien and leads to misunderstanding – misunderstanding suggested to us by distance in time, change in linguistic usages, or in the meanings of words and modes of thinking – that is certainly far from an absurd description of the hermeneutical endeavor. But the question also arises as to whether the phenomenon of understanding is defined appropriately when we say that to understand is to avoid misunderstanding. Is it not, in fact, the case that every misunderstanding presupposes a “deep common accord”? I am trying to call attention here to a common experience. We say, for instance, that understanding and misunderstanding take place between I and thou. But the formulation “I and thou” already betrays an enormous alienation. There is nothing like an “I and thou” at all – there is neither the I nor the thou as isolated, substantial realities. I may say “thou” and I may refer to myself over against a thou, but a common understanding [Verständigung] always precedes these situations. We all know that to say “thou” to someone presupposes a deep common accord [tiefes Einverständnis]. Something enduring is already present when this word is spoken. When we try to reach agreement on a matter on which we
have different opinions, this deeper factor always comes into play, even if we are seldom aware of it. Now the science of hermeneutics would have us believe that the opinion we have to understand is something alien that seeks to lure us into misunderstanding, and our task is to exclude every element through which a misunderstanding can creep in. We accomplish this task by a controlled procedure of historical training, by historical criticism, and by a controllable method in connection with powers of psychological empathy. It seems to me that this description is valid in one respect, but yet it is only a partial description of a comprehensive life-phenomenon that constitutes the "we" that we all are. Our task, it seems to me, is to transcend the prejudices that underlie the aesthetic consciousness, the historical consciousness, and the hermeneutical consciousness that has been restricted to a technique for avoiding misunderstandings and to overcome the alienations present in them all.

What is it, then, in these three experiences that seemed to us to have been left out, and what makes us so sensitive to the distinctiveness of these experiences? What is the aesthetic consciousness when compared to the fullness of what has already addressed us — what we call "classical" in art? Is it not always already determined in this way what will be expressive for us and what we will find significant? Whenever we say with an instinctive, even if perhaps erroneous, certainty (but a certainty that is initially valid for our consciousness) "this is classical; it will endure," what we are speaking of has already preformed our possibility for aesthetic judgment. There are no purely formal criteria that can claim to judge and sanction the formative level simply on the basis of its artistic virtuosity. Rather, our sensitive-spiritual existence is an aesthetic resonance chamber that resonates with the voices that are constantly reaching us, preceding all explicit aesthetic judgment.

The situation is similar with the historical consciousness. Here, too, we must certainly admit that there are innumerable tasks of historical scholarship that have no relation to our own present and to the depths of its historical consciousness. But it seems to me there can be no doubt that the great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present

live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future. History is only present to us in light of our futurity. Here we have all learned from Heidegger, for he exhibited precisely the primacy of futurity for our possible recollection and retention, and for the whole of our history.

Heidegger worked out this primacy in his doctrine of the productivity of the hermeneutical circle. I have given the following formulation to this insight: It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being.* This is a provocative formulation, for I am using it to restore to its rightful place a positive concept of prejudice that was driven out of our linguistic usage by the French and the English Enlightenment. It can be shown that the concept of prejudice did not originally have the meaning we have attached to it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something — whereby what we encounter says something to us. This formulation certainly does not mean that we are enclosed within a wall of prejudices and only let through the narrow portals those things that can produce a pass saying, "Nothing new will be said here." Instead we welcome just that guest who promises something new to our curiosity. But how do we know the guest whom we admit is one who has something new to say to us? Is not our expectation and our readiness to hear the new also necessarily determined by the old that has already taken possession of us? The concept of prejudice is closely connected to the concept of authority, and the above image makes it clear that it is in need of hermeneutical rehabilitation. Like every image, however, this one too is misleading. The nature of the hermeneutical experience is not that something is outside and desires admission. Rather, we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true. Plato made this clear in his beautiful

* Cf. WM, p. 261.
comparison of bodily foods with spiritual nourishment: while we can refuse the former (e.g., on the advice of a physician), we have always taken the latter into ourselves already.

But now the question arises as to how we can legitimate this hermeneutical conditionedness of our being in the face of modern science, which stands or falls with the principle of being unbiased and prejudiceless. We will certainly not accomplish this legitimation by making prescriptions for science and recommending that it toe the line—quite aside from the fact that such pronouncements always have something comical about them. Science will not do us this favor. It will continue along its own path with an inner necessity beyond its control, and it will produce more and more breathtaking knowledge and controlling power. It can be no other way. It is senseless, for instance, to hinder a genetic researcher because such research threatens to breed a superman. Hence the problem cannot appear as one in which our human consciousness ranges itself over against the world of science and presumes to develop a kind of antiscience. Nevertheless, we cannot avoid the question of whether what we are aware of in such apparently harmless examples as the aesthetic consciousness and the historical consciousness does not represent a problem that is also present in modern natural science and our technological attitude toward the world. If modern science enables us to erect a new world of technological purposes that transforms everything around us, we are not thereby suggesting that the researcher who gained the knowledge decisive for this state of affairs even considered technical applications. The genuine researcher is motivated by a desire for knowledge and by nothing else. And yet, over against the whole of our civilization that is founded on modern science, we must ask repeatedly if something has not been omitted. If the presuppositions of these possibilities for knowing and making remain half in the dark, cannot the result be that the hand applying this knowledge will be destructive?

The problem is really universal. The hermeneutical question, as I have characterized it, is not restricted to the areas from which I began in my own investigations. My only concern there was to secure a theoretical basis that would enable us to deal with the basic factor of contemporary culture, namely, science and its industrial, technological utilization. Statistics provide us with a useful example of how the hermeneutical dimension encompasses the entire procedure of science. It is an extreme example, but it shows us that science always stands under definite conditions of methodological abstraction and that the successes of modern sciences rest on the fact that other possibilities for questioning are concealed by abstraction. This fact comes out clearly in the case of statistics, for the anticipatory character of the questions statistics answer make it particularly suitable for propaganda purposes. Indeed, effective propaganda must always try to influence initially the judgment of the person addressed and to restrict his possibilities of judgment. Thus what is established by statistics seems to be a language of facts, but which questions these facts answer and which facts would begin to speak if other questions were asked are hermeneutical questions. Only a hermeneutical inquiry would legitimate the meaning of these facts and thus the consequences that follow from them.

But I am anticipating, and have inadvertently used the phrase, “which answers to which questions fit the facts.” This phrase is in fact the hermeneutical Urphänomen: No assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and assertions can only be understood in this way. It does not impair the impressive methodology of modern science in the least. Whoever wants to learn a science has to learn to master its methodology. But we also know that methodology as such does not guarantee in any way the productivity of its application. Any experience of life can confirm the fact that there is such a thing as methodological sterility, that is, the application of a method to something not really worth knowing, to something that has not been made an object of investigation on the basis of a genuine question.

The methodological self-consciousness of modern science certainly stands in opposition to this argument. A historian, for example, will say in reply: It is all very nice to talk about the historical tradition in which alone the voices of the past gain their meaning and through which the prejudices that
determine the present are inspired. But the situation is completely different in questions of serious historical research. How could one seriously mean, for example, that the clarification of the taxation practices of fifteenth-century cities or of the marital customs of Eskimos somehow first receive their meaning from the consciousness of the present and its anticipations? These are questions of historical knowledge that we take up as tasks quite independently of any relation to the present.

In answering this objection, one can say that the extremity of this point of view would be similar to what we find in certain large industrial research facilities, above all in America and Russia. I mean the so-called random experiment in which one simply covers the material without concern for waste or cost, taking the chance that some day one measurement among the thousands of measurements will finally yield an interesting finding; that is, it will turn out to be the answer to a question from which someone can progress. No doubt modern research in the humanities also works this way to some extent. One thinks, for instance, of the great editions and especially of the ever more perfect indexes. It must remain an open question, of course, whether by such procedures modern historical research increases the chances of actually noticing the interesting fact and thus gaining from it the corresponding enrichment of our knowledge. But even if they do, one might ask: Is this an ideal, that countless research projects (i.e., determinations of the connection of facts) are extracted from a thousand historians, so that the 1001st historian can find something interesting? Of course I am drawing a caricature of genuine scholarship. But in every caricature there is an element of truth, and this one contains an indirect answer to the question of what it is that really makes the productive scholar. That he has learned the methods? The person who never produces anything new has also done that. It is imagination [Phantasie] that is the decisive function of the scholar. Imagination naturally has a hermeneutical function and serves the sense for what is questionable. It serves the ability to expose real, productive questions, something in which, generally speaking, only he who masters all the methods of his science succeeds.

As a student of Plato, I particularly love those scenes in which Socrates gets into a dispute with the Sophist virtuosi and drives them to despair by his questions. Eventually they can endure his questions no longer and claim for themselves the apparently preferable role of the questioner. And what happens? They can think of nothing at all to ask. Nothing at all occurs to them that is worth while going into and trying to answer.

I draw the following inference from this observation. The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable. Now if we have before our eyes is not only the artistic tradition of a people, or historical tradition, or the principle of modern science in its hermeneutical preconditions but rather the whole of our experience, then we have succeeded, I think, in joining the experience of science to our own universal and human experience of life. For we have now reached the fundamental level that we can call (with Johannes Lohmann) the “linguistic constitution of the world.” It presents itself as the consciousness that is effected by history [wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein] and that provides an initial schematization for all our possibilities of knowing. I leave out of account the fact that the scholar — even the natural scientist — is perhaps not completely free of custom and society and from all possible factors in his environment. What I mean is that precisely within his scientific experience it is not so much the “laws of ironclad inference” (Helmholtz) that present fruitful ideas to him, but rather unforeseen constellations that kindle the spark of scientific inspiration (e.g., Newton’s falling apple or some other incidental observation).

The consciousness that is effected by history has its fulfillment in what is linguistic. We can learn from the sensitive student of language that language, in its life and occurrence, must not be thought of as merely changing, but rather as something that has a teleology operating within it. This means that the words that are formed, the means of expression that appear in a language in order to say certain things, are not accidentally fixed, since they do not once again fall altogether into disuse. Instead, a definite articulation of the world is built up — a process that works as if guided and one that we can always observe in children who are learning to speak.
We can illustrate this by considering a passage in Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* that ingeniously describes one definite aspect of language formation. The passage treats what Aristotle calls the *epagoge*, that is, the formation of the universal. How does one arrive at a universal? In philosophy we say: how do we arrive at a general concept, but even words in this sense are obviously general. How does it happen that they are “words,” that is, that they have a general meaning? In his first apprehension, a sensuously equipped being finds himself in a surging sea of stimuli, and finally one day he begins, as we say, to know something. Clearly we do not mean that he was previously blind. Rather, when we say “to know” [erkennen] we mean “to recognize” [wiedererkennen], that is, to pick something out [herauserkennen] of the stream of images flowing past as being identical. What is picked out in this fashion is clearly retained. But how? When does a child know its mother for the first time? When it sees her for the first time? No. Then when? How does it take place? Can we really say at all that there is a single event in which a first knowing extricates the child from the darkness of not knowing? It seems obvious to me that we cannot. Aristotle has described this wonderfully. He says it is the same as when an army is in flight, driven by panic, until at last someone stops and looks around to see whether the foe is still dangerously close behind. We cannot say that the army stops when one soldier has stopped. But then another stops. The army does not stop by virtue of the fact that two soldiers stop. When does it actually stop, then? Suddenly it stands its ground again. Suddenly it obeys the command once again. A subtle pun is involved in Aristotle’s description, for in Greek “command” means archē, that is, principium. When is the principle present as a principle? Through what capacity? This question is in fact the question of the occurrence of the universal.

If I have not misunderstood Johannes Lohmann’s exposition, precisely this same teleology operates constantly in the life of language. When Lohmann speaks of linguistic tendencies as the real agents of history in which specific forms expand, he knows of course that it occurs in these forms of realization, of “coming to a stand” [Zum-Stehen-Kommen], as the beautiful German word says. What is manifest here, I contend, is the real mode of operation of our whole human experience of the world. Learning to speak is surely a phase of special productivity, and in the course of time we have all transformed the genius of the three-year-old into a poor and meager talent. But in the utilization of the linguistic interpretation of the world that finally comes about, something of the productivity of our beginnings remains alive. We are all acquainted with this, for instance, in the attempt to translate, in practical life or in literature or wherever; that is, we are familiar with the strange, uncomfortable, and tortuous feeling we have as long as we do not have the right word. When we have found the right expression (it need not always be one word), when we are certain that we have it, then it “stands,” then something has come to a “stand.” Once again we have a halt in the midst of the rush of the foreign language, whose endless variation makes us lose our orientation. What I am describing is the mode of the whole human experience of the world. I call this experience hermeneutical, for the process we are describing is repeated continually throughout our familiar experience. There is always a world already interpreted, already organized in its basic relations, into which experience steps as something new, upsetting what has led our expectations and undergoing reorganization itself in the upheaval. Misunderstanding and strangeness are not the first factors, so that avoiding misunderstanding can be regarded as the specific task of hermeneutics. Just the reverse is the case. Only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world.

This discussion shows how the claim to universality that is appropriate to the hermeneutical dimension is to be understood. Understanding is language-bound. But this assertion does not lead us into any kind of linguistic relativism. It is indeed true that we live within a language, but language is not a system of signals that we send off with the aid of a telegraphic key when we enter the office or transmission station. That is not speaking, for it does not have the infinity of the act that is linguistically creative and world experiencing. While we live wholly within a language, the fact that we
do so does not constitute linguistic relativism because there is absolutely no captivity within a language — not even within our native language. We all experience this when we learn a foreign language, especially on journeys insofar as we master the foreign language to some extent. To master the foreign language means precisely that when we engage in speaking it in the foreign land, we do not constantly consult inwardly our own world and its vocabulary. The better we know the language, the less such a side glance at our native language is perceptible, and only because we never know foreign languages well enough do we always have something of this feeling. But it is nevertheless already speaking, even if perhaps a stammering speaking, for stammering is the obstruction of a desire to speak and is thus opened into the infinite realm of possible expression. Any language in which we live is infinite in this sense, and it is completely mistaken to infer that reason is fragmented because there are various languages. Just the opposite is the case. Precisely through our finitude, the particularity of our being, which is evident even in the variety of languages, the infinite dialogue is opened in the direction of the truth that we are.

If this is correct, then the relation of our modern industrial world, founded by science, which we described at the outset, is mirrored above all on the level of language. We live in an epoch in which an increasing leveling of all life-forms is taking place — that is the rationally necessary requirement for maintaining life on our planet. The food problem of mankind, for example, can only be overcome by the surrender of the lavish wastefulness that has covered the earth. Unavoidably, the mechanical, industrial world is expanding within the life of the individual as a sort of sphere of technical perfection. When we hear modern lovers talking to each other, we often wonder if they are communicating with words or with advertising labels and technical terms from the sign language of the modern industrial world. It is inevitable that the leveled life-forms of the industrial age also affect language, and in fact the impoverishment of the vocabulary of language is making enormous progress, thus bringing about an approximation of language to a technical sign-system. Leveling tendencies of this kind are irresistible. Yet in spite of them the simultaneous building up of our own world in language still persists whenever we want to say something to each other. The result is the actual relationship of men to each other. Each one is at first a kind of linguistic circle, and these linguistic circles come into contact with each other, merging more and more. Language occurs once again, in vocabulary and grammar as always, and never without the inner infinity of the dialogue that is in progress between every speaker and his partner. That is the fundamental dimension of hermeneutics. Genuine speaking, which has something to say and hence does not give prearranged signals, but rather seeks words through which one reaches the other person, is the universal human task — but it is a special task for the theologian, to whom is commissioned the saying-further (Weitersagen) of a message that stands written.

NOTES

2
On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection (1967)
(Translated by G. B. Hess and R. E. Palmer)

Introduction

Philosophical hermeneutics takes as its task the opening up of the hermeneutical dimension in its full scope, showing its fundamental significance for our entire understanding of the world and thus for all the various forms in which this understanding manifests itself: from interhuman communication to manipulation of society; from personal experience by the individual in society to the way in which he encounters society; and from the tradition as it is built of religion and law, art and philosophy, to the revolutionary consciousness that uninges the tradition through emancipatory reflection.

Despite this vast scope and significance, however, individual explorations necessarily start from the very limited experiences and fields of experience. My own effort, for instance, went back to Dilthey’s philosophical development of the heritage of German romanticism, in that I too made the theory of the Geisteswissenschaften (humanistic sciences and social sciences) my theme. But I hope to have placed it on a new and much broader footing linguistically, ontologically, and aesthetically; for the experience of art can answer the prevailing presumption of historical alienation in the humanistic disciplines, I believe, with its own overriding and victorious claim to contemporaneousness, a claim that lies in its very essence. It should be evident already from the essential linguisticity of all human experience of the world, which has as its own way of fulfillment a constantly self-renewing contemporaneousness. I maintain that precisely this contemporaneousness and this linguisticity point to a truth that goes questioningly behind all knowledge and anticipatingly before it.

And so it was unavoidable that in my analysis of the universal linguisticity of man’s relation to the world, the limitations of the fields of experience from which the investigation took its start would unwittingly predetermine the result. Indeed, it paralleled what happened in the historical development of the hermeneutical problem. It came into being in encounter with the written tradition that demanded translation, for the tradition had become estranged from the present as a result of such factors as temporal distance, the fixity of writing, and the sheer inertia of permanence. Thus it was that the many-layered problem of translation became for me the model for the linguisticity of all human behavior in the world. From the structure of translation was indicated the general problem of making what is alien our own. Yet further reflection on the universality of hermeneutics eventually made clear that the model of translation does not, as such, fully come to grips with the manifoldness of what language means in man’s existence. Certainly in translation one finds the tension and release that structure all understanding and understandability, but it ultimately derives from the universality of the hermeneutical problem. It is important to realize that this phenomenon is not secondary in human existence, and hermeneutics is not to be viewed as a mere subordinate discipline within the arena of the Geisteswissenschaften.

The universal phenomenon of human linguisticity also unfolds in other dimensions than those which would appear to be directly concerned with the hermeneutical problem, for hermeneutics reaches into all the contexts that determine and condition the linguisticity of the human experience of the world. Some of those have been touched upon in my Truth and Method; for instance, the wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein (consciousness of effective history, or the con-
scioussness in which history is ever at work) was presented in a conscious effort to shed light on the idea of language in some phases of its history. And of course linguisticality extends into many different dimensions not mentioned in *Truth and Method*.  

In rhetoric, linguisticality is attested to in a truly universal form, one that is essentially prior to the hermeneutical and almost represents something like the "positive" as over against the "negative" of linguistic interpretation. And in this connection the relationship between rhetoric and hermeneutics is a matter of great interest. In the social sciences, one finds linguisticality deeply woven into the sociality of human existence, so that the theorists of the social sciences are now becoming interested in the hermeneutical approach. Preeminentiy, Jürgen Habermas has recently established a relationship between philosophical hermeneutics and the logic of the social sciences in his significant contribution to the *Philosophische Rundschau*, evaluating this relationship from within the epistemological interests of the social sciences. This relationship too raises important questions as to the proper interests and purposes of hermeneutical reflection as compared with those characteristic of the sciences and social sciences.

It seems advisable, then, if not imperative, to take up the question of the interdependence of rhetoric, hermeneutics, and sociology as regards the universalities that run through all three, and to try to shed some light on the various kinds of legitimacy possessed by these elements. This endeavor is the more important in view of the fact that the claim to being strictly a science is in all three cases rendered rather ambiguous because of an obvious relationship to praxis. Of course this relationship applies most openly and clearly to rhetoric and hermeneutics; but it also applies to sociology, as we shall see presently.

For it is clear that rhetoric is not mere theory of forms of speech and persuasion; rather, it can develop out of a native talent for practical mastery, without any theoretical reflection about ways and means. Likewise, the art of understanding, whatever its ways and means may be, is not dependent on an explicit awareness of the rules that guide and govern it. It builds, as does rhetoric, on a natural power that everyone possesses to some degree. It is a skill in which one gifted person may surpass all others, and theory can at best only tell us why. In both rhetoric and hermeneutics, then, theory is subsequent to that out of which it is abstracted; that is, to praxis.

Historically it is worthy of note that while rhetoric belongs to the earliest Greek philosophy, hermeneutics came to flower in the Romantic era as a consequence of the modern dissolution of firm bonds with tradition. Of course, hermeneutics occurs in earlier times and forms, but even in these it represents an effort to grasp something vanishing and hold it up in the light of consciousness. Therefore, it occurs only in later stages of cultural evolution, like later Jewish religion, Alexandrian philology, Christianity as inheriting the Jewish gospel, or Lutheran theology as refuting an old tradition of Christian dogmatics. The history-embracing and history-preserving element runs deep in hermeneutics, in sharp contrast to sociological interest in reflection as basically a means of emancipation from authority and tradition. Reflection in rhetoric, like that in hermeneutics, is a meditation about a praxis that is in itself already a natural and sophisticated one. I should like to recall something of the early history of both rhetoric and hermeneutics in order to characterize and compare the scope and functions of the two fields.

*Rhetoric and Hermeneutics*

The first history of rhetoric was written by Aristotle, and we now possess only fragments of it. It is clear, however, that basically Aristotle's theory of rhetoric was developed to carry out a program originally projected by Plato. Plato, going back behind all the shallow claims put forward by the contemporary teachers of rhetoric, had discovered a genuine foundation for rhetoric that only the philosopher, the dialectician, could carry out: the task is to master the faculty of speaking in such an effectively persuasive way that the arguments brought forward are always appropriate to the specific receptivity of the souls to which they are directed. Certainly this statement of the task of rhetoric is theoretically enlightening,
but implicit in it are two Platonic assumptions: first, that only he who has a grasp of the truth (i.e., the ideas) can unerringly devise the probable *pseudes* of a rhetorical argument; second, that one must have a profound knowledge of the souls of those one wishes to persuade. Aristotelian rhetoric is preeminently an expansion of the latter theme. In it is fulfilled the theory of the mutual accommodation of speech and soul demanded by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, now in the form of an anthropological foundation for the art of speech.

Rhetorical theory was a long-prepared-for, result, of a controversy that represented the breaking into Greek culture of an intoxicating and frightening new art of speaking and a new idea of education itself: that of the Sophists. At that time an uncanny new skill in standing everything on its head, the Sicilian art of oratory, flowed in on the strait-laced but easily influenced youths of Athens. Now it became paramountly necessary to teach this new power (this great ruler, as Gorgias had called oratory) its proper limits— to discipline it. From Protagoras to Isocrates, the masters of rhetoric claimed not only to teach speaking, but also the formation of a civic consciousness that bore the promise of political success. But it was Plato, who first created the foundations out of which a new and all-shattering art of speaking (Aristophanes has depicted it for us bluntly enough) could find its limits and legitimate place.

The history of understanding is no less ancient and venerable. If one acknowledges hermeneutics to exist wherever a genuine art of understanding manifests itself, one must begin if not with Nestor in the *Iliad*, then at least with Odysseus. One can point out that the new philosophical movement represented by the Sophists was concerned with the interpretation of sayings by famous poets and depicted them very artfully as pedagogical examples. Certainly this was a form of hermeneutics. Over against this, one can place the Socratic hermeneutics.

Still, it is far from a full-fledged theory of understanding. It seems, rather, to be generally characteristic of the emergence of the “hermeneutical” problem that something *distant* has to be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome, a bridge built between the once and the now. Thus hermeneutics, as a general attitude over against the world,

came into its own in modern times, which had become aware of the temporal distance separating us from antiquity and of the relativity of the life-worlds of different cultural traditions. Something of this awareness was contained in the theological claim of Reformation biblical exegesis (in the principle of *sola scriptura*), but its true unfolding only came about when a “historical consciousness” arose in the Enlightenment (although it was influenced by the novel insights of Jesuit chronological information) and matured in the romantic period to establish a relationship (however broken) to our entire inheritance from the past.

Because of this historical development of hermeneutics hermeneutical theory oriented itself to the task of interpreting expressions of life that are fixed in writing, although Schleiermacher’s theoretical working out of hermeneutics included understanding as it takes place in the oral exchange of conversation. Rhetoric, on the other hand, concerned itself with the impact of *speaking* in all its immediacy. It did of course also enter into the realm of effective *writing*, and thus it developed a body of teaching on style and styles. Nevertheless, it achieved its authentic realization not in the act of reading but in speaking. The phenomenon of the orally read speech occupies an in-between, a hybrid, position: already it displays a tendency to base the act of speaking on the techniques of expression inherent in the medium of writing, and thus it begins to abstract itself from the original situation of speaking. Thus begins the transformation into poetics, whose linguistic objects are so wholly and completely art that their transformation from the oral sphere into writing and back is accomplished without loss or damage.

Rhetoric as such, however, is tied to the immediacy of its effect. Now the arousing of emotions, which is clearly the essence of the orator’s task, is effectual to a vastly diminished degree in written expression, which is the traditional object of hermeneutical investigation. And this is precisely the difference that matters: the orator carries his listeners away with him; the convincing power of his arguments overwhelms the listener. While under the persuasive spell of speech, the listener for the moment cannot and ought not to indulge in critical examination. On the other hand, the read-
ing and interpreting what is written is so distanced and detached from its author — from his mood, intentions, and unexpressed tendencies — that the grasping of the meaning of the text takes on something of the character of an independent productive act, one that resembles more the art of the orator than the process of mere listening. Thus it is easy to understand why the theoretical tools of the art of interpretation (hermeneutics) have been to a large extent borrowed from rhetoric.  

Where, indeed, but to rhetoric should the theoretical examination of interpretation turn? Rhetoric from oldest tradition has been the only advocate of a claim to truth that defends the probable, the eikós (verisimile), and that which is convincing to the ordinary reason, against the claim of science to accept as true only what can be demonstrated and tested! Convincing and persuading, without being able to prove — these are obviously as much the aim and measure of understanding and interpretation as they are the aim and measure of the art of oration and persuasion. And this whole wide realm of convincing "persuasions" and generally reigning views has not been gradually narrowed by the progress of science, however great it has been; rather, this realm extends to take in every new product of scientific endeavor, claiming it for itself and bringing it within its scope.

The ubiquity of rhetoric, indeed, is unlimited. Only through it is science a sociological factor of life, for all the representations of science that are directed beyond the mere narrow circle of specialists (and, perhaps one should say, insofar as they are not limited in their impact to a very small circle of initiates) owe their effectiveness to the rhetorical element they contain. Even Descartes, that great and passionate advocate of method and certainty, is in all his writings an author who uses the means of rhetoric in a magnificent fashion.  

There can be no doubt, then, about the fundamental function of rhetoric within social life. But one may go further, in view of the ubiquity of rhetoric, to defend the primordial claims of rhetoric over against modern science, remembering that all science that would wish to be of practical usefulness at all is dependent on it.

No less universal is the function of hermeneutics. The lack of immediate understandability of texts handed down to us historically or their proneness to be misunderstood is really only a special case of what is to be met in all human orientation to the world as the atopon (the strange), that which does not "fit" into the customary order of our expectation based on experience. Hermeneutics has only called our attention to this phenomenon. Just as when we progress in understanding the mirabilia lose their strangeness, so every successful appropriation of tradition is dissolved into a new and distinct familiarity in which it belongs to us and we to it. They both flow together into one owned and shared world, which encompasses past and present and which receives its linguistic articulation in the speaking of man with man.

The phenomenon of understanding, then, shows the universality of human linguisticity as a limitless medium that carries everything within it — not only the "culture" that has been handed down to us through language, but absolutely everything — because everything (in the world and out of it) is included in the realm of "understandings" and understandability in which we move. Plato was right when he asserted that whoever regards things in the mirror of speech becomes aware of them in their full and undiminished truth. And he was profoundly correct when he taught that all cognition is only what it is as re-cognition, for a "first cognition" is as little possible as a first word. In fact, a cognition in the very recent past, one whose consequences appear as yet unforeseeable, becomes what it truly is for us only when it has unfolded into its consequences and into the medium of intersubjective understanding.

And so we see that the rhetorical and hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticity completely interpenetrate each other. There would be no speaker and no art of speaking if understanding and consent were not in question, were not underlying elements; there would be no hermeneutical task if there were no mutual understanding that has been disturbed and that those involved in a conversation must search for and find again together. It is a symptom of our failure to realize this and evidence of the increasing self-alienation of human life in our modern epoch when we think in terms of organizing a perfect and perfectly manipulated information — a turn
modern rhetoric seems to have taken. In this case, the sense of mutual interpenetration of rhetoric and hermeneutics fades away and hermeneutics is on its own.

*Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*

It is in keeping with the universality of the hermeneutical approach that hermeneutics must be taken into account with regard to the logic of the social sciences, and especially in relation to the intentional alienation and distancing present in sociological methodology. Jürgen Habermas in his article on the subject worked with my analysis of the *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* and the model of translation as both were given in *Truth and Method* with the hope that they could help to overcome the positivistic ossification of sociological logic and move sociological theory beyond its historical failure to reflect upon its linguistic foundations. Now Habermas’s use of hermeneutics stands on the premise that it shall serve the methodology of the social sciences. But this premise is, in itself, a prior decision of greatest significance, for the purpose of sociological method as emancipating one from tradition places it at the outset very far from the traditional purpose and starting point of the hermeneutical problematic with all its bridge building and recovery of the best in the past.

Admittedly the methodical alienation that comprises the very essence of modern science is indeed to be found also in the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and the title of *Truth and Method* never intended that the antithesis it implies should be mutually exclusive. But the *Geisteswissenschaften* were the starting point of my analysis in *Truth and Method* precisely because they related to experiences that have nothing to do with method and science but lie beyond science — like the experience of art and the experience of culture that bears the imprint of its historical tradition. The hermeneutical experience as it is operative in all these cases is not in itself the object of methodical alienation but is directed against alienation. The hermeneutical experience is prior to all methodical alienation because it is the matrix out of which arise the questions that it then directs to science. The modern social scientists, on the other hand, insofar as they recognize hermeneutical reflection as unavoidable, nevertheless advance the claim (as Habermas has formulated it) of raising understanding up out of a prescientific exercise to the rank of a self-reflecting activity by “controlled alienation” — that is, through “methodical development of intelligence.”

It has been the way of science from its earliest stages to achieve through teachable and controllable ways of proceeding what individual intelligence would also occasionally attain, but in unsure and uncheckable ways. But is this way to be absolutized and idolized? Is it right that social scientists should believe that through it they attain human personal judging and practice? What kind of understanding does one achieve through “controlled alienation”? Is it not likely to be an alienated understanding? Is it not the case that many social scientists are more interested in using the sedimented truisms inherent in linguisticality (so as to grasp “scientifically” the “real” structures, as they define them, of society) than in really understanding social life? Hermeneutical reflection will not, however, allow a restriction of itself to this function that is immanent in the sciences. And most especially it will not be deterred from applying hermeneutical reflection anew to the methodical alienation of understanding practiced by the social sciences, even though it exposes itself to positivistic detraction.

But let us examine first how the hermeneutical problematic applies within social scientific theory and how it would be seen from that vantage point. Habermas sees in its analysis of historicity one of the principal values of hermeneutics for social theory. So it is the claim of hermeneutics that the idea of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history) furnishes a means of access to the realm of objects treated by sociology. The *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* (consciousness of effective history) seeks to be aware of its preunderstandings and to control its own preunderstanding; and thus it does away with that naïve objectivism that falsifies not only the positivistic theory of science but also any project of laying either a phenomenological or language-analytical foundation for sociology.

Yet the question arises as to what hermeneutical reflection...
really does. Habermas answers this question in reference to universal history, a goal that unavoidably lifts itself out of the multiple goals and conceptions of goal in social actions. He asserts that if hermeneutical reflection were simply satisfied with general considerations, such as that nobody is able to reach beyond the limitedness of his own standpoint, then it would be ineffectual. The claim to a material philosophy of history may be contested by such a consideration, but historical consciousness nevertheless constantly will project an anticipated universal history. What is the good, after all, Habermas asks, of knowing merely that a projected futurity cannot be other than preliminary and essentially provisional? So, where it is effective and operational, what does hermeneutical reflection do? In what relationship to the tradition of which it becomes conscious does this “historically operative” reflection stand?

My thesis is—and I think it is the necessary consequence of recognizing the operativeness of history in our conditionedness and finitude—that the thing which hermeneutics teaches us is to see through the dogmatism of asserting opposition and separation between the ongoing, natural “tradition” and the reflective appropriation of it. For behind this assertion stands a dogmatic objectivism that distorts the very concept of hermeneutical reflection itself. In this objectivism the understander is seen—even in the so-called sciences of understanding like history—not in relationship to the hermeneutical situation and the constant operativeness of history in his own consciousness, but in such a way as to imply that his own understanding does not enter into the event.

But this is simply not the case. Actually, the historian even the one who treats history as a “critical science,” is so little separated from the ongoing traditions (for example, those of his nation) that he is really himself engaged in contributing to the growth and development of the national state. He is one of the “nation’s” historians; he belongs to the nation. And for the epoch of national states, one must say: the more he may have reflected on his hermeneutical conditionedness, the more national he knows himself to be. J. F. Droysen, for instance, who saw through the “eunuch-like objectivity” of the historian in all its methodological naïveté, was himself tremendously influential for the national consciousness of bourgeois nineteenth-century culture. He was, in any case, more effective than the epical consciousness of Ranke, which was inclined to foster the nonpoliticality appropriate to an authoritarian state. To understand, we may say, is itself a kind of happening. Only a naïve and unreflective historicism in hermeneutics would see the historical-hermeneutical sciences as something absolutely new that would do away with the power of “tradition.” On the contrary, I have tried to present in Truth and Method, through the aspect of linguisticality that operates in all understanding, an unambiguous demonstration of the continual process of mediation by which that which is societally transmitted (the tradition) lives on. For language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world.

To this formulation Habermas objects that the medium of science itself is changed through reflection, and that precisely this experience is the priceless heritage bequeathed us by German idealism out of the spirit of the eighteenth century. Habermas asserts that although the Hegelian procedure of reflection is not presented in my analysis as fulfilled in an absolute consciousness, nevertheless my “idealism of linguisticality” (as he calls it) exhausts itself in mere hermeneutical appropriation, development, and “cultural transmission,” and thus displays a sorry powerlessness in view of the concrete whole of societal relationships. This larger whole, says Habermas, is obviously animated not only by language but by work and action; therefore, hermeneutical reflection must pass into a criticism of ideology.

In taking such a position, Habermas is tying directly into the central motif in sociological interest in gaining knowledge. Rhetoric (theory) stepped forward against the bewitching of consciousness achieved through the power of speech, by differentiating between the truth and that which appears to be the truth (and which it teaches one to produce). Hermeneutics, being confronted with a disrupted intersubjective understanding, seeks to place communication on a new basis and in particular to replace the false objectivism of
alienated knowing with new hermeneutical foundations. Just as in rhetoric and hermeneutics so also in sociological reflection an emancipatory interest is at work that undertakes to free us of outer and inner social forces and compulsions simply by making us aware of them. Insofar as these forces and compulsions tend to legitimate themselves linguistically, Habermas sees the critique of ideology as the means of unmasking the "deceptions of language." But this critique, of course, is in itself a linguistic act of reflection.

In the field of psychoanalytical therapy, too, says Habermas, we find the claims for the emancipatory power of reflection corroborated. For the repression that is seen through robs the false compulsions of their power. Just as in psychotherapy it is the goal to identify through a process of reflective development all our motives of action with the real meaning to which the patient is oriented (this goal is of course limited by the therapeutic task in the psychoanalytic situation, which therefore itself represents a limiting concept) so in social reality also (as Habermas would have it) hermeneutics would be at its best when such a fictitious goal situation is operative. For Habermas, and for psychoanalysis, the life of society and the life of the individual consists of the interaction of intelligible motives and concrete compulsions, which social and psychological investigation in a progressive process of clarification appropriates in order to set man, the actor and agent, free.

One cannot dispute the fact that this sociotheoretical conception has its logic. The question we must ask ourselves, however, is whether such a conception does justice to the actual reach of hermeneutical reflection: does hermeneutics really take its bearings from a limiting concept of perfect interaction between understood motives and consciously performed action (a concept that is itself, I believe, fictitious)? I maintain that the hermeneutical problem is universal and basic for all interhuman experience, both of history and of the present moment, precisely because meaning can be experienced even where it is not actually intended. The universality of the hermeneutical dimension is narrowed down, I think, when one area of understood meaning (for instance, the "cultural tradition") is held in separation from other recognizable determinants of social reality that are taken as the "real" factors. But is it not true that we can understand precisely every ideology as a form of false linguistic consciousness, one that might show itself not only to us as a conscious, manifest, and intelligible meaning but also might be understood in its "true" meaning? Take for example the interest in political or economic domination. In the individual life, the same thing applies to unconscious motives, which the psychoanalyst brings to conscious awareness.

Who says that these concrete, so-called real factors are outside the realm of hermeneutics? From the hermeneutical standpoint, rightly understood, it is absolutely absurd to regard the concrete factors of work and politics as outside the scope of hermeneutics. What about the vital issue of prejudices with which hermeneutical reflection deals? Where do they come from? Merely out of "cultural tradition"? Surely they do, in part, but what is tradition formed from? It would be true when Habermas asserts that "hermeneutics bangs helplessly, so to speak, from within against the walls of tradition," if we understand this "within" as opposite to an "outside" that does not enter our world - our to-be-understood, understandable, or nonunderstandable world - but remains the mere observation of external alterations (instead of human actions). With this area of what lies outside the realm of human understanding and human understandings (our world) hermeneutics is not concerned. Certainly I affirm the hermeneutical fact that the world is the medium of human understanding or not understanding, but it does not lead to the conclusion that cultural tradition should be absolutized and fixed. To suppose that it does have this implication seems to me erroneous. The principle of hermeneutics simply means that we should try to understand everything that can be understood. This is what I meant by the sentence: "Being that can be understood is language."

This does not mean that there is a world of meanings that is narrowed down to the status of secondary objects of knowledge and mere supplements to the economic and political realities that fundamentally determine the life of society.

*WM, p. 450.
Rather, it means that the mirror of language is reflecting everything that is. In language, and only in it, can we meet what we never “encounter” in the world, because we are ourselves it (and not merely what we mean or what we know of ourselves). But the metaphor of a mirror is not fully adequate to the phenomenon of language, for in the last analysis language is not simply a mirror. What we perceive in it is not merely a “reflection” of our own and all being; it is the living out of what it is with us—not only in the concrete interrelationships of work and politics but in all the other relationships and dependencies that comprise our world.

Language, then, is not the finally found anonymous subject of all social-historical processes and action, which presents the whole of its activities as objectivations to our observing gaze; rather, it is by itself the game of interpretation that we all are engaged in every day. In this game nobody is above and before all the others; everybody is at the center, is “it” in this game. Thus it is always his turn to be interpreting. This process of interpretation takes place whenever we “understand,” especially when we see through prejudices or tear away the pretenses that hide reality. There, indeed, understanding comes into its own. This idea recalls what we said about the atopon, the strange, for in it we have “seen through” something that appeared odd and unintelligible: we have brought it into our linguistic world. To use the analogy of chess, everything is “solved,” resembling a difficult chess problem where only the definitive solution makes understandable (and then right down to the last piece) the necessity of a previous absurd position.

But does this mean that we “understand” only when we see through pretexts or unmask false pretensions? Habermas’s Marxist critique of ideology appears to presuppose this meaning. At least it seems that the true “power” of reflection is evident only when it has this effect, and its powerlessness when one would remain occupied with the supposed phantom of language and spin out its implication. The presupposition is that reflection, as employed in the hermeneutical sciences, should “shake the dogmatism of life-praxis.” Here indeed is operating a prejudice that we can see is pure dogmatism, for reflection is not always and unavoidably a step towards dissolving prior convictions. Authority is not always wrong. Yet Habermas regards it as an untenable assertion, and treason to the heritage of the Enlightenment, that the act of rendering transparent the structure of prejudices in understanding should possibly lead to an acknowledgment of authority. Authority is by his definition a dogmatic power. I cannot accept the assertion that reason and authority are abstract antitheses, as the emancipatory Enlightenment did. Rather, I assert that they stand in a basically ambivalent relation, a relation I think should be explored rather than casually accepting the antithesis as a “fundamental conviction.”

For in my opinion this abstract antithesis embraced by the Enlightenment is a mistake fraught with ominous consequences. In it, reflection is granted a false power, and the true dependencies involved are misjudged on the basis of a fallacious idealism. Certainly I would grant that authority exercises an essential dogmatic power in innumerable forms of domination: from the ordering of education and the mandatory commands of the army and government all the way to the hierarchy of power created by political forces or fanatics. Now the mere outer appearance of obedience rendered to authority can never show why or whether the authority is legitimate, that is, whether the context is true order or the veiled disorder that is created by the arbitrary exercise of power. It seems evident to me that acceptance or acknowledgment is the decisive thing for relationships to authority. So the question is: on what is this acknowledgment based? Certainly such acceptance can often express more a yielding of the powerless to the one holding power than true acceptance, but really it is not true obedience and it is not based on authority but on force. (And when anyone in an argument appeals to authority, he only pretends.) One need only study the processes of forfeiture and decline of authority (or its rise) to see what authority is and that out of which it lives and grows. It lives not from dogmatic power but from dogmatic acceptance. What is this dogmatic acceptance, however, if not that one concedes superiority in knowledge and insight to the authority, and for this reason one believes that authority is right? Only on this crucial
concession, this belief, is acceptance founded. Authority can rule only because it is freely recognized and accepted. The obedience that belongs to true authority is neither blind nor slavish.

It is an inadmissible imputation to hold that I somehow meant there is no decline of authority or no emancipating criticism of authority. Of course, whether one can really say that decline of authority comes about through reflection's emancipatory criticism or that decline of authority is expressed in criticism and emancipation is a matter we shall leave aside (although we may say that it is perhaps a misstatement of the genuine alternatives). But what is really in dispute, I think, is simply whether reflection always dissolves substantial relationships or is capable of taking them up into consciousness.

In this regard, my presentation in *Truth and Method* of the teaching and learning process (referring principally to Aristotle's *Ethics*) is taken by Habermas in a peculiarly one-sided way. For the idea that tradition, as such, should be and should remain the only ground for acceptance of presuppositions (a view that Habermas ascribes to me) flies in the face of my basic thesis that authority is rooted in insight as a hermeneutical process. A person who comes of age need not — but he also from insight can — take possession of what he has obediently followed. Tradition is no proof and validation of something, in any case not where validation is demanded by reflection. But the point is this: where does reflection demand it? Everywhere? I would object to such an answer on the grounds of the finitude of human existence and the essential particularity of reflection. The real question is whether one sees the function of reflection as bringing something to awareness in order to confront what is in fact accepted with other possibilities — so that one can either throw it out or reject the other possibilities and accept what the tradition de facto is presenting — or whether bringing something to awareness always dissolves what one has previously accepted.

The concept of reflection and bringing to awareness that Habermas employs (admittedly from his sociological interest) appears to me, then, to be itself encumbered with dogma-
Obviously this fact makes the concept of “natural situation” discussed by Habermas highly questionable. Marx already persuasively held that this concept was the counter-idea to the working world of modern class society, but Habermas willingly uses it, not only in his reference to the “natural substance of tradition” but also to the “causality of natural patterns.” I believe it is pure romanticism, and such romanticism creates an artificial abyss between tradition and the reflection that is grounded in historical consciousness. However, the “idealism of linguisticality” at least has the advantage that it does not fall into this sort of romanticism.

Habermas’s critique culminates in questioning the immanentist of transcendental philosophy with respect to its historical conditions, conditions upon which he himself is dependent. Now this is indeed a central problem. Anyone who takes seriously the finitude of human existence and constructs no “consciousness as such,” or “intellectus archetypus,” or “transcendental ego,” to which everything can be traced back, will not be able to escape the question of how his own thinking as transcendental is empirically possible. But within the hermeneutical dimension that I have developed I do not see this difficulty arising.

The well-known young theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg has presented a highly useful discussion of my book in his article “Hermeneutics and Universal History,” which relates to the question of immaneitism but more particularly to the question of whether my philosophical hermeneutics necessarily but unconsciously rehabilitates the Hegelian concept of universal history (such as in the concept of fusion of horizons, where the ultimate horizon is, says Pannenberg, implied or presupposed in the direction of every individual event of fusion). In particular his discussion brought home to me the vast difference between Hegel’s claim to demonstrate the presence of reason in history and the conceptions of world history, those constantly outstripped conceptions, in which one unconsciously always behaves like the latest historian.

Hegel’s claim to a philosophy of world history can certainly be disputed. Hegel himself knew how finite it was and remarked that the feet of his pallbearers could already be heard outside the door.* and one finds that behind all the disavowals of world history the goal, the end-thought, of freedom possessed a compelling evidentness. One can as little get beyond this as one can get beyond consciousness itself.

But the claim that every historian must make and operate within, namely to tie the meaning of all events to today (and of course to the future of this today), is really a fundamentally more modest one than asserting a universal history or a philosophy of world history. Nobody can dispute that history presupposes futurity, and a universal-historical conception is unavoidably one of the dimensions of today’s historical consciousness from a practical point of view, or for practical purposes (“In praktischer Absicht”). But does it do justice to Hegel to want to reduce him to the limitations implied by this pragmatic interpretive requirement that the present demands? “In praktischer Absicht” — nobody today goes beyond this claim, for consciousness has become aware of its finitude and mistrusts the dictatorship of ideas or concepts. Even so, who would be so foolish as to try to reduce Hegel to the level of practical purposes? I certainly would not, even while criticizing his claims to a philosophy of universal history. So on this point I think there is really no dispute between Pannenberg and myself, so far as I understand him. For Pannenberg does not propose to renew Hegel’s claim either. There is only the difference that for the Christian theologian the “practical purpose” of all universal historical conceptions has its fixed point in the absolute historicity of the Incarnation.

All the same, the question [of universality] remains. If the hermeneutical problematic wishes to maintain itself in the face of the ubiquity and universality of rhetoric, as well as the obvious topicality of critiques of ideology, it must establish its own universality. And it must do so especially over against the claims of modern science to universality, and thus to its tendency to absorb hermeneutical reflection into itself and render it serviceable to science (as in the concept, for instance, of the “methodical development of intelligence” Habermas has in mind). Still, it will be able to do so only if it

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*Gadamer expresses this more picturesquely with a quote: “Die Füsse derer, die dich hinaustragen, sind schon vor der Türe.” [Trans.]
does not become imprisoned in the impregnable immanence of transcendental reflection but rather gives account of what its own kind of reflection achieves. And it must do it not only within the realm of modern science but also over against this realm, in order to show a universality that transcends that of modern science.

On the Universality of Hermeneutical Reflection

Hermeneutical reflection fulfills the function that is accomplished in all bringing of something to a conscious awareness. Because it does, it can and must manifest itself in all our modern fields of knowledge, and especially science. Let us reflect a bit on this hermeneutical reflection. Reflection on a given preunderstanding brings before me something that otherwise happens behind my back. Something — but not everything, for what I have called the *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* is inescapably more being than consciousness, and being is never fully manifest. Certainly I do not mean that such reflection could escape from ideological ossification if it does not engage in constant self-reflection and attempts at self-awareness. Thus only through hermeneutical reflection am I no longer unfree over against myself but rather can deem freely what in my preunderstanding may be justified and what unjustifiable.

And also only in this manner do I learn to gain a new understanding of what I have seen through eyes conditioned by prejudice. But this implies, too, that the judgments that lead my preunderstanding are also constantly at stake, right up to the moment of their surrender — which surrender could also be called a transformation. It is the untiring power of experience, that in the process of being instructed, man is ceaselessly forming a new preunderstanding.

In the fields that were the starting points of my hermeneutical studies — the study of art and the philological-historical sciences — it is easy to demonstrate how hermeneutical reflection is at work. For instance, consider how the autonomy of viewing art from the vantage point of the history of style has been shaken up by hermeneutical reflection (1) on the concept of art itself, and (2) on concepts of individual styles and epochs. Consider how iconography has pressed from the periphery to the forefront, and how hermeneutical reflection on the concepts of experience and expression has had literary-critical consequences (even in cases where it becomes only a more conscious carrying forward of tendencies long favored in literary criticism). While it is of course evident how the shake-up of fixed presuppositions promises scientific progress by making new questions possible, it should be equally evident that this applies in the history of artistic and literary styles. And we constantly experience what historical research can accomplish through becoming conscious of the history of ideas. In *Truth and Method* I believe I have been able to show how historical alienation is mediated in the form of what I call the “fusion of horizons.”

The overall significance of hermeneutical reflection, however, is not exhausted by what it means for and in the sciences themselves. For all the modern sciences possess a deeply rooted alienation that they impose on the natural consciousness and of which we need to be aware. This alienation has already reached reflective awareness in the very beginning stages of modern science in the concept of *method*. Hermeneutical reflection does not desire to change or eliminate this situation; it can, in fact, indirectly serve the methodological endeavor of science by making transparently clear the guiding preunderstandings in the sciences and thereby open new dimensions of questioning. But it must also bring to awareness, in this regard, the price that methods in science have paid for their own progress: the toning down and abstraction they demand, through which the natural consciousness still always must go along as the consumer of the inventions and information attained by science. One can with Wittgenstein express this insight as follows: The language games of science remain related to the metalanguage presented in the mother tongue. All the knowledge won by science enters the societal consciousness through school and education, using modern informational media, though maybe sometimes after a great — too great — delay. In any case, this is the way that new sociolinguistic realities are articulated.

For the *natural* sciences, of course, this gap and the methodical alienation of research are of less consequence than
for social sciences. The true natural scientist does not have to be told how very particular is the realm of knowledge of his science in relation to the whole of reality. He does not share in the deification of his science that the public would press upon him. All the more, however, the public (and the researcher who must go before the public) needs hermeneutical reflection on the presuppositions and limits of science. The so-called "humanities," on the other hand, are still easily mediated to the common consciousness, so that insofar as they are accepted at all, their objects belong immediately to the cultural heritage and the realm of traditional education. But the modern social sciences stand in a particularly strained relationship to their object, the social reality, and this relationship especially requires hermeneutical reflection. For the methodical alienation to which the social sciences owe their progress is related here to the human-societal world as a whole. These sciences increasingly see themselves as marked out for the purpose of scientific ordering and control of society. They have to do with "scientific" and "methodical" planning, direction, organization, development — in short, with an infinity of functions that, so to speak, determine from outside the whole of the life of each individual and each group. Yet this social engineer, this scientist who undertakes to look after the functioning of the machine of society, appears himself to be methodically alienated and split off from the society to which, at the same time, he belongs.

But is man as a political being the mere object of the techniques of making public opinion? I think not: he is a member of society, and only in playing his role with free judgment and politically real effectiveness can he conserve freedom. It is the function of hermeneutical reflection, in this connection, to preserve us from na""ive surrender to the experts of social technology.

Of course, a hermeneutically reflective sociologist like Habermas cannot conceive himself in these shallow terms of social engineering. Habermas's lucid analysis of social-scientific logic has resolutely worked out the authentic epistemological interest, which distinguishes true sociologists from technicians of social structure. He calls it an emancipating interest (what a contrast to the interest of the social engineers!), which takes reflection alone as its objective. He points in this regard to the example of psychoanalysis. And it is in psychoanalysis, as a matter of fact, that hermeneutical reflection plays a fundamental role. This is because, as we have emphasized earlier, the unconscious motive does not represent a clear and fully articulate boundary for hermeneutical theory: it falls within the larger perimeter of hermeneutics. Psychotherapy could be described as the work of "completing an interrupted process of education into a full history (a story that can be articulated in language)," so in psychotherapy hermeneutics and the circle of language that is closed in dialogue are central. I think I have learned this fact, above all, from Jacques Lacan.19

All the same it is clear that even this is not the whole story, for the psychoanalytic approach turns out not to be universalizable even for the psychoanalyst himself. The framework of interpretation worked out by Freud claims to possess the character of genuine natural-scientific hypotheses, that is, to be a knowledge of acknowledged laws. This orientation inevitably shows up in the role that methodical alienation plays in his psychoanalysis. But although the successful analysis wins its authentication in its results, the claim to knowledge in psychoanalysis must not be reduced to mere pragmatic validation. And this means that psychoanalysis is exposed again to another act of hermeneutical reflection, in which one must ask: How does the psychoanalyst's special knowledge relate to his own position within the societal reality (to which, after all, he does belong)?

The psychoanalyst leads the patient into the emancipatory reflection that goes behind the conscious superficial interpretations, breaks through the masked self-understanding, and sees through the repressive function of social taboos. This activity belongs to the emancipatory reflection to which he leads his patient. But what happens when he uses the same kind of reflection in a situation in which he is not the doctor but a partner in a game? Then he will fall out of his social role! A game partner who is always "seeing through" his game partner, who does not take seriously what they are standing for, is a spoil sport whom one shuns. The emancipatory power of reflection claimed by the psychoanalyst is a
special rather than general function of reflection and must be
given its boundaries through the societal context and con-
sciousness, within which the analyst and also his patient are
on even terms with everybody else. This is something that
hermeneutical reflection teaches us: that social community,
with all its tensions and disruptions, ever and ever again leads
back to a common area of social understanding through
which it exists.

Here, I think, the analogy Habermas suggests between
psychoanalytical and, sociological theory breaks down, or at
least raises severe problems. For where are the limits of this
analogy? Where does the patient-relationship end and the
social partnership in its unprofessional right begin? Most
fundamentally: Over against what self-interpretation of
the social consciousness (and all morality is such) is it in place to
inquire behind that consciousness — and when is it not?
Within the context of the purely practical, or of a universal-
ized emancipatory reflection, these questions appear un-
answerable. The unavoidable consequence to which all these
observations lead is that the basically emancipatory con-
sciousness must have in mind the dissolution of all authority,
all obedience. This means that unconsciously the ultimate
guiding image of emancipatory reflection in the social
sciences must be an anarchistic utopia. Such an image, however,
seems to me to reflect a hermeneutically false consciousness,
the antidote for which can only be a more universal herme-
neutical reflection.

NOTES

1. Thus what O. Marquard (Heidelberger Philosophiekongress,
1966) calls "das Sein zum Texte" does not at all exhaust the hermeneu-
tical dimension — unless the word Texte is taken not in the narrow
sense but as "the text that God has written with his own hand," i.e.,
the liber naturae, which consequently encompasses all knowledge from
physics to sociology and anthropology. And even in this case the model
of translation is implied, which is not wholly to the complexity of
the hermeneutical dimension.

2. See Johannes Lohmann, Philosophie und Sprachwissenschaft and
Lohmann's treatment may be seen as a greatly expanded application of
what I had briefly sketched as the imprint of the concept of Sprache

(language in Occidental thought). He traces "the emergence of the
concept (Begriff) as the intellectual vehicle by which given objects are
momentarily subsumed under one cogitated form" (p. 74). He recog-
nizes in the stem-inflecting verbs of Old Indo-Germanic the grammatical
expression of this idea, especially in the copula. From this, he says, we
can deduce the possibility of theory, which is a creation peculiar to the
occident. The significance of this is more than historical; it also extends
into the future. Not only does Lohmann take the transition from
stem-inflecting to word-inflecting language types to interpret the his-
tory of thought in the occident by showing the development of lan-
guage forms, he shows that this latter-day development to word-inflect-
ing types makes possible science in the modern sense — science as the
rendering disposable to us of our world.

3. I have considered some aspects of this in WM, but they can be
greatly expanded; see, for instance, the extensive supplements and
corrections contributed by Klaus Dockhorn to the Göttingen "Ge-

4. PhR, XIV, Beih. 5 (1967), pp. 149-180. See also his more
recent book, Knowledge and Human Interests, (Boston: Beacon Press,
1972).

5. Hermann Gundert has done this in his contribution to Her-
menaeus, 1952, a Festschrift for Otto Regenbogen.

6. Klaus Dockhorn has shown, with profound scholarship, in "Ge-
lehrten-Anzeiger," the extent to which the arousing of emotions has
been considered the most important means of persuasion from Cicero
and Quintilian to the political rhetoric of the eighteenth century in
England.

7. I discussed this in my book, and Dockhorn, "Gelehrten-Anzei-
gen," has carried out the exploration on a much broader basis.

8. Henri Gouhier in particular has shown this in his La résistance au

9. In this regard see the preface to the second edition (1965).


11. Ibid., p. 179.

12. Ibid., p. 178.

13. Ibid., p. 177.


15. On this point I am agreeing with J. Lohmann in Philosophie und
Sprachwissenschaft.


Achtemeier in History and Hermeneutic, ed. Robert W. Funk and

19. See the collection of his writings now published as Ecrits (Paris:
that follows, I want to focus my attention on the hermeneutical aspect from a point of view that does not seem to have been sufficiently stressed. I want to pose the question of whether our relation to the New Testament can be understood adequately in terms of the central concept of the self-understanding of faith or whether an entirely different factor is operative in it — a factor that goes beyond the individual's self-understanding, indeed, beyond his individual being. To this end, I will take up the question of the relationship between understanding and "playing." Preparatory considerations are in order, however, to help us indicate the hermeneutical aspect of the problem.

First of all, as a hermeneutical task, understanding includes a reflective dimension from the very beginning. Understanding is not a mere reproduction of knowledge, that is, it is not a mere act of repeating the same thing. Rather, understanding is aware of the fact that it is indeed an act of repeating. August Boeckh had already expressed this fact by calling understanding a "knowing of the known." Boeckh's paradoxical formulation epitomizes the clear insight that romantic hermeneutics had into the reflective structure of the hermeneutical phenomenon. The operation of the understanding requires that the unconscious elements involved in the original act of knowledge be brought to consciousness. Thus romantic hermeneutics was based on one of the fundamental concepts of Kantian aesthetics, namely, the concept of the genius who, like nature itself, creates the exemplary work "unconsciously" — without consciously applying rules or merely imitating models.

This observation indicates the special circumstance in which the hermeneutical problem appears. The problem clearly does not arise as long as one is involved directly in taking up and continuing a specific intellectual tradition. It does not arise, for instance, with the Renaissance humanists, who rediscovered classical antiquity and tried to be the successors of the ancient authors, imitating them, indeed, openly competing with them, rather than merely "under-


standing” them. The hermeneutical problem only emerges clearly when there is no powerful tradition present to absorb one’s own attitude into itself and when one is aware of confronting an alien tradition to which he has never belonged or one he no longer unquestioningly accepts.

The latter case is the aspect of the hermeneutical problem that we have to deal with here. For us, the understanding of the Christian tradition and the tradition of classical antiquity includes an element of historical consciousness. Even if the forces binding us to the great Greco-Christian tradition are still ever so vital, our consciousness of its alien character, of no longer belonging unquestioningly to it, determines us all. This point is especially clear when we consider the beginnings of the historical criticism of the tradition, and especially of biblical criticism as initiated by Spinoza in his _Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus_. Spinoza’s work makes it quite evident that the way of historical understanding is a kind of unavoidable detour that the person who understands must take when immediate insight into what is said in the tradition is no longer possible for him. Genetic inquiry, whose goal consists in explaining a traditional opinion on the basis of its historical situation, only appears where direct insight into the truth of what is said cannot be reached because our reason sets itself in opposition.

To be sure, the modern age of the Enlightenment was not the first to take this detour into historical explanation. In dealing with the Old Testament, for example, Christian theology very quickly faced the problem of eliminating exegetically those ideas which were not compatible with Christian dogmatics and moral teaching. Along with allegorical and typological interpretation, historical considerations also served this end, as Augustine demonstrated, for instance, in his _De Doctrina Christiana_. But in all such cases, the dogmatic tradition of the Christian Church remained the unshakable basis of all interpretation. Historical considerations were unusual and secondary aids to the understanding of Scripture. The emergence of modern natural science and the critical perspective it brought with it essentially changed this state of affairs. On the basis of pure reason, only a small portion of Scripture could be regarded as being in harmony with modern science, and hence that portion which one could understand only by recourse to historical conditions grew enormously. For Spinoza, there was certainly still an immediate certitude regarding moral truths that reason recognizes in the Bible. Their certitude is in a certain sense the same as the certitude of Euclid’s axioms, which contain truths that illuminate reason so immediately that the question of their historical origin is never raised at all. However, the moral truths in biblical tradition that are certain in this way are for Spinoza only a small part of the biblical tradition taken as a whole. On the whole, Scripture remains alien to reason. If we want to understand Scripture, we must rely on historical reflection, as in the case of the criticism of miracles.

Romanticism began with the deep conviction of a total strangeness of the tradition (as the reverse side of the totally different character of the present), and this conviction became the basic methodological presupposition of its hermeneutical procedure. Precisely in this way hermeneutics became a universal, methodical attitude: it presupposed the foreignness of the content that is to be understood and thus made its task the overcoming of this foreignness by gaining understanding. It is characteristic, therefore, that Schleiermacher did not find it at all absurd to understand Euclid’s _Elements_ historically, that is, by going back to the creative moments in Euclid’s life in which these insights occurred. Psychological-historical understanding took the place of immediate insight into the subject matter and became the only genuinely methodical, scientific attitude. With this development, the exegetical side of biblical scholarship or theology was first elevated to the status of a purely historical-critical science. Hermeneutics became the universal organ of the historical method. As is well known, the application of this historical-critical approach in the area of biblical exegesis led to severe tensions between dogmatics and exegesis, tensions that prevailed theological work on the New Testament even in our own time.

In conceiving the historian’s task, Friedrich Droysen, the most acute methodologist of the Historical School, thoroughly rejected this total, objectivistic alienation of the ob-
ject of history. He pursued this "eunuch-like objectivity" with biting ridicule and in opposition to it he pointed to a belonging of the knower to the great moral forces that rule history as the precondition of all historical understanding. His famous formula, that the task of the historian is to "understand by means of careful investigation" (forschend zu verstehen), has a theological aspect. The plans of Providence are hidden from men, but in its restless searching penetration into the structures of world history, the historical mind has a presentiment of the meaning of the whole, which is concealed from us. Here understanding is more than a universal method that is occasionally supported through the affinity or congeniality of the historian with his historical object. What concerns us is not simply the historian's own fortuitous sympathy. Rather, something of the historicity of the historian's own understanding is already at work in his choice of objects and in the rubrics under which he places the object as a historical problem.

It is certainly difficult for the methodical self-consciousness of historical investigation to grasp this side of the matter, for even historical studies are stamped by the scientific ideal of the modern age. To be sure, the romantic criticism of Enlightenment rationalism destroyed the dominance of natural law, but the path of historical investigation was itself understood as a step toward man's total historical self-illumination, which would dispel the final dogmatic vestiges of the Greco-Christian tradition. The historical objectivism corresponding to this ideal draws its strength from the idea of science that has its background in the philosophical subjectivism of the modern age. Droysen struggled to guard himself against this idea, but only the fundamental critique of philosophical subjectivism that began with Heidegger's Being and Time was able to establish philosophically Droysen's historico-theological position and to demonstrate its validity in opposition to Wilhelm Dilthey, who had succumbed so much more completely to the modern concept of science than did his genuine adversary, the Lutheran thinker Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg. Heidegger no longer regarded the historicity of Dasein as a restriction of its cognitive possibilities and as a threat to the ideal of scientific objectivity, but rather took it up in a positive way into his ontological problematic. As a result of Heidegger's work, the concept of understanding that the Historical School had made methodologically respectable was transformed into a universal philosophical concept. According to Being and Time, understanding is the way in which the historicity of Dasein is itself carried out. The futurity of Dasein — the basic character of projection that befits its temporality — is limited by its other basic determination, namely, its "thrownness," which not only specifies the limits of sovereign self-possession but also opens up and determines the positive possibilities that we are. In certain ways, the concept of self-understanding is an heirloom of transcendental idealism and has been propagated in our own time as such an idealism by Husserl. It was only through Heidegger's work that this concept acquired its real historicity, and with this change it became capable of supporting the theological concern for formulating the self-understanding of faith. It is not, therefore, as a sovereign self-mediation of self-consciousness but rather as the experience of oneself that what happens to one and (from the theological standpoint) what takes place in the challenge of the Christian proclamation, can remove the false claim of gnostic self-certainty from the self-understanding of faith. In his 1926 essay on Barth's Commentary on Romans,* Gerhard Krüger sought to radicalize dialectical theology in this direction, and Heidegger's own years in Marburg owed much of their unforgettable excitement to Rudolf Bultmann's theological use of Heidegger's critique of the "objectivistic" subjectivism of the modern age.

Heidegger did not stop, however, with the transcendental schema that still motivated the concept of self-understanding in Being and Time. Even in Being and Time the real question is not in what way being can be understood but in what way understanding is being, for the understanding of being represents the existential distinction of Dasein. Already at this point Heidegger does not understand being to be the result of the objectifying operation of consciousness, as Husserl's phenomenology still did. The question of being, as Heidegger

*Cf. Gerhard Krüger in Zwischen den Zeiten, 1926.
poses it, breaks into an entirely different dimension by focusing on the being of Dasein that understands itself. And this is the point at which the transcendental schema must finally founder. The infinite contrast between the transcendental ego and its objects is finally taken up into the ontological question. In this sense, Being and Time already begins to counteract the forgetfulness of being that Heidegger was later to designate as the essence of metaphysics. What he calls the “turn” is only his recognition that it is impossible to overcome the forgetfulness of being within the framework of transcendental reflection. Hence all his later concepts, such as the “event” of being, the “there” as the clearing of being, and so on, were already entailed as a consequence of the approach taken in Being and Time.

The role that the mystery of language plays in Heidegger’s earlier thought is sufficient indication that his concentration on the historicity of self-understanding banished not only the concept of consciousness from its central position, but also the concept of selfhood as such. For what is more unconscious and “selfless” than that mysterious realm of language in which we stand and which allows what is to come to expression, so that being “is temporalized” (sich zeitigt)? But if this is valid for the mystery of language it is also valid for the concept of understanding. Understanding too cannot be grasped as a simple activity of the consciousness that understands, but is itself a mode of the event of being. To put it in purely formal terms, the primacy that language and understanding have in Heidegger’s thought indicates the priority of the “relation” over against its relational members—the I who understands and that which is understood. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is possible to bring to expression within the hermeneutical consciousness itself Heidegger’s statements concerning “being” and the line of inquiry he developed out of the experience of the “turn.” I have carried out this attempt in Truth and Method. Just as the relation between the speaker and what is spoken points to a dynamic process that does not have a firm basis in either member of the relation, so the relation between the understanding and what is understood has a priority over its relational terms. Understanding is not self-understanding in the sense of the self-evident certainty idealism asserted it to have, nor is it exhausted in the revolutionary criticism of idealism that thinks of the concept of self-understanding as something that happens to the self, something through which it becomes an authentic self. Rather, I believe that understanding involves a moment of “loss of self” that is relevant to theological hermeneutics and should be investigated in terms of the structure of the game.

In pursuing this matter we are directed back immediately to antiquity and the peculiar relation between myth and logos that we find at the beginning of Greek thought. The customary Enlightenment formula, according to which the process of the demagification of the world leads necessarily from myth to logos, seems to me to be a modern prejudice. If we take this formula as our starting point, we cannot explain, for instance, how Attic philosophy opposed the tendencies of the Greek Enlightenment and was able to establish its secular reconciliation of religious tradition and philosophical thought. We are indebted to Gerhard Krüger for his masterful illumination of the religious presuppositions of Greek, especially Platonic, philosophizing.* The history of myth and logos in ancient Greece has a completely different and more complicated structure than the Enlightenment formula suggests. In light of this fact, we can begin to comprehend the great distrust that the modern study of antiquity has had of myth as a religious source and its decided preference for the more stable forms of cultic tradition. For the ability of myth to change and its openness for ever new interpretations by the poets compels one to regard it as wrong to ask in what sense an ancient myth was “believed” or, assuming it was no longer “believed” even then, where it passed over into poetic play. In truth, myth is obviously and intimately akin to thinking consciousness. Even the philosophical explication of myth in the language of concepts adds nothing essentially new to the constant movement back and forth between discovery and concealment, between reveryential awe and spiritual freedom, that accompanied the entire history of Greek myth. It is useful to remember this point if we are to

understand correctly the concept of myth that is implied in Bultmann's program of demythologizing. The contrast Bultmann makes between the "mythical picture of the world" and the scientific picture of the world that we hold as true hardly has the tone of finality that has been attributed to it in the course of the demythologizing controversy. In the last analysis, the relation of a Christian theologian to the biblical tradition does not appear to be so fundamentally different from the relation of the Greek to his myths. The casual and somewhat incidental formulation of the concept of demythologizing that Bultmann proposed (indeed, the sum of his general exegetical theology) had anything but an Enlightenment meaning. Rather, as a pupil of the liberal, historical study of the Bible, what Bultmann sought in the biblical tradition was the aspect that had persisted despite all historical explanation, which is the real bearer of the proclamation and represents the real challenge of faith.

This positive dogmatic interest, not an interest in a progressive enlightenment, marks Bultmann's concept of myth. Thus his concept of myth is completely descriptive and retains historical and contingent elements. In any case, although the specifically theological problem involved in demythologizing the New Testament may be fundamental, it is still a matter of practical exegesis and does not directly concern the hermeneutical principle of all exegesis. The general hermeneutical implication of this theological concept is that we cannot dogmatically establish a definite concept of myth and then determine once and for all which aspects of Scripture are to be unmasked by scientific explanation as "mere myth" for modern man. "Mere myth" must not be defined on the basis of modern science, but positively from the point of view of the acceptance of the kerygma - in terms of the inner claim of faith. The great freedom that the Greek poet possessed and employed in order to interpret the mythical tradition of his people is another example of such demythologizing. Here too we do not deal with "enlightenment," but rather with a religious basis for the poet's exercise of his spiritual power and critical insight. One need only think of Pindar and Aeschylus in this connection. Hence it is neces-

sary for us to consider the relation between faith and understanding in terms of the freedom of the game.

It may appear surprising at first to combine the deadly seriousness of faith with the arbitrariness of the game. In fact, the sense of this contrast would be completely destroyed if one were to understand the game or playing in the customary way, namely, as a subjective attitude rather than as a dynamic whole sui generis that embraces even the subjectivity of the one who plays. Now it seems to me that this latter concept of the game is the truly legitimate and original one,* and it is in terms of this concept of the game that we can best focus attention on the relation between faith and understanding.

The back and forth movement that takes place within a given field of play does not derive from the human game and from playing as a subjective attitude. Quite the contrary, even for human subjectivity the real experience of the game consists in the fact that something that obeys its own set of laws gains ascendancy in the game. To the movement in a determinate direction corresponds a movement in the opposite direction. The back and forth movement of the game has a peculiar freedom and buoyancy that determines the consciousness of the player. It goes on automatically - a condition of weightless balance, "where the pure too-little incomprehensibly changes - springs round into that empty too-much."** Even the intensification of the individual's effort that occurs in competitive situations is marked by something like a possession by the buoyancy of the game in which he has a role. Whatever is brought into play or comes into play no longer depends on itself but is dominated by the relation that we call the game. For the individual who, as playing subjectivity, engages in the game, this fact may seem at first to be an accommodation. He conforms to the game or subjects himself to it, that is, he relinquishes the autonomy of his own will. For example, two men who use a saw

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* Cf. WM, pp. 97-105 and 462-465, where I believe I have shown this to be the case.

** Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies, trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), Fifth Elegy, lines 84-86.
together allow the free play of the saw to take place, it would seem, by reciprocally adjusting to each other so that one man’s impulse to movement takes effect just when that of the other man ends. It appears, therefore, that the primary factor is a kind of agreement between the two, a deliberate attitude of the one as well as the other. But this attitude is still not the game. The game is not so much the subjective attitude of the two men confronting each other as it is the formation of the movement as such, which, as in an unconscious teleology, subordinates the attitude of the individuals to itself. It is the merit of the neurologist Viktor von Weizsäcker to have conducted experiments on phenomena of this kind and to have analyzed them theoretically in his work Der Gestaltkreis.* I am indebted to him also for his reference to the fact that the tension-filled situation in which the mongoose and the snake hold each other in check cannot be described as the reaction of one partner to the attempted attack of the other, but represents a reciprocal behavior of absolute contemporaneousness. Here too, neither partner alone constitutes the real determining factor; rather, it is the unified form of movement as a whole that unifies the fluid activity of both. We can formulate this idea as a theoretical generalization by saying that the individual self, including his activity and his understanding of himself, is taken up into a higher determination that is the really decisive factor.

This is the context in which I would like to consider the relation of faith and understanding. From the theological point of view, faith’s self-understanding is determined by the fact that faith is not man’s possibility, but a gracious act of God that happens to the one who has faith. To the extent that one’s self-understanding is dominated by modern science and its methodology, however, it is difficult for him to hold fast to this theological insight and religious experience. The concept of knowledge based on scientific procedures tolerates no restriction of its claim to universality. On the basis of this claim, all self-understanding is represented as a kind of self-possession that excludes nothing as much as the idea that something that separates it from itself can befall it. It is at this point that the concept of the game becomes important, for absorption into the game is an ecstatic self-forgetting that is experienced not as a loss of self-possession, but as the free buoyancy of an elevation above oneself. We cannot comprehend this in a unified way under the subjective rubric of self-understanding. The Dutch historian Huizinga recognized this point when he said that the consciousness of the one who is playing finds itself in an inseparable balance between belief and unbelief: the savage himself knows no conceptual difference between being and playing.*

It is not merely the savage, however, who is unacquainted with this conceptual difference. Wherever the claim of self-understanding is asserted – and where do men not assert it? – it remains within well-defined limits. The hermeneutical consciousness does not compete with that self-transparency that Hegel took to constitute absolute knowledge and the highest mode of being. We are not speaking of self-understanding in the realm of faith alone. In the last analysis, all understanding is self-understanding, but not in the sense of a preliminary self-possession or of one finally and definitively achieved. For the self-understanding only realizes itself in the understanding of a subject matter and does not have the character of a free self-realization. The self that we are does not possess itself; one could say that it “happens.” And this is what the theologian is actually saying when he asserts that faith is an event in which a new man is established. The theologian says also that we must believe and understand the Word, and that it is through the Word that we overcome the abysmal ignorance about ourselves in which we live.

That the concept of self-understanding has an originally theological stamp can be seen clearly in the work of Johann Georg Hamann. What he meant by the concept was that we do not understand ourselves unless it be before God. But God is the Word. From the earliest times, the human word has provided theological reflection with a concrete visualization of the Word of God and the mystery of the Trinity. Augustine in particular sought to describe the superhuman mystery of the Trinity by means of innumerable variations on the


word and the dialogue as they occur between men. Word and

dialogue undoubtedly include within them an aspect of the
game.

Many aspects of the dialogue between men point to the
common structure of understanding and playing: risking a
word or "keeping it to oneself," provoking a word from the
other person and receiving an answer from him or giving an
answer oneself. Another indication is the way every word
"comes into play" within the definite context in which it is
spoken and understood. It is in language games, for example,
that the child becomes acquainted with the world. Indeed,
everything we learn takes place in language games. This is not
to say that when we speak we are "only playing" and do not
mean it seriously. Rather, the words we find capture our
intending, as it were, and dovetail into relations that point
out beyond the momentariness of our act of intending. When
does the child who listens to and repeats the language of
adults understand the words he uses? When is his playing
transformed into seriousness? When does seriousness begin
and playing cease? Every determination of word meanings
grows, as it were, in playful fashion from the value of the
word in the concrete situation. Just as writing represents a
fixing of the phonetic constancy [Lautbestand] of language
and thus reacts upon the phonetic form [Lautgestalt] of the
language itself by articulating it, so too living speaking and
the life of the language have their play in a back and forth
movement. No one fixes the meaning of a word, nor does the
ability to speak merely mean learning the fixed meanings of
words and using them correctly. Rather, the life of language
consists in the constant playing further of the game that we
began when we first learned to speak. A new word usage
comes into play and, equally unnoticed and unintended, the
old words die. This is the ongoing game in which the being-
with-others of men occurs.

The common agreement that takes place in speaking with
others is itself a game. Whenever two persons speak with each
other they speak the same language. They themselves, how-
ever, in no way know that in speaking it they are playing this
language further. But each person also speaks his own lan-
guage. Common agreement takes place by virtue of the fact

that speech confronts speech but does not remain immobile.
In speaking with each other we constantly pass over into the
thought world of the other person; we engage him, and he
engages us. So we adapt ourselves to each other in a prelimi-
nary way until the game of giving and taking—the real
dialogue—begins. It cannot be denied that in an actual
dialogue of this kind something of the character of accident,
favor, and surprise—and in the end, of buoyancy, indeed, of
elevation—that belongs to the nature of the game is present.
And surely the elevation of the dialogue will not be expe-
rienced as a loss of self-possession, but rather as an enrich-
ment of our self, but without us thereby becoming aware of
ourselves.

Now it seems to me that these observations also hold for
dealing with written texts and thus for understanding the
Christian proclamation that is preserved in Scripture. The life
of tradition, and even more, the life of proclamation, consist
in such a play of understanding. The understanding of a text
has not begun at all as long as the text remains mute. But a
text can begin to speak. (We are not discussing here the
conditions that must be given for this actually to occur.)
When it does begin to speak, however, it does not simply
speak its word, always the same, in lifeless rigidity, but gives
ever new answers to the person who questions it and poses
ever new questions to him who answers it. To understand a
text is to come to understand oneself in a kind of dialogue.
This contention is confirmed by the fact that the concrete
dealing with a text yields understanding only when what is
said in the text begins to find expression in the interpreter's
own language. Interpretation belongs to the essential unity of
understanding. One must take up into himself what is said to
him in such fashion that it speaks and finds an answer in the
words of his own language. This observation holds true in
every respect for the text of the Christian proclamation,
which one really cannot understand if it does not seem to
speak directly to him. It is in the sermon, therefore, that the
understanding and interpretation of the text first receives its
full reality. It is the sermon rather than the explanatory
commentary of the theologian's exegetical work that stands in
the immediate service of proclamation, for it not only com-
municates to the community the understanding of what Scripture says, but also bears witness itself. The actual completion of understanding does not take place in the sermon as such, but rather in its reception as an appeal that is directed to each person who hears it.

If self-understanding comes about in this way, then it is surely a very paradoxical, if not negative, understanding of oneself in which one hears himself called into dialogue. Such self-understanding certainly does not constitute a criterion for the theological interpretation of the New Testament. Moreover, the texts of the New Testament are themselves already interpretations of the Christian message; they do not wish to call attention to themselves, but rather to be mediators of this message. Does this not give them a freedom in speaking that allows them to be selfless witnesses? We are much indebted to modern theological study for our insight into the theological intention of the New Testament writers, but the proclamation of the gospel speaks through all these mediations in a way that is comparable to the repetition of a legend or the continual renewal and transformation of mythical tradition by great poetry. The genuine reality of the hermeneutical process seems to me to encompass the self-understanding of the interpreter as well as what is interpreted. Thus “demythologizing” takes place not only in the action of the theologian, but also in the Bible itself. But neither in the work of the theologian nor in the Bible is “demythologizing” a sure guarantee of correct understanding. The real event of understanding goes beyond what we can bring to the understanding of the other person’s words through methodical effort and critical self-control. Indeed, it goes far beyond what we ourselves can become aware of. Through every dialogue something different comes to be. Moreover, the Word of God, which calls us to conversion and promises us a better understanding of ourselves, cannot be understood as a word that merely confronts us and that we must simply leave as it is. It is not really we ourselves who understand: it is always a past that allows us to say, “I have understood.”

4

Man and Language (1966)

Aristotle established the classical definition of the nature of man, according to which man is the living being who has logos. In the tradition of the West, this definition became canonical in a form which stated that man is the animal rationale, the rational being, distinguished from all other animals by his capacity for thought. Thus it rendered the Greek word logos as reason or thought. In truth, however, the primary meaning of this word is language. Aristotle once developed the difference between man and animal in the following way: animals can understand each other by indicating to each other what excites their desire so they can seek it, and what injures them, so they can flee from it. That is as far as nature goes in them. To men alone is the logos given as well, so that they can make manifest to each other what is useful and harmful, and therefore also what is right and wrong. A profound thesis. What is useful and what is harmful is something that is not desirable in itself. Rather, it is desired for the sake of something else not yet given, in whose acquisition it aids one. The distinguishing feature of man, therefore, is his superiority over what is actually present, his sense of the future. And in the same breath Aristotle adds that with this the sense for right and wrong is given — and all because man, as an individual, has the logos. He can think
and he can speak. He can make what is not present manifest through his speaking, so that another person sees it before him. He can communicate everything that he means. Indeed, even more than this, it is by virtue of the fact he can communicate in this way that there exists in man alone common meaning, that is, common concepts, especially those through which the common life of men is possible without murder and manslaughter — in the form of social life, a political constitution, an organized division of labor. All this is involved in the simple assertion that man is a being who possesses language.

One might think that this obvious and convincing observation had long ago guaranteed a privileged place for the phenomenon of language in our thinking about the nature of man. What is more convincing than the fact that the language of animals — if one wants to confer this name on their way of making themselves understood — is entirely different from human language, in which an objective world is conceived and communicated? Indeed, human language takes place in signs that are not rigid, as animals’ expressive signs are, but remain variable, not only in the sense that there are different languages, but also in the sense that within the same language the same expression can designate different things and different expressions the same thing.

In fact, however, Western philosophical thought has not placed the nature of language at the center of its considerations. It is indeed significant that in the Old Testament story of creation, God conferred dominion over the world on the first man by permitting him to name all beings at his discretion. The story of the Tower of Babel too indicates the fundamental significance of language for human life. Nevertheless, it was precisely the religious tradition of the Christian West that hindered serious thought about language, so that the question of the origin of language could be posed in a new way only at the time of the Enlightenment. An important advance occurred when the answer to the question of the origin of language was sought in the nature of man instead of in the biblical story of creation. For then a further step was unavoidable: the naturalness of language made it impossible to inquire any longer about an original condition in which man was without language. With this the very question of the origin of language was excluded altogether. Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt saw that language is essentially human and that man is an essentially linguistic being, and they worked out the fundamental significance of this insight for man’s view of the world. The diversity of human linguistic structures was the field of study of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the one-time minister of culture who withdrew from public life — the wise man of Tegel who through the work of his old age became the founder of modern linguistic science.

Nevertheless, Humboldt’s founding of the philosophy of language and linguistic science did not lead to a restoration of the original Aristotelian insight. By making the language of peoples the object of his investigation, Humboldt pursued a path of knowledge that was able to clarify in a new and promising way both the diversity of peoples and times as well as the common human nature underlying them all. But this procedure merely equipped man with a capacity and elucidated the structural laws of this capacity — what we call the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language — and it restricted the horizon of the question of man and language. The aim of such an approach was to comprehend the worldviews of different peoples, indeed even the details of their cultural development, through the mirror of language. An example of this approach would be the insight into the cultural situation of the Indo-Germanic family of peoples that we owe to Viktor Hein’s superb studies of cultivated plants and house pets.* Far more than other prehistories, linguistic science is the prehistory of the human spirit.

For this approach, however, the phenomenon of language has only the significance of an excellent manifestation in which the nature of man and his development in history can be studied. Yet it was unable to infiltrate the central positions of philosophical thought, for the Cartesian characterization of consciousness as self-consciousness continued to provide the background for all of modern thought. This unshakable foundation of all certainty, the most certain of all

* Cf. Viktor Hehn, Kulturpflanzen und Haustiere (Berlin: Gebrüder Borntraeger, 1870).
facts, that I know myself, became the standard for everything that could meet the requirements of scientific knowledge in the thought of the modern period. In the last analysis, the scientific investigation of language rested on this same foundation. The spontaneity of the subject possessed one of its basic forms in language-forming energy. Also, the worldview present in languages could be interpreted so fruitfully in terms of this principle that the enigma language presents to human thought did not come into view at all. For it is part of the nature of language that it has a completely unfathomable unconsciousness of itself. To that extent, it is not an accident that the use of the concept "language" is a recent development. The word logos means not only thought and language, but also concept and law. The appearance of the concept "language" presupposes consciousness of language. But that is only the result of the reflective movement in which the one thinking has reflected out of the unconscious operation of speaking and stands at a distance from himself. The real enigma of language, however, is that we can never really do this completely. Rather, all thinking about language is already once again drawn back into language. We can only think in a language, and just this residing of our thinking in a language is the profound enigma that language presents to thought.

Language is not one of the means by which consciousness is mediated with the world. It does not represent a third instrument alongside the sign and the tool, both of which are also certainly distinctively human. Language is by no means simply an instrument, a tool. For it is in the nature of the tool that we master its use, which is to say we take it in hand and lay it aside when it has done its service. That is not the same as when we take the words of a language, lying ready in the mouth, and with their use let them sink back into the general store of words over which we dispose. Such an analogy is false because we never find ourselves as conscious over against the world and, as it were, grasp after a tool of understanding in a wordless condition. Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up, and we become acquainted with men and in the last analysis with ourselves when we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.

An enigmatic and profoundly veiled process! What sort of folly is it to say that a child speaks a "first" word. What kind of madness is it to want to discover the original language of humanity by having children grow up in hermetic isolation from human speaking and then, from their first babbling of an articulate sort, recognize an actual human language and accord it the honor of being the "original" language of creation. What is mad about such ideas is that they want to suspend in some artificial way our very enclosedness in the linguistic world in which we live. In truth we are always already at home in language, just as much as we are in the world. It is Aristotle once again who gives us the most extensive description of the process in which one learns to speak. What Aristotle means to describe is not learning to speak, but rather, thinking, that is, acquiring universal concepts. In the flux of appearances, in the constant flood of changing impressions, how does anything like permanence come about? Surely it is first of all the capacity of retention, namely, memory, that allows us to recognize something as the same, and that is the first great achievement of abstraction. Out of the flux of appearances a common factor is spied here and there, and thus, out of accumulating recognitions that we call experience, the unity of experience slowly emerges. Knowledge of the universal originates in this way as a capacity for disposing over what has been experienced. Now Aristotle asks: Exactly how can this knowledge of the universal come about? Certainly not in such a way that one thing after the other goes by and suddenly knowledge of the universal is acquired when a certain particular reappears and is recognized as the same one. This one particular as such is not distinguished from all other particulars by some mysterious power of representing the universal. Rather, it too is like all other particulars. And yet it is true that at some point the knowledge of the universal actually comes about. Where does it begin? Aristotle gives an ideal image for this: How does an
A really gigantic achievement of abstraction is required of everyone who will bring the grammar of his native language to explicit consciousness. The actual operation of language lets grammar vanish entirely behind what is said in it at any given time. In learning foreign languages there is a very fine experience of this phenomenon which each of us has had, namely, the paradigm sentences used in text books and language courses. Their task is to make one aware in an abstract way of a specific linguistic phenomenon. In earlier times, when the task of acquisition involved in the learning of the grammar and syntax of a language was still acknowledged, these were sentences of an exalted senselessness that declared something or other about Caesar or Uncle Carl. The modern tendency to communicate a great deal of interesting information about the foreign country by means of such paradigm sentences has the unintended side effect of obscuring their exemplary function precisely to the extent that the content of what is said attracts attention. The more language is a living operation, the less we are aware of it. Thus it follows from the self-forgetfulness of language that its real being consists in what is said in it. What is said in it constitutes the common world in which we live and to which belongs also the whole great chain of tradition reaching us from the literature of foreign languages, living as well as dead. The real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it – what is said.

2. A second essential feature of the being of language seems to me to be its I-lessness. Whoever speaks a language that no one else understands does not speak. To speak means to speak to someone. The word should be the right word. That, however, does not mean simply that it represents the intended object for me, but rather, that it places it before the eyes of the other person to whom I speak.

To that extent, speaking does not belong in the sphere of the “I” but in the sphere of the “We.” Thus Ferdinand Ebner was right in giving his celebrated work The Word and Spiritual Realities the subtitle, Pneumatological Fragmente.* For the spiritual reality of language is that of the Pneuma, the

*Ferdinand Ebner, Das Wort und die geistigen Realitäten: Pneumatologische Fragmente (Innsbruck: Brenner, 1921).
spirit, which unifies I and Thou. It has long been observed that the actuality of speaking consists in the dialogue. But in every dialogue a spirit rules, a bad one or a good one, a spirit of obduracy and hesitancy or a spirit of communication and of easy exchange between I and Thou.

As I have shown elsewhere, the form of operation of every dialogue can be described in terms of the concept of the game.* It is certainly necessary that we free ourselves from the customary mode of thinking that considers the nature of the game from the point of view of the consciousness of the player. This definition of the man who plays, which has become popular primarily through Schiller, grasps the true structure of the game only in terms of its subjective appearance. In fact, however, the game is a dynamic process that embraces the persons playing or whatever plays. Hence it is by no means merely a metaphor when we speak of the “play of the waves,” or “the playing flies” or of the “free play of the parts.” Rather, the very fascination of the game for the playing consciousness roots precisely in its being taken up into a movement that has own its dynamic. The game is underway when the individual player participates in full earnest, that is, when he no longer holds himself back as one who is merely playing, for whom it is not serious. Those who cannot do that we call men who are unable to play. Now I contend that the basic constitution of the game, to be filled with its spirit — the spirit of bouyancy, freedom and the joy of success — and to fulfill him who is playing, is structurally related to the constitution of the dialogue in which language is a reality. When one enters into dialogue with another person and then is carried along further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person, holding itself back or exposing itself, that is determinative. Rather, the law of the subject matter is at issue in the dialogue and elicits statement and counterstatement and in the end plays them into each other. Hence, when a dialogue has succeeded, one is subsequently fulfilled by it, as we say. The play of statement and counterstatement is played further in the inner dialogue of the soul with itself, as Plato so beautifully called thought.

*cf. WM, pt. 3.

3. A third feature is what I would call the universality of language. Language is not a delimited realm of the speakable, over against which other realms that are unspeakable might stand. Rather, language is all-encompassing. There is nothing that is fundamentally excluded from being said, to the extent that our act of meaning intends it. Our capacity for saying keeps pace unerringly with the universality of reason. Hence every dialogue also has an inner infinity and no end. One breaks it off, either because it seems that enough has been said or because there is no more to say. But every such break has an intrinsic relation to the resumption of the dialogue.

We have this experience, often in a very painful way, when a statement is required from us. As an extreme example, we can think of an interrogation or a statement before a court. In such a case, the question we have to answer is like a barrier erected against the spirit of speaking, which desires to express itself and enter into dialogue (“I will speak here” or “Answer my question!”). Nothing that is said has its truth simply in itself, but refers instead backward and forward to what is unsaid. Every assertion is motivated, that is, one can sensibly ask of everything that is said, “Why do you say that?” And only when what is not said is understood along with what is said is an assertion understandable. We are familiar with this fact especially in the phenomenon of the question. A question that we do not understand as motivated can also find no answer. For the motivational background of a question first opens up the realm out of which an answer can be brought and given. Hence there is in fact an infinite dialogue in questioning as well as answering, in whose space word and answer stand. Everything that is said stands in such space.

We can illustrate this idea by an experience each of us has had. What I have in mind is translating and reading translations from foreign languages. The translator has a linguistic text before him, that is, something said either verbally or in writing, that he has to translate into his own language. He is bound by what stands there, and yet he cannot simply convert what is said out of the foreign language into his own without himself becoming again the one saying it. But this means he must gain for himself the infinite space of the saying that corresponds to what is said in the foreign lan-
language. Everyone knows how difficult it is. Everyone knows how the translation makes what is said in the foreign language sound flat. It is reflected on one level, so that the word sense and sentence form of the translation follow the original, but the translation, as it were, has no space. It lacks that third dimension from which the original (i.e., what is said in the original) is built up in its range of meaning. This is an unavoidable obstruction to all translations. No translation can replace the original. One might argue that the original assertion, which is projected into this flatness, should be more easily understandable in the translation, since much that was suggestive background or “between the lines” in the original would not be carried over. The reduction to a simple sense achieved by the translation could be taken, therefore, to facilitate understanding. But this argument is mistaken. No translation is as understandable as the original. Precisely the most inclusive meaning of what is said — and meaning is always a direction of meaning — comes to language only in the original saying and slips away in all subsequent saying and speaking. The task of the translator, therefore, must never be to copy what is said, but to place himself in the direction of what is said (i.e., in its meaning) in order to carry over what is to be said into the direction of his own saying.

This problem becomes clearest in those translations which make possible a verbal dialogue between men of different native languages by the interposition of an interpreter. An interpreter who only reproduces the words and sentences spoken by one person in the language of another alienates the conversation into unintelligibility. What he has to reproduce is not what is said in exact terms, but rather what the other person wanted to say and said in that he left much unsaid. The limited character of his reproduction must also attain the space in which alone dialogue becomes possible, that is, the inner infinity that belongs to all common understanding.

Hence language is the real medium of human being, if we only see it in the realm that it alone fills out, the realm of human being-together, the realm of common understanding, of ever-replenished common agreement — a realm as indispensable to human life as the air we breathe. As Aristotle said, man is truly the being who has language. For we should let everything human be spoken to us.

5

The Nature of Things and the Language of Things (1960)

The object of our study in this essay will be two common expressions that for all intents and purposes mean the same thing. Our intention is to illuminate a convergence of topics that dominates philosophy today despite every difference in starting points and methodological ideals. While these two expressions seem to say the same thing, we will show that a tension exists between them. At the same time, the power of the same impulse appears in both despite this difference. Linguistic usage alone gives us little indication of all this, for it seems to indicate that the two expressions are completely interchangeable. The two expressions are “it is the nature of things” [Es liegt in der Natur der Sache] and “things speak for themselves” [Die Dinge sprechen für sich selber], or “they speak an unmistakable language” [sie führen eine unmüßverständliche Sprache]. In both cases we are dealing with stereotyped linguistic formulas that do not really give the reasons for why we hold something to be true, but rather reject the need for further proof. Even the two basic terms that appear in these expressions, Sache and Ding, seem to say the same thing. They are both expressions for something that eludes more precise definition. Correspondingly, when we speak of the “nature” of things or the “language” of things, these expressions share in common a polemical rejection of violent arbitrariness in our dealing with things, especially the
mere stating of opinions, the capriciousness of conjectures or assertions about things, and the arbitrariness of denials or the insistence on private opinions.

However, if we look more closely and probe the more furtive differences of linguistic usage, the appearance of complete interchangeability is dispelled. The concept of the thing [Sache] is marked above all by its counterconcept, the person. The meaning of this antithesis of thing and person is found originally in the clear priority of the person over the thing. The person appears as something to be respected in its own being. The thing, on the other hand, is something to be used, something that stands entirely at our disposal. Now when we encounter the expression “the nature of things,” the point is clearly that what is available for our use and given to our disposal has in reality a being of its own, which allows it to resist our efforts to use it in unsuitable ways. Or to put it positively: it prescribes a specific comportment that is appropriate to it. But with this statement the priority of the person over the thing is inverted. In contrast to the capacity persons have to adapt to each other as they please, the “nature of things” is the unalterable givenness to which we have to accommodate ourselves. Thus the concept of the thing can maintain its own emphasis by demanding that we abandon all thought of ourselves and thereby even compelling us to suspend any consideration of persons.

This is where the exhortation to objectivity [Sachlichkeit] that we also know as the characteristic attitude of philosophy originates. Bacon’s famous words, which Kant chose as the motto for his *Critique of Pure Reason*, express it: “De nobis ipsis silentus, de re autem quae agitur.” [About ourselves we keep silent, but we will speak of the subject.]

One of the greatest champions of such objectivity among classical philosophical thinkers is Hegel. He actually speaks of the action of the thing and characterizes real philosophical speculation by the fact that the thing itself is active in it and not simply the free play of our own notions. That is, the free play of our reflective procedures with the thing is not operative in real philosophical speculation. The celebrated phenomenological slogan, “To the things themselves,” which at the beginning of the century expressed a new orientation within philosophy, also means something similar. Phenomenological analysis sought to uncover the uncontrolled assumption involved in unsuitable, prejudiced, and arbitrary constructions and theories. And in fact it exposed such assumptions in their illegitimacy by the unprejudiced analysis of the phenomena.

But the concept of the thing [Sache] reflects more than the Roman legal concept of res. The meaning of the German word *Sache* is permeated above all by what is called causa, that is, the disputed “matter” under consideration. Originally, it was the thing that was placed in the middle between the disputing parties because a decision still had to be rendered regarding it. The thing was to be protected against the domineering grasp of one party or the other. In this context, objectivity means precisely opposition to partiality, that is, to the misuse of the law for partial purposes. The legal concept of “the nature of things” does not mean an issue disputed between parties, but rather the limits that are set to the arbitrary will of the legislator in the promulgation of the law and to the judicial interpretation of the law. The appeal to the nature of things refers to an order removed from human wishes. And it intends to assure the triumph of the living spirit of justice over the letter of the law. Here too, therefore, “the nature of things” is something that asserts itself, something we have to respect.

If, however, we pursue what is expressed in the phrase “the language of things,” we are pointed in a similar direction. The language of things too is something to which we should pay better attention. This expression also has a kind of polemical accent. It expresses the fact that, in general, we are not at all ready to hear things in their own being, that they are subjected to man’s calculus and to his domination of nature through the rationality of science. Talk of a respect for things is more and more unintelligible in a world that is becoming ever more technical. They are simply vanishing, and only the poet still remains true to them. But we can still speak of a language of things when we remember what things really are, namely, not a material that is used and consumed, not a tool that is used and set aside, but something instead that has existence in itself and is “not forced to do any-
thing,” as Heidegger says. Its own being in itself is disregarded by the imperious human will to manipulate, and it is like a language it is vital for us to hear.¹ The expression “the language of things,” therefore, is not a mythological, poetic truth that only a Merlin the Magician or those initiated into the spirit of the fairy tale could verify. Rather this common expression rouses the memory (slumbering in us all) of the being of things that are still able to be what they are.

Thus, in a certain sense, the same truth is actually spoken by both phrases. Common expressions are not simply the dead remains of a linguistic usage that has become figurative. They are at the same time the heritage of a common spirit, and if we only understand them rightly and penetrate their covert richness of meaning, they can make this common spirit perceivable again. Hence our examination of these expressions has shown us that in a certain sense they say the same thing—something that must be kept in mind over against the despotic character of our capriciousness. This is not all, however. Even though the two expressions—“the nature of things” and “the language of things”—are sometimes used interchangeably and are stamped by what they both oppose, this commonality still conceals a difference that is not accidental. Rather, there is a philosophical task here of elucidating the tension perceivable in the subtle undertones of both expressions. I shall try to show that the arbitration of this tension that is taking place in philosophy today distinguishes the matrix of problems common to us all.

For the Philosophical mind, the concept of “the nature of things” brings into focus an opposition to philosophical idealism shared by many persons, and especially to the Neo-Kantian form in which idealism was renewed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This continuation of Kant, which sought to make him a spokesman for the faith in progress and pride in science of its own time, really no longer knew what to do with the thing-in-itself. With all their explicit rejection of metaphysical idealism, Kant’s successors no longer considered a return to the Kantian dualism of thing-in-itself and appearance. Only by means of a reinterpretation did Kant’s words fit their own self-evident convictions. As a result of this reinterpretation, their idealism meant the total determina-

1. The expression “the language of things,” therefore, is not a mythological, poetic truth that only a Merlin the Magician or those initiated into the spirit of the fairy tale could verify. Rather this common expression rouses the memory (slumbering in us all) of the being of things that are still able to be what they are.

2. The fact that knowledge brought about no alteration in the known, let alone that it meant its production, and the fact that, on the contrary, everything that is remains indifferent to whether it is known or not, seemed to Hartmann to speak against any form of transcendental idealism, even against Husserlian constitutional research. On the positive side, Hartmann believed the way to a new ontology to lie in the recognition of the autonomy of beings and their independence of all human subjectivity. Hence he came into proximity.
with the “critical realism” that triumphed at the same time in England too — and there completely.

But I believe such a dismissal of transcendental philosophical reflection involves a massive misunderstanding of its meaning and is the result of the decline of philosophical knowledge that began with Hegel’s death. There are of course reasons for the continual repetition of such a renunciation, even in the philosophy of our own time. When we contrast the superior reality of the divinely ordained order with our domineering will that is shattered on it (Gerhard Krüger), or man and his history with the indifference of the natural world (Karl Löwith), we can understand such polemical renunciation as an appeal to the nature of things. Nevertheless, it seems to me that such an appeal to the nature of things finds its limitation in a common assumption that remains unquestioned and dominates all these attempts at the restoration of the autonomy of things. It is the assumption that human subjectivity is will, an assumption that retains its unquestioned validity even where we posit being-in-itself as a limit to the determination of things by man’s will. In the nature of the case, this means that these critics of modern subjectivism are not really free at all from what they criticize, but only articulate the opposition from the other side. In contrast to the one-sidedness of Neo-Kantianism, which takes the progress of scientific culture as its guideline, they pose the one-sidedness of a metaphysics of being-in-itself, which shares with its opponent the predominance of determination by the will.

In light of this situation, we must ask if “the nature of things” is not a dubious battle cry, and if classical metaphysics does not prove to have a real superiority over against all these attempts and to pose a continuing task. The superiority of classical metaphysics seems to me to lie in the fact that from the outset it transcends the dualism of subjectivity and will, on the one hand, and object and being-in-itself, on the other, by conceiving their preexistent correspondence with each other. To be sure, classical metaphysics’ concept of truth — the conformity of knowledge with the object — rests on a theological correspondence. For it is in their creatureliness that the soul and the object are united. Just as the soul is created to encounter beings, so the thing is created true, that is, capable of being known. An enigma that is insoluble for the finite mind is thus resolved in the infinite mind of the Creator. The essence and actuality of the creation consists in being such a harmony of soul and thing.

Now philosophy certainly can no longer avail itself of such a theological grounding and will also not want to repeat the secularized versions of it, as represented by speculative idealism with its dialectical mediation of finite and infinite. But for its part, philosophy may also not close its eyes to the truth of this correspondence. In this sense, the task of metaphysics continues, though certainly as a task that cannot again be solved as metaphysics, that is, by going back to an infinite intellect. Hence we must ask: are there finite possibilities of doing justice to this correspondence? Is there a grounding of this correspondence that does not venture to affirm the infinity of the divine mind and yet is able to do justice to the infinite correspondence of soul and being? I contend that there is. There is a way that attests to this correspondence, one toward which philosophy is ever more clearly directed — the way of language.

It is no accident, it seems to me, that in recent decades the phenomenon of language has come to the center of philosophical inquiry. Perhaps one can even say that under this banner even the greatest kind of philosophical gulf that exists today between peoples — the one between Anglo-Saxon nominalism on the one hand and the metaphysical tradition on the Continent on the other — has begun to be bridged. At any rate, the analysis of language that was developed in England and America after the problematic of logical, artificial language broke down approximates the orientation of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological school in striking fashion. Just as the recognition of the finitude and historicity of human Dasein developed by Martin Heidegger has transformed the nature of the task of metaphysics, the antimetaphysical passion of logical positivism has been dissolved with the recognition of the autonomous meaning of spoken language (Wittgenstein). From information to myth and to the saga [Sage] which, for Heidegger, is a “pointing” [Zeige] as well, language constitutes the common theme. In order to
think seriously about language, I believe we must ask if in the end language does not have to be called the “language of things” – the language of things in which the primordial correspondence of soul and being is so exhibited that finite consciousness too can know of it.

In itself, the assertion that language is the medium through which consciousness is connected with beings is nothing new. Hegel had already called language the medium through which subjective spirit is mediated with the being of objects. And in our own time, Ernst Cassirer expanded the narrow starting point of Neo-Kantianism, namely, the facts of science, into a philosophy of symbolic forms that encompassed not only the natural sciences and the human studies, but was to provide a transcendental foundation for human cultural activity in its entirety.

Cassirer took as his starting point the idea that language, art, and religion are “forms” of representation, that is, the presentation of something mental in something sensuous. By transcendental reflection on all these forms of embodied spirit, transcendental idealism would be elevated to a new and authentic universality. The symbolic forms are the spirit’s processes of formation within the fleeting temporality of sensuous appearance, and they represent a connecting medium in that they are as much an objective appearance as they are a trace of the spirit. We must certainly wonder, however, if an analytic of the basic spiritual forces Cassirer had in mind really accounts for the uniqueness of the phenomenon of language. For language does not really stand alongside art and law and religion, but represents the sustaining medium of all of these manifestations of the spirit. The concept of language should not merely receive a special distinction among the symbolic forms, that is, among the forms in which spirit is expressed. Rather, as long as it is even conceived as a symbolic form, it is not yet recognized at all in its true dimensions. The idealistic philosophy of language from which Herder and Humboldt start already provokes the critical question that touches the philosophy of symbolic forms as well: by directing attention to the “form” of language, does it not isolate language from what is spoken in and mediated through it? It is not as a formal power or capacity

that language presents the correspondence we are seeking, but rather as the preliminary medium that encompasses all beings insofar as they can be expressed in words. Is not language more the language of things than the language of man?

The interconnection of word and thing, which was a problem at the beginning of Western thought about language, gains renewed interest in terms of this question. To be sure, the question the Greeks asked about the correctness of names is more a last echo of that word-magic that understood the word as the thing itself, or better, as its representative being. Indeed, Greek philosophy began with the dissolution of such name-magic and took its first steps as a critique of language. Nevertheless, it preserves in itself so much of the naïve self-forgetfulness of the original experience of the world, that for it the essence of things manifested in the logos is the self-presentation of beings themselves. In the Phaedo, Plato designates the flight into the logos as his second-best way because being is contemplated there only in the reflected image of the logos instead of in its direct reality. But a hint of irony is present in his assertion. In the end, the true being of things becomes accessible precisely in their linguistic appearance – in the ideality of what is intended that is concealed in such fashion that its being intended (the linguistic character of the manifestation of things) is not experienced as such. Since metaphysics understands the true being of things as essences that are directly accessible to the “mind,” the linguistic character of the experience of being is concealed.

So too, medieval scholasticism, as the Christian heir of Greek metaphysics, conceived the word wholly in terms of the species, as its perfection, without grasping the enigma of its incarnation. The linguistic character of the experience of the world, to which metaphysical thinking had originally oriented itself, became in the last analysis something secondary and contingent that schematizes the thinking gaze at things through linguistic conventions and closes it off from the primordial experience of being. In truth, however, the illusion that things precede their manifestation in language conceals the fundamentally linguistic character of our experi-
ence of the world. In particular, the illusion of the possibility of the universal objectification of everything and anything completely obscures this universality itself. Since at least within the Indo-Germanic family of languages, language has the possibility of extending its universal naming function to any element of the sentence and of making everything the subject of further assertions, it creates the general illusion of relification, which reduces language itself to a mere instrument of common understanding. Even modern linguistic analysis, as much as it tries to uncover the verbalistic seductions of language by means of artificial sign systems, does not bring the basic assumption of such objectification into question. Rather, through its own self-limitation it only teaches us that there is no liberation from the orbit of language by introducing artificial sign systems, since all such systems already presuppose natural language. Just as the classical philosophy of language showed the question of the origin of language to be untenable, so also the examination of the idea of an artificial language leads to the elimination of this idea and thus to the legitimation of natural languages. But what is implicit in all this discussion remains completely unconsidered. Certainly we know that languages have their reality everywhere they are spoken, that is, where people are able to understand each other. But what kind of being is it that language possesses? Is it that of an instrument of understanding? It seems to me that Aristotle had already indicated the true character of the being of language when he freed the concept of *synthese* from its naïve meaning as "convention."

By excluding every sense of founding or originating from the concept of *synthese*, he pointed in the direction of that correspondence of soul and world that comes to light in the phenomenon of language as such and is independent of the forceful extrapolation of an infinite mind by which metaphysics provided this correspondence with a theological foundation. The agreement about things that takes place in language means neither a priority of things nor a priority of the human mind that avails itself of the instrument of linguistic understanding. Rather, the correspondence that finds its concretion in the linguistic experience of the world is as such what is absolutely prior.

This fact can be illustrated beautifully by a phenomenon that itself constitutes a structural aspect of everything linguistic, namely, the phenomenon of rhythm. The essence of rhythm lies in a peculiar intermediary realm between being and the soul, as Richard Höningwald has already emphasized in his analysis from the point of view of the psychology of thought. The succession that is rhythmatized by the rhythm does not necessarily represent the rhythm of the phenomena themselves. Rather, rhythm can be imputed by our hearing even to a regular succession, so that it appears as rhythmically organized. Or better, wherever a regular succession is to be perceived by the mind, such a rhythmatizing not only can but in the end *must* take place. But what do we mean here when we say "it must"? Something opposed to the nature of things? Obviously not. But then what does "the rhythm of the phenomena themselves" mean? Are the phenomena not first precisely what they are in that they are thus apprehended as rhythmic or rhythmatized? Thus the correspondence that holds between them is more original than the acoustic succession on the one hand and the rhythmatizing apprehension on the other.

The poets know of this phenomenon, especially those who try to account for the process of the poetic mind that holds sway in them — Hölderlin, for instance. When they differentiate the original poetic experience from the pregiven character of language as well as from the pregiven character of the world (i.e., of the order of things) and describe the poetic conception as the harmony of the world and soul in the linguistic concretization that becomes poetry, it is a rhythmic experience they are describing. The structure of the poem, which thus becomes language, guarantees the process of soul and world addressing each other as something finite. It is here that the being of language shows its central position. The subjective starting point, which has become natural to modern thought, leads us wholly into error. Language is not to be conceived as a preliminary projection of the world by subjectivity, either as the subjectivity of individual consciousness or as that of the spirit of a people. These are all mythologies, just as the concept of genius is. The concept of genius plays so dominant a role in aesthetic theory because it understands
the origination of the form as an unconscious production and thus teaches us to interpret it in analogy with conscious production. But the work of art is as little to be understood in terms of the planned execution of a sketch — even an infallibly unconscious one — as the course of history may be conceived for our finite consciousness as the execution of a plan. Rather, here as well as there, luck and success tempt us into oracula ex eventu that in fact hide the event — the word or deed — by which they are expressed.

The consequence of modern subjectivism, it seems to me, is that in all such realms self-interpretation receives a primacy that is not justified by the facts. In truth, we may attribute a privilege to a poet in the explanation of his verse just as little as we may attribute it to the statesman in the historical explanation of events in which he had an active part. The real concept of self-understanding that is alone applicable to all such cases is not to be conceived in terms of the model of perfected self-consciousness, but rather in terms of religious experience. Inherent in it is the fact that the false paths of human self-understanding only reach their true end through divine grace. That is, only thereby do we reach the insight that all paths lead us to our own salvation. All human self-understanding is determined in itself by its inadequacy. This holds precisely for work and deed alike. According to their own being, therefore, art and history elude interpretation in terms of the subjectivity of consciousness. They belong to that hermeneutical universe that is characterized by the mode of operation and the reality of language that transcends all individual consciousness. The mediation of finite and infinite that is appropriate to us as finite beings lies in language — in the linguistic character of our experience of the world. It exhibits an experience that is always finite but that nowhere encounters a barrier at which something infinite is intended that can barely be surmised and no longer spoken. Its own operation is never limited, and yet is not a progressive approximation of an intended meaning. There is rather a constant representation of this meaning in every one of its steps. The success of the work constitutes its meaning, not what is only meant by it. It is the right word, and not the subjectivity of the act of meaning, that expresses its meaning.

It is tradition that opens and delimits our historical horizon, not an opaque event of history that happens “in itself.”

Thus the disavowal of the act of meaning that we perceive as the common feature in speaking about “the nature of things” and “the language of things” gains a positive sense and a concrete fulfillment. But with this the tension that exists between these two common expressions first appears in its true light. What seemed the same is not the same. It makes a difference whether a limit is experienced from out of the subjectivity of the act of meaning and the domineering character of the will or whether it is conceived in terms of the all-embracing harmony of beings within the world disclosed by language. Our finite experience of the correspondence between words and things thus indicates something like what metaphysics once taught as the original harmony of all things created, especially as the commensurateness of the created soul to created things. This fact seems to me to be guaranteed not in “the nature of things,” which confronts other opinions and demands attention, but rather in “the language of things,” which wants to be heard in the way in which things bring themselves to expression in language.

NOTES

1. In my essay “Heidegger’s Later Philosophy” I have emphasized this idea as the systematic starting-point for Heidegger’s later work.


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Martin Heidegger and Marburg Theology (1964)

Let us turn our thoughts back to the 1920s, to that tension-filled time when the theological break with historical and liberal theology took place in Marburg, to the time when the philosophical abandonment of Neo-Kantianism occurred, the Marburg School dissolved, and new stars arose in the philosophical heavens. It was at that time that Eduard Thurneysen delivered an address to the theological community in Marburg. For the younger of us, he was a first herald of dialectical theology in Marburg and after this address he received the more or less hesitant blessing of the Marburg theologians. The young Heidegger also took a part in that discussion. He had just come to Marburg as an assistant professor, and even today I find unforgettable the way he concluded his contribution to the discussion of Thurneysen’s address. After evoking the Christian skepticism of Franz Overbeck, he said it is the true task of theology, which must be discovered once again, to seek the word that is able to call one to faith and preserve one in faith. A genuine Heidegger-statement, full of ambiguity. In speaking these words, Heidegger seemed to be posing a task for theology. Yet perhaps he conjured up more than Overbeck’s attack on the theology of his time, for his statement reflected a despair at the possibility of theology itself. What a turbulent epoch of philosophical and theological controversy was beginning at that time! On the one side, there was the dignified reserve of Rudolf Otto; on the other, the sharp and gripping exegesis of Rudolf Bultmann. On the one side, there was Nicolai Hartmann’s finely chiselled thought; on the other, the breath-taking radicalism of the Heideggerian questions, which brought theology too under its spell. In its earliest form, Being and Time was an address that Heidegger gave before the theological community in Marburg in 1924.

What Heidegger expressed in his discussion of the Thurneysen address can be traced through to the present day as a central motif of his thinking: the problem of language. No ground had been prepared for this theme in Marburg. The Marburg School, which for decades had been distinguished within contemporary Neo-Kantian circles for its methodological rigor, had concentrated on the philosophical foundation of the sciences. It assumed without question that what can be known is really grasped by the sciences alone, and that the objectification of experience by science completely fulfills the meaning of knowledge. The purity of the concept, the exactness of the mathematical formula, the triumph of the infinitesimal method — these were the philosophical concerns of the Marburg School, not the intermediary realm of fluctuating linguistic configurations. Even when Ernst Cassirer brought the phenomenon of language into the program of Marburg Neo-Kantian idealism, he did so under the methodological principle of objectification. To be sure, his Philosophy of Symbolic Forms had nothing to do with a methodology of the sciences. It saw myth and language as symbolic forms, as configurations of objective spirit, and yet in such fashion that they should have their methodological basis in a fundamental dimension of transcendental consciousness.¹

At the same time phenomenology began to attract attention in Marburg. Max Scheler’s founding of the ethics of material value, which was connected with a vigorous critique of the formalism of Kantian moral philosophy, had already left a deep impression on Nicolai Hartmann, who represented the avant-garde in the Marburg School of that time.² Scheler had shown persuasively — as had Hegel a century earlier — that it is simply not possible to approach the whole range of
ethical phenomena by starting with the phenomenon of the “ought” in the imperative form of ethics. In the field of moral philosophy, therefore, a basic limitation of the subjective starting point of transcendental consciousness came to light. The consciousness of the “ought” could not encompass the entire domain of moral value. But the phenomenological school had an even stronger impact by no longer sharing the Marburg School’s orientation to the facts of the sciences as self-evident. It went behind scientific experience and the categorical analysis of its methods, and it brought the natural experience of life — that is, what the later Husserl named with his now-famous expression, the “life-world” — into the foreground of its phenomenological investigation. Both the turning away from imperative ethics in moral philosophy and the abandonment of the methodologism of the Marburg School had their theological parallels. When the problem of speaking of God was reawakened, the foundations of systematic and historical theology were shaken. Rudolf Bultmann’s critique of myth, his concept of the mythical picture of the world, especially to the extent that it is still dominant in the New Testament, was at the same time a critique of the total claim of objectifying thinking. Bultmann’s concept of having something at one’s disposal [Verfügbarkeit], with which he sought to encompass both the procedure of historical science and mythical thinking, plainly forms the counterconcept to the authentically theological expression.

And now Heidegger appeared in Marburg. No matter what he lectured on — whether Descartes or Aristotle, Plato or Kant formed the starting point — his analysis always penetrated behind the concealments of traditional concepts to the most primordial experience of Dasein. An early manuscript, which Heidegger had sent to Paul Natorp in 1922, and which I read, attests well to this fact. (It was a basic introduction to the interpretation of Aristotle, prepared by Heidegger, and it spoke especially of the young Luther, of Gabriel Biel and of Augustine. Heidegger would surely have called it a working out of the hermeneutical situation: it tried to make the reader aware of the questions and the intellectual resistance with which we confront Aristotle, that master of the tradition.) Today no one would doubt that the basic purpose in

Heidegger’s preoccupation with Aristotle was a critical and destructive one. At that time, however, this purpose was not so clear. The remarkable phenomenological power of intuition Heidegger brought to his interpretation liberated the original Aristotelian text so profoundly and strikingly from the sedimentations of the scholastic tradition and from the lamentably distorted image of Aristotle contained in the criticism of the time (Cohen loved to say, “Aristotle was an apothecary”) that it began to speak in an unexpected way. Perhaps what happened then, not only to the students, but to Heidegger himself, was that the power of Aristotle, though an adversary, came to dominate him for a time. Indeed, Heidegger’s interpretation took this risk, true to the Platonic axiom of making the opponent’s position stronger. For what else is interpretation in philosophy but coming to terms with the truth of the text and risking oneself by exposure to it?

I became aware of something of this for the first time when I met Heidegger in 1923. At that time he was still in Freiburg, and I participated in his seminar on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. We studied the analysis of phronesis. Heidegger pointed out to us in the text of Aristotle that every techein poses an intrinsic limit: its knowledge is not a full uncovering of something because the work it knows how to produce is delivered into the uncertainty of a use over which it does not preside. Then he began to discuss the difference that distinguishes all such knowledge, and especially mere doxa, from phronesis: ληθή τίς μεν τοιάστης ἔχεως ἔστω, φρονήσεως δὲ ὧν ἔστω. We were unsure of this sentence and completely unfamiliar with the Greek concepts; as we groped for an interpretation, he declared brusquely: “That is the conscience!” This is not the place to reduce the pedagogical overstatement involved in this assertion to its proper proportions, and even less, to indicate the logical and ontological force that the analysis of phronesis actually had in Aristotle. Today it is clear what Heidegger found in it, and what so fascinated him in Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s idea of the Good and the Aristotelian concept of practical knowledge. They described a mode of knowledge (an eidos γνώσεως) that could no longer be based in any
way on a final objectifiability in the sense of science. They described, in other words, a knowledge within the concrete situation of existence. Could Aristotle perhaps even help in overcoming the ontological prejudice in the Greek concept of *Logos*, which Heidegger later interpreted temporally as presence-at-hand and presence [*Anwesenheit*]? The violent rending of the Aristotelian text here recalls Heidegger’s own thematic concerns. In *Being and Time*, for instance, it is the call of conscience that first makes “Dasein in man” manifest in its ontological and temporal event-structure. Of course it was only much later that Heidegger defined his concept of Dasein in terms of the “clearing,” and thus disengaged it from all transcendental reflection. Could the word of faith also ultimately find a new philosophical legitimation by means of Heidegger’s criticism of the *logos* and of the traditional understanding of being as presence-at-hand? In somewhat the same way, later on Heidegger’s “remembrance” [*Andenken*] never allows us to forget entirely its old proximity to “devotion” [*Andacht*], which Hegel had already observed. Was that the ultimate meaning of his ambiguous contribution to the Thurneysen discussion? 

Later, in Marburg, a similar instance attracted our attention. Heidegger was dealing with a scholastic distinction and spoke of the difference between the *actus signatus* and the *actus exercitus*. These scholastic concepts correspond approximately to the concepts “reflective” and “direct” and mean, for instance, the difference between the act of questioning and the possibility of directing attention explicitly to the questioning as questioning. The one can lead over into the other. One can designate the questioning as questioning, and hence not only question but also say that one questions, and say that such and such is questionable. To nullify this transition from the immediate and direct into the reflective intention seemed to us at that time to be a way to freedom. It promised a liberation from the unbreakable circle of reflection and a recapturing of the evocative power of conceptual thinking and philosophical language, which would secure for philosophical thinking a rank alongside poetic use of language.

Certainly Husserl’s phenomenology had, in its analysis of transcendental constitution, already gone beyond the realm of explicit objectifications. Husserl spoke of anonymous intentionalities, that is, conceptual intentions in which something is intended and posited as ontically valid, of which no one is conscious thematically as individually intended and performed, which nonetheless are binding for everyone. Thus what we call the stream of consciousness is built up in internal time consciousness. The horizon of the life-world too is such a product of anonymous intentionalities. Nevertheless, not only the scholastic distinction that Heidegger cited but also the Husserlian constitutional analysis of the anonymous “accomplishments” of transcendental consciousness proceeded from the unrestricted universality of reason, which can clarify each and every thing intended in constitutional analysis, that is, can make them into the object of an explicit act of intending — in other words, objectify them.

In contrast to this objectification, Heidegger himself went resolutely in quite another direction. He pursued the intrinsic and indissoluble interinvolve of authenticity and inauthenticity, of truth and error, and the concealment that is essential to and accompanies every disclosure and that intrinsically contradicts the idea of total objectifiability. The direction in which this carried him is clearly indicated by the insight that instructed us and moved us most deeply in those times, namely, that the most primordial mode in which the past is present is not remembering, but forgetting. Heidegger’s ontological opposition to Husserl’s transcendental subjectivity becomes evident at the very center of the phenomenology of internal time consciousness. Indeed, in contrast to the role that memory played in Brentano’s analysis of time, Husserl’s analysis sought the more precise phenomenological differentiation of explicit recollection (which always implies a “having-been-perceived”) from the actual existence of the present that is retained in the process of sinking away into the past, and that Husserl called “retentional consciousness.” All consciousness of time and of entities in time rests on the function of retentional consciousness. To be sure, these were “anonymous” functions but precisely functions of a keeping-present, of a stopping, as it were, of the process of passing away. The now, which emerges out of the future and
sinks into the past, is still understood in terms of the present-at-hand. In contrast to this, Heidegger had in view the primordial ontological dimension of time that lies in the fundamental dynamic of Dasein. From this perspective, light is cast on the enigmatic irreversibility of time, which never permits time to arise but always merely to pass away. Furthermore it also becomes clear that time has its being not in the "now" or the succession of nows, but rather in the essentially futural character of Dasein. That is obviously the actual experience of history, the mode in which historicity happens to us. The fact that more happens to one here than one does testifies to forgetting. It is one way in which the past and passing away demonstrate their reality and power. Heidegger’s thought clearly pushes out beyond the transcendental philosophical direction of reflection that, with the help of Husserl’s anonymous intentionalities, had thematized these structures of temporality as the consciousness of internal time and its self-construction. In fact, in the end, the critique of the ontological prejudice involved in the Aristotelian concept of being and substance, and in the modern concept of the subject, necessarily brought about the dissolution of the idea of transcendental reflection itself.

This *actus exercitus* in which reality is experienced in a quite unreflective way — for example, the experience of the tool in the inconspicuousness of its actual use, or of the past in the inconspicuousness of its receding — is not transformed into a signifyed act without a new concealment. The upshot of Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein as being-in-the-world was rather that the being of beings experienced in this way, and especially the worldliness of the world, is not encountered objectively. Rather, it conceals itself in an essential way. *Being and Time* had already discussed the holding-in-itself of the ready-to-hand [*Ansichhalten des Zuhandenen*] upon which “being-in-itself” [*Anschein*] — unexplainable in terms of being-present-at-hand — ultimately rests. The being of the ready-to-hand is not simply a concealment and concealedness whose disclosure and disclosedness is at issue. Its “truth” — its authentic, undisguised being — obviously lies precisely in its inconspicuousness, unobtrusiveness, inobstinacy. Here already in *Being and Time* were hints of a radical abandonment of the “clearing” and the “disclosedness” that were oriented toward the self-understanding of Dasein. For even if this holding-in-itself of the ready-to-hand is finally founded in Dasein as the ground [*Worumwillen*] of every involvement, it is nevertheless clear as regards being-in-the-world itself that its “disclosedness” is not a total transparency of Dasein, but entails instead an essential domination of indefiniteness. The holding-in-itself of the ready-to-hand is not so much a withholding and concealment as it is a being-included and being-saved in the world-relation in which it has its being. The inner tension in which “disclosure” stands not only with concealment [*Verbergung*] but also with saving [*Bergung*] also probes, in the final analysis, the dimension in which language appears in its versatile being and can be of use to the theologian in his understanding of the Word of God.

In the realm of theology too the concept of self-understanding experienced a corresponding transformation. The self-understanding of faith — the main concern of Protestant theology — clearly cannot be grasped appropriately through the transcendental concept of self-understanding. We are acquainted with this concept from transcendental idealism. Fichte, especially, proclaimed that his *Wissenschaftslehre* had consistently carried through the transcendental idealism that understands itself. One recalls his critique of Kant’s concept of the thing-in-itself. In his critique, Fichte declared, with characteristically scornful coarseness, that if Kant had understood himself, then only such and such could have been meant by “thing-in-itself.” If Kant did not think that, then he was only a half-wit and no thinker at all. Hence at the basis of the concept of self-understanding lies the fact that all dogmatic assumptions are dissolved by the inner self-production of reason, so that at the end of this self-construction of the transcendental subject it is totally transparent to itself. It is astounding how close Husserl’s idea of transcendental phenomenology comes to this requirement set by Fichte and Hegel.

For theology, however, such a concept could not be retained without transformation. For if anything is inseparable from the idea of revelation, it is precisely this: man cannot
reach an understanding of himself by his own means. It is an age-old motif of faith, which already pervades Augustine’s reflection on his life, that all of man’s efforts to understand himself out of himself, and in terms of the world over which he presides as his own, ultimately founder. It would seem, in fact, that the word and concept “self-understanding” owe their first use to a Christian experience. We find both in the correspondence between Hamann and his friend Jakobi. From the standpoint of a pietistic certainty of faith, Hamann tries to convince his friend that he can never reach a genuine self-understanding with his philosophy and the role that faith plays in it. By “genuine self-understanding,” Hamann obviously means more than the complete self-transparency possessed by thought in harmony with itself. Rather, self-understanding contains historicity as a determining aspect. Something happens and has happened to one who attains true self-understanding. Thus the meaning of the self-understanding of faith is that the believer is conscious of his dependence upon God. He gains insight into the impossibility of understanding himself in terms of what he has at his disposal.

In his concept of having something at one’s disposal and the necessary shattering of any self-understanding founded on it, Bultmann put Heidegger’s ontological critique of the philosophical tradition to work for theological purposes. He delineated the position of the Christian faith over against the self-consciousness implicit in Greek philosophy. In keeping with his own scholarly background, however, Greek philosophy, for him, was the philosophy of the Hellenistic age, and his attention focused not on ontological foundations but on existential self-understanding. In particular, Greek philosophy meant the Stoic ideal of self-control, interpreted as the ideal of complete self-sufficiency and criticized as untenable from the point of view of Christianity. From this point of departure, under the influence of Heideggerian thinking, Bultmann explicated his position by means of the concepts of inauthenticity and authenticity. Dasein that has fallen into the world, that understands itself in terms of what is at its disposal, is called to conversion and experiences the turn to authenticity in the shattering of its self-sufficiency. For Bultmann, the transcendental analytic of Dasein seemed to de-
in Heidegger’s thought, namely, truth as an event containing its own error within itself, a disclosure that is concealment and thus at the same time saving, and also the celebrated phrase from the Letter on Humanism, that language is the “house of being.” All of this points beyond the horizon of any self-understanding, be it ever so frail and historical.

Yet one can also advance in the same direction from the experience of understanding and the historicity of self-understanding, and it is at this point that my own efforts to develop a philosophical hermeneutic began. First of all, the experience of art presents indisputable evidence for the fact that self-understanding does not yield an adequate horizon of interpretation. This fact is certainly no new piece of wisdom for the experience of art. Even the concept of genius, upon which the modern philosophy of art has been founded since Kant, contained unconsciousness as an essential ingredient. For Kant, there is an inner parallel between nature’s creativity, whose forms favor us with and establish for men the miracle of beauty, and the genius, who, like a favorite of nature, creates what is exemplary unconsciously and without the application of rules. It is a necessary result of this account that the artist’s self-interpretation is deprived of its legitimation. When such interpretive declarations by the artist do arise, they are the product of subsequent reflection, in which the artist has no particular privilege over against anyone else who confronts his work. Such declarations of the artist are indeed documents, and in certain circumstances constitute points of departure for subsequent interpretation. But they do not have a canonical status.

The consequences become even more decisive, however, when we look beyond the limits of the aesthetics of genius and Erlebnis-art, and consider that the interpreter belongs intrinsically to the movement of meaning of the work. For then even the standard of an unconscious canon that is seen in the “miracle of the creative mind” is given up. The whole universality of the hermeneutical phenomenon appears behind the experience of art.

In fact, a deeper penetration into the historicity of all understanding necessarily leads in this direction. An insight with important implications emerges, especially from the study of the older hermeneutics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Can the mens auctoris, what the author meant, be acknowledged in an unqualified way as the standard for understanding a text? If we give a broad and sympathetic interpretation to this hermeneutical axiom, it certainly contains something convincing. That is, if by “what the author meant” we understand “what in general he could have meant” — what lay within his own individual historical horizon — and therefore exclude “whatever could not have occurred to him at all,” then this axiom seems sound. It protects interpretation from anachronisms, from arbitrary interpolations and illegitimate applications. It seems to formulate the ethic of the historical consciousness, the conscientiousness of the historical mind.

However, if one considers the interpretation of texts together with the understanding and experience of the work of art, then this axiom too still involves something that is fundamentally questionable. There may also be historically appropriate and to that extent authentic modes of experience of the work of art. But the experience of art surely cannot be restricted to them. Precisely because we hold fast to the historical task of integration that is posed for every experience of the work of art as human experience, we may not embrace completely a Pythagorizing aesthetic. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that the work of art represents a structure of meaning of a unique kind, whose ideality approaches the unhistorical dimension of the mathematical. Our experience and interpretation is obviously in no sense limited by the mens auctoris. Now when we add that the inner unity of understanding and interpreting, which the romantics had already exhibited, transports the object of understanding — whether a work of art, a text or whatever kind of tradition — into the present and brings it again to speech in its own language, then I think I see certain theological consequences adumbrated.

The kerygmatic meaning of the New Testament, which gives the form of application of the pro me to the gospel, cannot ultimately contradict the legitimate investigation of meaning by historical science. This is, I contend, an unalterable requirement of the scientific consciousness. It is impossi-
to assume a relation of mutual exclusion between the meaning and the salvation-meaning of a scriptural text. But can it be a question here at all of a mutual exclusion? Does not the intended meaning of the New Testament authors — even what they may concretely have in mind — move in the direction of the meaning of salvation for which one reads the Bible? This is not to say that an adequate and appropriate self-understanding is to be attributed to their statements. They belong completely to the genre which Franz Overbeck characterized as UrLiteratur. If by the meaning of a text we understand the *mens auctoris*, that is, the “actual” horizon of understanding of the original Christian writers, then we do the New Testament authors a false honor. Their honor should lie precisely in the fact that they proclaim something that surpasses their own horizon of understanding — even if they are named John or Paul.

This assertion in no way entails an uncontrollable theory of inspiration or pneumatic exegesis. Such things would dissipate the gain in knowledge that we derive from New Testament scholarship. In fact, however, it is not a question of a theory of interpretation. That becomes clear if we consider the hermeneutical situation of theology together with that of jurisprudence, with the human studies and with the experience of art, as I have done in my efforts toward a philosophical hermeneutic. Nowhere does understanding mean the mere recovery of what the author “meant,” whether he was the creator of a work of art, the doer of a deed, the writer of a law book, or anything else. The *mens auctoris* does not limit the horizon of understanding in which the interpreter has to move, indeed, in which he is necessarily moved, if, instead of merely repeating, he really wants to understand.

The surest testimony to this seems to me to lie in the character of language. Not only does all interpretation occur within the medium of language, but insofar as it has to do with linguistic forms it also carries over the form of what is understood into its own linguistic world when it raises it into its own understanding. That is not a secondary act standing over against “understanding” as such. Since Schleiermacher, the ancient distinction that was always maintained by the Greeks between “thinking” (*νοεῖν*) and “expressing” (*λέ-γεῖν*) no longer holds a prominent position in hermeneutics. What is at issue here is not even basically a matter of translating, at least not from one language to another. The hopeless inadequacy of all translations can well illustrate the difference we have in mind. When one who understands attempts to explicate his comprehension, he is not in the unfree situation of the translator, who must coordinate his efforts word for word with a given text. He participates in the freedom that belongs to actual speaking, which is to say what the text means. Certainly every understanding is only “underway”; it never comes entirely to an end. And yet a whole of meaning is present in the free achievement of saying what is meant — even in what the interpreter means. Understanding that is linguistically articulated has free space around it which it fills in constant response to the word addressing it, without filling it out completely. “There is much to say” is the basic hermeneutical relation. Interpretation is not a subsequent fixing of fleeting meanings — anymore than speaking is something of that sort. What comes to language, even in literary tradition, is not some sort of meanings as such, but rather by means of it, the very experience of the world, which always entails the whole of our historical tradition. Tradition is always porous for what is handed on [*tradierit*] in it. Not only the word that theology must seek but every answer to the address of tradition is a word, a word that preserves.

NOTES

1. For Cassirer’s discussion of this point, see his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 73-114. (Trans.)
3. In this connection, one might consider the reference to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* VI and *Metaphysics* XII in *SuZ*, p. 225.
6. Ibid., 1141, 633 ff.
7. That the Aristotelian concept of *φῦν* was at the same time also


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Heidegger’s Later Philosophy (1960)

When we look back today on the time between the two world wars, we can see that this pause within the turbulent events of our century represents a period of extraordinary creativity. Omens of what was to come could be seen even before the catastrophe of World War I, particularly in painting and architecture. But for the most part, the general awareness of the time was transformed only by the terrible shock that the slaughters of World War I brought to the cultural consciousness and to the faith in progress of the liberal era. In the philosophy of the day, this transformation of general sensibilities was marked by the fact that with one blow the dominant philosophy that had grown up in the second half of the nineteenth century in renewal of Kant’s critical idealism was rendered untenable. "The collapse of German idealism," as Paul Ernst called it in a popular book of the time,* was placed in a world-historical context by Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. The forces that carried out the critique of this dominant Neo-Kantian philosophy had two powerful precursors: Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of Platonism and Christendom, and Søren Kierkegaard’s brilliant attack on the *Reflexionsphilosophie* of spec-