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## Hermeneutics and the Ancient Philosophical Legacy: *Hermēneia* and *Phronēsis*

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Hermeneutics as we understand it today is an essentially modern phenomenon. Wilhelm Dilthey (1990, 323–326; 1996, 242–245) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1990, 177–180; 2004, 175–177) point out that its two principal forms, philological and theological hermeneutics, emerged from early modernity's new desire to reappropriate the texts of a paradigmatic past—the writings of classical antiquity for Renaissance humanists, the biblical canon for the Protestant Reformation—on their "own terms," without relying on the unquestioned authority of the mediating tradition (the Latin Middle Ages and its patristic and ecclesiastical traditions) through which those texts had been transmitted. This task naturally required a new emphasis on methods of interpretation and textual criticism. The use of the term *hermeneutics* in the sense of a scholarly discipline of interpretation derives from a seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian, Johann Conrad Dannhauer.<sup>1</sup>

As for philosophical hermeneutics in the pregnant, Heideggerian and Gadamerian, sense, it is a specific product of "late" modernity—a properly *postmodern* form of thought, if we follow Gianni Vattimo (2002, 113–181). The unfolding of the modern age—marked by Europe's expanding encounters with non-European cultures, the Enlightenment idea of the historical progress of knowledge, culture, and society, the Romantic notion of the radical individuality of cultural expressions, and the emergence of the new historical "human sciences" in the nineteenth century—finally convinced Western philosophy of the irreducibility of the dimension of historicity and cultural specificity inherent in language, experience,

and meaning, and of the profound philosophical importance of interpretive understanding. This conviction came into fruition in the post-Hegelian historical consciousness that Jürgen Habermas (1988, 41; 1992, 34) identifies as one of the central components of contemporary “postmetaphysical thinking.”

The following observations will briefly illustrate some of the central ways in which these modern and late modern phenomena relate to the ancient philosophical legacy. First, the roots of hermeneutics will be traced to ancient views on linguistic, textual, and sacral interpretation. We will then take a look at certain fundamentally unhermeneutic elements of the Platonic, Aristotelian, and Augustinian “logocentric” theory of meaning that philosophical hermeneutics and its heirs sought to call into question, reconsider, and deconstruct. Finally, Aristotle’s practical philosophy, particularly the notion of *phronēsis*, “practical insight,” will be designated as an implicit ancient prototype of hermeneutic thinking, the reappropriation of which lay at the core of the Heideggerian and Gadamerian philosophical projects.

### The Ancient Roots of Philological and Theological Hermeneutics

Ancient thought did not distinguish hermeneutics as a specific theoretical discipline or general method of interpretation. The only classical mention of a particular *hermēneutikē* (*technē*), an interpretive art, is found in Plato’s *Statesman* (260d11, and also in the probably spurious *Epinomis* 975c6) in a limited sense to which we will presently return.

This does not mean that the theoretical problems of interpretation and understanding were absent or irrelevant. Herodotus’s *Histories* shows how keenly the Greeks of the classical age were interested in the different customs, institutions, and sacred rites of other societies, particularly those of mighty older civilizations such as Egypt, to which Herodotus considers Greek culture greatly indebted. However, there was a strong sense of intercultural continuity without specific linguistic or cultural gaps in mutual comprehensibility, combined with a certain cultural universalism. Herodotus straightforwardly assigns Greek counterparts to Egyptian deities, stating his belief (*Historiae* 2.3) that all human beings are equally knowledgeable about the gods—an approach later continued by the Romans in the

*interpretatio Romana*, the assimilation of Greek and barbarian deities. Jean Grondin (1995, 25–26) points out the Greeks' remarkable lack of interest in the practice and theory of textual translation; they considered their literary heritage to be more or less autarkic. Literary translation was in many ways a Roman invention; Livius Andronicus's Latin translation of Homer's *Odyssey* in the mid-third century BCE introduced the novel concept of rendering an entire work of literature into another language. Even in the Roman context, the cultivated elite was expected to be able to read the Greek originals, and until late antiquity, when knowledge of Greek began to decline sharply in the West, translations were primarily limited to Latin "remakes" of Greek poetry and drama (cf. Cameron 2011, 527–535).

On the other hand, like Renaissance humanists and Protestant reformers, the classical Greeks had a particular textual heritage of their own that was separated from them by centuries but regarded as culturally paradigmatic—the Homeric epics. Systematic philology and textual criticism evolved at the Hellenistic libraries of Alexandria and Pergamon primarily as an attempt to secure and canonize the correct text of Homer's works (see Sandys 1967, 105–166). Even in spite of their status as historical, ethical, and aesthetic models, the Homeric epics, particularly their attributions of very human imperfections and misdemeanors to the gods, easily offended later sensibilities; Homer was reproached for this as early as the sixth century BCE by Xenophanes of Colophon (21 B 11, in Diels and Kranz 1951 [DK]). This gave rise to the allegorical method of interpreting, reportedly first adopted by Xenophanes' younger contemporary Theagenes of Rhegium (DK 8 A 2; cf. Hersman 1906, 10), which attributes to Homeric texts "deeper meanings" (*hyponoiaî*) beyond the literal and manifest ones, turning the Homeric gods into figurative names for abstract entities such as the physical elements, virtues, or intellectual capacities. Allegorical explanation had become an established practice by the time of Plato, who rebukes it (*Republic* 2.378d3–8) as an inefficient device (whether true to Homer's intent or not) for circumventing Homer's potentially demoralizing effect on the youth.

Through the Homeric interpretations of the Presocratics (Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, Metrodorus of Lampsacus), Hellenistic and late ancient writers

(Heraclitus Homericus, Pseudo-Plutarch), and the Neoplatonists (Porphyry), as well as the biblical exegetics of Philo of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine, allegory dominated (but not exclusively; see Dawson 1992, 52–72) the ancient and medieval theory of interpretation. It was systematized by John Cassian (*Collationes* 14.8) in the fourth century CE into the famous classification of the different “spiritual” layers of meaning of the scripture (the allegorical, the “tropological” or moral, and the “anagogical” or prophetic) as opposed to its literal or historical meaning. It should be noted, however, that an allegorical reading does not really presuppose any fundamental hermeneutic distance between text and interpreter, but is rather a way of accounting for the foreign or unacceptable elements and expressions of a text without assuming a basic intercontextual difference. The allegorical apologist “defends” and “explains” the relevant author as if this author were a contemporary (cf. Dawson 1992, 47).

There was one context of interpretation, however, that Greek culture did regard as indeed involving an irreducible distance, one that always made interpretations uncertain, equivocal, and insufficient renderings of radically foreign meanings: the mediation between gods and human beings, thought to be the function of the divine messenger Hermes, the presumed namesake of hermeneutics.<sup>2</sup> There was a general understanding that the gods express themselves to mortals indirectly and implicitly, through omens, signs, and cryptic statements mediated by inspired oracles: “The lord whose oracle [*manteion*] is at Delphi [i.e., Apollo] neither speaks out [*legei*] nor conceals [*kryptei*], but indicates [*sēmainei*]” (Heraclitus DK 22 B 93). The minds of the gods were as such inaccessible to humans; one simply had to make what one could of whatever signals available, most often with the help of professional interpreters.

Diotima of Mantinea, in her teachings related by Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium* (202d13–203a8), describes the realm of the “daimonic” (*to daimonion*) as filling up an intermediate space between the gods and human beings and thereby connecting these two inherently separate realms into a unified and consistent whole. A god, says Diotima, does not interact (*meignytai*) with a human being directly; all conversation (*dialektos*) between the divine and the human takes place through the

mediation of the daimonic, which acts as interpreter (*hermēneuon*) and transmitter (*diaporthmeuon*) between them and thus constitutes the sphere of *mantikē*, the art of the divinely inspired seer (*mantis*, connected to *mania*, divine frenzy), accordingly characterized as a “daimonic” human being. From the context of Plato’s mention of *hermēneutikē* (*Statesman* 260d11)—closely connected with *mantikē* and characterized as an art involving commanding or prescribing (*epitattein*)—it is evident that what is first and foremost meant is precisely this “daimonic” art of interpreting the counsels of the gods.

Even the textual interpretation of literary works was importantly oriented toward the sacral dimension. As we have seen, what most interested the allegorical readers of Homer were his accounts of the gods; for example, the treatise *Homeric Problems* by the first-century BCE author Heraclitus is subtitled “On Homer’s Allegories Concerning the Gods,” and it attributes (3.1) to Homer a veneration of “all daimonic things” on the basis of the fact that Homer himself is divine (*theios*). In Plato’s *Ion* (533c9–536d3), poets are portrayed as “interpreters” of the gods in the sense of inspired mouthpieces through which the divine affairs find verbal expression in human language, and this effect is reproduced on a secondary level by the rhapsodes, professional performers of poet’s works. The poets and rhapsodes have no rational epistemic command of the message that they transmit; like oracular pronouncements, poetic words simply verbalize the transcendence of the divine sphere, without making it transparent or comprehensible. With regard to the divine, the poets function precisely as soothsayers (*chrēsmōdoī*) and diviners (*manteis*; 534d1).

The predominantly sacral and theological orientation of theories of interpretation until Friedrich Schleiermacher’s general hermeneutics in the early nineteenth century is thus one of the most important aspects of the ancient and medieval legacy of modern hermeneutics. Through the influence of Judaism and Christianity, sacral interpretation lost its connection with divination and became essentially textual exegesis, incorporating many of the methods of Alexandrian philology. In this sense, Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*, which lays out specific textual rules and guidelines for interpreting the scripture on the basis of a the notion of the biblical texts as human attempts to articulate and praise the ineffable

transcendence of God (1.6), can be regarded as an epitome and culmination of the ancient protohermeneutic heritage, theological as well as philological (cf. Heidegger 1988a, 12; 1999, 9; Gadamer 1974, 1062).

### Language as *Hermēneia* and the “Logocentric” Theory of Meaning

As we have seen, the roots of hermeneutics as a general theory of interpretation can be traced to antiquity. However, in the light of the notions of language and linguistic meaning predominant in ancient philosophy, the idea of a philosophical hermeneutics that would place interpretation at the very heart of discursive thought remained utterly foreign.

Heidegger (1988a, 9–10; 1999, 6–8; 2001, 37–38; 2010, 35) emphasizes that his radicalized notion of hermeneutics is based on a specific wide sense of the Greek *hermēneia*: verbalization, enunciation, and linguistic articulation. We find this meaning in *Ion*: the kind of “interpretation” practiced by poets and rhapsodes is simply verbal expression and vocalization, not explication or elucidation aimed at an articulate understanding. It is only in this sense that Aristotle’s treatise on discursive articulation and linguistic syntax, *Peri hermēneias* (*De interpretatione*), is really a treatise “on interpretation.” The famous opening of the work indicates its fundamentally unhermeneutic point of departure:

Vocal utterances [*ta en tē phōnē*] are tokens [*symbola*] of experiences [*pathēmata*] in the soul, and written signs are tokens of vocal utterances. Just as written signs are not the same for all, so vocalizations are not the same; but the primary experiences in the soul that they signify are the same for all, as are also the things [*pragmata*] to which these experiences conform [*hōn . . . homoiōmata*]. (*De interpretatione* 1.16a3–8)

Written and vocalized material expressions are conventional (*kata synthēkēn*; 16a26–28) tokens of a prelinguistic discourse, that is, of the way in which reality is experienced and articulated in discursive thinking, described by Aristotle in *De interpretatione* and in *De anima* 3 as a process of differentiating (*diairesis*) as well as connecting (*synthesis*) semantic elements into the basic propositional composite form

of subject or noun (*onoma*) and predicate (*rhēma*). While propositionally structured thoughts are in themselves discursive “interpretations” of reality that are already prone to error (*De anima* 3.3.427b16–429a9; 3.6.430a26–b30; *De interpretatione* 1.16a9–18), they are not “symbolic” but rather a natural way in which consciousness “conforms” to reality, and thus move in a universal medium. Spoken and written expressions belong to a particular language or system of writing, but the notions they signify are the same for all.<sup>3</sup>

This principle effectively removes the need for linguistic interpretation in the radical hermeneutic sense, which presupposes that the speaker’s thoughts and intentions are no more “universal” or “ideal” than the language in which they are inscribed, but rather in themselves thoroughly conditioned by that language as a discursive system. From the Aristotelian perspective, linguistic expressions are simply material (vocal or graphic) “translations” of a primordial immaterial discourse, of thinking (*dianoia*) in the Platonic sense of the soul’s voiceless “discourse with itself” (*Sophist* 263e3–9). Understanding them simply involves translating them back into the “language of thought,” that is, recapturing the original discursive experiences verbalized by the author. We find a similar principle in Augustine’s account of how,

when we speak, in order that what we bear in the soul may flow into the soul of the hearer through fleshly ears, the word [*verbum*] which we carry in our hearts becomes an outward sound and is called speech [*locutio*]; and yet our thought [*cogitatio*] is not transformed into that sound, but remains untouched [*integra*] in itself, and assumes a vocal form in which it is introduced to the ears without being modified in itself by the change. (*De doctrina christiana* 1.13)

The Aristotelian and Augustinian notions of linguistic meaning are paradigmatic examples of what Derrida (1967, 71–72; 1997, 49) characterizes as the traditional “logocentric” tendency to conceive the material chain of signs and references as ultimately reducible to an immaterial level of ideal and universal meanings. This, in turn, is one facet of the general “ontotheological” hierarchy attributed by Heidegger (1991, 207–210; 1998b, 311–315; 2002a, 31–67; 2002b, 42–74)

to the Platonic–Aristotelian metaphysical tradition as a whole. In the ontotheological approach, in which ontology (the study of being *qua* being) is ultimately realized in the form of theology (the study of the supreme kind of being; see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1.1026a23–32), the various levels and senses of being are progressively referred back to more fundamental, self-sufficient, and “substantial” levels and senses and, finally, to a perfectly autarkic instance of being. For Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 12.7.1072a19–b30; 12.9.1074b15–1075a10), this is the metaphysical divinity as the perfectly self-immanent self-awareness. According to Heidegger (see, e.g., 1998a, 147–148, 154; 2000, 206–208, 216–217; 2001, 25–26; 2010, 24–25), the fundamental ontotheological standard of being is constant presence or accessibility, and the most constant kind of presence is one that no longer refers to anything outside or beyond itself. Put in another way, ontotheology seeks a path beyond all contextuality, a point of reference that would be absolute in the literal sense of being “absolved” (cf. Heidegger 2002c, 102; 2003a, 136) from all constitutive references to anything other than itself—an ultimate “transcendental signified” that would no longer be “textual” in the Derridean sense of being caught in an indefinite process of the referral and deferral of meaning (*différance*; Derrida 1972, 13–14; 1982, 13).

Philosophical hermeneutics, however, is precisely *the* philosophy of discursive contextuality. It regards meaning and understanding as irreducibly context-sensitive and historically and culturally situated and accepts no universal, ideal level of discourse that would precede its inscription into different material languages, maintaining that the thoughts, notions, and intentions one is capable of having are specific to one’s cultural-linguistic situation. “[T]he ideality of the meaning lies in the word itself. . . . Experience is not wordless to begin with. . . . Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it” (Gadamer 1990, 421; 2004, 417). Philosophical hermeneutics thus abandons the prospect of attaining an ultimate, pre- or supra-contextual point of reference. Its maxim is captured by Gadamer’s (1990, 478; 2004, 470) famous formulation: “*Being that can be understood is language.*” To the extent that anything can be understood, that is, experienced as meaningful and discursively interpreted, it can be understood in the way a linguistic expression is



understood, that is, (con)textually—by considering it as a part of a wider “text,” that is, of a context or framework.

However, the basic dynamic of the hermeneutic circle (Heidegger 2001, 152–153; 2010, 147–149; Gadamer 1990, 270–281; 2004, 268–278) implies that the context is itself never static but dynamic, always in the state of temporal and historical becoming. Every meaningful experience is approached in terms of a “preunderstanding” consisting of earlier interpretations and articulations of relevant earlier experiences. There is no experience without “presuppositions.” However, a preunderstanding is never definitive; since every new experience is as such singular and unprecedented, it also gives an opportunity to “test” one’s presuppositions and thereby to enrich and transform them (Gadamer 1990, 311, 373; 2004, 305, 361). As a putting to test of one’s preunderstanding in the light of one’s concrete singular experiences, interpretation can only be a productive event in which the dialogue between one’s own particular experience and one’s inherited discourses can yield an entirely new meaningful situation, a synthetic “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontenverschmelzung*; 1990, 305–312; 2004, 299–306). For philosophical hermeneutics, all *hermēneia*, all articulation of meaningful experiences, is always also an interpretation of a discursive context consisting of earlier articulations—a dialogue with inherited ways of speaking that has the power to produce new, transformed discourse. To understand is not to reproduce a preexisting ideal meaning, but to reinterpret, to produce new meaning by adapting previous discourse to a new situation.

### Aristotelian *Phronēsis* as a Model for Philosophical Hermeneutics

Even though we can see that the premises of philosophical hermeneutics are at odds with some of the basic presuppositions of ancient thought, we must highlight the fact that both Heidegger and Gadamer nevertheless discovered one of their methodological starting points and basic resources within Greek philosophy, within the inexhaustible richness of the Aristotelian corpus itself. This point of departure is the account of *phronēsis*, “prudence,” “practical insight,” or “circumspection,” in Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

*Nicomachean Ethics* 6 is an account of the “intellectual virtues” (*arētai dianoētikai*), the human excellences related to discursive rational thought and awareness. There are five main dispositions (*hexeis*) through which the soul attains truth (*alētheuei*), that is, discloses and discovers meaningful reality, in a discursively structured way: art or skill (*technē*), scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*), prudence or practical insight (*phronēsis*), wisdom or theoretical understanding (*sophia*), and the intuitive intellect (*nous*; 6.3.1139b15–17). *Epistēmē* is the capacity to derive valid systematic knowledge about the intelligible structures of reality from a set of first, immutable principles (*archai*; 6.3.1139b18–36; 6.6.1140b31–35), and *sophia* is a comprehensive understanding of these structures, one that combines intuitive insight into the first principles with the knowledge of what follows from them (6.7.1141a9–20, 28–b8). *Nous* is in itself nondiscursive and immediate, and appears in the context of discursive thought first and foremost as a component of *sophia*, as the intuitive apprehension of principles (6.6.1140b31–1141a8), not in the pure, “divine” form described in *Metaphysics* 12. These three virtues constitute the “scientific” (*epistēmonikon*) faculty of the soul for knowing things with immutable principles, that is, for attaining fundamental and universal truths. *Technē* and *phronēsis*, by contrast, are based on the “calculative” (*logistikon*) faculty for reckoning with (*logizesthai*) and deliberating about (*bouleuesthai*) contingent and changing matters; they grasp reality from a purpose-oriented viewpoint in the form of “practical truths” (6.1.1139a6–6.2.1139b13). *Technē*, the rational and articulate “technical” capacity for finding the appropriate means in order to attain given ends, relates to particular instrumental situations of making or producing (*poiēsis*; 6.4.1140a1–23). *Phronēsis*, however, relates to particular situations of action (*praxis*), of performing deeds and of choosing how to live one’s life, not simply in view of some particular goal or end, but in order to enact the good and appropriate way of life, “the human good,” as a whole (6.5.1140a24–b30, 6.7.1141a20–28, b8–6.8.1142a30). It is a “truth-disclosing [*alēthē*] and discursive [*meta logou*] practical disposition concerning that which is good and that which is bad for the human being” (6.5.1140b4–6).

Of particular relevance in the Aristotelian account of *phronēsis* is for Heidegger its specific temporality, which is fundamentally oriented to the future as a

dimension of possibilities (6.2.1139b7–9). Being prudent (*phronimos*) essentially involves a capacity for forethought or providence (*dynamis pronoētikē*; 6.7.1141a26–28)<sup>4</sup>; prudence is the ability to consider (*theōrein*), in each case, one’s own particular situation (*ta peri hautō hekasta*) in an appropriate way (6.7.1141a25–26), that is, in the light of one’s own essential possibilities as a human being. *Phronēsis* is precisely the disclosure of the “in each case,” of the practical situation of future-oriented action in the context of one’s utmost possibilities.

[F]or it [sc. *phronēsis*] is concerned with what is ultimate [*tou eschatou*] . . . , and the matter of action [*to prakton*] is such. . . . It [*phronēsis*] is not knowledge [*epistēmē*] but a perception [*aisthēsis*] of the ultimate, . . . in the sense in which we perceive that a triangle is the ultimate geometrical figure; even there, one must stop. (6.8.1142a24, 25, 26–27, 28–29)

Just as *sophia* views the unchanging intelligible structure of reality in terms of an insight into the most universal principles of intelligibility that can no longer be discursively analyzed but can simply be grasped, *phronēsis* is based on a material perception (*aisthēsis*) of a concrete lived situation as an “ultimate” particular fact that cannot be further analyzed but must simply be acted upon. Like the perception of geometrical truths, situational perception essentially involves possibility. In the case of a triangle, we intuitively perceive that it is not possible to come up with a more elementary polygon; in the case of a concrete situation of action, we grasp what it is possible to do in that situation (*to prakton*) so as to contribute to the enactment of a good life.

This future-oriented dimension of possibility is the temporal horizon or context that makes the situation singular and unique. Situations of action are the context-sensitive facets of meaningful reality; whereas ultimate universal principles are permanently intelligible at all times as identical and unchanging, ultimate singular situations have no permanence at all and cannot be reproduced as identical. In this sense, practical “perception” is the exact opposite of theoretical intuition, but here, Aristotle’s terminology vacillates in an interesting manner—in another passage

(6.11.1143a32–b5), he characterizes practical perception precisely as a form of *nous*, arguing that *nous* discloses the primal unanalyzable elements of meaningfulness in “both directions,” that is, in terms of ultimate universality as well as ultimate particularity.

In his 1924–25 lecture course on Plato’s *Sophist*, Heidegger sums up the temporal determinations of *sophia* and *phronēsis*:

*Phronēsis* is catching sight of the just-this-once [*Diesmaligen*], of the concrete singularity [*Diesmaligkeit*] of the instantaneous situation [*augenblicklichen Lage*]. As *aisthēsis*, it is the glance of the eye, the instantaneous glance [*Augen-blick*] at what, in each instance [*jeweils*], is concrete, which as such can always be otherwise. On the other hand, the *noein* in *sophia* is a contemplation [*Betrachten*] of that which is *aei*, that which is always present [*gegenwärtig*] in sameness. Time (the instant and being-always) here functions to discriminate between the *noein* in *phronēsis* and the *noein* in *sophia*. (Heidegger 1992, 163–164; 2003b, 112–113; trans. mod.)

As William McNeill (1999, 93–136) has shown, we discover here, in the reading of *Nicomachean Ethics* 6, the roots of Heidegger’s own notions of the “instant” (*Augenblick*), the temporally multidimensional, dynamic, and context-sensitive present.<sup>5</sup> This notion is absolutely central for philosophical hermeneutics. It describes the most primordial form of the meaningful temporal present as a singular instant, constituted as meaningful in terms of a temporal context consisting of two other temporal “ecstases”: futural possibilities as well as a factual past or “already-having-been” (*Gewesenheit*) that always already delimits the possibilities of a given situation (Heidegger 2001, 323–331; 2010, 309–316). This temporal contextuality of the primordial present is also the ontological foundation for the hermeneutic circle of understanding: the phenomenon to be interpreted is in each case approached in terms of an implicit preunderstanding that delimits in advance the possibilities for understanding in the sense of projecting (*Entwerfen*) existential possibilities upon a futural dimension of sense (*Sinn*; 2001, 142–153; 2010, 138–149). However, our encounter with the phenomenon may make us reconsider our preunderstanding and

discover its finite, particular, and historical nature, thereby freeing up new interpretive possibilities.

Heidegger attributes the discovery of the “instant” to Kierkegaard, maintaining that with this discovery, Kierkegaard has introduced the possibility of a “completely new epoch of philosophy . . . for the first time since antiquity” (Heidegger 1983, 225; 1995, 150). This is, of course, the hermeneutic epoch in which philosophy focuses on the singularity and situatedness of meaning. Yet the outline of this epoch-making discovery was drawn already in Aristotle’s analysis of *phronēsis*. “Aristotle already saw the phenomenon of the instant [*Augenblicke*], the *kairos*, and he circumscribed it in Book 6 of his *Nicomachean Ethics*” (Heidegger 1975, 409; 1988b, 288; trans. mod.). Indeed, Aristotle himself notes that because of their lack of fixity, particular cases of action do not fall within the scope of any set of rules, but the agents themselves must, in each case, “examine matters relevant to the situation [*ta pros ton kairon skopein*]” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.2.1104a3–9). However, Heidegger (1975, 409; 1988b, 288) goes on, Aristotle never connected this analysis with his specific account of time in *Physics* 4, thus failing to “bring the specific time-character of the *kairos* into connection with what he otherwise knows as time.”

Gadamer was profoundly influenced by Heidegger’s reappropriation of the hermeneutic potential of Aristotle’s practical philosophy, and kept returning to the topic again and again throughout his career.<sup>6</sup> His own viewpoint is summarized in the chapter of *Truth and Method* discussing the “hermeneutic relevance of Aristotle” (Gadamer 1990, 317–329; 2004, 310–321). What is essential in the Aristotelian *phronēsis* is for Gadamer the fact that it is a form of knowledge “directed towards the concrete situation. Thus it must grasp the ‘circumstances’ [*Umstände*] in their infinite variety” (1990, 27; 2004, 19). *Phronēsis* grasps the “concrete,” that is, singular and contextual situation, in terms of the wider teleological dimension of enacting the good human life as a whole. At the same time, it looks at the human good not in general terms but from the point of view of what it means in this specific situation. The phronetic grasping of the situation is thus a process that already involves the hermeneutic circle. It is a two-way dialogue that approaches the “particular” in terms of the “universal” yet, at the same time, understands this “universal” in terms

of the “particular.” In other words, *phronēsis* is a matter of applying the universal in a singular case and of understanding—interpreting and reappropriating—the universal through this singular application.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer connects the hermeneutic relevance of Aristotle precisely to the central question of application (*Anwendung*; 1990, 312–316; 2004, 306–310). For philosophical hermeneutics, applying a discourse is not external or subsequent to interpreting and understanding it, but interpretation is rather always already a two-way process of application, of interpreting one’s hermeneutic situation in light of an existing discourse and of reinterpreting this discourse in light of the singular situation. It is in this sense that Aristotle’s analysis of practical insight “offers a kind of *model of the problems of hermeneutics*.” In this model, in order to understand the “universal”—the text—the interpreter “must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutic situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all” (1990, 329; 2004, 320–321).

To conclude this tentative assessment of the ancient philosophical legacy of hermeneutics: we have seen that this legacy has an essentially twofold character. On the one hand, ancient thought restricted the activity of interpreting to certain limited contexts—first and foremost the “daimonic” mediation between the divine and the human realms and the closely related task of performing and explaining the work of poets, the “interpreters” of the gods—and sharply distinguished between the inspired “interpretive” activity of poetry and the rational accounts of philosophers. Moreover, while material language was conceived as a form of *hermēneia*, this first and foremost meant a verbalization and transmission of immaterial and universal discursive meaning which left no need for interpretation in the radical Heideggerian sense of projecting future-oriented situational meaning.

Nonetheless, the philosophical hermeneutics of the twentieth century drew some of its central conceptual resources from Aristotle’s practical philosophy, but in a way that involved overturning the internal hierarchy of the Aristotelian intellectual virtues, first and foremost that of *phronēsis* and *sophia*. *Nicomachean Ethics* 6 concludes that it is *sophia* which is the “most accurate [*akribestatē*] form of knowledge” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 6.7.1141a16–17); it is both a knowledge of (*epistēmē*) and an

insight into (*nous*) the things that are supreme (*timiōtatōn*) by nature (6.7.1141b2–3). It would, Aristotle adds, be strange indeed to regard *phronēsis* or its communal application, political prudence, as the most weighty (*spoudaiotatē*) form of knowledge, “supposing that the human being is not the most excellent being [*ariston*] in the world-order [*kosmos*]” (6.7.1141a20–22). In the “theological” culmination of Aristotle’s ethics, *theōria*, pure disinterested contemplation of reality in the light of its ultimate intelligible principles, is shown to be the supreme form of human flourishing, *eudaimonia*—precisely insofar as *theōria* is an essentially superhuman activity, one that rises above the contextuality and contingency of mortal affairs (10.7.1177a12–18, b26–1178a8; 10.8.1178b7–32).<sup>7</sup>

For the ontotheological ethics of Aristotle, firmly inscribed within the ancient and medieval ethical tradition reaching from Parmenides to Thomas Aquinas, the culmination of human active and intellectual being is thus the escape of thinking from the situatedness of “merely” human existence to the autarkic beholding of the divine and the absolute. Philosophical hermeneutics, by contrast, is precisely the philosophical embracing of this irreducible mortal situatedness of humanly accessible meaning, and in this respect it indeed marks an entirely “new philosophical epoch” with regard to antiquity.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Dannhauer uses the term *hermeneutics* in his treatise *Idea boni interpretis* (Dannhauer 1630, 11) to designate a general “grammar” common to law, theology, and medicine; cf. Thouard 2011, 248. In 1654, he published a methodological treatise on Biblical exegesis bearing the title *Hermeneutica sacra*.

<sup>2</sup> However, the etymologies of *hermēneus/hermēneuein* and of Hermes are uncertain, and there is no conclusive evidence that they are connected; see Chantraine 2009, 356–357.

<sup>3</sup> Porphyry, according to Boethius (*Commentarii in librum Aristotelis Peri hermēneias*, vol. 2, 29.29–30.10), says that the Peripatetic school of Aristotle distinguished a particular “mental” level of language in addition to spoken and written language (see Sorabji 2012).

<sup>4</sup> The Latin *prudentia*, “prudence,” is a contraction of *providentia*, “foresight, providence” (Aubenque 2002, 35n2). It is possible to understand Heidegger’s term *Umsicht*, “circumspection”—one of his translations for *phronēsis* (Heidegger 1992, 21–22; 2003b, 15–16)—in an analogous sense: what is meant is an *Um-zu-sehen*, a “seeing-in-order-to,” that sees the situation in terms of a futural dimension of purpose.

<sup>5</sup> On Heidegger’s interpretation of *phronēsis*, see also Volpi 1988; Bernasconi 1990; Elliott 2002, 225–262; Long 2002; Brogan 2005, 138–148, 169–178; Backman 2007; Ruoppo 2007; Elm 2007; Pedersen 2010. Comparisons between Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s readings of *phronēsis* are carried out in Coltman 1998, 11–24; Figal 1995; Svenaeus 2003.

<sup>6</sup> For Gadamer’s main independent studies on Aristotle’s practical philosophy (besides *Truth and Method* and his studies on Heidegger’s readings of Greek philosophy), see Gadamer 1972; 1985, 164–186, 230–248; 1986, 159–178; 1987, 175–188; 1991, 373–395; 1993, 301–329; 1995, 238–246, 259–266; 1999, 18–36, 142–161; 2007, 227–265, 274–289; 2015 as well as his commented and annotated German translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* 6. For discussions of Gadamer’s reappropriation of *phronēsis*, see Risser 1984; Figal 1995; Coltman 1998, 11–24; Berti 2000; Svenaeus 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger (1992, 171; 2003b, 117) explains the temporal metaphysical roots of this hierarchy: “[B]ecause *sophia* is the purest way of comportment to, and of tarrying with, the everlasting, therefore *sophia*, as a genuine positionality toward this highest mode of being, is the highest possibility.” On Gadamer’s more ambivalent approach to this hierarchy, see Berti 2000.