

# Witnessing, Truth, and Realism: A Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Approach

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## Abstract

*Departing from the opening lines of Aristotle's Metaphysics, this essay provides a hermeneutic phenomenological contribution to the recent turn to realism. In particular, it offers an account of how the notions of truth and reality are thought in hermeneutic phenomenology by exploring the meaning of notions such as *res*, *substance*, and *causa*; it provides a contemporary reinterpretation of *theōria* that does not fall prey to either the modern version of the scientific-theoretical point of view or the onto-theological fallacies of metaphysics. By developing the model of witnessing as a guideline for a rethinking of *theōria*, this essay discusses, first, two realist critiques of hermeneutic phenomenology concerning correlationism and relativism; second, two ways of understanding the real and the true in hermeneutic phenomenology; and third, develops how language can be the locus of truth. In the course of these explorations, it is shown how truth, realism, *theōria* are understood in hermeneutic phenomenology.*

**Keywords:** truth, realism, witnessing, *theōria*

## 1. Introduction: Reinterpreting Aristotle's *Theōria*

"All humans by nature desire [*oregontai*] to know", as the famous opening line of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* reads. The human sensing of

the world is paradigmatic for this *orexis* of the human, this propensity and conation to learn what is:

An indication of this is the delight [*agapēsis*] we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness [*chreias*] they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do [*prattein*] anything, we prefer sight to almost everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things [*kai pollas dēloi diaphoras*] (*Metaphysics* 908a22–27; Aristotle 1984: 1552).

Reading this citation as the prolegomena to a neutral, theoretical attitude prefiguring that of the modern subject in epistemology, one runs the risk of missing the particular attunement of the human Aristotle describes here and the characteristic encounter with reality to which it gives rise. Humans use their senses to orient themselves in the world and to help them deal with beings in the world; the senses are thus usually in the service of making (*poiēsis*) or acting (*praxis*). Yet, there is another use of the senses, a genuine free one, in Aristotle's sense of freedom (*Metaphysics* 983a13–23), namely sensing for the sake of sensing itself.

This free use is not neutral, but rather attuned by *agapēsis*, a profound affection for sensing itself, beyond any practical uses. What is sensing itself? It is *not* the sensing of sensing—once that phenomenon is examined, the inquiry rather concerns the *dunamis* of the *psuchē* (Agamben 1999: 179–183). By contrast, to sense is always to sense something, that is, *to be with* something or someone else, to be attentive and to be drawn to that which *is there as it is* and not as how one might want it to be. The realm of sensing for the sake of

sensing itself is opened up by the suspension of making and acting. Only in this way, the free use of the senses lets beings be encountered and experienced simply as what they are and as how they show themselves – they are not understood as objects subjected to or resisting a human will. Sensing for the sake of sensing itself therefore marks the human mode of existing that resounds in the etymological sense of *ex-sistere*: humans are outside of themselves, attentive and exposed – *ausgesetzt* (Heidegger 1976: 189) writes – to what offers itself to them, to what they encounter and experience.

In a telling turn of phrase, early modern authors such as Locke and Reid describe the senses as witnesses and speak of “the testimony of nature given by the senses” (Reid 1823: 232). The senses testify to that which is; they give evidence of that which is there. The human as a sensing being offers us a first hint of why we might call the human a witness of that which is – and a witness of being (Heidegger 1999: 61–62). Yet, one has to tread carefully here. In fact, to call the human a witness of that which is, goes against the grain of Locke’s and Reid’s understanding of the image of the senses as witness. In the context of early modern thought, this image is overtaken by the legal role of testimony and is marked by the emphasis on epistemology (e.g., also Kant 1956: BXIII–XIV; Latour 1993: 22–24). The senses are compared to witnesses that are interrogated by a tribunal. The case at hand for such a tribunal is never the testimony itself, but rather the nature of the being that is experienced. The case the tribunal needs to settle concerns the truth of this being. In this framework, the testimony of the senses counts as evidence and proof helping the judging subject to settle this case.

If we understand the testimony of the senses along these early modern lines of thought, the figure does not apply to the opening lines of the *Metaphysics*. Aristotle does not describe the senses as a source of information about the world, which is subsequently judged

to be true or false. In fact, this is exactly the account of the senses he rejects. Rather than being worried about the question of whether the way in which the senses inform the subject about reality is truthful and trustworthy, Aristotle's citation speaks of a more elementary testimony of the senses. Humans are witnesses of that which is there *because*, when sensing for the sake of sensing itself, they are truly there with that which offers itself to the senses. The senses are not described as *means* to arrive at judgment; rather, the senses are enjoyed for themselves. Hence, not simply the senses, as opposed to the judging subject, are witnesses of what is; rather, when sensing for the sake of sensing itself, humans themselves are witnesses of the beings to which they are exposed. Humans feel a deep affection, *agapēsis*, for their witnessing of what is.

The truth to which judgment strives is that of the statement, which is true if and only if sufficient grounds or reasons for the sentence or statement are provided. The exposure of the human as a witness of that which is, on the other hand, guides us to a different conception of truth, which Aristotle captures here by the word *dēloi*, from the verb *dēloō*, which means "to become manifest", "to disclose", or "to make known". Sensing enjoyed for itself is the paradigm of the basic attunement that allows humans to exist in their most proper way among that which is, namely as witnesses of beings. The way in which these witnesses encounter and are engaged with these beings is captured by this verb *dēloō*: beings become manifest, disclose themselves and make themselves known to the human. To be human is to be this (taking) place of truth.

How or as what do these beings disclose themselves to the senses? Aristotle responds with the words *polus*, many, and *diaphoros*, difference or perhaps even disagreement, *différend*. When humans witness reality, it presents itself in its plurality and difference, in its conflict and strife. The profound affection that attunes humans does

not only concern their own feeling that they sense – it is not about the sensing of sensing here. This affection rather encompasses the sensing and the sensed, because there is no sensing without something being sensed. *Agapēsis* – and not *eros* or *philia* – is therefore the attunement of this witness to the immense variety of different beings that are made known to them. The human receptiveness and openness to this variety only takes place within this attunement and the free use of the senses it enables. When our seeing is in the service of something else, for instance, when we are on the look-out for something or when we try to find our way in busy traffic, we do not witness the immense variety of that which is simply there, but only see that which is relevant to our particular purposes. The receptiveness and exposure to the variety of all that is, belongs to the attunement of *agapēsis*, an affection for sensing itself as well as for that which is sensed in this way, the plurality of all that is.

This account of the opening lines of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* orients us in a specific way to questions concerning truth and realism as well as to a renewed, hermeneutic-phenomenological conception of *theōria* in line with the Aristotelian idea that *theōria* is distinct from both *praxis* and *poiēsis* exactly because it is an attitude in which humans do not manipulate or transform the reality they encounter, but rather exercise a certain reticence or reserve with respect to that which is, allowing them to be receptive to that which is as it is (Van der Heiden 2021: 24–27). A hermeneutic phenomenological reassessment of the role of truth and reality that resonates with the projects of a “hermeneutic realism” or a “veritative hermeneutics”, needs to rethink *theōria* along the lines of the paradigm of the witness as described above. In this essay, I discuss what such a task involves.

Such a reassessment is not without obstacles. In fact, it necessitates an inquiry into the specific form of metaphysics with which *theōria* is usually associated and which are not endorsed in herme-

neutic phenomenology. Let me distinguish two motifs in the metaphysical paradigm usually associated with *theōria*. First, metaphysics is understood as a metaphysics of substance. It is important to explain why such a metaphysics is problematic for hermeneutic phenomenology. Second, metaphysics often presupposes the notion of an encompassing order – such as thought under the heading of *kosmos* – in which each being has its proper place. Yet, the modern predicament of philosophy is the conviction that all order is a created order, that is, is always also a human artifice. Thus, every order attests to the human genius to invent orders, in the ambiguous sense of *inventio* as both discovery and creation. Yet, when the artifice is mistaken for the absolute order of being itself, these orders tend to conceal the primordial human receptiveness for the many differences in being. In its most elementary sense, this concealment is the onto-theological constitution of these forms of metaphysics. If we understand the onto-theological constitution in terms of this primacy of a unified order, it is not only problematized by hermeneutic phenomenology, but also and consistently in the new forms of realism. At the same time, in several realisms, such as, for instance, object-oriented ontology, objects and things are the preferred entrance to and actual subject of study in this new ontology. From a hermeneutic phenomenological point of view, this gives rise to the worry that the onto-theological *faux pas* is once more committed: when object or thing is another guise of the Aristotelian substance, does this not mean that these ontologies derive from a particular meaning of being determined by one particular being, namely *ousia*?

With these questions and concerns in mind, I want to inquire in more detail into, first, two realist critiques of hermeneutic phenomenology; second, ways of understanding the real and the true in hermeneutic phenomenology; and third, language as the locus of truth.

In the course of these explorations, it is shown how a new hermeneutic phenomenological sense of *theōria* takes shape.

## **2. Two Realist Critiques of Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Different reasons can be provided when discussing the question of why realism recently has become a feasible philosophical point of view (again). Among them, two stand out when addressing the question of whether, how, and to which extent hermeneutic phenomenology is a relevant partner in conversation in this matter, because these two include a critique of (certain forms of) phenomenology and hermeneutics, respectively. The first concerns the charge of correlationism and the second the charge of relativism and the included abandonment of any truth-claim.

As is by well-known, Meillassoux's (2009) account of correlationism includes a whole range of different transcendental and idealist philosophies, from Descartes to Kant and Husserl, and is extended to the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger and Gadamer. If the idealist position is summarized by the statement that beings are only to the extent that they appear to – or are given to – a particular consciousness, the alternative that a realist philosophy wants to address is: "that thought can think what there must be when there is no thought" (Meillassoux 2009: 36). Taken at face value, this critique of transcendental philosophy basically repeats the hermeneutic phenomenological critique of the subject-object dichotomy in favor of a more original co-belonging of thinking and being. However, for speculative realism, the subject-object dichotomy is only one version of correlationism this critique is concerned with; in fact, any philosophy that somehow departs from the original co-belonging of being and thinking is addressed by this critique. Yet, if correlationism is supposed to include such a wide range of positions, one may wonder why Meillassoux's account of the task of thinking, namely to think what

there is when there is no thought, is not itself a hidden form of correlationism. After all, one has to account for how and why thinking can correspond to this being-without-thought in the first place.

Yet, let us apply the principle of charity to Meillassoux and acknowledge that an important variant of this critique can nevertheless be raised against the role of the fore-structure of understanding in hermeneutics. Whatever is explicated is always already implicitly understood, that is, is always already within the reach of thinking and does not confront thinking with its own limitations. In this form, correlationism raises an issue that many other authors have raised under the more phenomenological heading of the question of alterity or difference: how is thinking capable of encountering and responding to that which goes beyond its own limitations and regulations?

The problem, however, with this form of critique is that it is one-sided and does not seem to be aware that *both* claims, the hermeneutical and the realist one, have to be true at once. On the one hand, there must be something – whether we call it the absolute, the thing in itself, alterity, or difference – that transcends a given historico-cultural constitution – say: perspective or horizon – of thinking. On the other hand, for an encounter with this “something” to be truly possible, one must account for the particular potentiality of thought that it *can* be receptive to this difference and, hence, for thought’s basic potentiality-of-being-otherwise (see Van der Heiden 2014). This means that, in addition to the realist insistence on thinking what there is when there is no thought, one has to account for the receptiveness of thought for all that is, that is, for some form of co-belonging of thinking and being. The task to reinterpret *theōria* goes exactly in this direction.

The charge of relativism ties into this. Let us take a small detour to get a sense for the range of this charge. The problem of correlationism does not exist in an onto-theological framework (see Gada-



mer 1990b: 70–71). If beings are created in the mind of God, the correspondence of idea and being is always already given and the presence of the idea in the mind of God is the ground of the existence of this being. Hence, only in a framework where thinking is always already *human* thinking, that is, *finite* thinking, the problem of correlationism can occur. Finitude refers to a particular *passivity* of human thought with respect to that which is to be thought. The human is affected by that which is and thinking is a response to this being-affected, which in itself depends on the physical, biological, historical, social, cultural, and linguistic constitution of the human who responds. Thus, human thinking will necessarily be perspectival and horizontal.

In this framework, relativism might be an attractive option, especially if one argues, as a certain Nietzsche does, that any attempt to articulate one's *singular* responses to one's *singular* way of being affected by that which is, in a language that is *shared* by others, necessarily *betrays* the original, singular experience and response. In this approach, all forms of generality or universality are the result of abstraction, invented in a process of forgetting, distorting, and betraying the original encounter with reality. Moreover, if truth is understood as the correspondence between idea and thing or between statement and state of affairs, truth itself is necessarily an illusion created by this process of forgetting, distorting, and betraying. Moreover, not only truth, but also "the thing itself" is a construction arrived at by abstracting from how one is uniquely affected by a reality that is known only through our being affected by it.

In several forms of realism, it is claimed that this framework of Nietzschean relativism can only be overcome by returning to a conception of the thing itself. That is to say, thinking should not begin with human relations to beings, but thinking should rather return to its old "objective" standard and approach beings as beings in them-

selves, beyond their effect on the human. Apparently – and this marks these realist approaches as speculative in the pejorative sense of the word – human thinking, abstracted from how it is informed by all that is, is capable of such a gesture. Let me repeat that the onto-theological framework is capable of explaining this, since it has divine thought as an objective, external yardstick of every being to which human thought can try to correspond. Yet, if one rejects the onto-theological framework, the question arises how thinking can have this capacity to think the being in itself. With respect to these questions, hermeneutic phenomenology has much to offer since it does not only provide the resources for rethinking the notion of the real, but also for recalibrating the concept of truth so that a truth-claim can be maintained with respect to this notion of the real, without either becoming onto-theological or speculative in the pejorative sense of the word.

### **3. Two Senses of the Real and the True**

Regarding the question of the meaning of the real, hermeneutic phenomenology offers two different accounts, one dismissive and one affirmative.

#### *3.1. Realism and Truth in Sein und Zeit*

In §§ 43 and 44 of *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger addresses realism and truth, respectively. In this context, the notion of *res* appears as soon as beings are encountered in their *Vorhandenheit*: “beings are first conceived as a context [*Zusammenhang*] of things (*res*) objectively present. *Being* acquires the meaning of *reality*. Substantiality becomes the basic characteristic of being” (Heidegger 1977: 201; 1996: 187). These notions of substance, *res*, and thing constitute the dismissive sense of realism. An ontology presenting itself as realism in this sense, has always already understood being as *res*, that is, in

light of the paradigm offered by substance, and thus commits an on-to-theological fallacy by approaching all that is as “*objectively present as real*”. Heidegger’s rejection of this realism concerns exactly this fallacy: this realism forgets to inquire into the understanding of being that always already guides its approach to the beings it encounters. This is philosophically insufficient<sup>1</sup>.

To move this issue forward and to arrive at another understanding of realism that is not susceptible to this criticism, we need to displace the distinction so essential to present-day forms of realism, namely that between “for us” and “in itself”, or between appearing and being. In hermeneutic phenomenology, this displacement has two dimensions.

(1) First, rather than distinguishing being from appearing, we might distinguish between *two forms of appearing*. Such a distinction can be traced in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Beings appear to the senses in two ways, either as useful for something else or for the sake of this appearance itself. Similarly, by distinguishing between *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*, *Sein und Zeit* shows how these two forms of appearing concern two ways of understanding the being of the beings that are encountered. Yet, Heidegger’s version of this distinction is distinctly modern and proceeds from a problematic philosophical decision that obstructs a renewed interpretation of Aristotle’s *theōria*. The

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<sup>1</sup> This is why Heidegger (1977: 207; 1996: 192) prefers idealism over (this type of) realism. Note that § 43 includes one more important ingredient for the discussion with present-day forms of realism. Heidegger argues that the question of the existence of a mind-independent world remains indebted to a subject-object distinction. This means that any explication of the new realisms as an attempt to establish—or simply: to posit—the existence and the priority of a mind-independent reality does not truly overcome this distinction and that a particular form of correlationism lurks behind these realisms which is hidden in the account—or the lack thereof—of the relation of being and thinking. For instance, the idea found in a different way in both Badiou and Meillassoux that mathematics offers us the resources of ontology simply obscures the fact how the modern sense of mathematics presupposes a modern subject. With respect to such positions, Heidegger’s remarks that idealism, rather than realism, has at least understood the philosophical problem at stake here, remain valid.

focus on beings for the sake of themselves in terms of substantiality or *Vorhandenheit* is reductive – reductive but not simply: Aristotle’s basic understanding of being is substance, after all. Yet, Heidegger’s account of *Vorhandenheit* is profoundly modern because he understands the theoretical attitude of the sciences in the first place as an attitude that aims to master and govern that which is, that is, that approaches beings from within the framework of *poiēsis*, characteristic of modern science and technology. Or, in terms developed in *Sein und Zeit*, *Vorhandenheit* is only an accentuated form of appearing within – and presupposing – *Zuhandenheit*. This is fundamentally different from Aristotle’s *theōria* anticipated in sensing for the sake of sensing itself, which requires a genuine suspension of *poiēsis* and *praxis*. In this sense, *Sein und Zeit* does not move forward to a fruitful reinterpretation of *theōria*.

This obstruction can also be formulated in terms of the meaning of *res*. In *Sein und Zeit*, Dasein’s being with other beings is always already understood in terms of *Verfallenheit*. Literature informed by Arendt’s thought on the public realm has already shown why this emphasis on fallenness is problematic with respect to the relation to other humans. Yet, there is also a problem with respect to non-human (or non-animal) beings. In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger determines the human encounter with innerworldly beings always already in terms of a particular meaningful *use* of them. The example of the tool, *Zeug*, is thus the paradigm for the meaningful dealings with innerworldly beings. Consequently, another encounter with innerworldly beings, which would allow these beings to appear as what they are, beyond their use, is itself beyond *Sein und Zeit*’s reach. For another, more affirmative account of *res* we need to turn to other resources. Yet, first, we consider the second consequence of the displacement of being and appearing.

(2) In its most basic sense, as Heidegger (1977: 212; 1996: 196) reminds us, the question of truth concerns Parmenides's dictum regarding the sameness of being and thinking. This dictum receives a particular sense in hermeneutic phenomenology. Truth is *not* in the first place a *correspondence* between appearance and being, be it between idea and object or between proposition and state of affairs. For Heidegger, truth as correspondence is a derivative of an ontological sense of truth, that is, the truth of being. As Heidegger stipulates already in *Sein und Zeit*, in a turn of phrase that might also trigger a rethinking of *res* not as *ousia* but as *Sache*: "'truth' means the same thing as 'matter' [*Sache*], 'what shows itself'" (1977: 213; 1996: 197). Appearing is not added to being, as a supplement, representation, or imitation that may or may not correspond to being, but being itself rather involves and includes appearing (Heidegger 1983: 105–113; Van der Heiden 2021: 139–144). The truth of being is to appear, that is to say, to be drawn from mere concealment, *lēthē*, or forgetfulness. Moreover, only because to be (true) is to appear, does the possibility of a point of view come into play. To be is to appear; and to appear can be to appear to someone, that is, to be sensed, experienced, and understood from a particular point of view to which a being is thus made known. This means that the sameness, co-belonging, or reciprocity of being – *einai* – and thinking – *noein* – is grounded in this sense of being as appearing. Thinking is only possible because beings appear to thinking or, more precisely, because both thinker and being are taken up in the same movement of appearing that characterizes being both as a showing of itself of a particular being and as a showing to the point of view that senses, experiences, or understands. There is a tendency in *Sein und Zeit*, which Heidegger later corrects, to understand this movement of being as appearing as a form of disclosedness and, hence, only in terms of the being of *Dasein*, as if this disclosedness is not the very form of being

in which both beings and Dasein are taken up. Exactly at these points, also due to Heidegger's interpretation of innerworldly beings in terms of *Zuhandenheit*, his account of disclosedness receives subjective overtones. These overtones tend to obscure Heidegger's genuine discovery here, namely that to be *is* to appear and that only to the extent that something appears, it can appear to someone, that is, to a point of view that senses or understands it.

For these reasons, Meillassoux's claim that correlationism includes the Heideggerian idea of the co-belonging of being and thinking guides realism into a fundamentally unfruitful direction since a realism that rejects this co-belonging can only make sense on the basis of the dualism of being and appearing. What Meillassoux seems to be missing here is that this co-belonging that *happens* as the truth of being cannot be separated from that which the Greeks called *lēthē* and *pseudos*. The duality of appearing and being could only arise in Platonic thought because among the different ways of appearing, one appearance was singled out as the true one, that is, as the yardstick and measure for all others – and was subsequently called the true being. Yet, the very name that was given to this true being, *idea* or "the look", expresses that it concerns an *appearance*. Moreover, this yardstick can only be discerned *within* a frame of appearances, and can therefore never be the measure of this frame itself, which is marked by the movement of concealment and unconcealment (Van der Heiden 2021: 139–152).

These considerations also compel us to rethink the meaning of beings. *Sein und Zeit's* approach of thingly beings in terms of *Zuhandenheit* offers a reductive interpretation of what it means that beings appear – to appear here means to appear as a tool (in the mode of *Zuhandenheit*) or as broken tool that interrupts the course of its usage and present itself in its isolation (in the mode of *Vorhandenheit*). However, there is no reason to equate the thingly

being's appearance with its appearance as something useful. This one-sided interpretation of appearance approaches the question of meaning in terms of that of use alone. Yet, what happens to the appearance of beings that are sensed for the sake of sensing itself? The primacy of *Zuhandenheit* thus obstructs the access to a more profound to-and-fro movement between humans and beings in which the human is not an active will, but rather a passive, immersed witness.

### 3.2. Reinterpreting *Res* in Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is thus compelled to reinterpret the appearance of beings beyond the mere being-a-tool-to-use and the mere isolation of the broken tool. Indeed, there are important resources available that allow us to move towards another interpretation of the being as *res* and to rethink Aristotle's *theōria* beyond an account of beings as substance. Both Heidegger (2000) and Gadamer (1990b) emphasize that the question of beings needs to be rethought under the heading of what they call the thing, *das Ding*, or the subject matter, *die Sache*. How does this shift from *Zeug* to *Ding* or *Sache* exactly contribute to rethinking truth and reality in hermeneutic phenomenology? We may distinguish two different aspects.

(1) Heidegger (2000: 177–178) describes two ways of understanding the notion of *res*. Firstly, he emphasizes that in course of the history of philosophy, the notion of *res* is understood in terms of substance and substantiality. The same meaning of *res* is used in *Sein und Zeit*. In "Das Ding" he argues that this meaning depends on the Greek understanding of the being as present being, *das Anwesende*. He emphasizes that the sense of presence is derived from the process of making and representing, *das Herstellen* and *das Vorstellen*—this is the same sense of presence characterizing *Vorhandenheit* in *Sein und Zeit*. The one who makes and the one who represents relate to a being in terms of its *eidos* or *idea*. The user, as Heidegger (2000: 169–

170) repeats the argument of *Sein und Zeit*, has a different, more primordial relation to this being. Even ancient metaphysics as *ousiology* thus takes its point of departure in the model of making, *poiēsis*, rather than using, *chrēsis*.

Secondly, however, Heidegger emphasizes that the Roman experience of *res* is guided by a different experience, modelled on the paradigm of neither making nor using but rather captured by the German verb *angehen* and the noun *Angang*. In this affirmative sense, *res* is the being that concerns or is of concern to us. Our relation with a being as *res* in this sense, is not mediated by its look. Let us be as precise as possible. This look, *eidos* and *idea*, should not be mistaken for any look or any sense we can have of a thing by looking at it. Here, the look is the one we adopt when we make or represent something. This is quite a peculiar look. In fact, it is the look a being offers when it is *not* there and when we cannot be there, with it. In the process of making, the being that is made is not yet there, so that I cannot be there with this being. The being-there of the being is actually the termination of the process of making. Even though this sense of being in terms of *eidos* and *idea* is called "presence", and its accompanying metaphysics, the metaphysics of presence, it actually implies absence: the being in question is only present mediated by its look, abstracted from its actual being-there, here and now. By contrast, the sense of *res* in terms of *Angang* and *angehen* offers an interpretation of the difference between a present being, *das Anwesende*, presented by the look and the being's actual being-there and our being-there-with them: when beings are there and are not merely presented, they *matter* to us. They are not seen as their look suggests, abstracted from their being-there with us, but they make a claim – *Anspruch* (Gadamer 1990a: 131–132) – on us here and now, to see and understand them in the singular sense with which they address us here and now.



The look is an external measure that prescribes what a being should look like and that discards – or even condemns – every difference between this yardstick and the actual appearance of this being in its being-there with us. Yet, the actual encounter with the being is marked by these differences that make a claim on us – in Aristotle’s phrasing: when used for themselves and not for the goal of making, the senses show us beings in their many differences.

This difference between the look that presents a being by abstracting from the actual encounter with a being in a particular here and now, and the appearance offered here and now where and when we are with the being and encounter it in its being-there, implies a distinction between two types of spectators. The spectator who adopts the point of view of the look, might best be called by its modern name, “subject”, because the subject is the one who represents what is and whose representation is repeatable as the same. The second spectator, however, I propose to call “witness” because the witness, for instance the eyewitness, is the one who is there when something happens. This is, after all, how witnesses make themselves known: “I was there”. Moreover, the witness is the one who was there with that which happened; the witness and their witnessing has the character of an unrepeatable, singular encounter with that which appeared there, in its own sense and difference. In folklore, *Angang* also refers to someone’s contingent encounter with something or someone else that plays a decisive role in their future. *Angang* thus describes how the being-there with beings affects the witness and how it matters for them, because from that point onwards, they *are* witness of their encounter with beings.

These considerations resonate with Gadamer’s reflections (1990a: 126–139; esp. 129–130) on the role of the spectator in his account of the “religious rite” (*Kultspiel*) and the “play in a theater” (*Schauspiel*; 1990a: 114; 2013: 113). To grasp its specific role, Gad-

amer characterizes the spectator as a player, *Spieler*, and he does so in order to distinguish his conception of the spectator from the other conception of the spectator that takes its point of departure in aesthetic consciousness. This second conception, from which Gadamer distances himself, coincides with the spectator as subject. His account of the spectator as player, on the other hand, strongly resonates with what I prefer to call the spectator as witness. In fact, it seems to me that the characteristics of the spectator Gadamer mentions are actually characteristics of a witness and not a player. This is especially clear in the account of the temporality discerned in the to-and-fro movement of play and spectator. Gadamer emphasizes that “the being of the spectator is determined by his ‘being there present’ (*Dabeisein*). Being present does not simply mean being there along with something else that is there at the same time. To be present [*Dabeisein*] means to participate [*Teilhabe*]” (1990a: 129; 2013: 127). This particular precedence of participation or belonging over conscious attention to what is shown is, according to me, the very essence of the witness. Gadamer seems to affirm this when he subsequently connects this account of the spectator to the ancient Greek role of the *theōros*, from which *theōria* is derived. The *theōros* originally is the envoy sent to participate in another community’s religious festival and to watch it. Such a *theōros*, however, is more a witness than a player. The *theōros* engages and participates, but also from a particular distance and hence by a certain reticence or reserve – they are, after all, *theōros* at *another* community’s festival. This characterizes a witness’s participation in an event in which they are neither actor, nor player, nor victim.

Moreover, the *theōros* is marked by a form of self-forgetfulness because they are immersed in what they witness: “*Theoria* is a true participation, not something active but something passive (*pathos*), namely being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees”

(1990a: 129–30; 2013: 127). This citation captures the difference between subject and *theōros*. However, in his attempt to stipulate this difference as strong as possible, Gadamer exaggerates the involvement of the *theōros* in that which offers itself to be seen. This exaggeration is probably due to his interpretation of the *theōros* as player rather than as witness. Players are *fully* immersed in the game they are playing. The point of view of the witness, however, needs to be distinguished from the one who celebrates the festival and is indeed fully carried away by the gods and the enthusiasm they evoke. The *theōros* participates, but in this participation, the festival is in the first place a spectacle, that is, something to be witnessed and to be seen rather than something to be simply celebrated.

Yet, if we reinterpret Gadamer's account of the spectator as witness, a rethinking of Aristotle's *theōria* becomes possible. The *Sache*, the subject matter, takes precedence in the attunement that marks the *theōros*. The being of the *theōros* as witness is a true form of "Bei-der-Sache-sein", being-there-with-the-subject-matter, in which the witness is passive in the sense that it lets the subject matter appear as what it is and does not impose its own frame of reference. The strange interplay of involvement and distance or reticence that characterizes the spectator as witness has its own sense that cannot be separated from the question of truth. Gadamer opposes one's being fully immersed in a festival or the playing of a game to the absolute distance of the subject-position. However, those who are fully immersed in a game or in the enthusiasm or the intoxication of the religious rite are not concerned with the festival or the game as something that appears and is manifested. The particular interest in the truth of the subject matter requires the spectator as witness, positioned in between the player, who as player is always fully immersed, and the subject who is always at absolute distance. It is the particular play of proximity, concern, and participation, on the one

hand, and distance, reserve, and reticence, on the other, that characterizes the spectator as a witness who is interested in what appears for the sake of this appearing itself<sup>2</sup>.

(2) Closely related to this first rethinking of *res* as the being that concerns us here and now and the reinterpretation of the *theōros* that goes hand in hand with it, is the second reinterpretation of *Sache* and *Ding*. As Gadamer (1990b: 67) notes, *Sache* translates not only *res* but also *causa*. The juridical sense of *causa* is also characteristic for the notion of *Ding*. In Dutch, in which one has the same word *ding*, the expression *in het geding zijn* exists, which means that this thing, *ding*, is actually the case in question, that is, the case that gathers different parties in their dispute, as in a court case, *rechtsgeding*. In such a law suit, these parties are all competing – *dingen* – and pleading so that their points of view will be acknowledged and will be done justice.

In such a legal context or metaphorical usages of phrases such as *in het geding zijn*, *Sache*, *ding*, and *causa* retain the meaning of something that matters to those who have a stake in this case. Yet, the notion of *causa* adds to the phenomenological explication of *res*, the particular sense of gathering or assembly (Heidegger 2000: 174–175). This is what *causa* does: it gathers different stakeholders or different points of view around itself. Moreover, the gathering or assembly in which these are brought together is marked by a striving for justice. In its most elementary sense, this striving means that the gathering lets itself be guided by the case in question. The *Sache* requires, as one can say in German, an approach that is *sachlich* or *sachgemäß*, that is, according to the *Sache*. To explicate this *Sachlichkeit*, Gadamer (1990b: 66–67) emphasizes that when a being

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Gadamer (1990a: 137) returns to this complex of proximity and distance in his reflection on the spectator in Greek tragedy. Yet, even though the

is encountered as subject matter, it does not bend to a human will – it is encountered as neither tool nor object of manipulation – but is rather experienced as resistance, *Widerstand*, against the human attempt to bend it to their will. When this happens, the primacy of the subject over the subject matter turns upside down: the *Sache* insists on what it is and on as what it appears. This resistance and insistence of the *Sache* implies that the points of view no longer matter as *subjective* points of view. Subjective points of view can be mutually attuned, for instance, in order to reach an acceptable intersubjective assessment of the case in question. By contrast, this resistance and insistence of the subject matter implies that points of view only matter as points of view *of the subject matter*, that is to say, that (partially) show it *as it is*. Hence, the assembly is a gathering around the *Sache* in question, concerned with its truth, that is to say, with how it appears as it is to a plurality of (possibly conflicting) points of view.

Heidegger (1983: 111–112) suggests that the presocratic Greek experience of being is structured in exactly this way. When analyzing the meaning of being as appearing, he notes that because a being first appears and offers a particular aspect (*Ansicht*), that it can be seen from a particular point of view and that, given the diversity of points of view, this aspect changes and differentiates. Clearly, in the to-and-fro movement between appearance and points of view, distortions or displacements can take place and a point of view can cover over (partially or fully) the being it claims to have discerned. Consequently, if the truth of being consists in appearing and offering aspects, this truth cannot occur without the possibility of displacing, distorting, or covering over. Yet, it would be wrong to deduce from this that the variety or diversity *itself* of points of view would be the source of these forms of concealment. The possibility of concealment

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spectator belongs to the essence of Greek tragedy for Aristotle, this does not imply

is given with the to-and-fro movement of appearance and point of view. Yet, additionally, every encounter is the source of another point of view on the same subject matter because, to quote Aristotle, the free use of the senses discloses the many differences of things, shows them in their variety. The living encounter with a being here and now is thus itself the ground of both diversity and of the possibility of concealment.

In this case as well, the model of the witness provides an example. The eyewitness of a traffic accident might be attuned properly to what happens here by the anxiety of the event and the care for the victims elicited by seeing and sensing the accident, but might at the same time be distorted by other worries, because they, for instance, have an important appointment to which they don't want to be late, and so on. In this sense, the possibility of distortion is *intrinsic* to the point of view of the eyewitness. Yet, this does not mean that there is an external measure or point of view that can establish once and for all "what has happened" – the eye of the camera, for instance, senses nothing and for that very reason can only register and not understand the meaning of what happens. However, there may be other eyewitnesses who sensed and perceived what has happened differently because of the *variations* in which they are attuned to the sight of the scene. Someone who was a victim of a traffic accident themselves will be affected differently than someone who experiences such a scene the very first time, but also than someone who is professionally used to offer medical assistance to victims of traffic accidents, or someone who notices that the victim is a loved one. The variations of these different points of view are due to the very nature of appearing (see Yazicioğlu 2019: 104–105). At the same time, all these witnesses are gathered around one case in question: what is the sense of what

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that the spectator is a player.

happened there where they were present affecting them? There is no external yardstick that fixes the true meaning of what has happened. Yet, that does not mean that there is no concern for truth. The gathering of different and possibly conflicting points of view around one case in question, which resists and insists, is the very locus of truth.

#### **4. Language as the Locus of Truth**

These considerations on the primacy of the *Sache*, the subject matter, in hermeneutic phenomenology and the specific explication of *res*, not in terms of substance but in terms of that which matters to us, offer a clear account of the type of realism at stake in hermeneutic phenomenology. Moreover, these considerations have also shown how and to which extent the hermeneutic-phenomenological account of the *Sache* includes a particular ontological conception of truth: being shows itself as something that matters to us and that makes a claim (*Anspruch*) on us.

Yet, within the framework of hermeneutic phenomenology, the ontological question of truth as the co-belonging of being and thinking is also a question concerning language and *logos*. That language is the locus of truth basically forms the heart of both a logical and epistemological conception of truth. In hermeneutic phenomenology, however, this locus is reinterpreted ontologically. If the human on which the *Sache* makes a claim by its very appearing (as distinct from its mere usefulness) can be understood as *theōros* and witness, the singular impact of the *Sache* can only reach others in its significance when the spectator bears witness to what they have seen. Language as testimony *extends* the claim as well as the appearance of the *Sache*. Albeit only in linguistic form, it allows the claim and the appearance to be shared. I have extensively discussed the concept of testimony elsewhere. Here, I want to consider which conception of language and of the truth of language is needed to be able to think

the linguistic articulation of the claim and the appearance of a *Sache* in this way.

Let us recall what Heidegger already offers in § 44 of *Sein und Zeit*. Even though only in a nutshell, § 44 provides a conception of the truth of language. This conception is not a logical one. The linguistic version of truth as the co-belonging of thinking and being is not the correspondence between a linguistic statement and a state of affairs. This secondary, logical, and epistemological sense of truth rather depends on a primordial conception of the truth of language. Language or *logos* is first and foremost characterized by its capacity to let beings be seen “in their discoveredness” (Heidegger 1977: 218; 1996: 201), that is, as they show themselves. Such a conception of language only makes sense if it is *not* understood as a necessary *distortion* of that which it articulates. The Nietzschean relativist position, as mentioned above in the second section, presupposes that it is impossible to do justice to one’s singular experiences when articulating them. The conception of language in hermeneutic phenomenology is different. In language, the human has the potential to show a being as it has shown itself, as it is sensed, experienced, or understood. Therefore, language has its being in showing and disclosing the subject matter about which it speaks.

Obviously, such an account of language must include a sense of *displacement* as well. The one who is addressed by testimony does not experience the subject matter about which the witness speaks in exactly the same way as the witness did. This means that Derridean questions concerning the nature and the extent of this displacement have to be raised. Nevertheless, this displacement does not need to diminish the claim or the appearance of the subject matter. The subject matter of a testimony also makes a claim on the addressee. It is therefore thanks to language that the question of plurality starts making sense. The appearance of a being to different points of view



can now be exchanged and shared between these points of view: by using language someone can show how something showed itself to someone else and vice versa. Similarly, in terms of the legal provenance of the notion of *Sache* as *causa*, the case in question can only be deliberated in language and requires that each claim on the case is articulated.

The possibility of a dialogue as well as of a dispute that thus opens up concerns the space in which a plurality of appearances can be brought into play, which one can think, *mutatis mutandis*, along lines of thought developed by Arendt. A dialogue or a dispute only makes sense on the basis of the following dual appearance or evidence of the case in question, bringing into play both identity and difference.

First, the subject matter must show itself to both speakers as the *same* subject matter. In this sense, one has to adjust Gadamer's claim that in a dialogue the interlocutors strive for agreement and that this agreement basically functions as regulative idea in a Kantian sense – that is to say, as a transcendental yardstick that can never be arrived at in any actual dialogue. Instead, the "agreement" that is relevant here is positioned at the very beginning of both dialogue and dispute. They can only take place if an agreement exists that both interlocutors are concerned with the *same* subject. Moreover, a dialogue is not measured by the striving towards agreement but rather by the shared subject matter around which the speakers are gathered. Hence, it is not the intersubjective dimension of dialogue or dispute that define it, but it is the subject matter. This is a crucial, realist correction of a certain tendency to let the question of the subject matter be dissolved in social discourse and intersubjective spaces filled with conflicting wills to power (Latour 2004). Even though the spaces of dialogue and dispute are spaces in which the case in ques-

tion appears, these appearances and their articulations are *of* the subject matter.

Second, the subject matter must appear differently to the speakers or conflicting parties. If both have, from the outset, the exact same opinion about the subject matter, there is nothing to talk about and nothing to be gained in terms of the appearance and the understanding of this particular being. Also in this respect, I tend to disagree with Gadamer that the goal of dialogue is to reconcile different points of view on the subject matter. Rather, it seems to me that a true and fruitful dialogue consists in showing many differences with respect to the subject matter – much like the Aristotelian senses when used for themselves bring to light many differences. The point of departure is a plurality or a conflict of interpretations. Nevertheless, these interpretations are *of* the same subject matter. Hence the dialogical space of appearances and of conflicting interpretations is a genuine manifestation of *logos* as *legein* or gathering. What unifies the space of many different points of view is the case in question, that is, its claim on all and its significance for all.

The crucial, realist commitment here is that we are not imprisoned in language, but rather that language allows the claim of the subject matter to appear. The alternative claim that we are imprisoned in language depends on a dichotomy of language and being, which reiterates the dichotomy of appearing and being. This alternative has already shown its profoundly nihilistic face; it implies that we are only dealing with our own fictions of being and that, consequently, the question of truth as such does not make any sense. It is for this reason that Gadamer emphasizes that language is not simply the language of humans; it is also the language *of things*. That is to say, language and *logos* are not simply that of the human. Rather, beings have their own participation in *logos* and, because of that, they can be said. The possibility that all beings can be said (Gadamer 1990b:

72) marks the hermeneutic phenomenological conception of language. It is the possibility that beings can come to language – *zur Sprache kommen* – and that in this coming to language they appear and make a claim – *Anspruch* – on human thinking and speaking to be in accordance with these beings – *sachlich* or *gemäß*. Language thus gathers being and human thought in their co-belonging.

Let me emphasize that this co-belonging of being and thinking is not simply presupposed, as it is in the onto-theological paradigm, but is always *at stake* in the enactment of humans responding to and interpreting the beings that appear to them. “Claim” renders *Anspruch*. The claim made by the appearance of beings is itself already part of language: *Anspruch* is derived from *ansprechen*, that is, to address and also to address someone in such a way that it becomes significant to them, a matter of concern. This particular dimension, role, and significance of language to account for what happens in the truth that marks the co-belonging of being and thinking is what makes this form of realism a genuinely *hermeneutic* realism.

Let me conclude with the remark that this implies that just as a double sense of the Aristotelian senses exists, used for themselves or for something else, a double sense of language exists. On the hand, we have human language, which is the language that approaches all that it encounters in such a way that it can be bended to the human will. It is the human language of manipulation by which each being is interpreted in such a way that it fits within a particular use imposed on them. Clearly, in this human language, the language of the beings themselves is not simply absent, since the use in which these beings are to be incorporated must be one (reductive) way of explicating them. Yet, this language is ruled by wills to power. On the other hand, there is the language of things, that is, the language by which humans respond to the way in which beings address them when appearing as they are. Aristotle’s depiction of sensing for the sake of sensing

itself prepares his account of *theōria*. By reinterpreting the notion of *res*, we have been able to rethink the spectator as witness. By reinterpreting language as the thinking response to the being's appearance and address, we have been able to rethink the linguistic interpretation and articulation that this witness of beings offers, is a genuine testimony of what is.

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