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Language, Truth, and Rhetoric

Collin Pointon

Key words, concepts, and names: Rhetoric, Postmodernism, Hermeneutics, Continental Philosophy, *alētheia*, Bruns, Tarnas, optionally Heidegger, Gadamer, Nietzsche.

Truth, in its nature, is untruth -Martin Heidegger (Bruns 21)

The words of Martin Heidegger are no example of the lowest form of wit. His sentence is meant to be interpreted in two important ways that utilize different meanings of the word "truth." Our common understanding of the word truth is not something innate but a product of history and culture that stretches back through the Romans to the ancient Greeks. *Alētheia* in ancient Greek was translated to *veritas* in Latin. The translation included an interpretation--as all translations do (which is why translation is rhetorical in nature)--of *alētheia* as a Platonic entity. *Alētheia* was interpreted as something transcendent; something that remains constant no matter what culture, language, time, class, gender, race, etc., one comes from. *Alētheia/veritas/truth* is "out there" somewhere and we just need to find it. We often think of truth in this way. It's at the heart of phrases like "the moral of the story is," or "the author's message is," or "what the novel is really about is,"--as if we fully know the author's intent and that the text contains one absolute "point."

If the quotation from Richard Tarnas is our understanding of the world, truth as something transcendent is an impossibility because everything is internal to interpretation. As Friedrich Nietzsche said "truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions..." (*On Truth...* 878). The consequence of Tarnas' understanding (or interpretation) is to interpret Heidegger's words in the same way as Nietzsche's. Fundamentally, "truth" is propaganda and a form of exclusion. For Plato truth excluded the poets, for René Descartes it excluded the mad, and for others it has excluded the heathen, the savage, the communist, and the terrorist: i.e. the Other.

But there is another interpretation of *alētheia*; the one that has been lost in translation. Gerald Bruns explains that Heidegger uses an:

...etymology of *alētheia*, which frequently is translated as 'truth' but which Heidegger renders as 'unconcealedness'. *Alētheia* is rooted in the word for forgetfulness (*lēthē*), which for Heidegger means that *lēthē* belongs to truth, is internal to it; but *alētheia* also entails words for secrecy, hiddenness, or escaping notice... (22)

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.....
If we take Heidegger's understanding of *alētheia* to also be his use of the word truth, then "truth, in its nature, is untruth" means something different. The root of truth (*alētheia*) is forgetfulness (*lēthē*), thus Heidegger is getting at the idea that truth is the revealing of what we have forgotten, or the revelation of what our truths have excluded (ergo unconcealedness). He uses the terms "presuppositions" and "prejudices" as what *alētheia* renders unconcealed. Using Nietzsche's terms, *alētheia* is the recognition of the illusions.

So what does Heidegger's interpretation of truth (*alētheia*) have to do with rhetoric and Tarnas' quotation? Honestly, I can think of no better explanation than: everything. Tarnas' description comes in his chapter about postmodernism and postmodernism is significantly the creation of Nietzsche and Heidegger. But I want to say something much more significant than: Tarnas' description is the product of Nietzsche and Heidegger. First, this isn't a fact because there are an untold number of other contributors, such as Sartre, Foucault, and Derrida. Second, these two, and others, are reaching the exact same conclusion for the basis of truth: rhetoric. While Nietzsche speaks of illusions, Heidegger of presuppositions, and Hans-Georg Gadamer of prejudices, they are all reaching the same conclusions. Our truths have no absolute objective basis, whether that be a transcendent form, universal human nature, or anything else. Without a purely objective basis, "everything is internal to interpretation" (Bruns 3). The beginnings of postmodernism are in Tarnas' own conclusion: "the world cannot be said to contain any features in principle prior to interpretation" (397).

We could say there is a level playing field for all interpretations: "In the contemporary *Weltanschauung*, no perspective--religious, scientific, or philosophical--has the upper hand..." (Tarnas 402). But this is *only* theoretically. Theoretically, anything goes, and anything could be truth. But realistically, I see nothing of the sort. Entrenched dogmatism and irreconcilable factions are common. We are in a state of always already holding a preference for what is true (or equally, what is sensible/reasonable/understandable). This is why language as we know it is rhetorical--the ancient sophist Gorgias was making this evident before Plato. Language presupposes an audience and the speaker/writer and the audience must hold similar values in order to understand one another--Aristotle, unlike Plato, was well aware of this. One system of shared values is the proper construction of a sentence. Grammatical errors completely undermine the ethos, logos, and pathos of the speaker/writer for the audience. Gadamer says our prejudices lead us from behind and it takes an extraordinary amount of effort just to become aware of them. The important distinction to make though is that our prejudices and preferences are not wholly determined. There always remains the possibility for new understandings and any truth is debatable and negotiable.

The postmodern attitude toward truth, language and rhetoric is not new. The view has always been around but we see in history an attempt to hide it. The fact is that rhetoric never died. Rhetoric is like art, where art can somehow include anti-art like Dadaism. When someone cuts down rhetoric or entombs it somewhere--as so many thought they did--that action in itself is a rhetorical action. The story of those who attempt to destroy rhetoric is the story of Oedipus. As they dismantle, they deny and deny all the forces of (wo)man and nature that inform that their act of destruction is actually an act of construction. By fleeing from their fear they become their fear. "He who

fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster," as Nietzsche warns (aphorism 146). That isn't to say that rhetoric is a monster, although it can be used for monstrous ends. Rhetoric, like fire, is powerful. It can be used wisely or foolishly; can protect or harm depending on who uses it and how.

We should not exalt our ingenuity in the interpretation that postmodernism throws off all the shackles encircling freedom. Dogmatism is still entrenched throughout our culture, academics, and identities. A sensible reaction to the nonexistence of absolute truth is horror; since apparently the only certainty is uncertainty and the only truth is untruth. Another reaction is to sweep it aside as "just talk," as I find some contemporary analytic philosophers doing. This should be no surprise. Their interpretation of truth is that any assertion like Nietzsche's won't lead us anywhere we want to go or should want to go. Therefore, it cannot possibly be truth. Is this an example of dogmatism and irreconcilable factions? Maybe we've just misunderstood one another and all we need is to find the "common ground." William Faulkner should echo in our minds: "The past is never dead; it's not even past" (*A William Faulkner Encyclopedia*, 326).

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