



In Search of a Universal Landmark of Hermeneutic Reflection

VAJA VARDIDZE 

Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University, v.vardidze@sabauni.edu.ge

Abstract: The aim of the present article is to identify a universal landmark of hermeneutics in order to discern what is involved in the act of cognition and the object towards which the process of understanding is directed. The focus is placed on a paradigmatic shift from the horizon of dialogue between inner and outer speech to a perspective of freedom, which ultimately confers meaning upon the act of dialogue itself. In this context, reference is made to Hermann Krings' transcendental analysis of freedom, which does not provide a direct answer to the hermeneutical question, but rather thematizes the preconditions for the realization of freedom. This thematization elucidates the substantive dimension of cognition, engages its point of origin and its teleological orientation, and substantiates the phenomenological perspective. However, in order to ensure that transcendental analysis is not construed as an absolutist claim regarding the determination of consciousness, the present article also points to the need for defining the status of the hermeneutical process itself. The process of transcendental analyses presupposes factuality, revisits the historical-critical method, and aims to "regulate" the inherent dynamics and laws of understanding. Such an approach gestures toward the horizon of the possibility of understanding, which, although shaped by a regulative concept (a worldly mediation) and situated within a framework of epistemic reference or a particular system of thought—may also be determined by the creative act of the Absolute. As such, this act transcends the existing epistemic frameworks and cognitive systems, thereby opening a theological perspective that does not negate rational categories but rather integrates them into the quest for an order oriented toward the Absolute.

Keywords: hermeneutic, freedom, truth, transcendental analyses

The civilizational crisis is a sign of a hermeneutical crisis, which is understood as a deficiency of meaning. The determination of a universal landmark in hermeneutical inquiry reflects the desire to overcome this crisis. This desire arises through the conceptual identification of understanding. This implies that the conceptual definition of hermeneutics' universal landmark represents an attempt to comprehend it, though the universal aspect of hermeneutics traditionally was conceived within the paradigm of transmission as the givenness of the internal word—*im verbum interius*. Jean Grondin sees Hans-Georg Gadamer's explanation of this aspect along Augustinian lines, within the complexity of inner dialogue, which cannot provide the possibility of saying everything (Grondin 2001, 10). This complexity was considered

This article presents, in a modified form, a certain conceptual aspect of my book published in Georgian (Vardidze 2025).

a universal moment in which *actus signatus* never completely coincides with *actus exercitus*. Universality was reduced to linguisticity. For Gadamer, the being that can be understood is language. The uttered is understood fully only when the hidden inner speech is comprehended beyond it. Of course, this does not refer to a private or psychological world that precedes linguistic expression, but rather to the depositum that strives for the articulation of wrestling as such. But the orientation of the wrestling also raises questions. With an anti-metaphysical logic, the utterance is self-sufficient and must be examined for its internal consistency. However, in Martin Heidegger's language, expression for hermeneutics is secondary, futural (*Abkünftiges*). The wrestling with the expressed and the desire to possess it reveals a wrestling with language. In classical hermeneutics, this is precisely what has been considered the universal landmark.

However, the purpose of this article is not to search for this universal in the linguistic horizon, but to redirect it to freedom, which seeks the basis of understanding and is concretized in the paradigm of transcendental logic. It is precisely in this logic that the conceptual instrumentarium is perceived—an instrumentarium that does not provide a substantive response to hermeneutical inquiry but rather defines the starting and target points in the explication of its universal component. This relates to the mutual constitution of the structures of knowledge and freedom. Consequently, conceptual precision is sought not in the definition of language, but in comprehending meaning as a component of freedom. In other words, the universal determiner in hermeneutics is not in the expression of dialogue, but in the realization of freedom underlying it, because the struggle with language is not primary, but rather a self-determination expressed in the definition of language. It is precisely self-determination that represents the primary ability and reality which provides the hermeneutical process with its foundation and legitimacy. The difference between foundation and legitimation points to the interconnection and fundamental distinction between persuasiveness and conviction within the hermeneutical process, which emerges in the dialectic of (knowledge) possession (*Haben*) and being (*Sein*). This difference demonstrates that hermeneutics is not reduced to a rhetorical discipline requiring linguistic juggling, but remains faithful to a statement of truth, which attributes an authentic and factual significance to foundation and legitimation.

1. The Contemporary Challenge of Hermeneutics

First, if we cast a glance at the historical development of hermeneutical thought, we can summarize it by enumerating several hermeneutical components that play a decisive role in the process of cognition and have been emphasized within the

systemic vision of various hermeneutical schools.¹ It is evident that the rational nativity of empiricism and mechanism (the assumption that what we perceive directly and empirically is self-evident) does not provide convincing and clear answers. Instead, it demands a more precise and lucid description of the cognitive process. This process is characterized by preconditions that are marked by existential orientation (Heidegger 1984) and are always perceived within a specific perspective, paradigm, or tradition (Gadamer 1986). It is the nature of the mind not only to combine the received experience into a one whole (Immanuel Kant), but also to obscure or even expel experience deemed unnecessary from consciousness (Sigmund Freud). Phenomenological analysis reveals that, stemming from the existential component and the non-immediate, eccentric-intentional character of consciousness, there are no pure facts or their immediate apprehension. Rather, every object of cognition is the result of interpretation and is transmitted through interpretation. Interpretation presupposes the existence of what is already understood, because if nothing is comprehended, nothing can be the subject of interpretation. The incomprehensible cannot be interpreted unless it enters the space of understanding. In the process of cognition or interpretation, language appears not merely as a passive instrument of comprehension and communication but is viewed as an active and living flow of understanding—a conceptual system under constant development that both animates and conditions cognition as a creative process.

The aforementioned discourse clearly demonstrates that the hermeneutical process is characterized by complexity, revealing multiple intricate dimensions of cognition: a relational nature of truth; perspectival constitution and hierarchical nature of comprehended reality; its interconnection with constitutive variables and contextual dynamics; the coherence of relationships between the holistic and the partial; the structural significance of the hermeneutical circle; the intermediary component of reality as an echo of the spirit's eccentricity. Drawing from Paul Ricoeur's conceptualization of self-consciousness (Ricoeur 1988–91; 2005), the "I" is understood as a continuous process of reception, reformulation, and transmission. In this process, the understanding of the experience of belief emerges as a translation of the yet inexpressible; moving from the internal/intrinsic word to the external/expressed word. This experience carries an *excess of meaning* that demands a persistent exercise of doubt and critique (as explored by Jürgen Habermas (1988a, 1988b), Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno), and a continuous content renewal (Ricoeur 1976). The process of experiencing and comprehending requires a fundamental reference point that often serves an orienting and systematizing function. Consequently, truth is frequently ascribed a functional significance. Such a reference point is expressed through fundamental experience, orienting thought, key conceptual frameworks,

¹ For reference, we can cite the following positions as supporting literature: Thiselton 2009; Jensen 2007; Joisten 2009; Ineichen 1991; Jeanrond 1991; Grondin 1994.

and paradigmatic constructs (as in Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language). This is particularly evident in Gadamer's concept of horizon fusion—experienced as an unexpected and incalculable encounter of intersecting experiences.

Against the contemporary epistemological landscape, a profound philosophical question emerges: Is the act of cognition a process deliberately orchestrated by the subject, or an inevitable, self-illusory endeavor suspended in perpetual anticipation of the ultimate revelation of meaning? Within the labyrinthine terrain of pluralism, ambivalence, and postmodern critical discourse, the "I" confronts an existential challenge: How does it situate and discover itself as an active cognitive subject? A fundamental phenomenological observation reveals that the human being—as a consumer of freedom and an ardent pursuer of knowledge—actualizes self-experience through complex, multi-dimensional processes. This occurs not merely within accompanying contextual frameworks, but within the fundamental existential processes that define one's very being. Whether manifesting through the dynamics of self-realization or in the concrete facticity of striving toward the absolute, the individual emerges as a person and cognitive subject through a dialectical formation of continuous searching and experiential accumulation. The ambivalent interconnection between dependence and freedom illuminates the thinking subject, whose content—drawing from the *Cogito* conception—is entangled in the maelstrom of history and language, immersed in their inherent ambiguities.

For the American theologian David Tracy, hermeneutics fundamentally investigates two pivotal dimensions: historical context and linguistic significance (Tracy 2014, 159–69).² From their analysis, it logically follows that there is no primary

² In his article, Tracy argues that theological hermeneutics must encompass four critical dimensions: (1) Historical development of hermeneutical traditions incorporate and critically engage with the historical schools of hermeneutical teachings, recognizing their evolutionary trajectories and epistemological contributions; (2) Mystical-prophetic actuality of christianity emphasizes the contemporary relevance of Christianity's mystical and prophetic dimensions, ensuring that theological interpretation remains dynamically connected to its transformative spiritual essence; (3) Ecclesiastical diversity and justice develop a hermeneutical approach that is fundamentally just and responsive to the growing diversity within the universal church, acknowledging multiple perspectives and cultural expressions of faith; and (4) Preferential option for the marginalized integrate a critical lens that prioritizes attention to the impoverished, marginalized, and suffering populations as a fundamental Christian criterion for confronting systemic global injustice.

Tracy's approach does not seek to replace the theological-political focus with a new conceptual framework. Instead, he advocates for a hermeneutical pluralization of critique and reconstruction—a discourse that operates as a "trans-cultural" orientation and remains open to hermeneutical approaches from Eastern religious traditions. Against this backdrop, Tracy indicates a four-dimensional development of contemporary Western hermeneutics: (1) Restoration of understanding/experience recovering and reinterpreting foundational experiential narratives; (2) Critical elimination of conceptual errors systematically identifying and eliminating misunderstandings and conceptual fallacies; (3) Exercise of doubt and self-criticism cultivating an intuition of potential error that requires ongoing verification, representing a critical hermeneutical self-reflection; and (4) Reconstructive synthesis achieving new reconstructive frameworks through: (a) restoring systematic coherence; (b) resolving internal contradictions; and (c) generating

point of knowledge from which everything else can be derived. Instead, it becomes evident that knowledge is always connected to the *Other*, which, through its difference, cannot be captured under the categories of rationality or the thinking “ego”—except at the cost of violence that does not enable comprehension, but rather leads to classification, cataloging, and conquest. Tracy fundamentally takes up this issue and perceives it epistemologically and theologically through the Christian concept of sin, which is already linked to knowledge in its original form (Gen 3) and manifests in the logic of an “ego” possessed by desires. Consequently, considering the historical and linguistic-theoretical labyrinths, Tracy calls into question the subject’s autonomy as an instance of self-determination, where the idea of the self, as a self-revealing linguistic user instrument, the I as “ego,” establishes reality. This is because this “ego” is never fully presented to itself—neither in René Descartes’ moments of certainty nor in Edmund Husserl’s transcendental reduction. The contemporary Cartesian “ego” confronted its own language, where it awoke and no longer knows who or what it is. Everything is difference, and every difference is already always a deferral, a delay of any meaning. Difference has transformed into differentiation (Tracy 1993, 87). The inevitability of interpretations remains. Only through interpretation can reality be conditionally described: within radical multiplicity and ambiguity (Tracy 1993, 98–120). This is the primary characteristic of postmodernism (Sheehan 2004, 20–43).

If no approach to reality is possible other than its interpretations, the traditions of interpretation acquire special significance. Now, Tracy struggles to critically recognize the importance of such traditions. There is no ultimately justifiable standard in its premises, because any possible identification in this direction must inherently be critical, as well as historical, conditional, and consequently, ambiguous and arbitrary. Traditions became fragile on the horizon of pluralism in the course of history. However, simultaneously it can be said that certain traditions are considered despite their exceptional significance or precisely because of this significance. According to Tracy, these are texts, events, symbolizations, or people associated with the experience of truth. They pose or respond to ultimate questions: about the meaning of life, death, the whole, the ultimate cause, as well as God. Over time, such traditions have maintained their significance: questions and attempts to answer them have revived their importance and relevance.

Ultimately, in postmodern theology, truth is understood as facticity, as linguistically transmitted, a simultaneous self-establishment and self-limitation of reality, in which it is revealed as the enlightenment of human existence and its authorization regarding the meaning of its being. In light of this understanding, it is not the result of interpretation, though it does not exist without the effort of interpretation.

more comprehensive understanding. The goal is not to replace one hermeneutical approach with another, but to develop a dynamic, self-critical methodology that progressively eliminates the reality of conceptual “sin” and achieves more nuanced philosophical and theological insights.

Immediacy with God becomes a phenomenon of interpretation. God's word is identified as such, that is, defined by its interpretation, as mediation, as the displacement of signs, as the intertwining of God's absence and presence. Only from the highest, absolute perspective could the identity of the sign and the signifier be guaranteed. However, since such a hermeneutical central position can only be comprehended through signs from a human perspective, due to its conditional nature, it must also be deconstructed.

On the other hand, contrary to postmodern tendencies, if we do not reread the hermeneutical process from a subjective-theoretical perspective and do not conceive it as the starting point of freedom and meaning-seeking, then ultimately any discussion about personal responsibility and the significance of cognition loses its meaning: the striving towards cognition, the hermeneutical process leads the subject, beyond recognizing itself, to an authentic form of existence that corresponds to it as a free and responsible subject, and in which it satisfies the possibility of meaning as its horizon opened in the other.

The subject is not surrendered but authentically experiences itself in the structure of self-transfer—in a “self-transcendence” brought through and in the other. It is already more than its facticity; meaning also transcends the given content. The subject is seen in its freedom, but not merely in simple distancing, in the formation of difference and the deconstruction of the positive. It is understood in self-determination, creativity, and the discovery of the new. This requires comprehending a process whose result opens the experience of meaning. Not negative self-identification, not the constitutional understanding of difference, or Derridean deconstruction, but its positive formation and subsequent calling into a new being creates the foundation in which the primacy of relationality, as a creative reality, is established. Meaning is now presented not in ontological categories, but as the subject's recognition of encountered reality and the realization of this recognition. The recognition of reality is the beginning of a new search and the harbinger of meaning.

2. First-Philosophical Orientation of Hermeneutics

To comprehend such a process (and not to define its content), we can invoke Krings' transcendental analysis of freedom (Krings 1980; Pröpper 2023),³ through which it becomes possible to connect truth with freedom and consider this as the personal

³ We connect truth with freedom as a criteriology to demonstrate the location of hermeneutical judgment, where convincingness is sought and cognition's necessary precondition is identified. Here, freedom is discussed as being unconditional and absolute in its formal aspect, while materially determined by the content of cognition. It is understood as the human's primary intrinsic ability to engage with one's own

foundational origin of subject constitution. However, this connection is not simply received *a priori* but is also interpreted as an act of knowledge and cognition, where the expectation of freedom's fulfillment as an experience of meaning emerges. Knowledge is now seen within the paradigm of freedom, as a free act entering into freedom, whose structure corresponds to the structure of knowledge.

A discussion based on the transcendental analysis of freedom reveals the primary philosophical foundation, which provides the ultimate justificatory standard and the criteria of interpretation within its own presuppositions (Verwey 2000, 67–72). It does not define the meaning of sense, but reveals the foundation of its clarity. Notably, sense demands absolute justification of meaning, and the connection between freedom and sense resolves the dilemma of sense and meaning insofar as it conceives the presence of the absolute within itself as the ultimate guarantor of sense, its anticipation, and necessary precondition—without which everything would sink into the maelstrom of absurdity. Conceiving the hermeneutical process and constitution of being from the perspective of freedom creates the possibility of escaping ontological constraints and substantiating interrelational categories. This approach evaluates being in its futural relation (existence within the horizon of possibilities, self-transcendence through the perspective of sense, fullness, or the absolute). Such an approach both circumscribes the meaning of sense and leaves it open to the potential horizon of meaning's fullness.

By seeking the first-philosophical foundation, one must distinguish between persuasiveness and convincingness to prevent the hermeneutical process from becoming a manipulative, existentially groundless act of superficial belief. Instead, it should create complete clarity and convincingness in the subject; a fundamental basis of autonomy and authenticity. The boundary between persuasiveness and convincingness must be verified through the experience of freedom and overcome the space of manipulation. This means that hermeneutics does not become rhetoric, but discovers an authentic, sense-oriented form that directs its art (hermeneutics understood as the art of understanding) toward truth and freedom. However, it must be emphasized that freedom invoked through transcendental analysis (understood through its aporetic nature and initial character of self-determination) reveals itself,

knowledge: to analyze, recognize, distance oneself from, or even reject it. This manifests as an expression of will open to cognition and striving for its substantiation—serving as the act's scale, origin, and purpose. On this basis, the cognitive process acquires its autonomy and self-development/self-determination, realized through reflection, where the comprehended content transforms into real experience. If cognition's content is not validated by freedom, it may appear as a pure thought figure lacking real foundation and potentially recognized as a product of fantasy. It is also worth noting that the first philosophical use of freedom also takes on special significance for theological discourse. The paradigm of freedom plays a crucial role not only for philosophical but also for theological cognition. In this regard, the following literature is noteworthy, the conceptual echo of which is also evident in this article. For example, see the following literature: Pröpper 2011; Essen 1996; Essen and Pröpper 1997.

above all, as the primary existential moment that transcendently underlies the act of cognition.

Krings suggests in his transcendental analysis of freedom that the reduction of being to freedom on the basis of rationality was first accomplished by Kant through the transcendental critique of reason, where he established limits for theoretical reason and objective knowledge of being, beyond which he defined the place of belief. Metaphysics was transformed through the self-convincingness of practical reason and the making of distinctions (Krings 1980, 136–37). Conceiving being and freedom in one perspective as constitutive of sense is not new in the history of philosophy. Johann Gottlieb Fichte understands subjectivity as self-initiative (*Selbsttätigkeit*). The character of a rational being is the activity of returning to itself. Fichte seeks how the transcendental unity of consciousness is possible. The question is: How can the sense of self-positing/self-regulation (*Selbstsetzung*) be conceived? This sense cannot exist as a precondition beyond this self-positing/self-regulation because it has no precondition—this is the character of its freedom. But if self-regulation, on the one hand, does not pose a question about a sense existing beyond itself, and on the other hand, the absoluteness of the concept does not provide an answer, then what is the meaning of extended reflection on posing the question? What is the point of asking a question if it is *a priori* known that no answer can be given? To clarify this, Heidegger speaks of a “step back” towards understanding being as the basis of freedom. From the concept of “ontological difference,” Heidegger attempts to take this “step back” and comprehend freedom as “transcendence” and “ex-istence.” (Krings 1980, 136–37) Instead of the Heideggerian “reverse step,” the transcendental analysis of freedom reveals a radical alternative path of thinking that must identify the constitutive conditions of sense.

Similar to Krings’s approach, where being is considered in relation to freedom, sense, and the process of cognition must be revealed in the act of freedom. What sense is, appears as freedom. The essence of freedom consists in entering into relation with one’s own being, as well as with knowledge, and justifying what is declared, clear, and certain. But what is the comprehension of knowledge, the possession of sense? It is a meaning that does not exist without its own analysis, its own explanation, insofar as this explanation opens up to knowledge and enters into relation with it, so that through its own aspiration and seeking, it circumscribes its meaning. To have essence for a human being means that knowledge has meaning, and not as an *eidos*, a visible form, or eternal duration to which being freely belongs as an essential characteristic. Moreover, sense consists in manifesting one’s meaning in reality and thereby recognizing freedom as sense.

The question “What is sense?” cannot be answered *a priori*. Not because it must first be answered *a posteriori* and be transferable to empirical experience, but because the concepts of *a priori/a posteriori* are inapplicable where sense must be understood in its primary relationship to freedom. Sense is a transcendental category

that demands a categorical resolution (cf. Frankl 1996). However, it is formally pre-determined. The use of the concept of sense pre-supposes knowledge as a duration (*Bestand*), which points to either the “before” or the “after” as the basis for all determinations.

In other words, while the question about sense cannot be answered *a priori*, its existence is *a priori* determined, just as with Krings, the primacy of being (*Sein*) is inherently given. This means that sense does not simply “subsist” (*besteht*), but “subsists” insofar as it manifests, self-presents, and is validated in the perspective of knowledge. Therefore, it must be formally understood as the distancing, difference, and “reflection” that appears in the structure of knowledge. This suggests that sense, insofar as it is comprehended and experienced as freedom, is identical to knowledge according to its primary self-awareness. Knowledge is freedom. Just as knowledge is free with itself, so conversely: the free being-with-itself of sense (*freies Beisichselbstsein*) is the essence of knowledge.⁴ It follows from this that the primary relationship between sense and freedom is the same as the primary relationship between knowledge and freedom. Just as, according to Krings, thinking of being (*das Denken des Seins*) as freedom cannot be established beyond thinking of knowledge (*Denken des Wissens*), similarly the meaning of sense cannot be established without the experience of freedom (Krings 1980, 138).

Knowledge, as well as meaning, does not originate either beyond itself or in a zero point, but rather within itself. The knowledge for which the foundation is questioned does not simply reveal the knowable, but points to doing, to demand. Therefore, the primary relationship does not consist of knowledge and meaning emerging in freedom, but rather that *freedom emerges*. The knowledge of three times three is free from external factors. Analogously, the primary, transcendental dimension of responsibility, and consequently ethics, is comprehended—which signifies an attitude toward givenness and self-determination.

How can the origin of knowledge be understood, how can we comprehend that meaning is free? In other words, how is the comprehension of meaning an experience of freedom? This requires a radical reflection, a transcendental analysis. This radical analysis is necessary so that freedom is revealed in its prior constitutional conditions and simultaneously defined within the boundaries of its substantively complete and determined knowledge, and not beyond it (Krings 1980, 144). When knowing something, not only is a determined content known, but also the fact that it is and, as such, is comprehended. Knowledge is realized not only in a material understanding, but in its prior conditions, in a prior comprehension, that is, in what “words are” and what truly has its own name. It has not only a material horizon

⁴ What is the difference between knowledge and sense? The Knowledge is objectified consciousness, sense is the comprehension of being. Both being and sense are the realization of freedom, insofar as their structure is the possibility of being-with-itself in the other and within the other.

of determined contents, but an understanding of the formal horizon of being and knowledge. Possessing this primary understanding is the prior condition of reflection, of thinking. Where nothing is simply understood (if we do not understand the words), there is nothing to be conceptualized. The primary understanding of being and knowledge (not merely the understanding of concepts, but the propriety, the belonging of the experience underlying these concepts) is the space of the movement of knowledge that is called reflection. This means that the understanding of being (*Sein*), as implied in real knowledge, of the final or primary (i.e., *a priori*) meaning and knowledge (*Wissen*) is not a result of reflection. The understanding that is the result of reflection (which can be called *secondary understanding*) must be structurally distinguished from the *prior understanding* which is the condition of reflection and without which reflection would not occur (Krings 1980, 142). Reflection is not capable of concluding primary knowledge, just as it cannot generate or derive the understanding of being and knowledge. What is simply known is brought forth as implicit. What is generally conceived is self-evident as that which is called “being” and “knowledge.” There is no prior conceptualization about this; rather, the understood is the precondition of all knowledge.

But from where does this *prior understanding* exist, by which real knowledge is *a priori* “informed,” and reflection points to its content, through which it is realized as reflection? It does not stem from reflection or thinking. However, it does not exist beyond knowledge either. The origin of *prior understanding* is this understanding itself, that is, *prior understanding* (creativity) must be understood by itself as primary knowledge. Yet, not as an innate idea (*idea innata*), moreover, knowledge itself must be comprehended as a primacy through which the primary openness of content and thereby openness in the general sense, manifestability is brought forth. Understanding and comprehension reveal a hermeneutical process. (“First” the life, there is creativity/action/awareness and subsequently action/reaction/consciousness. These together form the hermeneutical circle.) Primacy negatively means non-derivability, non-deducibility. The primary is not something reducible to a foundation, but itself represents the establisher in knowledge. Positively, primacy means that openness is unexpectedly self-actualizing disclosure. Primary understanding is understanding from freedom (Krings 1980, 143). The transcendental manifestation character of primary knowledge does not enable reflection upon it but rather creates the possibility of the act of reflection, just as transcendental hearing establishes personhood and is not a capacity of the person. Accordingly, reflection reveals not the content of *prior understanding*, but the comprehension of this content. This is accentuated by the postmodern inevitability of “difference,” which seeks the constitutional moment of the hermeneutical process. On the same basis, representatives of existentialism argue that a human being does not simply have freedom but is already freedom.

3. The Phenomenological Necessity of Hermeneutics

Parallel to the transcendental analysis, let us briefly mention the phenomenological aspect, where truth and freedom are viewed not from a transcendental, but from a categorical, substantive perspective. If the hermeneutical process of inquiry is not fixed on truth but is focused solely on determining content and its persuasiveness, then it can be said that the characteristic of truth or freedom oriented toward persuasiveness is an insistent negation of the finite (cf. further reflection: Grondin 2001, 196–98). In this negation, the fundamental movement of metaphysics can justifiably be recognized. Here, metaphysics is conceived etymologically, objectively, and historically as overcoming the temporal/time-bound. But what is the basis of this overcoming? Is there an apprehension of absolute truth? According to Heidegger, such transcendence is founded on the expulsion of one's own temporality. The pretension to infinite truth originates from the self-negation of the finite. Finitude possesses the reality (if this is not to be a meaningless tautology) that it remains finite, precisely at the moment when it makes a claim to infinity.

Unconditional truth must be absolute, not relativized. However, the absence of absolute truth does not imply that no truth exists at all. As the undeniable experience of falsehood and falsity testifies, we always have a claim to truth, to something rational that is in harmony with objective experience and that allows for arguments, evidence, and testimony. To deny this would be a sophistical delusion. The truths in which we participate and for which we justly struggle are neither an arbitrary nor an absolutely guaranteed reality. Descartes' novelty was equating truth with a methodical assurance of knowledge. This method, from which scientific development found diverse applications, was not absolute or detached from human interests, but dependent on the mind's dialogue with itself, oriented towards verifying one's own knowledge. Thanks to its great success, this model, which was subsequently uprooted from its origins, has now become the standard for all knowledge. From this perspective, everything else is essentially hopelessly relativistic.

Such a view became essential for 19th-century historicism. The danger facing it and the unacceptability of its consequences led hermeneutics to a point where historicism adopted the scale used against it and thereby ultimately overcame itself. This process made clear that knowledge recognized within historicity is measured by metaphysical and absolute criteria (cf. Corzillius 2013, 396–97; Gross 1998, 235–36). A serious resultant error lay in considering the historical dialogue, which each mind conducts with itself and expands in world comprehension, as a barrier to truth. Hermeneutics has once again found in historicity the saving seed of self-understanding. Historicity was not viewed as a limit of mind and its declaration but as a positive condition for the comprehension of truth. Through this, historical relativism lost its argumentation. The demand for an absolute truth

criterion revealed itself as an abstract-metaphysical idol that loses all methodological significance. Historicity resolves and eliminates the shadow of historical relativism here.

Despite the significance of the method, it must be emphasized that truth still exists beyond its methodical transmission of comprehension. Indeed, there are many foolish things both within and beyond methods. However, the criterion for recognizing foolishness is not found, but only a dialogue about truth is raised, for which not everything is acceptable, and which only calls truth into itself. Its benchmark of realization is within the experience of freedom, because dialogue, as an expression of freedom, finds truth in freedom, as an inherently self-contained substantial determination. It is precisely here that the drama of human essence unfolds, in which the struggle with oneself reveals one's determination and uniqueness. It is not language or external logos that characterizes humanity (animals also use signs), but rather inner thought, which enables human beings to distance themselves from everything and establishes the fact of decision as freedom. Humans are not hopelessly surrendered to their instincts, but rather are given an inner space of freedom, which continually remains the subject of hermeneutical inquiry.

4. The Statute of Historical Awareness of Hermeneutics

Within the framework of historical research, cognitive-critical-constructive approaches, which are oriented towards event reconstruction and evaluation, indicate that the result of historical thinking is not a repetitive or duplicated reproduction of events in a continuous and expansive sequence through space and time. Instead, its effort is directed towards systematizing past events within the historical context of events and meanings.

Historical knowledge can be derived from categories and principles that organize, structure, and primarily select sources (cf. Weber 1973, 212). From the infinite complexity and diversity of past events, only specific and selected events are considered, in accordance with the scale of cognitive interest, though not all accessible events. The selection criteria distinguish the essential from the non-essential and, based on specific relevant aspects, present events in a sequential and expansive progression that appears significant and noteworthy to the historian. The cognitive achievement of history involves reaching a consensus about what was, during the acquisition of specific and selective knowledge.

The term "history" implies a specific method of understanding and conceptualization, which the subject of knowledge already employs when evaluating a given phenomenon historically. Johann Gustav Droysen claimed that what occurred in the

past, because it is truly completed, is presented only on the basis of the present's reflexive, conscious memory. "History" for us is only what has been investigated, known, and made accessible. "History is not the sum of events, not the course of everything, but the knowledge that something happened and how what happened is known in this way" (Essen 1995, 206; cf. Droysen 1977)

As an object of the past, history is the result of the present's conceptual processing, which we understand as "event comprehension," and thus as a "known event." The so-called "subject of history" is always a "knowledge project," a fundamental construction comprised of *a priori* conditions. These conditions define and justify all specific knowledge according to the method used and the researcher's investigative intent. The thesis that reflection is a constructive moment of history also implies that historical knowledge is the transcendental (defining) achievement of the searching subject, who primarily represents the historical object in thought. Here, thought must be understood as the condition of possibility for the process of concept formation, which transforms "interest" into "history." In other words, thought assembles the elements of past reality into a context and structure of meanings, thereby transforming them into a narrative form. With this constructive approach, history "emerges" as a transcendently formed and substantively determined narrative (Essen 1995, 207).

Let us also point to a dual clarification:

- 1) The comprehension of history occurs with a practical intention and is (both as a visualization of the past and as the foundation of historical continuity) an interpretative, meaning-conferring ability that is motivated and grounded in action-orientation, in an effort to ensure self-understanding and identity. It is based on human *a priori* interest and their knowledge of rationality and meaning. Historical knowledge must first and foremost be understood in practical terms and subjected to human freedom. Otherwise, it appears more as an uncertainty, a barrier, rather than a preliminary definition of the present. The condition of possibility for a relationship between the person in question and the world, in cognition and knowledge, in will and action, appears in a *transcendental reduction*, which ultimately addresses "transcendental freedom" (the unconditional possibility of action, judgment, attitude), as an absolutely unquestionable prerequisite. Although this possibility is not factual, it nevertheless determines factual reality. Within it, an absolutely unquestionable condition creates an authority of action, which does not determine the direction of history, but orients and normalizes human thinking. It is a principle of significance that judges and critically substantiates the actual real-historical conditions and figures.
- 2) On the other hand, systematization of past events occurs through a collected and meaningful sequence of events within the medium of *narration*. Past objects are systematized and organized within a temporal totality through an original

narrative synthesis. In this regard, the formation of history, a constructively unified image, emerges as a narrative discourse construct (Essen 1995, 209).

Describing historical knowledge represents a response and analytical process that develops in a regulated procedure from question to answer. In the first phase, a “historical question” is formed, which captures present interest and then turns to the past. The latter occurs in the second phase, and it aims to connect the question to sources and obtain the necessary information to answer current questions. In the final phase, a historical response is ultimately shaped, through which the question is answered and the revitalized past is thus integrated into the life practices of its addressees. The historical research process, through which knowledge is connected to empirical, fundamental givenness, can be divided into several distinct stages that correspond to a constructive transformation process. This process encompasses three stages: “heuristics,” “criticism,” and “interpretation.”

Heuristics differentiate and determine preconditions; criticism distinguishes between false and true evidence and checks for explanatory plausibility; and interpretation invokes patterns, paradigms, or examples that explain a given phenomenon. By these three factors, historical objects are formed, not through their sequential expansion, but through mutual overlapping and interdependence. Without a detailed analysis, we can summarize the following procedures that define the hermeneutical character: (1) perspective outline, which is motivated by practical intention; (2) selection, narrative organization, where no continuous and direct progression in time exists; (3) retrospection, which examines the organized result; (4) hermeneutical construction of a lived fact from the past world; and (5) historical event—a hypothetical-descriptive discourse that is temporary and subject to revision.

After comprehending this complex process, and in opposition to the naivety of positivist historical theories that assert the existence of “pure facts,” emphasis must be placed on the fact that they: (1) ignore the regressive-analytical character of their own methodology, which manifests itself in these five steps; (2) suppress the logical distinction between objectivity (confirming reference to an object) and truth (proving correctness). The researcher is interested in reality, has their own interest in it, and transforms this interest into history; that is, by forming an interest in the past within the historical narrative, they place themselves in a qualified relationship with the past. However, this does not mean that past facts can be “eliminated”; they remain definitively in the past, closed and inaccessible. But by establishing this relationship, the character of a fact as a simple occurrence is dissolved. Facts do not exist as “pure facts” (*factum brutum*) but rather appear as a symbolically structured history. Their factuality is dissolved in favor of history. Through historical cognition, the researcher places themselves in a qualified relationship with the inaccessible factuality of the past. Past events, if they are interpreted as historical and defined according to their

“what” and “how,” remain not simply facts, but according to their “that” (“this”). In this respect, factuality is a constitutive part of the historical event. History implies and requires factuality, and not the fictional character of reality.

Access to factuality (substantive definition) is formed through a methodological approach that can be analyzed and has its validity substantiated through transcendental analysis. Through transcendental analysis, the significance of the methodological approach must be demonstrated, and the “layered” formation of the cognitive process must be shown. However, the status of transcendental analysis must be clear: it aims to reveal the formal, *a priori* conditions of the constitution of historical knowledge, and not to determine the content of cognition. A fact understood as “this givenness” can be defined both positively and negatively. Positively, because it constitutes completed content. A fact has priority over reason: it is pre-given, “inviolable” and “inalienable.” It is more eloquent than a logical and cohesive image. Negatively, as a logically indecipherable content, still unfinished and context-dependent (Essen 1995, 281). We can attribute any content to a “Fact” (*Factum*), insofar as there is no basis for legitimizing a question about it, or if such a basis exists, then this question remains unanswered. However, the term “fact” is “late,” because it can be defined within transcendental logic itself as a “construction” that emerges from an intellectual-reflexive initiative toward what a human has experienced or undergone. Since factuality is content-wise defined only through the act of reflection, as conclusively and unequivocally judged, what we experience or undergo are not “facts,” but interpreted content, which is identified as a “fact” precisely to the extent that it resists interpretation (Essen 1995, 282). There is never a separation between establishing facts and drawing conclusions, because the existence of every fact is already the result of a process of judgment (Essen 1995, 283).

To clarify once again the status of transcendental philosophical thinking; because the analysis occurs *post factum*, transcendental philosophy cannot explain the event whose condition of possibility it merely reflects. Transcendental analysis is:

- 1) A subsequent reflection that reconstructs the process of understanding a historical object, but in no way generates it. Transcendental philosophy is “completely materially poor.” It can substantiate any content but it cannot determine it. What it needs to substantiate must be provided by history. Referring to the “something” provided as a fact is only the result of a determination of content, which transcendently precedes the historical research process and must itself be evaluated in terms of how substantiated this determination is.
- 2) Transcendental analysis attempts to reveal the *prior understanding* of historical research, specifically, as a limitation of the historical-critical method, that is, as a change in the conditions of its application. It revises this method and aims to “halt” the inherent dynamics and laws (even false paradigms) that are used in research and require substantiation, especially the correlative and analogical

principles that relativize and nivellate. These principles are employed in the analytical process of historical cognition. Accordingly, in this context, the question is raised whether the status of *prior understanding* is correctly determined. Any historical narrative is not *a priori* true but requires substantiation of the correctness of its own *prior understanding*. Since the conceived “preliminary” understanding is initially “prior,” it requires testing and is, in principle, falsifiable. *Prior, preliminary understanding* awaits reflexive determination, through which it is extracted into consciousness and methodologically disciplined. It is necessary that the *prior understanding* of historical research, since it is directed towards a certain content, be justified (Essen 1995, 325). If it has a normative, universal, and generally obligatory claim to truth, which must inevitably be demonstrated argumentatively, then it must be substantively expressed and discursively liberated (Essen 1995, 326). The question can be raised as to how this “prior” experience existing in everyday life justifies itself and how it can actually validate the knowledge of what truly occurred. The ability to convince oneself of the existence of an event can protect itself from accusations of subjective arbitrariness only by being open to communication and seeking the intersubjective validity of factual claims (Essen 1995, 334).

To emphasize the understanding process once again, it must be said that it implies the condition of its own possibility. Consequently, it also points to the fundamental similarity of all historical events; the formation of analogies is possible only due to the common similarity of the human spirit and its general historical activity. This fundamental perspective is now more precisely defined by the idea that the subject of understanding and the object to be understood also materially participate in a prior interpretative framework. They are represented as a specific individuality and an individual phenomenon of a general essence, and because of this common participation in the essence of history, they possess the same ontological structure. Herewith, reference is made to a fundamental philosophical theory that epistemologically reveals the corresponding basis as a cognitive and constitutive principle, which ensures the unity of the experiential space and defines the “essence” of history in its totality. On one hand, this defines the theoretical framework for establishing the essence of history, creates the space of historical experience, intellectually regulates and shapes it, and reflects the center that “assembles” the relationship with the object, and opposes the “chaotization of historical knowledge.” However, on the other hand, this foundation also ensures the guarantee of essential unity and structural identity between the cognitive subject and the historical object, which, in turn, primarily makes understanding possible. What is crucial in this context is that defining the essence of history (“the inevitability of the free flow of events”) includes a material prior conception that pre-determines both the constitution of the historical object and the theory of historical knowledge (Essen 1995, 396).

The categories (*idea*—in Wilhelm von Humboldt; *moral cosmos*—in Droysen; *life*—in Wilhelm Dilthey) indicate that there is no unchanging theory of reality. Moreover, through them, the given reality is assimilated and understood. In this respect, the material prior conception is revealed as a form of thinking, a paradigm that, as a specific structure of content, shapes the essence of history, the consequent connection of events, and accordingly, the horizon of history's possibility. It functions as a prior understanding that already determines the content of the entire historical comprehension. By using the categories of "humanity" or "salvation history," it became possible to demonstrate that the material prior understanding, which constitutes the object and guides historical knowledge, owes itself to the mediation of the real world, is given through worldly mediation, and in the corresponding experience of the present, it also grants an evaluative criterion of its expediency and correctness. Accordingly, the possible "material substrate" of history must be determined as an empirical fact, that is, as a spatio-temporal event. The material/substantive prior conception of history is revealed in the constitutive process of the historical object. In modern history, the dominant form of thinking shapes the cognitive and constitutive principle together with the regulative "humanity," which limits the possible in history to the horizon of what is humanly possible (Essen 1995, 397). In contrast to this, in the paradigm of "salvation history," the form of thinking is not limited by the "humanly possible," but its horizon is defined by God's creative act.

Human possibility also implies the incomprehensible, because otherwise the perception of the incomprehensible, even as something not yet known, would not be possible. That which exceeds the realm of human representation transcends the boundaries of human imagination. Both the worldly comprehensible and the incomprehensible are born within the horizon of human experience. Only a specific combination of the familiar and the unknown provides understanding, which makes them necessary and urgent. However, understanding implies the existence of a prior ongoing interpretative framework that makes the accessibility of reality possible and protects it. This is a referential, contextual framework within which something "foreign" and new, as such, can be perceived as something incomprehensible. Therefore, the "foreign" is also a rational category: something strange and incomprehensible is only incomprehensible in relation to the given interpretative framework. In another context, it might be comprehensible. However, during the process of understanding, what was previously incomprehensible becomes integrated into this "reference" framework. Accordingly, it is assimilated through understanding as something previously incomprehensible. On the other hand, the problem may also lie in the power of interpretative explanation and the capacity of thought itself. A certain incomprehensible, new contingency disrupts the stability and sustainability of the form of thought and the power of interpretative explanation. It is precisely through this constant stability and sustainability that the high level of integration of thinking ability and power is determined. This sustainability enables the classification

of encountered phenomena and affirms the capacity for integration. The ability to think is, in fact, a way of dealing with contingency (Essen 1995, 399). Through the cognitive system or “reference,” by means of a pre-existing ongoing framework, not only are problematic situations of cognition managed, but also the horizon that determines the possibilities of cognitive content is delineated.

From this, it can be clearly asserted how theological hermeneutics differs from philosophical hermeneutics. Not only does the prior assumption of God’s existence and activity in our lives provide an entirely different dialogue horizon, but it also introduces a transcendent reality into the cognitive process as the foundational and target condition, rather than developing within the subject-object schema. Accordingly, the creative process is not merely a search governed by human ability, but a horizon of possibilities opened by God’s grace, which creates a new dynamic that introduces open logical possibilities transcending human comprehension within the cognitive process. Consequently, the difference between theological and philosophical hermeneutics points to a transformation of self-understanding that is not satisfied with information flow but focuses on the subject’s co-creative potential and its new horizon. This cannot be merely a revealing of meaning, but a change in the mode of existence, described in a life of faith as determining freedom within earthly categories and the perspective of salvation. Even Augustine already indicated the importance of the practical dimension in the theological cognitive process, which acquires constitutional significance for theological hermeneutics. Knowing God and enriching consciousness with this knowledge raises human existence to a level where encountering meaning begins to impact people in the form of kerygma, initiating the liberation of freedom for divine co-existence.

Conclusion

Focusing on freedom as a universal landmark of the hermeneutic process should serve to define a paradigmatic approach that signals the necessity of shifting from categorical/ontological inversion toward relational justification. This shift does not imply a denial of the ontological dimension but rather sees the determinant of its identity in the perspective of absolute freedom, which does not represent the actual reality of creation (human freedom), but rather delimits it to its ultimate meaning and horizon of possibility. The hermeneutic process is formed within this domain, wherein the categorical/content-based definition of truth evolves through the principle of freedom, and its meaningfulness and persuasiveness are revealed solely in complete harmony or alignment with this principle, where freedom is recognized as a category of meaning.

Accordingly, within the hermeneutic process, alongside the phenomenological inquiry into truth, there must be a proposition of freedom as a criteriological foundation. This allows the act of cognition to be materially specified within a historical context through the recognition of other freedoms and the facilitation of their realization. In turn, this process emerges not merely with a persuasive and humanistic character but also enables a foundational (first-philosophical) justification of truth from a primary philosophical standpoint.

The discourse of the historical development of hermeneutic thought clarifies that placing comprehended meaning within the perspective of freedom constitutes a fundamental necessity that underlies the cognitive process. Thus, defining the comprehended meaning from the standpoint of freedom not only provides the criteriological potential for justification but also illuminates a new horizon in the form of the Absolute. This Absolute is not confined to human logic but instead opens up a realm of possibilities and expands the boundaries of philosophical cognition. Consequently, truth is revealed as freedom, and freedom as the enactment of truth.

Reasoning based on transcendental analysis in the hermeneutic process rationalizes truth and the unknowable, placing them within the horizon of the absolute in such a way that it is neither confined by rational order nor determines the known through the rational, but rather anticipates the universal manifestation of meaning. This does not signify a rationalistic reduction of truth but rather emphasizes its responsibility toward this order. Such consciousness of responsibility causes a transformation of self-understanding, which liberates human creative potential in the perspective of the absolute and portends new meaning in the form of the absolute. The result is a change in the form of thinking and way of life, which is concretized in the experience of faith and transmitted in the practical expression of belief.

Bibliography

- Corzillius, Martin. 2013. "Geschichte." In *Hermeneutik: Die Geschichte der abendländischen Textauslegung von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, edited by Meinrad Böhl, Wolfgang Reinhard, and Peter Walter, 383–439. Wien–Köln–Weimar: Böhlau.
- Droysen, Johann Gustav. 1977. *Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857): Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857/1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882)*. Vol. 1 of *Historik: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, edited by Peter Leyh and Horst Walter Blanke. Stuttgart: Frommann–Holzboog.
- Essen, Georg. 1995. *Historische Vernunft und Auferweckung Jesu: Theologie und Historik im Streit um den Begriff geschichtlicher Wirklichkeit*. Mainz: Grünewald.
- Essen, Georg. 1996. "Letztgültigkeit in geschichtlicher Kontingenz: Zu einem Grundlagenproblem der theologischen Hermeneutik." In *Hoffnung, die Gründe nennt: Zu Hansjürgen Verweyens Projekt einer erstphilosophischen Glaubensverantwortung*, edited by Gerhard Larcher, Klaus Müller, and Thomas Pröpper, 186–204. Regensburg: Pustet.

- Essen, Georg, and Thomas Pröpper. 1997. "Aneignungsprobleme der christologischen Überlieferung: Hermeneutische Vorüberlegungen." In *Gottes ewiger Sohn: Die Präexistenz Christi*, edited by Rudolf Laufen, 163–78. Paderborn: Schöningh.
- Frankl, Viktor Emil. 1996. *Der leidende Mensch: Anthropologische Grundlagen der Psychotherapie*. Bern: Huber.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1986. *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Gesammelte Werke Band 1–2. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Grondin, Jean. 1994. *Der Sinn für Hermeneutik*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Grondin, Jean. 2001. *Einführung in die philosophische Hermeneutik*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Gross, Mirjana. 1998. *Von der Antike bis zur Postmoderne: Die zeitgenössische Geschichtsschreibung und ihre Wurzel*. Wien–Köln–Weimar: Böhlau.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1988a. *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen*. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 749. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1988b. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. 2 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1984. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Ineichen, Hans. 1991. *Philosophische Hermeneutik*. Handbuch Philosophie. Freiburg: Alber.
- Jeanrond, Werner G. 1991. *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*. London: Macmillan.
- Jensen, Alexander S. 2007. *Theological Hermeneutics*. SCM Core Text. London: SCM Press.
- Joisten, Karen. 2009. *Philosophische Hermeneutik*. Akademie Studienbücher – Philosophie. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Krings, Hermann. 1980. *System und Freiheit: Gesammelte Aufsätze*. Reihe Praktische Philosophie 12. Freiburg: Alber.
- Pröpper, Thomas. 2011. *Theologische Anthropologie*. Vol. 1. Freiburg: Herder.
- Pröpper, Thomas. 2023. *Evangelium und freie Vernunft: Konturen einer theologischer Hermeneutik*. Freiburg: Herder.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1976. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1988–91. *Zeit und Erzählung*. 3 vols. München: Fink.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2005. *Das Selbst als ein Anderer*. 2nd ed. Übergänge 26. München: Fink.
- Sheehan, Paul. 2004. "Postmodernity and Philosophy." In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, edited by Steven Connor, 20–43. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. 2009. *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Tracy, David. 1993. *Theologie als Gespräch: Eine postmoderne Hermeneutik*. Welt der Theologie. Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald.
- Tracy, David. 2014. "Eine Hermeneutik der Orthodoxie." *Concilium: Internationale Zeitschrift für Theologie* 50 (2): 159–69.
- Vardidze, Vaja. 2025. *Theological Hermeneutic*. Tbilisi: Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University Press.
- Verweyen, Hansjürgen. 2000. *Gottes letztes Wort: Grundriß der Fundamentaltheologie*. Regensburg: Pustet.
- Weber, Max. 1973. "Die Objektivität sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis." In *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, by Max Weber, 4th rev. ed., edited by Johannes Winckelmann, 146–214. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.