



IN SEARCH OF TRUTH: A BRIEF PHILOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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Abstract:

This paper touches upon the concept of truth by revisiting ancient Greek authorities Plato and Aristotle as well as a few seminal German thinkers of the Kantian and post-Kantian era. Truth is observed as both a broad philosophical concept and a narrow linguistic concept. In philosophy, it implies the ultimate metaphysical reality while in linguistics or the science of logic it can refer to the use of language that corresponds to reality. These various aspects of truth are closely related to other important philosophical themes that are briefly discussed in the paper, such as reason, knowledge, and language, all of which form the fundamental faculties of the human being.

Article info:

Received: July 12, 2021
 Correction: July 29, 2021
 Accepted: August 14, 2021

Keywords:

truth,
 Plato,
 Aristotle,
 Enlightenment,
 reason,
 knowledge,
 faith.

Could you find anything that belongs more to wisdom than truth does? – Of course not.¹

Philosophical awareness of the problem of truth in language and thinking began in ancient Greece. In his dialogues *Cratylus* and *Sophist*, Plato examined the notion of truth as reflected in human language. For him, speech that represents things as they are is true, while false speech represents things as they are not.² In *Republic*, he provided arguments for banning poets from his ideal state because they often sing about things that are not true, especially in relation to gods. “We have to be concerned about the truth,” says Socrates in *Republic*, and this statement must be considered when discussing religious matters.³

In order to understand Plato’s condemnation of poets, we should keep in mind the important aspects of his philosophical position. As a rational idealist, Plato insisted that senses and passions are below rational thinking in regard to attaining knowledge.

1 Plato, “Republic,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1108.

2 Plato, “Cratylus,” *ibid*, 105.

3 Plato, “Republic,” *ibid*, 1024, 1026, 1029.



For him, rational thinking is crucial to philosophers, the supreme rulers of his republic. Elevated, passionate lyrics and concepts are stock in trade of poets which, notwithstanding their aesthetic qualities, cloud rational judgement. Plato maintained that poetic acts of creation entail irrational and often dubious and passionate state of frenzy, which he even associated with bodily pleasures. He fiercely criticized such state of mind and considered it as a serious obstacle to reaching true knowledge of the soul.⁴ The ultimate truth in Plato's philosophy are *ideas* or *forms*. They are beyond this material world and represent things as they truly are in their essence. Material objects of the world are merely copies of those found in the world of forms. Therefore, when poets sing about the material world, their work of art is copy of an existing copy,⁵ thus qualitatively very much below the world of forms. According to him, only philosophers are capable of reaching the knowledge of the forms, that is the truth in itself. To him, philosophers are not only "good at remembering, quick to learn, high-minded, graceful" but also "friend[s] and relative[s] of truth, justice, courage, and moderation."⁶ In *Phaedo*, Plato maintains that very few "true philosophers" are able to resist sensual temptations and acquire knowledge of the soul, which corresponds to wisdom, and wisdom further corresponds to the truth. This implies that in Plato's philosophy, the truth has little to do with material world, which is no more than a distant reflection of his ideal forms. Few philosophers are capable of grasping the ultimate truth. Those who are doubtless despise human body and the senses, for "the soul reasons best when none of these senses trouble it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure."⁷ Therefore, the notion of truth in Plato's understanding rests on the ontological and epistemological foundations of his philosophy. *Ontological* in this case refers to Plato's absolute and immutable world of forms, which can only be glimpsed upon through deep thinking and the subsequent rational ascension. From this idealistic standpoint, Plato recognized two kinds of worlds: the world of changing reality, where things become and disappear, and the unchanging world of absolute reality. Senses enable knowledge of the former whereas knowledge of the latter is only attainable with reason (conceptual knowledge; logos).⁸

Aristotle disagreed with Plato on such interpretation of the truth. The main reason for their disagreement was the important difference between their philosophical positions – that of idealism and empiricism. Unlike Plato, Aristotle emphasized the importance of sense knowledge which, even though it is not wisdom in itself, still gives us "the most authoritative knowledge of particulars."⁹ Therefore, sense knowledge is the first step towards the truth. Aristotle, however, examined the notion of truth primarily within the linguistic and logical paradigm. He claimed that true speech must correspond with reality: a word or statement is true if it conforms with reality.¹⁰ For him, the relation between statements (thoughts) and objects (things) establishes conformity between our subjective consciousness and the objective world.¹¹

4 Plato, "Phaedo," *ibid*, 55–58.

5 Plato, "Republic," *ibid*, 1203.

6 Plato, "Republic," *ibid*, 1110.

7 Plato, "Phaedo," *ibid*, 57.

8 Kornelije Kvas, *Istina i poetika* (Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga, 2011), 82.

9 Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *Aristotle – Works*, ed. by W. D. Ross (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 2207.

10 Kvas, *Istina i poetika*, 11.

11 Cf. Aristotle, "Metaphysics," 2408.



Such conception of the truth proved influential in modern linguistics and science of logic. For instance, Alfred Tarski, a Polish American logician, took up Aristotle's analysis of truth and came up with his own definition of linguistic truth: "the truth of a sentence consists in its agreement with (or correspondence to) reality."¹² Tarski thought that we could interpret a language if we knew the nature of all its statements, i.e., whether they are true or false. On a level of linguistics, Aristotle's conception of truth implies both correspondence to reality as well as coherence of all elements in a statement.¹³ In other words, a statement is true if each of its parts are true, which means that such statement is coherent. If any of its parts is not coherent or true, the entire statement is false. Therefore, coherency in this context implies a logically structured linguistic system.¹⁴ This was mathematically expressed by Dale Dorsey: "A normative sentence x is true if and only if it is part of a normative system and that system is coherent."¹⁵ Reaching the truth in language as a whole in such normative way was attempted by generations of modern thinkers who sought to express truth in linguistic statements that resemble mathematical formulae. This analytical approach opens up a broad range of issues and ongoing debates on the nature of language and its relation to reality, the relation between language and thought, language's expressive capacity, etc.

The complexity of Aristotle's thought cannot be reduced to any theory of truth. Within the context of language, we may claim that he put a great emphasis on structure and wholeness. His thoughts on tragedy in drama are directed toward coherency of a plot's components.¹⁶ In the eighth section of *Poetics*, he commented on the structural unity of events that form a plot's composition. He insisted that removing either of the events in a plot would disrupt the entire plot.¹⁷ Therefore, Aristotle strongly emphasized the organic connection of individual components within a structure.

The age of the 18th century Enlightenment gave rise to the idea of progress, which paved the way for various advancements of civilization that we enjoy today. Enlightenment is usually defined as a moral, cultural, and political revolution "based on schemes for fundamental reorganization potentially applicable to any society."¹⁸ Philosophers of this period prepared the ground for the industrial revolution in the following century as well as major scientific breakthroughs. Discoveries of major philosophers and scientists, such as those of Leibniz, Newton, and Descartes, sparked a strong interest in reason and its capabilities. In a way, these philosophers extended the rational tradition of Plato and his followers. Enlightened philosophers firmly believed that the knowledge of all things is attainable through reason alone, which can thus illuminate the pathway toward the truth. For them, scientific progress was the main aspect in the advancement of civilization and that also entailed the abolition of all prejudice, including religion.

12 Alfred Tarski (1994): *Semantic Conception of Truth: And the Foundations of Semantics*, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 3, no. 4, 343. Cf. Kvas, *Istina i poetika*, 13.

13 Kvas, *Istina i poetika*, 17.

14 Ibid, 18.

15 Dale Dorsey (2006): *A Coherence Theory of Truth in Ethics*, Philosophical Studies 127, 495.

16 Kvas, *Istina i poetika*, 203.

17 Aristotle, "Poetics," in *Aristotle – Works*, ed. by W. D. Ross (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 3320.

18 Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.



Immanuel Kant, arguably the most important philosopher of his age, hailed Enlightenment as *the age of reason*. In his 1784 essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment*, Kant famously wrote that *sapere aude* or “dare to be wise” is the Enlightenment’s motto.¹⁹ He claimed that every healthy and grown human is capable of using his or her reason and should not refrain from doing so. Those who are unable to do so simply lack courage and resolution, not intelligence. Therefore, Kant came up with the definition of the Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,” adding that *immaturity* is “the inability to use one’s own reason without the guidance of another.”²⁰ He considered this type of immaturity not only useless, but also dangerous because it could easily become man’s second nature.²¹ If dogmas and formulas became the only guiding principles in man’s life, they would be “the ball and chain of his permanent immaturity.”²² Kant made difference between the use of reason that promotes enlightenment (*public use*) and the one that hinders it (some forms of *private use*). Public use of reason is the one which any man of learning can employ to address the entire public. Such use “must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men.” On the other hand, private use of reason is “that which a person may make of it in a particular *civil* post or office with which he is entrusted.”²³ For example, an officer who received an order from his superiors must not quibble openly, while on post, regarding the usefulness of the order in question. However, he cannot be “banned from making observations as a man of learning on the errors in the military service, and from submitting these to his public for judgement.”²⁴ Therefore, Kant encouraged open literary debate regarding all fundamental questions in society. For him, truth (an idea supported by compelling arguments) is necessary for the universal progress of mankind. It could be attained with the use of reason that is free from all coercion and prejudice.

Rational philosophers of the Enlightenment believed that only reason could pave the way toward truth. Among the pinnacles of their faith in reason was Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Published in 1781, it attempted to establish the core principles of reason in their relation to knowledge and sense experience. Employing systematic theoretical analysis, this renowned philosopher sought to discover *a priori* principles of reasoning, i.e., the way of thinking that could provide mathematical certainty to any operation of the human mind.²⁵ His aim was to explore “the faculty of reason in general, in respect of all knowledge after which it may strive *independently of all experience*.”²⁶ This assumed a radical rational solipsism, as Kant considered one’s subjective reason to be the exclusive bearer of such pure forms of rational knowledge: “If this principle is generalized, so that knowledge is only possible through reason, then it results [that] all we know are

19 Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment*, transl. by H. B. Nisbet (New York/London: Penguin, 2009), 1.

20 Ibid

21 Ibid, 2.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid, 3–4.

24 Ibid, 4.

25 Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 42–45. The emphasis is Kant’s.

26 Ibid, 9.



the products of our own activity, but no reality independent of them."²⁷ We could infer that Kant sought to unravel the principles of reason that would enable true knowledge: "The subject of the present enquiry is [...] how much we can hope to achieve by reason, when all the material and assistance of experience are taken away."²⁸ This might be interpreted as an intention to reduce the world to the status of a mere appearance in order to reach the truth.²⁹

This particular philosophy, known as transcendental idealism, proved immensely influential at the time. However, Kant's philosophical system had numerous inherent ambiguities. For instance, universal and pure principles of reason that he believed to exist did not accord with the contingencies of reality and sense experience, upon which all rational activity was ultimately dependent.³⁰ That is why subsequent philosophers either severely criticized Kant's system or tried to solve its problematic dualisms. Still, *Critique of Pure Reason* gave impetus to numerous strands of philosophical debates, especially the ones concerning knowledge and science, as well as alleged scientific objectivity. Even in our age there are theses and ideas which either partially or completely rely on Kant's central philosophical tenets.³¹ This fact is a clear indication that Plato's main idea – that truth can be attained through reason – still has enormous influence.

When it comes to philosophical examinations of reason and its purported capacity to attain the ultimate truth and objectivity, the years immediately following the publishing of Kant's *Critique* are particularly interesting. Namely, from 1781 to 1794, enlighteners were chiefly occupied with a single fundamental problem: the authority of reason.³² In particular, philosophers of the German Enlightenment began to critically approach and analyze this core human faculty, thinking that reason could explain everything. However, this belief was thrown into question towards the close of the eighteenth century as more and more thinkers began to realize that the demands of modern philosophy "were leading straight toward atheism, fatalism, and anarchism."³³ The fate of modern philosophy in the post-Kantian era was characterized by a painful dilemma of rational skepticism or irrational fideism, because neither philosophy provided satisfactory answers to all the issues.³⁴ For philosophy of the Enlightenment, it seemed, the pathway to truth was still shrouded in darkness.

During that time, a neglected and scarcely known figure simultaneously baffled and fascinated the greatest minds of the 18th century and after. That figure was Johann Georg Hamann, a friend and neighbor of Kant, and also his first wholly original critic.³⁵ By the time Kant's first *Critique* was published, Hamann had already been well acquainted with rational philosophies of his time and Kant's philosophical standpoint.

27 Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 3.

28 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 10–11.

29 Connor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 74.

30 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 13.

31 Cf., for example, Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London/New York: Routledge, 2008).

32 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, VII–VIII.

33 Ibid, 1–2.

34 Ibid, 2–7.

35 Cf. John Betz (2004): *Enlightenment Revisited: Hamann as the First and Best Critic of Kant's Philosophy*, *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2, 291–301.



He was a rational enlightener himself until 1758, when he suddenly experienced a profound spiritual crisis in London which subsequently converted him to Christianity.³⁶ From that point onward, Hamann became a bitter opponent of all forms of dogmatic secular rationalism, which he saw as a direct threat to traditional Lutheran Christianity. Moreover, he recognized that secular rationalism did not lead to any truth at all but to nihilism and even fatalism. Hamann was among the first to receive a draft of Kant's *Critique* before it reached the print thanks to a mutual publisher in Königsberg. He saw it as "a prime example of many of the vices of *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment]"³⁷ and it inspired him to pen one of his most important and original writings, *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason* (1781).³⁸ The main topic of this essay is the alleged "purity" of reason and Kant's attempt to abstract reason from all sense experience. Hamann argued that such attempt was unjustified because reason is embodied in language, tradition, custom, and experience.³⁹ Therefore, reason is not a separate and isolated faculty but a "specific way of thinking and acting in a specific cultural and linguistic context."⁴⁰ For Hamann, the essential question in this debate concerned language which, for him, is inextricably tied to reason. The depths of language (and reason), such as its origin and mystical nature, may be touched upon by way of faith and mythology. Therefore, rational dreams of objective scientific certainty should be dispensed with. Ultimately, "this is where reason stands before an abyss; this is where it must recognize its own inadequacy and incompleteness; in short, this is where it can proceed no further except by some kind of faith."⁴¹ With such view, Hamann has pointed his finger to language, which would eventually become the major topic for most philosophers from the post-Kantian era to postmodernity. "In Hamann one encounters arguably the first *linguistic turn* in the history of ideas."⁴² For this Christian enlightener, the ultimate truth is the knowledge of God as revealed in the *Bible*. As for objective scientific truth, Hamann, as well as some philosophers before and after him, showed that reason cannot attain any true knowledge at all without faith.⁴³ In other words, there can be no objective philosophical truth apart from faith. Unlike most his contemporaries, Hamann equaled truth with reason and belief in God, for one cannot do without the other.⁴⁴

36 Cf. Josef Nadler, *Johann Georg Hamann 1730–1788: Der Zeuge des Corpus mysticum* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1949), 76.

37 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 38.

38 *Metacritique* was not published until 1800.

39 Cf. Johann Georg Hamann, "Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft," in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. III: Schriften über Sprache, Mysterien, Vernunft, ed. by Josef Nadler (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1999), 286.

40 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 39.

41 John Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of Johann Georg Hamann* (Malden/Oxford/Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 231.

42 *Ibid.*, 230.

43 Cf. Johann Georg Hamann, "Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten," in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. II: Schriften über Philosophie, Philologie, Kritik ed. by Josef Nadler (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1999), 57–82. In this work, Hamann used David Hume as an ally. In his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1738), Hume posed a dilemma: either a rational skepticism or irrational leap of faith. Cf. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 3.

44 John Betz (2009): *Reading 'Sibylline Leaves': J. G. Hamann in the History of Ideas*, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 1, 96.



Even though Hamann's ideas may sound overly Christian or even radical to some,⁴⁵ his numerous insights proved influential to generations of future historians and philosophers. Among the most important of those was Wilhelm Dilthey. He spent most of his life examining problems related to scientific methodology and how social sciences⁴⁶ could be used to reach objective knowledge of the world. Dilthey believed that man is capable of knowing the truth, but he cannot reach this knowledge with the methods employed by previous generations of rational philosophers. Therefore, he tried to come up with his own philosophical methodology by avoiding excessive rationalism and understanding the human being in his or her wholeness, as the being of reason, senses, emotions, desires, and will. Dilthey's main contribution was the famous division between "natural" and "human" sciences. The former attempt to describe the world whereas the latter attempt to understand humans.⁴⁷ Dilthey was a psychologist who tried to work out his own description of how we form knowledge. He claimed that the knowledge we process rationally establishes our inner spiritual world, thus creating our own historical and spiritual being. Dilthey was certain that our consciousness forms its *facts*, which are empirical in nature but are embedded with meaning only after our reason has processed them. Our consciousness is able to facilitate processes on the basis of the information coming from the senses. These processes contain what Dilthey terms the "primordial relation" (*ursprünglichen Zusammenhang*), as well as other specific meanings within the conditions of our consciousness.⁴⁸ He believed that human sciences should pursue objective knowledge, otherwise their existence as such would be at stake. However, Dilthey's primary concern was not how we gain knowledge of the outside world but how we understand ourselves and others. He insisted that "the human studies are knowledge in a sense in which natural science is not, because physical objects as known to us are merely appearances, while minds are 'real realities' [...], known to us as they are in themselves."⁴⁹ According to him, our lived experiences form part of the history of our mind, but we cannot fathom an idea or depths of our personal life until we put them into words.⁵⁰ Similarly to Hamann, Dilthey was aware that language is the ultimate medium through which we obtain knowledge. It is the only medium through which we can approach the truth. He believed that truth cannot be divorced from reason, scientific objectivity, and understanding others through language and world literature.

Therefore, how can we know what the truth is when language is flexible to the point that it can be used for sinister aims and lying? On a purely philosophical level, we can hardly express complex ideas apart from language. However, ever since Plato, philosophers of rationalism have been concerned whether language was an adequate tool for obtaining "true" knowledge of the external world and its objects.

45 Oswald Bayer, a contemporary German critic called Hamann the "radical Enlightener." Cf. Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*. Translated by Roy Harrisville and Mark Mattes (Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012).

46 Dilthey called them *Geisteswissenschaften*, which loosely translates into English as "sciences of the mind" or "human sciences".

47 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (Leipzig: Dunker & Humblot, 1883), XVI.

48 Ibid.

49 H. A. Hodges, *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Traubner & Co., 1944), 12.

50 Dilthey, *Einleitung*, 13.



The great philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries, such as Kant, Schelling, and Hegel, are famous for being the architects of splendid philosophical systems. But their systems are no more than linguistic sandcastles that easily collapse as soon as their core ambiguities are exposed. Knowing that, Hamann ingeniously stated that language is the source of reason's quarrels with itself.⁵¹ He claimed that we do not need something as sophisticated as Kant's synthetic *a priori* judgements, for we can communicate all we need with our everyday language. This tells us that the truth should not be understood as something overly complex and unattainable.

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⁵¹ Hamann, "Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft," in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. III: Schriften über Sprache, Mysterien, Vernunft, ed. by Josef Nadler (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1999), 286.



U POTRAZI ZA ISTINOM: KRATAK FILOLOŠKI NALAZ

Резиме:

Овај рад представља кратак осврт на проблем истине у филозофији и књижевности. Филозофска испитивања проблема истине у мишљењу и језичком изразу започињу у античкогрчкој старини, а веома су актуелна и у данашње време. Платон и Аристотел су тврдили да су истини језички изрази они који одговарају стварности. Док је Платон у својој филозофији наглашавао метафизичку област, Аристотел је преферирао логику писаног и изговореног израза. Стога је Аристотел инсистирао на кохерентности сваког појединачног дела целине, како би сама целина остала непоремећена. Ово је важан предуслов истине. Период просветитељства осамнаестог века представљао је епоху научног напретка и наступања просвећене филозофије рационализма. Мислиоци овог времена били су заокупљени проблемом истине унутар великих филозофских система. За ове утицајне учењаке, као што су Кант и Хегел, истина је егзистирала само унутар њихових сложених мисаоних система. Насупрот њима налазила се једна хришћанска струја коју је предводио Јохан Георг Хаман. Хаман је веровао да никакав идеалистички филозофски систем, већ само вера у Бога води ка истини.

Кључне речи:

Истина,
Платон,
Аристотел,
Просветљење,
Разлог,
Разумевање,
Вера.