

The Quest for Truth

Maike Anne Stevens

Tutor: Polly Gould

Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design

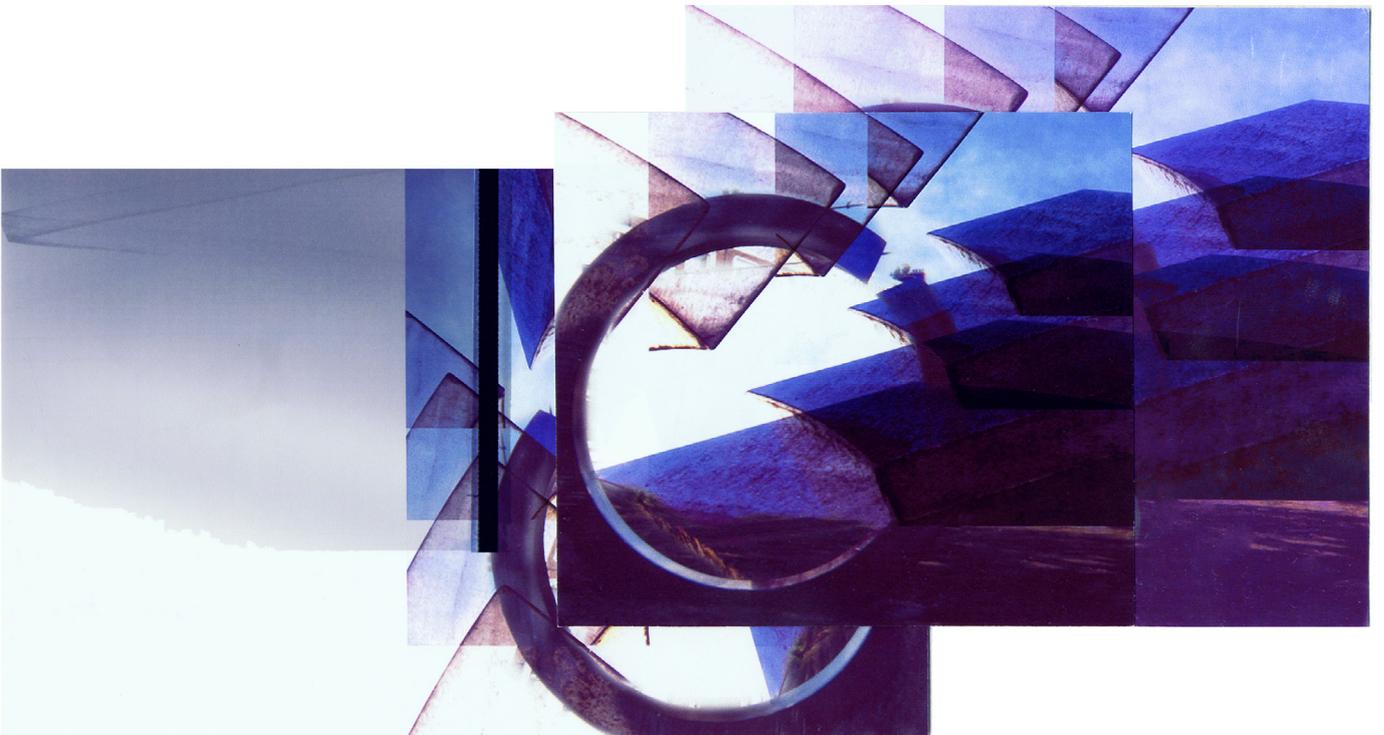
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'Usually, respect for reality gains the day'

Sigmund Freud



Introduction

Many thinkers have preoccupied themselves with the issue of truth. This essay examines the ideas of the German philosopher Heidegger and several of his contemporaries in their search for universal truth. The incongruity between what we perceive in reality and what is understood by 'the truth' is one of the guiding principles in this discussion. Closely related to this question is another topic of investigation: whether the ultimate truth appears inside individuals, or as an external force.

Aletheia

According to Heidegger the most fundamental form of being was Aletheia, the ancient Greek word for 'truth'. The original meaning of this word was inherently linked to a form of unconcealing, revealing, disclosing. Truth was tantamount to 'bringing things out of concealment'. Therefore to Heidegger Aletheia was the first truth: it comes before one can match up a statement about an object with that object, it first had to be disclosed as 'being'.

Heidegger was greatly influenced by his tutor Husserl who was interested in a 'universally-true' consciousness. According to him the only ultimately true and knowable world is the one that exists in one's own consciousness. The Ego is the ultimate 'is'. All things that spring up in this world are true, although it is never reality that will come into being through consciousness.

Initially it was also Heidegger's conviction that it is in human beings, in 'Dasein', where things could be disclosed, where Aletheia could find its place. The world is not presented to us as a set of assertions, but is affected by the way human beings are and understand occurrences.

In the 1930s however, he made an extreme shift in this theory and put the field of truth outside 'Dasein' into a 'field of relatedness', as he called it.

Clearing

Whatever theory was more likely, both of them leave an incongruity between truth and reality. Heidegger's shift in belief however, made it seem possible to close this gap; if the truth about beings is 'out there', there might be a way in which it is disclosed to us human beings.

To Heidegger this place where truth existed, was an infinitely complex space of possibilities where things and people existed. He called it 'Lichtung', meaning an 'opening', or 'open space'. Another translation of this word is 'lighting' and this referred to the way truth sheds light on things, brings them out of obscurity.

The paradox in the theory about Aletheia is, that the process of unconcealing things, simultaneously conceals things. If from the endless supply of possibilities, one option becomes reality, it conceals all other possibilities at the same time. Those remain unimaginable absences. Jacques Lacan noted:

'In Heidegger's word Aletheia, truth teaches her lovers her secret: that it is in hiding that she offers herself to them most truly.'

(1998, p.122)

This means that Aletheia can never be empirically verified, it is to be experienced.

Art

The creative process has a structure which is the reverse of the order of logical reasoning (either empirically or through deductive reasoning). This is because the creative act cannot be verified in accordance with the laws of logic where hypotheses are tested by a pair of opposed terms: either 'A' or 'non-A'.

The process of bringing something new into the world, asks for an inductive approach. Methodologies in design and architecture for example, consist of several necessary steps, in order to arrive at the final stage, the end product. These methods usually start with an analysis of existing products or situations, followed by a phase in which ideas are being generated. Through a reiterating series of diverging (gathering ideas) and converging (selecting promising ideas and developing them), the final product comes into existence. This is a very thorough, almost machine-like way of 'being creative'. It forcefully steers towards a successful outcome by working on the basis of trial and error.

Heidegger moved away from Western philosophy and reasoning in his search for truth. He believed Aletheia was a mystery and needed a different kind of thinking that has nothing to do with looking at the things that are at hand. He was convinced that an important role was granted to art. In his text 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1950) he states:

'The nature of art would then be this: the truth of beings setting itself to work.'

(1997, p118)

In his opinion, a work of art reveals the true nature of things, and in order to receive that quality, the maker of the work needs to be guided by an impersonal force. Making art is a form of birth, a new

beginning. To become a new addition to the world, art needs to be a form of projection, of looking into the future. This is closely linked to another important concept Heidegger introduced: 'Care'.

Care

In everyday life human beings are thrown into the world (they never had a choice) and are constantly being pulled between being with others and being oneself (authentic). Furthermore, Dasein is always aware of things that may come. Heidegger introduced a concept that brings unity in the human being: Care. Because it is directed towards the future, Care seems to be a safety clause for the temporality of Dasein. In 'Being and Time' Heidegger describes this form of projection that occurs in human beings:

'Dasein is 'constantly more than it factually is'. Always (...) poised between alternative possible ways of continuing.'
(1997, p.45)

This distinguishes Dasein from things and objects, even from animals. The difference is based on the fact that Dasein knows things. Animals and humans, to different degrees, both have a way of recording occurrences in their memory in the shape of stills. From the moment the images are captured in the psyche they are pulled loose from the world outside. The human mind differs from the animal in the sense that this consciously captured moment is added to the panoramic image of all the moments of time in a memory. Human beings have access to these images, the past, which can be lined up at any given moment. The human mind can actualise the past. This is possible, because the material that has been captured in the mind, has become abstract matter. The 'knowing of' a situation leads to a decision to act or not. We can postpone it, use it, let it pass. Every moment we experience, will be a chosen moment, in which we can freely create a new reality.

Care is the force that comes before this knowing, wishing and striving. It might be the same drive that inspires the artist in making his work of art.

Language

In this way information that exists in the human mind, somehow became abstracted form. The moment reality shows itself to Dasein through the senses, it is transformed into something else, like words, or images. For the discovery of truth, this could be a very important transition.

The nature of actual language is multi-interpretable. When first signs of human-like life on earth came into existence, communication was far from the present form of exchanging words. During the course of history the uttering of sounds developed into words, and subsequently the semantic field and emotional charge of words went under a gradual change as well. Especially in the present-day world of abbreviation, words have become symbols for information. The result is that in the contemporary use of language, connotations vary from a personal to a cultural level. The action of converting thoughts into words, and the reverse operation that is carried out by the receiver, will inevitably change the true meaning of the original thought (the truth).

A philosopher who thought extensively about true language, was Walter Benjamin. In his essay 'The Task of the Translator' he describes the difference between a poet and a translator. Benjamin thinks that true language, the language philosophers all hope for, is hidden in translations. He describes the translator as the mediator between poetry and everyday usage of language. He quotes Mallarmé:

"The imperfection of languages consists in their plurality, the supreme one is lacking: thinking is writing without accessories or even whispering, the immortal word still remains silent; the diversity of idioms on earth prevents everybody from uttering the words which otherwise, at one single stroke, would materialise as truth".

(1999, p.78)

To Heidegger, this problem of the plurality of the meaning of words that don't have single determinate meanings or connotations, plays a role as well. He speaks of language being impersonal, words make the meanings of what we say. He has a different theory about the unification of language:

'The life of actual language consists in multiplicity of meaning. To relegate the animated, vigorous word to the immobility of a univocal, mechanically programmed sequence of signs would mean the death of language and the petrification and devastation of Dasein.'

(1997, p.49)

Heidegger seeks 'properly thinking', that will lead to truth, in an already existing language: German, which is closely related to Greek, in his opinion the most original of all languages.

It seems as if both thinkers have a different 'solution' to this imperfection of reality that comes with language. On the other hand, they both seem to find their ultimate truth in a different field, that of

mysterious, 'poetic' language. According to Benjamin the essence of a literary work is not imparting information, but what it contains in addition to the information: the mysterious, the 'poetic'. To Heidegger too, language is not just a medium for communicating what we know. It can show a form of 'projected saying', of a means through which we can show each other truth. Poetry and thus a specific form of language is a basis of all other arts according to his vision. With poetry the world opened up into Aletheia, and after that, all the other arts followed.

Simultaneity

There is another interesting side-effect to the use of language: words are handicapped by their dependence on time. Like in music, the order in which we perceive the elements that make the final work, plays a major role in the meaning of the work. In Benjamin's theories the allegorical image replaces temporality as a means of grasping truth because it suddenly arrests the historical continuum in a revelation. The image is the caesura in the movement of thought. After this split, a new departure is possible.

For Heidegger a similar thing happens to the artist and the thinker. He was struck by a letter of Mozart in which he wrote that, while thinking of one of his musical works, it became almost finished in his head, not serially, but as though all at once. Heidegger thought that this 'time all at once' was the essence of our thinking.

Conclusion

A concept that is closely related to these thoughts is the philosophy of 'Pataphysics, by the French author Alfred Jarry. It is the philosophy of imaginary solutions, that lies behind metaphysics. Metaphysics describe topics that pass by physics, 'pataphysics tackle the whole universe, it is an adventure in eternity, as the brainfather describes it. It is the science of the specific, of the laws that govern the exception. Its goal is not to generalise, but to look for the specific.

Human beings have become victims of their own knowledge. In 'pataphysics lies the only weapon against themselves. It gives the opportunity for individuals to express themselves on a higher level. It is an attitude, a discipline, a form of art that makes it possible for everyone to live according to ones own laws.

If we assume the fact that in Dasein we can find truth, the insurmountable gap between reality and truth needs to be dealt with in everyday life. Heidegger was aware of the fact that this 'factual' life

comes first, it is 'where entities make their appearance, in the first instance, before they become objects of theoretical knowledge.' (1998, p.48). His fear was that science and Western philosophy lead to a forgetting of the true nature of being. They try to summarise, generalise and categorise when attempting to grasp the reality of things. But Dasein is not 'a' being, nor a class of entities.

Reality and truth obviously are two different phenomena. Their disparity is probably based on the time-honoured antagonism of practice and theory, of doing and thinking.

Whether truth lies inside humans or not, is something which is harder to determine. But one thing is sure: because of the Western linear approach to time it is almost impossible to grasp reality in all its possibilities at once in order to find the ultimate truth. Approaching every situation in life as a completely new example of reality, would then be the next best thing.

Resources

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- Stevens, M.A. (2004) *Opening*