1 A Typology;  
Hermeneutics and Rhetoric

My focus is not hermeneutics in general, but specifically philosophical hermeneutics. To grasp the latter's significance requires the context of the former. And because, like rhetoric, hermeneutics has many meanings, we ought to survey some of them.

**Five Interpretations of Interpretation**

In its most common use, both now and in the past, hermeneutics designates the art or science of text interpretation. Writing preserves discourse over time and allows, especially with the advent of print, wide distribution over space. The inevitable result is some degree of alienation, as texts speak to a situation and an audience that no longer exist. "Hermeneutics has its origin in breaches of intersubjectivity" (Linge 1976, xii), breakdowns in both oral and written communication, but since texts cannot explain themselves, elaborate and self-conscious hermeneutical practice belongs to chirography and print. The need for it intensifies when a text such as sacred writ or legal codes has special authority and functions as a guide to decision-making. In such cases, we frequently interpret in the sense of construing intent—what, for example, the framers of the Constitution meant by establishing a religion—and by seeing current controversies in the light of our understanding of the past—for example, whether prayer in school amounts to establishing a religion.

For the greater part of its history, then, hermeneutics was really what is now sometimes called normative hermeneutics. When the dogma of the church is at stake in a culture where organized religion dominates daily activity or when a person's life, freedom, or property depends on the interpretation of statutes or precedent, a high premium accrues to having what will pass for correct and authoritative textual readings. In such circumstances, hermeneutics can become a highly specialized and esoteric pursuit.
Philosophical Hermeneutics: Its Place and "Places"

Normative hermeneutics will always be with us. But in modern times the focus of concern has been on developing a scientific hermeneutics with a solid epistemological grounding. The spectacular development of natural science, whose methods seemed to yield certain and reliable knowledge, led students of the humanities and the social sciences to strive after equally precise and prestigious methods of inquiry and verification. However, when people study people they are studying history, not objects or natural processes that subjects can observe, but the very history in which subjects reside.

How, therefore, can we manage in the historical sciences to obtain the storied objectivity of the natural sciences? Only by resort, so scientific hermeneutics thought, to a methodical discipline as carefully controlled in its own way as natural science. The aim of scientific hermeneutics was to restore the past, which meant overcoming somehow the distance separating the object of study (for example, a text) from the subject or interpreter. Hence it relied heavily on philology, on efforts to reconstruct the world views of past eras, and on suspending all assumptions on the part of the interpreter that might distort restoration, recovery of the author's intention, and the original audience's understanding.

So conceived, hermeneutics would serve the epistemological needs of historical studies. It would produce reliable knowledge of the past. It would function as the foundational discipline of historical studies in much the same way that standards for data collection, experimental design, and statistical evaluation secure the authority of natural science.

Scientific hermeneutics is also still with us, very much alive, for example, in the work of Emilio Betti and E. D. Hirsch. Its assumptions and methods reign in journals dedicated to "hard scholarship." The two great founders of modern hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, were after a scientific hermeneutics.

Philosophical hermeneutics radically questions the assumptions of scientific hermeneutics. Since Descartes, philosophy has been preoccupied with epistemological problems. Its basic questions are: How do we come to know anything? How can we be sure of what we claim to know? But epistemology tends to ignore a question prior to these: What is Being or beings? There is nothing to know and hence no problem of knowledge without beings—something to know about, someone capable of knowledge—hence the priority of the ontological over the epistemological question. In Being and Time (1962), Heidegger reasserted the priority of Being and provided the impetus for Gadamer's extensive development of philosophical hermeneutics in Truth and Method (1989b).
The specific concepts of philosophical hermeneutics are the concern of the next two chapters. In general it differs from both normative and scientific hermeneutics in its view of the status of interpretation. Interpretation is not primarily an art or a science, the special discipline of priests, lawyers, or professors; interpretation, rather, is human being, our mode of existence in the world. That is, hermeneutics does not come into play only when intersubjective understanding fails. It is not only an instrument for overcoming or preventing misunderstanding, as it was for Schleiermacher, or the enabling discipline of the human sciences, as it was for Dilthey. Rather, interpretation constitutes the world in which we exist. We always find ourselves in the midst of interpretations carried by our language and our culture. Regardless of our conscious stances toward history, we are caught up in history to a degree that we cannot hope to grasp or control fully. Because human being is being in time, "it"—what we try to objectify in scientific studies of language, culture, history, or tradition—is actually what "we"—supposedly neutral onlookers or subjects—are. To the extent that we can understand and interpret our intentions or actions, to proffer "readings" of this text or that individual's motives, we can do so because we always already dwell, mostly without being aware of it, in understandings, interpretations, and readings.

It follows that there is no subject "over here" and object "over there." Both belong to the history of interpretation. There is no place for a subject to stand outside or apart from this history-which-we-are, no neutral observing place, and no place where objects can appear apart from the history of understanding. It follows that knowledge can neither be discovered nor warranted by method. The whole rationale of scientific hermeneutics dissolves in Heidegger's hermeneutic of being.

All told we have

1. **Naïve or natural hermeneutics**, the spontaneous, everyday, mostly unreflective interpretations necessary when intersubjective understanding breaks down
2. **Normative hermeneutics**, the art of text interpretation as a deliberate and deliberating discipline for a "priestly" caste of specialists
3. **Scientific hermeneutics**, conceived as the foundational discipline of the human or historical sciences
4. **Philosophical or ontological hermeneutics**, a general philosophy of human existence, which holds that interpreting is not so much what human beings or some class of human beings do, but rather what all human beings are, namely, interpreters. To this typology we should add yet one more category, often called
5. Negative or depth hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of distrust or suspicion, a continuation of the Enlightenment's effort to liberate us from the dogma, error, and superstition of the past. It counters the emphasis of philosophical hermeneutics on being caught up, in Gadamer's phrase, "over and above our wanting and doing" (1989b, xxviii) in tradition. It is called "negative" because of its undermining intent and is sometimes styled "depth hermeneutics" because it purports to sound beneath linguistic surfaces to the unconscious (Freud) or to the economic-political conditions, the regimes of power, that control human communication (Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault).

The Priority of Philosophical Hermeneutics

Two basic questions remain in this initial survey of the territory: Why concentrate on philosophical hermeneutics? What does hermeneutics have to do with rhetoric?

Philosophical hermeneutics either subsumes, replaces, or claims priority to the other types. It subsumes naïve hermeneutics in that it aims to understand understanding itself. Philosophical hermeneutics is reflection on interpretation, a theory of what happens whenever we understand anything. It begins with a natural human ability or spontaneous performance, as does rhetoric, which strives to make conscious and accessible the process of speaking or writing well.

The relation of philosophical hermeneutics to the normative or negative types is more complex. It claims priority to any normative hermeneutic insofar as the interpretation of law, sacred texts, any body of art, and so on clearly depends on the general human ability to understand, whatever special assumptions or rules might distinguish, say, legal hermeneutics from biblical hermeneutics. To the extent that normative hermeneutics can rest only in "the" reading of some cultural artifact, philosophical hermeneutics denies such a possibility. For reasons that will become apparent in the next chapter, there can be no definitive reading of anything, no last or preemptive interpretation.

The concerns of philosophical hermeneutics are also indisputably prior to negative hermeneutics, since deconstructions depend on constructions, depths on surfaces, critiques on some existing self-understanding. But does philosophical hermeneutics subsume the various forms of negative hermeneutics? The claim of the latter rests in penetrating "beyond" or "beneath" natural hermeneutics and reflection on the process of interpretation itself. A good example is the Marxist critique of ideology, which holds that interpretation is always distorted by economic and political inequities thought natural and ineluctable, whereas the inequities themselves are only the outcome of a temporary state in the means of production and therefore anything but beyond remedy. To detect the distortions, one must see through the rhetoric of apologists for the system to the real material conditions underpinning the system.
Neo-Marxian critics contend that philosophical hermeneutics lacks the systematic depth of ideology critique and thus is inadequate in itself both as a theory of interpretation and as a guide to constructive social change (Habermas 1986, 269–74). Gadamer contends that nothing inherent in philosophical hermeneutics excludes critical theory (1986, 288–89). But whether or not critique is subsumed by hermeneutics, the priority of understanding (for example, some construction of what a text says) to critique is enough in itself to justify concentration on the process of understanding.

Philosophical hermeneutics encompasses naïve hermeneutics and reflects on what is presupposed by the theory and practice of normative and negative hermeneutics. It may also replace scientific hermeneutics.

The energy once devoted to a science of interpretation has been dissipated by the failure of its proponents to advance a compelling method for stabilizing text interpretation. Too many of its key categories—"intention," for example—have become marginal in an intellectual climate very much aware of the impact of the un-, non-, and pre-conscious on all human activities. Moreover, the aspiration for certain knowledge in the human sciences to rival the natural sciences appears misplaced now that natural science itself is generally construed as a succession of paradigms, not a progressive refining of a single interpretation. Post-Kuhnian thought is no longer in awe of the natural sciences.

In Europe especially, but increasingly in this country as well, the assumptions of philosophical hermeneutics have displaced those of scientific hermeneutics. Why?

Philosophical hermeneutics begins explicitly with the primacy of Being, with our dependency on "the given," on nature, language, culture, tradition, and social practices. This starting point accords well with the social and ecological concerns of the age. Its basic postulate, human finitude, the limitations of temporal existence, recalls a broadly religious awareness. It also responds to the chastened aspirations of an age of specialists uncertain as to exactly where their work fits in the whole or even whether there is a whole for anything to fit in.
Habermas has ridiculed the self-conception of what he has called "the posties"—postmodern, poststructural, postanalytical, and so on. But he has also had to admit that the "master thinkers"—for example, Descartes, Kant, Hegel—have fallen on evil days (1987, 296). Precisely without claiming mastery, philosophical hermeneutics, with its stress on dialogue rather than system, is filling the void left by philosophy's foundational project—its attempt to establish an unshakeable ground of certain knowledge, now for the most part abandoned. In the absence of ultimates and absolutes, we are left with what Gadamer, echoing the German poet Hölderlin, called "the conversation that we ourselves are" (1989b, 378).

To a much greater extent than any other type of hermeneutics, philosophical hermeneutics is about the conversation that we are. Probably that is why it is moving to stage center even outside the humanities; that is why it deserves at least as much attention from us as deconstruction now enjoys. Deconstruction can reveal that scientific hermeneutics, in its effort to re-present a lost presence, to restore a past meaning, is but another instance of the metaphysics of presence; it can, that is, critique scientific hermeneutics, but cannot offer anything positive as an alternative. Philosophical hermeneutics can. It is, to use John Dewey's term, "reconstructionism," the necessity and value of which Crowley recognizes by frankly admitting that, in her suggestions for teaching writing, she has shifted from deconstruction proper to hermeneutics (1989, 53). To compose (from *componere*, to put together) is to construct and reconstruct, interpret and reinterpret; deconstruction can at most be a moment within this process, not an end in itself.

**Hermeneutics and Rhetoric: Relationships**

The close relation between rhetoric and hermeneutics has been explicitly recognized for a long time. At least since Schleiermacher it is a commonplace that the two verbal arts are complementary—textmaking, text interpretation (Palmer 1969, 88). Gadamer, however, points to rhetoric's claim to priority in the sense that "by its very nature [rhetoric is] antecedent to hermeneutics in the limited sense [of text interpretation] and . . . represents something like the positive pole to the negative of textual explication" (1989a, 276). In rhetoric, something is put together and comes to stand; only by this "first" can the answering "second" of interpretation take place.

Habermas agrees with Gadamer, while also calling attention to the common origin of rhetoric and hermeneutics "in arts which take in hand the methodical training and development of a natural ability. The art of interpretation is the counterpart of the art of convincing and persuading in situations where practical questions are brought to decision" (Habermas 1989, 294).
When we think of hermeneutics in the limited sense of text interpretation, the linkage with rhetoric tends to remain external, as if the two were sharply distinct arts. But Habermas's reference to practical questions suggests a deeper, more integrated connection, which Gadamer explicates in the following way:

Where else... should theoretical reflection on the art of understanding turn than to rhetoric, which from the earliest days of the tradition has been the sole champion of a claim to truth which vindicates the plausible, the eikos (verisimilar), and that which is illuminating to common sense against science's claim to proof and certainty? To convince and illuminate without being able to prove, that clearly is just as much the goal and measure of understanding and explication as it is of rhetoric and the art of persuasion. (1989a, 279)

Here we detect the goal shared by the two arts, to hold open a notion of truth that is neither self-evident nor reducible to methodical verification. Most of our questions are practical ones in the art of daily living—questions that can neither be approached by nor await the labors of method, but must be decided now on the basis of common sense and the most plausible interpretation, or the most persuasive argument. This Aristotelian notion of truth as pistis (opinion, faith) is therefore really the one that dominates human affairs. Chaim Perelman's The New Rhetoric (1969) is about this notion of truth, as is Wayne Booth's Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent (1974).

There remains at least one more level, deeper still, where, in Gadamer's words, "the rhetorical and the hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticality interpenetrate each other at every point" (1989a, 280). At this level, hermeneutics is no longer primarily a natural ability taken in hand and turned into a partly conscious art, a faculty cultivated for interpreting texts. Rather, hermeneutics is ontological, Heidegger's Dasein, human-being-in-the-world. We do not employ rhetoric and hermeneutics as we select a tool for this or that purpose; we are, in our very being, persuaders and interpreters, beings immersed in language and dwelling in a world both made and revealed by language. It follows that there is no first; the rhetorician's act is interpretation and interpretation an act of rhetoric. At this level, the level of philosophical or ontological hermeneutics, rhetoric and hermeneutics come together in a dialogue of mutual reflection.
The rest of this essay is an effort to begin this dialogue, first by meditating on the recurrent *topoi* of philosophical hermeneutics, and then by letting its "places" become the region for a rethinking of rhetoric. Why a rethinking? As Gadamer explains,

> There would be no speaker and no act of speaking if understanding and consent were not in question, were not underlying elements; there would be no hermeneutical task if there were no mutual understanding that has been disturbed and that those involved in the conversation must search for and find again. It is a symptom of our failure to realize this and evidence of the increasing self-alienation of human life in our modern epoch when we think in terms of organizing a perfect and perfectly manipulated information—a turn modern rhetoric seems to have taken. In this case, the sense of mutual interpenetration of rhetoric and hermeneutics fades away and hermeneutics is on its own. (1976b, 25–26)

Perhaps better than anyone else, Derrida has revealed the impossibility and the hubris of a perfect and perfectly manipulated information. It is a dream for machines, not people. If we rethink rhetoric hermeneutically, perhaps we can do something about one modern alienation and revive the conversation between rhetoric and hermeneutics.
2 Topoi I: Homelessness and Being

The real question is not in what way being can be understood but in what way understanding is being.

—Gadamer 1976b, 49

To understand a philosophy is to acquire a language, not so much in the sense of a glossary of terms, a set of categories, but more in the sense of topoi, the generative commonplaces of its thinking. "Commonplace" is especially appropriate in the case of philosophical hermeneutics with its emphasis on an existential vocabulary rather than a technical jargon. Instead of talk of axioms and corollaries and entailments, implicatures, propositions, illocutionary acts, and the like, philosophical hermeneutics uses a vocabulary that stays as close as possible to general human experience and the common problems of understanding. It is a terminology less suited for analysis than for inventio, for further discoveries, a language that would listen to rather than dissect the things of an objective world or the propositions of somebody's utterances. In this most of all, hermeneutics shows its debt to rhetoric.

The way I discuss hermeneutics here will perhaps not please a certain scholarly disposition. With few exceptions, I have not given the German originals of the key terms and phrases, since only a thorough familiarity with German could make them meaningful. Those who have familiarity do not need the German words; those who lack it will scarcely find the German terms helpful. Nor have I been rigorous in discriminating Heidegger from Gadamer or either from Ricoeur. The result, I hope, is a compact, uncluttered, accessible rendering of mainly Gadamer's version of philosophical hermeneutics. I readily admit, however, that my approach obscures the differences among these three thinkers, differences both numerous and significant. Finally, I should warn the reader that I have been selective in choosing what to discuss and what to discuss in relative detail. For the most part, I have not even alluded to the great deal left out or explained why some aspects receive special attention. Space will not permit the former; the latter is determined by my perception of the concerns of English teachers.
Homelessness

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.

—Matthew 8:20

One central theme of contemporary thought is spiritual crisis. Something has gone badly wrong with the ways of the West, despite its relative wealth and its domination of global affairs. So pervasive is this theme that one finds diagnoses of and prescriptions for the malaise underlying our frantic activity almost everywhere, in a host of sources seeming to share little else but the theme itself.

Heidegger characterized our era as "the darkening," glossed as "the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the transformation of men into a mass, [and] the hatred of everything free and creative" (1977a, 37–38). He did not offer much in the way of advice, apparently because of an almost Greek-like resignation to fate, but he did try to bring light to the darkening by striving to understand the sources of rootlessness and alienation. How did we arrive where we are? How is it that there is so little sense of belonging to anything, that even the fortunate residing in energy-efficient suburban houses find no home, no authentic dwelling place?

For Heidegger, for Derrida, and before both of them, for Nietzsche, the problem is metaphysics, whose heritage extends from Plato. Truth for Plato is the ancient ideal of theory, silent contemplation of the eternal, the *eidos* (form). Here is the source of the dispassionate Western onlooker and the object or thing concept of being—of the subject-object dichotomy, prominent in Western thought to this day. Scientific method is wholly dependent on it, as is the applied science of technology. For modern thought the source is Descartes, whose philosophy turns on a finally unbridgeable hiatus between mind and thing. But it is just as evident in Kant, who wanted to know exactly what the mind contributes to knowledge as opposed to the objects the mind experiences. And even Hegel, whose struggle is to overcome the subject-object dichotomy, affirms its centrality in the very struggle to overcome it.

Homelessness is the inevitable outcome of subject-object thinking. The contemplative self is an alienated self. It does not belong to the earth, to "the works and days of hands," for the earth is a realm of alteration and anything that changes can at best be a shadow of the real. The earth is appearance, illusion, death, or as the
preacher said, vanity (emptiness). This self does not belong to history, for the contemplative mind wants most of all a world of abstract law, fixed regularity, whose jurisdiction is universal and potentially ideal, completely knowable and predictable. Truth does not belong to time, and insofar as we pursue "the Truth," neither do we. It does not belong to society, to the active life of practical affairs, the life of rhetoric and discussion, for this life is caught up in earth and history and messy contingency and imprecision and mere opinion and endless controversy—in everything the contemplative merely tolerates, ignores, or despises.

The contemplative self, in sum, is self-ali enated, shorn of what he or she is. A mind purified for pure reason cannot fully acknowledge its bodily home either. The flesh is transitory and therefore of little consequence, or it is the source of weakness and evil. All that finite and fallible human beings are—flesh, earth, creatures of time, who belong to a particular place, society, and language—is rejected in favor of a dwelling meta-physis, beyond nature. The Son of (wo)man, the prophet, the role now filled by the scientist and the technocrat, has no place to rest his head because his places are no-places, utopias of mathematics, technical languages, symbolic logics, "heavens" of pure form with or without God. The great imperative is to find the source or ground of "the" one Truth, the foundational project of Western philosophy; the lesser imperatives are abstract and analyze, explain, predict, and, where possible, shape and manipulate to satisfy human desires. Method and technique, the god-terms of mastery, are the idols of the West, especially the modern West, yielding in our time the cult of the expert, the bureaucratic Leviathan, global domination by international business, and lives dedicated to self-improvement (even the self is manipulatable) and temporary arrangements, rootlessness made almost obligatory and certainly normal (a move on average every three to four years; a flitting here and a flitting there in the cause of business or recreation).

In our world there is little sense of locale; in the language of metaphysics, alienation and homelessness are not incidental or accidental but essential to modernity. For this reason, no serious hermeneutical thinker imagines an easy overcoming of the subject-object dichotomy or a sudden recovery of a sense of belonging. To employ a distinction put to another use by Frank Lentricchia in *Criticism and Social Change* (1983, 50–51), we can demystify the condition in which we find ourselves, to some extent understanding it; but defusing it, doing something about the power it has over us, is quite another matter. We may, for example, grasp clearly the dangers of the technological compulsion to control nature, but we look for solutions in still more technology, as in the various proposals for disposing of nuclear wastes.
For Heidegger, modernity is a fate, the destiny of our way of being, which must simply run its course. He did refer to "the turning" (1977b, 39–42), a future point when we can enter a new way of being. For Heidegger, this turning is something we cannot make happen, but something that will happen to us, perhaps something that is happening to us as we try to imagine a postmodern existence, for the most part conceived negatively, as only the antithesis of modernity.

For Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur—who differ sharply on this count with Derrida and with another influential French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, author of The Postmodern Condition (1984)—there can be no revolutionary break with the past, no sudden shifting of ground. Whatever possibilities we have reside in understanding our own history, not in leaping to somewhere else. It is accurate, then, to call philosophical hermeneutics profoundly conservative. But its critique of metaphysics also reveals an emancipatory interest that clearly sets it apart from an uncritical traditionalism. There is no simple endorsement of what we are.

Philosophical hermeneutics does not believe that it can decree an end to modernity or overcome metaphysical self-alienation by deconstructing the subject-object dichotomy or any of the other habitual distinctions of Western thought. Its program is more modest and, I would argue, more realistic. The ways of living and thinking that result in homelessness are deeply entrenched in our social practices, our institutions, and especially in our language, all of which operate for the most part preconsciously. Interpretation—hermeneutical reflection—can bring only bits of what is going on to awareness. Even when it does, not only must it reckon with never having the whole picture, but also with resistance or denial, in the strong Freudian sense of these words, and less dramatically with loss of insight through daily immersion in the business of our lives. Emancipation is consequently slow and imperfect, caught up as we are in a finite existence prestructured by the tremendous inertial force of the past, whose effects on us are both good and bad, typically at the same time.

All philosophical hermeneutics can hope to do, therefore, is hold open an alternative, constantly pointing to ways of living and thinking less destructive of the earth and the human spirit. The pervasive way we have thought about being, as consisting of isolatable objects that can be technologically manipulated, willed to be what we want them to be, is not the only way of thinking about being or living in the world.
Philosophical hermeneutics is an effort to rethink what we are and how we might relate ourselves to the world. It is preparation for and complicity with the turning, when perhaps we can learn to heed the claims of Being.

The Priority of Being

Western thought since Descartes typically begins with an individual consciousness contrasted with what it can be conscious of, the objects of contemplation or experience. Truth can only be correspondence or correctness, a perfect match between the "in here" (what we assert about the world) and the "out there" (objective existence). Philosophical hermeneutics does not deny consciousness. It does not deny that some experiences can be objectivized, treated as so many self-contained items. It does not deny the legitimacy of human concern, within some frame of reference, for reporting the world accurately. What it does deny is the primacy of the subject-object dichotomy.

Before subjects can be observers of and asserters about the world, they must be dwellers within it. The Western subject belongs to the world from which it would abstract itself. It "knows" the world tacitly, preconsciously, always to a much greater extent than it knows in the sense of explicit formulation. Our being-in-the-world, then, is always prior to abstracting (literally "drawing away from") this being-in-the-world to become the Cartesian cogito. Prearticulate experience and semiconscious know-how gained from interacting with the environment condition both what and how we observe, so that the neutral, disinterested subject is at best, by the most charitable construction, an unattainable ideal.

We do not and cannot exist as an isolated, individual mind or consciousness. We belong to a society and a culture in the sense of unquestioning interiorization of its norms and ways long before we have the capacity to reflect and criticize. The very fiction of the detached subject is itself a cultural norm, not a natural fact or an ineluctable beginning point or postulate. This fiction conceals too much our being-with-others, which always underlies the act of will required to function, temporarily and imperfectly, as mere onlookers. And because it conceals the more deeply rooted being-with-others, it also conceals the moral imperatives that guide observation. We cannot just look; we are always looking for something, something made significant by the explicit and tacit rules of the game, for what counts within some particular inquiry or context.
The subject side, then, of the subject-object dichotomy is neither primary nor self-aware. It cannot be what it claims to be: apart from the world, whereas it is always in the middle of things; isolated, whereas it is always more collective and social than individual.

What about the other side, the side of the object? As the epistemological subject is a reification, so also is the object of its gaze. In the first place, as Edmund Husserl clearly showed, we can focus on some one something only by ignoring the context or background against which we perceive it (Gadamer 1976b, 118). No less than subjects, objects exist only in the middle of things. In the second place, any perceiving is always a "seeing as," not the pure seeing, the "just looking" of naïve empiricism. Since to perceive an individual tree as tree requires the concept tree, language conditions perception at a mostly deep, nonconscious level.

The phrase "priority of Being" sums up the hermeneutical critique of Cartesian epistemology. The separation of subject from object amounts to a forgetting of their belonging together in the world, in Being. Heidegger's famous hammer analogy in Being and Time (1962, 69) expresses the relationship clearly. For the carpenter, the hammer is an extension of the hand, an existential unity, bound together in purposefulness, the project at hand. The hammer can become an object only when it falls out of human projects—when the hammer breaks, for example. Our knowledge of the hammer is rooted in our unreflective use of it; we know it as such only when it ceases to function in our world, when it ceases to be a hammer. Subject-object thinking treats all experience as if it were broken, as if the belonging together of people and things that always precedes the momentary abstractions to subject and object were unimportant.

"Thinking Being" is the step back from subjects and objects to the more original relationship of existential unity. To use Kenneth Burke's geological metaphor (1969a, xix), consciousness becomes only the crusts thrown up from the molten center of Being, where all exists as the not-yet-distinguished; objectivity becomes but one possible stance of no special privilege; and truth as correspondence becomes secondary to the question of how anything comes to appearance at all.

That is: before we can make any judgments about a tree, before any statements about objects are possible, the tree must somehow show itself to us, come out of the molten center as tree. But how? That question belongs to the next topos.
Being as Event

"Being as event" is the place of places for philosophical hermeneutics. Much of its vocabulary was designed to talk about Being nonsubstantially—that is, not as perduring sameness, as the eternal Is, but as happening, something that occurs in time and in this world. Philosophical hermeneutics asserts the priority of Being as a counter to the alienation of human being from the world, of subjects from objects, and as a way of displacing consciousness from the center of modern Western thought; it asserts Being as event as an alternative to the fixation with objective truth, which always alienates the knower from the known and restricts truth itself to either self-evidence or the methodically verified.

The rest of the topoi discussed in the next chapter have to do with Being as event, not with truth as correctness or correspondence of a proposition with an extraverbal state of affairs, but with truth as disclosure or unconcealedness, how beings "show themselves" to us. It is therefore crucial that we understand what Being means—and perhaps more important, what it does not mean—in the context of hermeneutics and why hermeneutics insists on the temporality of Being and truth over the "eternal truths" termed objective.

Although there have always been significant dissenting voices, Western philosophy has on the whole tried to think being in two ways. In the first way, being inheres in the things of experience and gives them identity. There is, for example, a "treeness" about trees, and even a "goodness" about everything we call good. Being is the search for essence; the only question is whether we have the right concepts for saying what a tree or the good is. In other words, whatever is isolatable in experience has a fixed nature, whose essence is in principle knowable. This or that tree will deteriorate, die, and return to the earth, but the essence of tree will live on in timeless statements about treeness. To assume otherwise is to fall into sophistry, to say, as indeed the Sophists did say, that what is good depends on whether one is talking to Athenians or Spartans.

This way of thinking attends to the Being of beings and works with a propositional calculus—that is, with concepts combined into assertions. Its characteristic tool is logic. Its philosophical concern is with validity—the formal correctness of statements and sets of statements—and with truth in the sense of correspondence or extension, the extralinguistic state of affairs represented by concepts and statements. It is metaphysical in the sense that it assumes a stable order that is not only accessible to reason, but is in its very being logos, rational.
For the most part, Western thought has been preoccupied with the Being of beings, with intellectual and technical mastery of things. But it has also sought to grasp the Being of beings in a second way, not as the treeness of tree, but as the "isness" of tree, the Being that any existent thing shares with all existing things. Here, the attempt of Western thought to reach "beyond nature" becomes most obvious: Plato's eidos, Aristotle's unmoved mover, the Hellenized God of the New Testament, and all their many variations and derivatives testify to the metaphysical ground or foundation attributed to Being itself. Being in this version is not only beyond shape-shifting appearance, but is also beyond flesh and earth in some heavenly or transcendent realm of pure intellection and imperishable Being.

Western thought is driven to the metaphysical strategem because it wants to grasp Being in the same way that it grasps everything else, conceptually. But the concept of Being is empty, contentless, indistinguishable from Nothing. If one tries to think of Being itself apart from anything that exists, one finds only nullity, for isness offers nothing concrete for the mind to grasp. All that can be said about Being is that it is not: not limited, not mortal, not anything that belongs to our experience, our world. It therefore has to be metaphysical, like the God whose perfect circular nature has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. Only in such paradoxical metaphors can Being itself find conceptual expression.

In sum, then, the Western effort to think being ends in either the will to power, domination of beings, or in a Being so refined that not even breath or wind can represent it. Both result from the conceptual reduction of being; they belong together, as hubris and emptiness belong together.

By Nietzsche's time, if not before, metaphysics' way of thinking being was anachronistic. Evolutionary thought destroyed whatever was left of the idea of a stable chain of being, and with it the Being of beings as essence. Beings can still be thought as structure and structural transformation (that is, process), but not as essence in the sense of a permanent, inherent nature. At the same time, the hold of a realm beyond this world, whether sustained by a personal, theistic God or the abstract God of the philosophers, was slipping. Any positing of a realm beyond nature triggers suspicion as a sign of bad faith or inauthenticity, the choice of comforting illusions over solid effort in this world now.
For the most part, the old ontological question of the Being of beings is just not asked. In the context of modernity, it is hard to dispute Heidegger's accusation that Western thought has forgotten Being (1977a, 41). At the same time, a century after Nietzsche, it is no longer interesting, much less prophetic, to announce the end of metaphysics. If, as some say, deconstruction has lost vitality, probably that loss results from its job being done. What is left of the metaphysics of presence that needs deconstruction? Disorganized remnants survive in popular culture and can still undergird reactionary political programs—as will to power, we still have to take it seriously—but I can think of no important contemporary advocate of truth as unmediated presence. The genuine issue now is not whether or how to bring metaphysics to an end. Metaphysics is spent. The issue, rather, as Robert Nozick put it, is to find a place worth being (1981, 2). The issue is living meaningfully.

To find a place worth being can hardly be managed with thinking that forgets place and being. By a kind of internal necessity, traditional Western thought deprived us of both through obsession with objectivity, universals, and absolutes, nonplaces where no one can dwell. But have the antitraditional and nontraditional alternatives opened a place worth being? Some have looked to the East, exotic and fascinating, no doubt, but not a home for Western minds. Others have sought a place worth being in some future fruition, like the classless state, long recognized as a materialistic parody of the Kingdom of God on earth. Like the Kingdom of God, such a faith seems to reside in endless deferral, the difference between Derrida's world of infinite signifiers and the prophetic never-quite-yet being that the former cannot imagine a signified. Others see the new age as here already in the form of a definitive break with the past. Henceforth we are free to make and remake ourselves at will. "But out of what?" one might ask. Presumably, like the God of metaphysics, out of nothing, for if the past does not carry our possibilities, what does? Being as radical freedom seems indistinguishable from freedom as "just another word for nothing left to lose," to recall a poignant definition from a once-popular song.

Philosophical hermeneutics' effort to rethink Being as event eludes easy categorization as traditional or anti/nontraditional, modern or postmodern. On the one hand, reviving Being seems to run counter to the aggressive nihilism of post-Nietzschean thought as well as the implicit nihilism of scientific-technical reason, which does not think Being at all. Philosophical hermeneutics "reaches back," trying to recover something lost by both sides in the current struggle between modern and postmodern allegiances.
And yet, on the other hand, philosophical hermeneutics is not traditional in the hapless "back to" kind of thinking characteristic of nostalgia for some lost golden age. No less than Nietzsche, philosophical hermeneutics breaks with metaphysics. Being is not something open to conceptual grasp and control. Being always has us; we always find ourselves within not just a natural environment, but a world, a particular society, language, history. In this world, the life-situation of our time and place, Being is in the sense of established social practices and institutions, prevailing interpretations of what has been, is, and can be; but Being also unfolds in the sense that interpretation never stops, can never reach finality. If we belong to Being in that we cannot step aside from or discard our society, language, or history, we also "make Being" through the reflective power of language, through partial deconstructions and reconstructions of understandings passed down to us.

As we make our way through some of the topoi of Being as event, we might think about philosophical hermeneutics as a whole in the context of postmodernism. Philosophical hermeneutics is postmodern in that it does not pretend to know anything about ultimate foundations and final or ultimate Truth. But in rejecting the Being of metaphysics, it does not reject Being, as postmodernism generally does. The key move of philosophical hermeneutics is to construe Being in time, as the truths of process and discovery rather than essence and correctness, of unsecured imaginative insight rather than system and method. Being is the immanent, the always emerging meanings concealed when tradition is reified, made into what it is not, monolithic and static. The place worth being is participation in the truths now unfolding, in the revealing and making-remaking of Being itself. It is a certain activity, a way of being, not a state of being.