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## History of Truth: *Aletheia* and Related Terms in Ancient Greek

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### Introduction

"Aristotle defines truth for classical philosophy: 'to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.' (*Metaphysics* 1011b) This seems simple, but it is important to see that it is not. The formula synthesizes three distinct and in no way obvious or unobjectionable assumptions, assumptions which prove decisive for the career of truth in philosophy.

First, the priority of nature over language, culture, or the effects of historical experience. One can say of what is that it is just in case there exists a what which is there, present, with an identity, form, or nature of its own.

Second, the idea that truth is a kind of sameness, falsity a difference, between what is said and what there is. In another formula Aristotle says, 'he who thinks the separated to be separated and the combined to be combined has the truth, while he whose thought is in a state contrary to the objects is in error' (1051b). To be true, what you think separated must be what is separated—that is, they must be the same (the same form or *eidos*). To accommodate the priority of nature, however, truth has to be a secondary sort of sameness: according to the classical metaphor, the imitation of original by copy. It is up to us to copy Nature's originals, whose identity and existence are determined by causes prior to and independent of local convention. Thus a third feature of classical truth: the secondary and derivative character of the signs by which truth is symbolized and communicated. Classical truth subordinates the being (the existence and identity) of signs (linguistic or otherwise) to the natural, physical, finally given presence of the non-signs they stand for." (pp. 9-10)

Heidegger remarks that 'in ontological problematic, being and truth have from time immemorial been brought together if not entirely identified (*Sein und Zeit*, 228). He thinks this is a kind of hint. There is, however, reason to think it is an originally meaningless accident of historical grammar. To be is spoken in many ways, but for Aristotle 'it is obvious that of these the what-something-is, which signifies the substance, is the first' (1028a). In a study of the Greek verb 'be' (*einai*), Charles Kahn shows the priority of its use as a predicating copula and the corresponding insignificance of the difference between existing and not existing. 'Both of them,' he writes of Plato and Aristotle, 'systematically subordinate the notion of existence to predication, and both tend to express the former by means of the latter. In their view to be is to be a definite kind of thing.' In contrast to what something is, the factor of existing, if it appears at all, appears secondary and of no distinct significance. For both, 'existence is always *einai ti*, being something or other, being something definite. There is no concept of existence as such.' This is not to say that Aristotle, for instance, is oblivious of the difference between what a thing is and its existence. Joseph Owens observes, 'Aristotle does not for an instant deny existence. He readily admits it in Being *per accidens*. But he does not seem even to suspect that it is an act worthy of any special consideration, or that it is capable of philosophical treatment.' (1) Kahn also describes a so-called veridical use of the Greek 'be' according to which it 'must be translated by 'is true,' 'is so,' 'is the case,' or by some equivalent phrase.' He remarks that 'instead of existence ... it was another use of to be that gave Parmenides and Plato their philosophical starting point: the veridical use of *esti* and *on* for 'the facts' that a true statement must convey. Thus the Greek concept of Being takes its rise from ... this notion of what is as whatever distinguishes truth from falsehood ... doctrines of Being first arose in Greece in connection with the question: what must reality be like for knowledge and informative discourse to be possible and for statements and beliefs of the form X is Y to be true?' To ask what reality must be like for sentences to be true implies that truth in sentences is their being like what is. Kahn writes, 'the pre-philosophic conception of truth in Greek ... involves some kind of correlation or fit between what is said or thought, on one side, and what is or what is the case or the way things are on the other side.' As veridical, the Greek *esti* 'poses a relation between a given descriptive content and the world to which it refers or which it purports to describe ... truth depends on some point of similarity or agreement between the two.' Truth, in Greek, is the virtue of a discourse that subordinates itself to what is, assuming second hand the same form as the beings whose being makes the discourse true. 'If we bear in mind the structure of the veridical use of the verb, we will easily see how the

philosophers' interest in knowledge and truth, taken together with this use of 'to be,' immediately leads to the concept of Being as ... the facts that make true statements true.' (2)" (pp. 14-15)

## Notes

(1) Charles H. Kahn "Retrospect on the Verb 'To Be' and the Concept of Being," in Simo Knuuttila & Jaakko Hintikka (eds.), *The Logic of Being: Historical Studies*, Dordrecht: Reidel, (1986), pp. 21-22; and "Why Existence Does Not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 58 (1976), 333. Joseph Owens, *Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian "Metaphysics,"* 3d ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978), p. 309.

(2) Charles H. Kahn, "Retrospect," pp. 8, 22; "Why Existence," p. 329; and *The Verb "Be" in Ancient Greek*, Dordrecht: Reidel, (1973), pp. 313, 363.

The idea of a veridical "be" has been questioned by Mohan Matthen, "Greek Ontology and the 'Is' of Truth," *Phronesis* 28 (1983) pp. 113-135.

From: Allen Barry, *Truth in Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1993 (notes abbreviated).

"Our question is: how is truth related positively to historicity? Our guiding suggestion is that such an investigation itself needs to be conducted in a historical manner, by working through the generation of our present ways of thinking about truth. To propose this way of investigating the topic of truth and historicity is, however, to be brought face-to-face with a recurring problem. For straight away the topic of our investigation seems to pose a dilemma for us at the level of method.

On the one hand, if we are to take our own historicity seriously, it would seem that the investigation will have to be undertaken in a historical manner; in short, to be an inquiry into the history of the idea of truth and of the idea of historicity. Yet, on the other hand, the topic of the relation of truth to historicity seems, in itself, to be a philosophical issue which a historical survey could, at best, only illustrate. Thus philosophy and history, as two different kinds of inquiry, seem to exhibit just that same polar opposition as do the ideas of truth and historicity. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the enterprise of carrying out an inquiry which is at once historical and philosophical should seem impractical. This methodological stumbling-block warrants careful pondering. (p. 7)

The historian of philosophy is operating with a consciousness different from that of the historical philosopher. The directedness of the former's thinking remains focused upon the thinkers of the past; their thoughts are what the inquiry is about. Thus, there is an inevitable epistemological 'distance' between the historian as subject and the past as object. But whoever philosophizes historically is engaged essentially in a complex act of self-consciousness. One enters into the past only to return to oneself; indeed, one recognizes elements of one's own way of thinking there in the past, and recognizes them as one's own. The historian of philosophy may be struck by flashes of self-recognition too, just as contrariwise the inquiry might lead to the revision of beliefs held now. But from the point of view of the teleology of the discipline, those results are accidental side-effects. For the historical philosopher, such outcomes are essential to the kind of self-conscious reflection engaged upon. Again, unrealized possibilities for thought forgone by past thinkers may be identified by historians of philosophy, especially by those whose procedure is hermeneutically sensitive. But for those who philosophize historically such identifications are only the first step towards the development of one's own position, in full self-consciousness, as both growing out of the inherited past and yet going beyond it." (p. 10)

From: Richard Campbell, *Truth and Historicity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

"The study of early Greek notions of truth is still dominated, fifty years later, by Heidegger's influential restatement (1) of the view (2) that *to a-lêthes* is, originally and essentially, *to mê lanthanon* -- i.e., the "unhidden" or "unforgotten". If Heidegger and his followers are correct, *alêtheia* must be a quality inherent in objects perceived or information received: a certain self-evidence, abiding clarity or memorableness (3). Against this view (though also, by implication, against those who reject altogether the correctness or relevance of the derivation from the root *lath-* (4) Bruno Snell has recently suggested (5) that the *lêthê* excluded by *a-lêtheia* is something found in persons rather than things: forgetfulness rather than hiddenness or being forgotten. A-lethes is that which is retained in the memory without any of the gaps to which such *lêthê* would give rise. (p. 7)

In this "subjective" reformulation of the established, "objective" interpretation, *aletheia* becomes the result of the way an original apprehension remains in the perceiving subject's memory, not an aspect of objects or information as originally apprehended. But perception or apprehension continues to be of major, if no longer central, importance. The discussion which follows accepts Snell's subjective interpretation in the main but argues for further reformulation, this time in terms of the processes of communication rather than perception: *alêtheia* is that which is involved in, or results from, a 'transmission of information that excludes *lêthê*', whether in the form of forgetfulness, failure to notice, or ignoring (6). The semantic development thus posited, by which a word that originally meant something like "conscientious reporting" became a synonym for truth (*etymon* or *eteon* in the earliest attested Greek) has a close parallel in the transformation of Latin *accuratus* ("careful", usually of speech or writing) into English "accurate". The Greek counterpart to this development is more complex and harder to trace: *alêtheia* absorbs some of the original meaning of two other more specialized terms (*nêmertês*, *atrekês*) and transmits some of its own to a third (*akribês*) before finally becoming, in the mid-fifth century, the most general and important word for truth. Moreover, the initial and terminal stages of its history are much better documented than the intervening ones. But the development in all its phases is worth an attempt at reconstruction, even if the consequences for the history of Greek thought are less spectacular here than where the Heideggerian etymology serves as a point of departure.

Snell's subjective reformulation, whether as originally presented by him or in the revised version to be offered here, removes the most 'crucial' problem posed by its objective alternative. Hiddenness (or failure to be remembered) and its opposite are conditions which should attach to things as well as to the content of statements. Yet it is almost, exclusively to the latter that *alêthes* refers in its first two and a half centuries of attestation. A Greek may, from the very beginning, speak the truth (or "true things"), but it is not until much later that he is able to hear it (Aesch. Ag. 680), or see it (Pind. N. 7,25), or be truly good (Simonides 542,1 Page), or believe in true gods (Herodotus 2, 174, 2). And it is later still that *alêtheia* comes to refer to the external reality of which discourse and art are imitations. Other *lanthanein* derivatives -- *lathra*, *lathraios* (and *alastos*, if it belongs to this group) -- are applied freely, at all periods of their use, to persons, things and situations; why not *alêthes* as well (7). The question becomes fairly easy to answer if *alêtheia* is taken to be, in origin, a kind of "unforgettingness", a specifically human quality and one which is most crucially and consistently important in the realm of human discourse. (p. 28)

## Notes

(1) In *Sein und Zeit* 33 and 220-223. Cf., also, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, 26-33 and 'Aletheia (Heraklit, Fragment 16)', 54-61.

(2) First stated by J. Classen, *Beobachtungen über den homerischen Sprachgebrauch*, Frankfurt 1867, 197 [reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1977] (\*)

(3) See, most briefly, the articles in the etymological dictionaries of Frisk (s.v. '*alethês*') and Chantraine (s.v. '*lanthanô*'), and, most exhaustively, J.-P. Levet, *Le vrai et le faux dans la pensée grecque archaïque*, Paris 1976.

(4) E.g., A. W. H. Adkins, 'Truth, Kosmos and Arete in Homer', *Classical Quarterly* 66, 1972, 6-7. Cf., also, Friedländer's suggestion (Plato (2nd edition) vol. 1, eng. transl. New York 1958, 221 -- modified and largely abandoned in Plato (3rd edition) vol. 1, Berlin 1964, 234-236) that the word may not even be Indo-European.

(5) In *ALETHEIA, Festschrift für Ernst Siegmann* (= Wurzbürger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft 1, 1975), 1-18. See, especially, 14 " ἀλήθεις ist das im Gedächtnis lückenlos Festgehaltene (das in seiner Fülle hergezählt werden kann)", and 11, "... in einen bestimmten Wissens-Kontinuum nichts der Lethe anheimfallen lassen". Snell seems indebted to T. Krischer's study, ' *ETYMOΣ und ΑΛΗΘΗΣ*', *Philologus* 109, 1965, 161-174 for his notion of *aletheia* as the larger whole from all of whose parts the process or idea associated with the *lethe*-root is excluded. For Krischer this idea is that of being "unnoticed" rather than "unhidden" or "forgetful", so that an *alethes logos* is "... der Bericht der die Dinge darstellt... ohne das dabei etwas unbemerkt bleibt" (op. cit. 167; cf. 165: "... so aussagen das nichts [dem Angeredeten] entgeht) ".

(6) As in the corresponding verbs *lanthano* and *lethomai*, the distinction between unintentional forgetting or failure to notice and intentional ignoring is not strictly observed. The meaning posited is broad enough to include both.

(7) Usage thus tells strongly against the relevance of W. Luther's contention (*Wahrheit, Licht und Erkenntnis in der griechischen Philosophie bis Demokrit*, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 10, 1966) that the Homeric world is one which knows "keinen Unterschied zwischen Wahrheit und Wirklichkeit" (31), and in which "die Dinge und die sie bezeichnenden Wörter noch in einem untrennbaren Wirkungszusammenhang stehen" (37). This may be true in general, and for *etymos* (text, p. 13), but not for *alêthes*. Cf. Snell (above, n. 5) 11, n. 4, and 17.

(\*) [Note added by Raul Corazzon: The text by Johannes Classen is: "Wahr ist den Griechen das Unverhüllte, ἀ-λήθεις (von λήθω, λανθανω ) und die Wahrheit, ἀλήθεια , kommt den Dingen und Worten zu, in so fern sie sich unsrer Einsicht nicht entziehen." in: *Über eine hervorstechende Eigentümlichkeit der griechischen Sprache* (1850), reprinted in *Beobachtungen... cit.*]

From: Thomas Cole, *Archaic Truth*, Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica, Nuova Serie, 13, 1983.

### Remarks on the etymology of *Aletheia*

"*Aletheia* is the most important Greek counterpart of our 'truth'; *alethes* (true), *alethos* (truly) and *alethein* (to speak the truth) are related words. However, the Greek "truth-family" is much more comprehensive and consists of 14 words, among others (adjectives): *atrekes*, *nemertes*, *adolos*, *ortos*, *apseudos*, *etymos* and *etetymos*. It is characteristic that several words, including *aletheia* also, belonging to this variety begin with 'a'. The most common interpretation of this lexical phenomenon is to consider 'a' as a sign of *privativum*, that is, as a negative noun or adjective. This understanding of *aletheia* was proposed by Sextus Empiricus, Plutarch, Ohimpiodoros and the so-called *Lexicon Gudianum* in antiquity (see [Wilhelm Luther, "*Wahrheit*" und "*Lüge*" im ältesten Griechentum (1935), pp. 12-13; Paul Friedländer, *Platon: Seinswaheheit und Lebenswirklichkeit*, (1954) pp. 222, 375]). In our times, it was recalled by Leo Myers in his influential *Handbuch der griechischen Etymologie* (1901) and popularized by Rudolf Bultmann (see [*Der griechische und hellenistische Sprachgebrauch von ἀλήθεια* , p. 239]): "*aletheia* - etymologisch das Nicht(s) - *verheimlichen* - bedeutet". According to this interpretation, we should consider such words as complexes of the following structure: *a-letheia*, *a-trekes*, *a-dolos* or *a-pseudos*; *nemertes* can be understood in a similar way, because 'ne' functions as 'a', that is, as an indicator of a privative character. As far as the matter concerns *aletheia*, its etymology is derived as *a* + *lethe* + suffix. *Aletheia* as a noun occurred with so-called *verba dicendi*, [verbs of saying] that is, verbs like Greek counterparts of "to tell" or "to hear". So much about matters of lexicology and a simple grammar. Of course, semantic matters are much more important. Very schematically, if *V* (*aletheia*), where the letter *V* stands for a *verbum dicendi*, represents an *aletheia*-context, to *V* an *aletheia* consisted in issuing a concrete sentence in the present tense about something, usually supported by direct experience, particularly seeing (see [H. Boeder, *Der frügeschichtliche Wörtgebrauch von Logos und Aletheia* (1959) pp. 68-71]). Then, applications of *aletheia*-contexts were extended to past and future events. Finally, *aletheia* became an abstract noun, denoting a property of sentences (judgements, etc.)." (p. 341)

From: Jan Wolenski, *Aletheia in Greek Thought Until Aristotle*, *Annals of Pure and Applied Logic*, 127: 2005, pp. 339-360.

### A synthetic overview of *Aletheia* in Ancient Greek

1. For many years there has been a tendency in biblical studies to over-generalize about the uses of *alétheia* and *aléthes* in classical Greek. This has been done partly with a view to drawing a clear-cut contrast between Greek and Hebraic concepts of truth. It is then argued that whilst some New Testament writers preserve the Hebraic concept, other writers, especially John, achieve a fusion of these two views. Thus R. Bultmann too readily speaks of "the Greek use" of *alétheia* as over against "the semitic use" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* I 238). According to this theory, *alétheia* in classical Greek denotes truth in contrast to mere appearance, whilst in Hebrew the parallel word denotes stability or faithfulness. It is also urged that truth in Greek writers is timeless, raised above the temporal and material world. It relates only to extra-historical being. Most scholars also insist that the basic meaning of *alétheia* in classical Greek is that of unhiddenness or unveiling. These traditional claims of nineteenth- and twentieth-century biblical scholarship are valid up to a point, but can be misleading unless they are carefully qualified.

2. The traditional approach depends largely on three arguments. (a) Much is made of the etymology of *alétheia* in ancient Greek. The word is said to derive from *letho* or *lanthano*, meaning to escape notice or to cause to forget, together with Alpha privative prefix, which negates the idea. The difficulty, however, is to show that the etymology of the word played a decisive part in determining its meaning in later Greek of the classical and Hellenistic periods. Indeed, even Homer shows little evidence that the word has this special nuance.

(b) *alétheia* does indeed mean truth in contrast to mere appearance in much Greek philosophy. But the vast majority of classical Greek writers and readers were not philosophers. J. B. Skemp observes, "There is one particular vice in the theological picture (or rather, caricature) of the Greeks. They are always represented as philosophical thinkers.... Such a description of the Greeks ignores the fact that many other Greeks at all the relevant times thought differently, and that a multitude of them did not think in this systematic way at all" (*The Greeks and the Gospel*, 1964, 3-4).

(c) The notion of truth as against mere appearance and as that which belongs only to the realm of timelessness and immateriality finds strong support in Parmenides and especially in Plato. This need not be denied. Nevertheless, even within Greek philosophy itself there are other views of truth besides Plato's, for example, that of the Sophists, which Plato himself attacks, and also that of Aristotle. In these writers truth has a more positive relation to the material world.

3. (a) In Homer *alétheia* is most frequently used in contrast to the telling of a lie or to the withholding of information, e.g. "Tell me all the truth [*pasan alétheian*] whether my son is by the ship" (*Ilyad* 24, 407); "I will tell you all the truth" (*Odyssey* 11, 507). When Odysseus with cunning "spoke not the truth", he simply tells a lie (*Od.* 13, 254). Achilles set an umpire to tell the truth of a race, i.e. the state of affairs as it really was (*Il.* 23, 361). However, this is not the only meaning of *alétheia* or *alethes* in Homer. In *Il.* 12, 433 *gyne chernetis alethes* means a woman who is careful, honest, accurate, or even perhaps reliable. (b) *alétheia* usually stands in opposition to falsehood in Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophanes. For example, the cowherd in Herodotus "tells the truth" under threat of violence (1, 116). Thucydides speaks of "the actual truth" in contrast to mere empty boasts (2, 41, 2). An oracle provides true answers to enquiries (Herodotus., 1, 55). (c) This usage also persists in later Hellenistic writers. Thus Epictetus contrasts telling the truth with deceiving flatteries (*Discourse* IV, 1, 6, 7). Philo writes that Moses marvelled at the delusion (*pseudos*) which the multitude had bartered for the truth (*alétheia*) (*De Vita Moses* 2, 167). The evil spies sent out to view the land prefer deceit (*apate*) to truth (*Vit. Mos.* 1, 235). Josephus uses *alétheia* in several different senses.

(i) Truth is that which corresponds to the facts of the matter. Thus Jonathan did not question the truth (veracity) of David's words (*Antiquities of the Jews* 6, 225).

(ii) Truth is also proved to be such by historical events. The words of a prophet are thus proved true (*Antiquities* 2, 209); whilst in the previous passage Jonathan does not wait to see David's words proved true (*Antiquities* 6, 225). (iii) Josephus also uses *alethes* in the sense of "genuine" or "real". Thus Ahab killed the real owner (*ton alethe despoten*) of the vineyard (*Antiquities* 8, 360).

4. The use of *alethes* in Greek philosophical texts is best seen in Parmenides, the Sophists, Plato, and Aristotle. Some of Plato's uses also appear in Philo.

(a) Parmenides asks what is the nature of real being, and draws a contrast between the way of truth and the way of seeming. Change belongs only to the material world, which is the realm of mere appearance. There can be no change in what really exists (Fragment 8, 29). "What is not" is unthinkable and unknowable, but change would be the supposed movement of what is to what is not, or of what is not to what is. Hence truth, in contrast to appearance, belongs to the extra-historical realm of the changeless. That such a view occurs in Greek philosophical literature is therefore clear. What is less certain is the extent to which ordinary Greek writers shared the view of Parmenides.

(b) The Sophists clearly held a different view. In particular Protagoras refused to view the material world as mere illusion. His famous dictum that "man is the measure of all things" was not intended merely, as Plato implied, as an extreme form of relativism. He cited the example of a wind which may seem warm to one person and cool to another. It is not necessary, he urged, to say that one view is true and the other false. Each may be true for the person concerned. In this way Protagoras comes near to the modern notion of existential truth.

(c) Plato rejects this view.

(i) He replied that if "true" and "false" are only relative to the individual thinker, then as soon as someone says that the philosophy of Protagoras is false for him, it is therefore false (*Theaetetus* 171

a). Falsehood, for Plato, is a matter of deception. It conceals reality (*ta onta*). False words, he believed, are merely a copy (*mimem*) of deception in the soul (*Republic* 2, 21, 382a-383b).

Falsehood is the presentation of what is only appearance (*phantasma*). By contrast "the divine and the divinity are free from falsehood [*apseudes ... to theion*]". God is true in deed and word (*alethes en to ergo kai en logo*) and neither changes himself nor deceives others (382e). Plato thus returns to the view, earlier outlined in Parmenides, that truth stands in contrast to appearance and to change, although he goes further than Parmenides in locating it in the realm of eternal ideas.

(ii) At the same time Plato also uses *alétheia* and *alethes* in more ordinary and less metaphysical ways. Truth sometimes means simply "the facts of the matter" (*Epistles* 7, 330). *alétheia* stands in contrast to legend (*Timaeus* 22d). "Equal to equal ... because of truth" (*Legibus* 2, 668a).

(d) Aristotle takes us closest to the view of truth found in modern propositional logic. Firstly, Aristotle distinguishes between the genuine proposition, which is true-or-false, and sentences such as pleas or commands. "We call propositions only those (sentences) which have truth or falsity in them" (*On Interpretation* 4, 17a, 4). Secondly, he considers the logical conditions under which the truth of a proposition entails the denial of its contrary. If it is true to say "Socrates is well", it is therefore false to say "Socrates is ill" (*Categories* 10, 13b, 14-35). Thirdly, he argues that "the truth of a proposition consists in corresponding with facts" (*hoi logoi aletheis hosper ta pragmata*, *On Interpretation* 9, 19a, 33). The principle is said to include statements about future states of affairs (18a-b). Often, however, the actual word *alétheia* is used in its ordinary everyday sense without philosophical content. The philosopher seeks to discover "the truth" that is in the universe (*De Mundo* 4, 391a).

(e) Philo uses *alétheia* in ordinary ways, as we have seen. As a Jewish theologian he speaks of "true doctrine" (*alethes dogma*, *Legum Allegoriae* 3, 229). But as a speculative writer who has been influenced by Platonism he also contrasts truth with mere appearance: "Moses desired truth rather than appearance [*tou dokein*]" (*De Vita Moses* 1, 48). However, he also sees the truth of God manifested in historical events, as in a quick punishment for unbelief (*Vit. Mos.* 2, 284)." pp. 874-877

From: Anthony C. Thiselton, "Truth", in Colin Brown (ed.) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Vol. III. Exeter: Paternoster Press 1978, pp. 874-902.