

The God of Thieves

Hermes and the Philosophy of the Improper

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Abstract

In this philosophical essay, I intend to understand hermeneutics as a philosophical tradition that favors the idea of exchange and impropriety over the ideas of ownership and identity. To this end, I will explore the mythological figure of Hermes, the Greek god that was the patron of merchants, travelers, translators, and also of thieves. Attending to the idea of robbery, and opposing the notion of use against the one of ownership, I argue that a philosophy that focus on interpretation and on texts leads to acknowledge that there is nothing proper to anything nor anyone, but that propriety is but the outcome of a negotiation, of an exchange, of mutual dis-appropriations.

Keywords

hermeneutics – intertextuality – Hermes – language – identity

It is proper to human beings to signify and give meaning to the events we face during our lives. There is nothing in this world that is completely meaningless, for everything that is part of it is articulated somehow in our general understanding of the place we live in. The philosophical question, however, aims at clarifying the ontological status of these meanings of the world: from Plato to our present days, we are still hesitant to decide if there is some truth in worldly events that does not depend on our cognitive processes, or whether everything we perceive is just a human construction. Between pure objectivism and pure subjectivism, philosophy is always rehearsing possible schemes to understand

these dialectics between something given and something taken, between the world that offers itself to be known and human beings that make use of it and give it a certain meaning. Among the different philosophical strategies to comprehend these dialectics, there is one that is built upon the corner-stone of an image: that the world offers itself to us *as if it were* a book, both to be read and to be written. This philosophical standpoint is called *hermeneutics*. Its roots can be traced back to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, just to mention its most important proponents. As any other philosophical tradition, hermeneutics has many possible variations according to its scope: it has been considered as a kind of epistemology, but also as an ontological perspective; it has been centered on subjectivity, and the ways by which we can grasp the living other through the mediating text, but it was also centered on textuality, focusing on the semantics of linguistic structures. Despite these variations, hermeneutics, as its name shows, has to do with *interpretation*, with dealing with something that is meaningful and whose meaning must be explicated. My intention in this text is not to write a history of hermeneutics, nor a study on any particular hermeneutical philosopher or hermeneutical problem. In this essay – without footnotes, nor bibliography, in the margins of academic writing – I will let myself run freely through the semantic field disclosed by the symbol of the Greek god Hermes, exploring how a hermeneutical philosophy could understand the way we signify the shared world in which we live in.

The name *hermeneutics* comes from the Greek *hermeneia*, that is, *interpretation*. Hermeneutics is, broadly speaking, the art of interpreting. Although its etymology does not refer to the Greek god Hermes, the association is quite natural – and also quite productive, for this god “gives rise to thought” (as Ricoeur liked to say concerning symbols). Hermes is a very peculiar god amongst his fellow-Olympic gods: he was reluctant to inhabit a place in Mount Olympus, being fonder of roads than of beds and heaths. With wings on his toes, Hermes was destined to the life of a nomad, always on the run, always on the move. Traveling from one shore to the other, Hermes was the responsible for the communication between the immortals and the mortals, and had to interpret the message from the gods so that men could understand it. As usual, the Greeks were good on paradoxes and jokes, and the god of language and communication could not be but a stutterer, someone who is not in control over his tongue, someone who must wrestle against language. Greeks knew that one speaks a language one does not possess, way before Jacques Derrida. In any case, Hermes is the god that watches over those whose business is trade, exchange, communication: he is the protector of travelers, merchants, businessmen, translators ... but he was also the protector of thieves. All of these

walks of life share their *translatory* activity, for they all either bring foreign elements to the city, or take elements out of it; somehow, they all use and bring to circulation different things, without possessing any of them. Hermes, as well, seems to be a paradoxical god, for although he is the *patron* of these men, he does not have any patrimony at all. Hermes shares with these people the condition of carrying baggage and owning nothing. A patron without patrimony, a father without a household, Hermes and his “friends” are always on the run, homeless, stateless. Far from being a state-god, Hermes is the *god of frontiers*, for frontiers are these impossible places of passage where there is no property nor sovereignty. Hence, Hermes is a paradoxical god, a god without territory, without jurisdiction. Almost an anti-god, for Hermes does not rule nor command; Hermes is just moving from one place to the other, a fellow traveler of those whose feet always ache.

The symbol of Hermes can teach us many things about interpretation and language itself, mainly if we consider the concept of *frontier*. Frontier is a peculiar political concept. In the frontier there is no government, but just competition and negotiation: frontiers are drawn out of a fight. In frontiers one cannot stay still (*otium*) but must stay on the move (*neg-otium*). If gods were to be apathetic, there is no chance for Hermes to live a quiet and peaceful life. It is not by chance that wings grew out of his feet. If we trace hermeneutics to the symbol of Hermes, one could claim that this philosophy shares with the travelling god this destiny of eternal movement and negotiation. However, this negotiation is of a peculiar kind, for it knows no home nor property. Therefore, hermeneutics entails the art of not having any possession, an activity that ignores the art of economy (that is, the art of administrating one's own household) and that negotiates what it is not its own. Hermeneutics entails to wander around strange lands, coming and going from texts to texts, from language to language, walking through territories that interpreters do not own, nor to which they belong. The only thing that belongs to those who devote themselves to hermeneutics is the element of commerce: money, or currency (the element that is meant to flow from one place to another, as the water and its currents). As a traveler, hermeneutics can only take money with her: no furniture, no house, not even too many clothes, nor food and drink. Interpreters, as Hermes, are mostly concerned with consumption, not with owning or possessing. For both Hermes and interpreters, things are there to be *used*. Hence, hermeneutics is the art of using.

One should focus on the metaphor of money to understand hermeneutics. Currency is the element of transitivity, of movement. And this transit, the coming and going, this using and consuming, is possible in the element that flows unceasingly as a water current. Money is the element of exchange, and

as such is always a *sign*, not a thing. Every transformation and movement happen within the sign of money; every property is valuable under the signal of currency, and every *ousía*, every substance/property is de-substantialized in money. Due to this trans-figuration of things to signs performed by currency, money does not belong to anyone, but to everyone. Money is not a substance, and thus is not a property (*ousía* in Greek means substance, essence, and property). Money, currency, is not something in-itself: its essence (*ousía*) is paradoxical, for it can only be expressed by the prefix *metá-* or *trans-*. Hence, money is paradoxically *an-economical*, for *oikonomía* entails an *ousía*, a possession that must be administered, something that we dispose of (*oikos*). Although money is some-*thing*, it appears as such only when an exchange happens. The very phenomenality of currency is to be found in this movement, in this passing-through that knows no country nor house, no possession nor essence. Money *happens* in its current flow, in its *sounding*, when it sounds as it hits the trading table (“contante y sonante”, we say in Spanish). If we take money as a metaphor for signified elements, one could claim that meaningful objects do not belong to anyone. Let me understand every signified element in the world in analogy with a text, for this image of a text can show both dimensions of materiality and of meaning of these objects. And let me also understand every signified element of the world as being articulated somehow in a discourse, or narration, that shapes our World-view; that is, every signified element of the world finds a place and it is expressed in a text (that can be both oral or written). Thus, let us keep with the metaphor of money to understand texts in this broad sense. Texts are outside any economic order, beyond any household or homeland. Texts are always passing, always moving, always being exchanged. As it is the case with travelers, texts live in a frontier, a space that welcomes everyone but doesn’t invite them to stay. As money, texts do not belong to anyone: they are spoken, they are heard, they are written, they are read: in short, they are *used*. Texts know no bank, for they cannot be saved nor accumulated; texts are always floating in a never-ending flow. Due to its *an-economics*, text cannot be administered, nor ruled, nor controlled. There is no sovereign over a text.

However, as in every commercial exchange, texts are “claimed” as belonging to someone. There are text-banks, guardians of texts, “textual-police”. These “owners” of texts subtract texts from their current use, and by keeping them they make a profit out of them by “lending” them to someone else. There is an “interest” to be paid for the use of these texts that “belong” to these text-keepers, to these texts-capitalists. As it is the case of money, because there are those who claim ownership over it, texts and currency are stamped by “royal” symbols, and exchanges are made “in the name of” the sovereign depicted on one side of the coin – or in the cover of a book, for texts are also in the

market, where many instances of control and authorization aim at organizing, administrating, taxing, and controlling textual exchanges. In these exchanges, in these trans-actions, trans-ferences, trans-lations, the instance of a sovereign decision appears. The prefix *trans-*, or *meta-*, which describes the movement so dear to Hermes and his friends, cannot keep its “innocence”, cannot run freely. The ball is stopped by someone who defines the rules of the game. No more innocent, childish play. We are now grown-ups: “this ball is mine, and I will tell you *how* to use it *properly*”. “Properly” is an adverb that denotes a propriety, it is a matter of propriety, of something that belongs to someone who normalizes its use.

However, the ball is meant to run. Hermes and his fellow *hermeneuts*, those who travel by his side, are called to resume the game. “He who receives a name, receives a destiny”, the Argentinian poet Leopoldo Marechal once wrote. The calling of hermeneuts, of those who “do” hermeneutics, is to make texts disposable again. Hermeneutics turn markets into battle-fields; hermeneuts know Heraclitus’ dictum well: *pólemos páter pánton*, “war is the father of all things”. Exchange – the soul of texts – is a matter of appropriation and des-appropriation ... a matter of *stealing*, in a word. Hermeneutics will not obey any master of texts. Hermeneutics serves no author, no reader, no publisher, no academy, no political cultural ministry. The value of a text is in itself a matter of con-frontation, of neg-otiation. No sovereignty over texts is powerful enough to claim it unmovable, to claim it as an un-disputable possession. Possession, in any case, will be the outcome of im-propriety. As every negotiation, it is a matter of power and force, of dissuasion and rhetoric, of argumentation – even of physical domination. But as those who live in frontiers, and love this impropriety, Hermes and hermeneuts are called to confront publishers, universities, foundations, governments, for they all have the financial and juridical means to push us in some direction, in some way of writing, reading or clas-sifying texts. Against this monopolization of textual exchange, hermeneutics is called to action. If hermeneutics is “critical”, it is not because it decides over the “true value” of texts, over the “right” or “correct” meaning of them. It is critical because it decides on the *un-decidability* of texts, their un-decided nature as elements in perpetual movement. It is critical because it is suspicious about any kind of attempt of ownership or sovereignty over the texts. Hermeneuts are critical because they *restitute* texts to their *use*, because they steal texts from the banks where they are kept, because they bring back texts to the streets so that everyone can make use of it. Hermeneuts are *de-stabilizing*, *an-archival*, sceptic people; they just want texts to flow, meaning to be in disposal. They just want the show to go on. They just want to keep on playing, as children, with no rules defined; they just want everyone to run after the ball and take it from

the other. Of course, they love frontiers (*Grenzen*), and this also entails that they love to draw distinctions (*Grenz-ziehung*): interpreters define texts, watch over their limits, structures and compositions, because interpreting is already a matter of delimiting signs and meanings. But they are aware that distinctions are a matter of conflict, that they are the result of a *de-cision* (*de-scissio*; *Ent-scheidung*), the product of a divorce (*Scheidung*), of separating (*scheiden*) that which was deemed and claimed to belong to someone; they know that texts are the expression of an excision, of a breaking (*ex-scissio*; *Auf-spaltung*). Every kind of coupling of texts (with their authors, with their readers, with their publishers, with their academic disciplines, with their literary category) are there for hermeneuts to break it (*spalten*). It is true, hermeneuts ruin the party, but they do so because they know that people/texts are too comfortable in their seats: they just want people/texts to dance.

It does not matter if the god Hermes is to be found in the etymology of hermeneutics. Hermes and *hermeneia* seem to be bounded one with the other. Etymology is also a kind of text, and it is there also to be negotiated. In any case, as a hermeneutical philosopher, I like to think of myself as one of these travelers, pilgrims, that wander through the infinite land of letters and symbols, as one who is also ready to take texts from those who keep them to themselves; I like to think of myself as telling that bully of a boy: "Hey, let everyone play along! The ball is meant to run!". Hence, as I consider it, hermeneutics is the reflexive experience of *expropriation* (*Ent-eignung*), of being deprived of our belongings (*Eigentum*). Hermeneutics is the reflexive experience of being des-inherited, dis-possessed. And this experience could be found in many textual and linguistic levels. First, texts do not belong neither to the author nor the reader. Texts are the very frontier between both kingdoms that in their dispute define the limits and the space of this very frontier. But as a frontier, it will never belong to either of them, for no one can rule over a frontier. A text – like a frontier – is the outcome of a negotiation, of a fight, and as such will be always *dis-puted*, always *neg-otiated*. It is eloquent that translation (as a paradigmatic hermeneutic activity) was defined paradoxically by Franz Rosenzweig in political terms, for the translator must be "in the service of two masters (that is, the author and the reader)". Second, a text does not belong to itself, nor is it something that can be defined as being a substance nor an object to be possessed. What is a text? This is a matter of negotiation as well, a dispute between all that refer to "it". There is no text, nor con-text, that is not already an outcome of an exchange between readers, writers, publishers, and scholars. "Texts" are but limited and *cut-off* pieces of an infinite cloth, for the very nature of text is its belonging and its referring to all the other texts that exist and that will exist in the future. Inter-textuality is not an outcome, but the

very *humus* from where every text is born; inter-textuality is the expression of the hermeneutic experience of dispossession, the name for claiming texts as not belonging to anyone, but to the infinite textual tissue that lays behind all our textual activities. Hence, inter-disciplinarity is also not something that one should construct, but the very starting point of any disciplinary and discursive production. Third, language is not a possession. The idea of an idiomatic language (a language that is one's own: *idios* in Greek means proper) is an illusion. We don't own our language. And an "idiom" is already the outcome of a never-ending exchange and commerce between speakers, between texts. Our language cannot be dominated nor governed. It will always be something that can be used, but not possessed. Our idioms are already a *permixtum*, a contaminated and contagious element that tinges every other idiom and that is itself colored by all the others. English, for example, refers to its typographical systems of letters as "alphabet" (alpha, beta, and so forth), without using the Greek letters: even the name for its system of letters is pierced by something that is not proper to it, by a strange code! There is no "idiom", for we do not master our own language: Hermes himself was not capable of talking properly, he was himself power-less over language, although he is the god of communication. Remember he was a stutterer! The claim for idioms is just idiotic: idiots are those who are unable to see outside themselves.

I would define hermeneutics, thus, as the reflective experience of dispossession, as the philosophy of impropriety. Hermeneutics is the philosophy that knows that texts and language are the space of a never-ending exchange, it is the philosophy that renders what is *proper* as being an illusion. We are always in a conversation that has already started. As speakers, as writers, as readers, we *inter-vine*, we are *inter-fering*, we "come in between" something that is already happening, that is, the infinite space of flowing textuality. Nothing is so strange nor so familiar that a negotiation is not needed. In this textual market, in this space of permanent conflict and negotiation, hermeneutics is the reflexive experience of dispossession, expropriation, and appropriation. We are not inhabitants nor citizens nor rulers in the space of language and texts. Within this signified world we are just pilgrims, travelers, *par-oikoi* (as Greeks would say): we use language without ever owning it. Hermeneutics, *inter-pretation*, therefore, is always a matter of strategy, a matter of negotiation, of knowing how to appropriate or expropriate one another a certain text; it is the activity of giving a certain value to a certain text, knowing that this value is just one more possible outcome of a confrontation, of a commerce within the market of language. And in this continuous negotiation, *oneself* is understood as being on a continual journey, in a continual trade, in a coming and going from one to the other. Hermeneutics entails to understand oneself once and again, always anew, thanks to its con-frontation with the infinite tissue of texts from which

we take our own narrative to clothe us and wear our own name, a name that is also a text, a name that is also a matter of negotiation and commerce. We are born out of exchange; we are the offspring of a commerce.

In the light of the symbol of Hermes, the dialectics between the world and its meanings is understood hermeneutically as the unceasing conversation between every human being. If we are all invited to go around (*con-versatio*) the world together to signify it, then the world and its meanings are but an object of dispute. Stressing objectivity or subjectivity fails to understand this middle ground shown by language: objects and subjects are both an outcome of this continuous commerce between all participants in the market. There is nothing proper to an object, nor nothing proper to a subject. Properties are claimed arbitrarily of both, and it is the task of hermeneutics, as a philosophy of the improper, to remind us that everything is negotiable: mostly those things and meanings that want to be shown as unquestionable truths. However, hermeneutics is not a philosophy that is fulfilled in the movement of destruction of these fundamentalistic claims, for, if we are to negotiate, we must also propose something else. Hermeneutics is not silencing anyone, but calling everyone to say something. Hermeneutics is, thus, a philosophy of dialogue (*dia-logos*), a philosophy that is more concerned with the movement (*dia-*) than with words (*logos*). Hermeneutics as a philosophy of the improper is not a philosophy of texts, but of *inter-textuality*. Hermeneutics is to be found, therefore, in these little prefixes that shake our verbs and substantives: *trans-*, *con-*, *syn-*, *para-*, *inter-*, *dia-*. Everything is on the move, and the ball is still running so that we all play the game.

Biography

Martín Grassi (1983, Buenos Aires), PhD in Philosophy (University of Buenos Aires). Assistant Professor and Researcher at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina and at the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research of Argentina (CONICET). Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow (University of Bonn and University Sorbonne-Paris I, 2018–2020). University of Oxford – John Templeton Foundation Latin American Scholar for Science and Religion (University of Oxford and University of Bonn, 2016). He has published four books on philosophy: “El Dios de los ladrones” (2021); “La comunidad democrática: Ontología, Política y Teología del vivir en común” (2017); “(Im)posibilidad y (sin)razón: La filosofía, o habitar la paradoja” (2014); “Ignorare Aude! La existencia ensayada” (2012). He is currently working on the notion of life and of community within the western tradition, focusing on the semantical displacements between political, biological, and theological discourses.