

SCHLEIERMACHER'S HERMENEUTICS AND THE MYTH OF THE GIVEN

CORNEL WEST

Friedrich Schleiermacher is the father of modern philosophical hermeneutics. His Copernican Revolution in hermeneutics shifted the focus from understanding texts to the process of understanding itself. Instead of providing general rules for biblical and philological exegesis, he asked a more fundamental question: How is understanding possible? By separating the applicatory function of interpretation from the act of understanding, Schleiermacher created the new, independent domain of theoretical inquiry into the necessary and sufficient conditions for the possibility of understanding.

In this essay, I shall argue that Schleiermacher's valiant attempt to provide an acceptable hermeneutical theory to overcome the distance between speakers and listeners, readers and authors is unsuccessful owing to his acceptance of The Myth of the Given. The Myth of the Given is a philosophical doctrine held most notably by Cartesian and Kantian thinkers. Its rests upon a particular view of language and the relation of language to consciousness and awareness. I will try to show that The Myth of the Given is untenable by sketching three contemporary attacks on it—those of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Lastly, I will suggest implications these attacks have for the future of philosophy and theology.

A. *The Myth of the Given in Modern Philosophy*

Before we examine the role of The Myth of the Given in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, it is essential to put forward a clear definition of this Myth and illustrate briefly how it functions in the epistemological viewpoints of Cartesian and Kantian thinkers. The Myth of the Given consists of the following epistemological assumption: the justification of our employment of concepts, utterance of sentences, or intelligent use of words rests on non-linguistic awareness, that is, on special, felt, incommunicable qualities. The Myth of the Given is based on the privileged status of certain states of consciousness, representations or assertions as species of knowledge unmediated by language.

Descartes is an appropriate thinker to begin with in order to see the modern philosophical legitimation of The Myth of the Given. Descartes' breakthrough was neither, as is commonly believed, to establish the *cogito* as axiomatic evidence for the certainty of knowledge-claims, nor to prove indubitability as the mark of self-consciousness. Rather, his innovation—and the initiation of his version of The Myth of the Given—was to transform what previous philosophers had meant by sensations and to widen the scope of what they believed the notion of thought to be. Descartes writes,

Thought (*cogitatio*) is a word that covers everything that exists in us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus, all the operations of will, intellect, imagination, and of the sense are thoughts.¹

By subsuming sensations and ideas under the rubric, *cogitatio*, he represents the assimilationist tradition, namely, the assimilation of ideas to sensations, language to consciousness, and words to experience, giving privileged status to the latter as well as the basis for the former.

Cornel West is Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

This privileged status and basis are seen clearly in Descartes' perennial attempt to distinguish between ideas and the sensory stimulus which activate them. In his famous arguments with Hobbes and Gassendi, he distinguishes between ideas and mental images, concepts and mere pictures in the brain—all viewed as species of *cogitatio*. For Descartes, rational defense of our employment of concepts, utterance of sentences or intelligent use of words presupposes mental images, pictures in the brain, or similar kinds of special, felt, incommunicable qualities. Cartesian epistemology rests on this kind of pre-linguistic, preconceptual consciousness which supports valid knowledge-claims. In this way, it thus subscribes to The Myth of the Given.

The empiricists—Locke, Berkeley and Hume—are Cartesian thinkers to the extent that they assume people have self-authenticating nonlinguistic episodes of knowledge. These episodes consists of primordial, non-problematic features of immediate experience, such as Lockean ideas of sensation and Humean impressions. Such features constitute, for them, a kind of awareness which is prior to, and basis for, our ability to employ concepts, utter sentences or intelligently use words.

Kant succumbs to The Myth of the Given and upholds the assimilationist tradition by distinguishing between intuitions given by sense and concepts contributed by intellect. Kant calls both “representations” (*Vorstellungen*). Intuitions are more immediate and privileged than concepts since, he implies, we can intuit a manifold of diversity in need of conceptual unity. But how do we know that a manifold is one of diversity without concepts? Kant claims that we are conscious only of synthesized intuitions, therefore we can know only a synthesized, unified manifold. On what grounds, then, can we hold that a manifold is one of diversity prior to our ability to employ concepts, utter sentences, or intelligently use words? Kant says that “intuitions without concepts are blind,” yet it seems that they manage to “see” enough to inform us about that upon which concepts work, namely manifolds of diversity. This intuitive information can be attributed only to a kind of immediate awareness or privileged representation without concepts – a possibility Kant cannot, yet would like to, avoid.

The central fault of the Cartesian and Kantian traditions of assimilationism is that they permit the existence of knowledge unmediated by the employment of concepts, utterance of sentences, or intelligent use of words. They support The Myth of the Given because they hold that this employment, utterance, or use can be learned and practiced only by calling on an awareness or immediate knowledge of pre-linguistic qualities such as Lockean ideas of sensation, Humean impressions, or Kantian intuitions.

B. Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics and Language

For our purposes, it is best to understand Schleiermacher's hermeneutics by juxtaposing it to the Cartesian and Kantian epistemological perspective. The crucial questions we will keep in the background are: Is Schleiermacher an assimilationist? Is a version of The Myth of the Given operative in his hermeneutics? If so, in what form does it appear?

For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is concerned with the phenomenon of understanding. It tries to discover the universal laws or general principles which state the requisite conditions for the possibility of human understanding. Only by satisfying such conditions can we make intelligible what others have said in speech or written in texts, and thereby avoid misunderstanding.

Schleiermacher conceives of hermeneutics as a doctrine of art (*Kunstlehre*) or a technique (*Technik*). It is a science and an art; it consists of scientific investigation and artistic skill. It provides rational guidelines which regulate interpretive activity; it also depends, however, on specific talents acquired and refined only by actual practice.

This twofold definition of hermeneutics roughly corresponds to the two kinds of interpretations which comprise Schleiermacher's hermeneutics: the grammatical and psychological interpretations. These two interpretations are two moments of reconstruction (*Nachbildung*). And as he notes, "Understanding takes place only in the conherence of these two moments."²

The grammatical interpretation is a reconstruction of the historical context, linguistic discourse and word-meanings of an author (or speaker). This interpretation probes into the *Zeitgeist* of the period in which the author writes; the intellectual, emotional and personal stage of the author's development; the literary genre which the author adopts; and the semantic possibilities of the words that the author employs.

The grammatical interpretation contains two canons. The aim of the first canon is to determine, as precisely as possible, claims, insights, and statements in the author's text "on the basis of the use of language common to the author and his original public."³ The goal of the second canon is to ascertain the single meaning of words in the author's text "by the context in which it occurs."⁴ In short, the first canon reconstructs the historical context and linguistic discourse of the author; the second canon, the word-meanings in the text.

The psychological interpretation is Schleiermacher's original contribution to hermeneutics. It is a reconstruction of the author's style, subjectivity, individuality and uniqueness. This interpretation delves deep into the inner chambers of the author, viewing the author's text as an expression and manifestation of what goes on within these inner chambers.

The psychological interpretation contains two kinds of interpretations: the technical and psychological-proper interpretations. The former interpretation tries to reconstruct the particular circumstances and details which have direct bearing on the uniqueness of the author's text. The latter consist of two interpretative procedures—the comparative and divinatory procedures.

The psychological-proper interpretation reconstructs the text as an event which serves as the outward expression of a free-flowing, meaning-producing, creative process within the author. At this point, Schleiermacher reveals his romanticism by permitting the interpreter to participate in the creative process initiated by the author. The interpreter can be more creative than the author since, aside from this participation, he or she can unearth elements in the text unknown to the author. Such understanding can be viewed as the goal of hermeneutics. "The task is to be formulated as follows: 'To understand the text at first as well as and then even better than its author.'"⁵

Understanding can be achieved, and the superiority of the interpreter over any self-interpretation by the author established, only by employing the comparative and divinatory procedures in conjunction with one another (along with the grammatical and technical interpretations). The comparative procedure entails "subsuming the author under a general type" and discovering the author's unique characteristics "by comparing him with the others of the same general type."⁶ This comparison makes possible the necessary point of contact for an act of understanding to occur between interpreter and author only if the interpreter is able to recognize within him/herself similar characteristics to those of the author.

For Schleiermacher, this point of contact consists of a fundamental identity and commonality between interpreter and author. The divinatory procedure tries to make possible this identity and commonality "by leading the interpreter to transform himself, so to speak, into the author."⁷ And what are the grounds for this possible identity and commonality? A pre-existing connection of all individuals, an omnipresent stream which

flows from person to person. Despite the uniqueness of individuals, Schleiermacher must assume that there is a universal element implicit in every human expression which enables understanding to take place.

The divinatory is based on the assumption that each person is not only a unique individual in his own right, but that he has a receptivity to the uniqueness of every other person. This assumption in turn seems to presuppose that each person contains a minimum of everyone else, and so divination is aroused by comparison with oneself.⁸

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics rest on establishing the fundamental identity and commonality between people, e.g., interpreter and author, speaker and listener. According to this viewpoint, understanding is possible only by justifying the fundamental identity and commonality of people. I shall now try to show that Schleiermacher's justification appeals to a version of The Myth of the Given. This can be illustrated by examining how he conceives the relation of language to consciousness and awareness.

In recent years, there has been much controversy concerning the "early" and "late" Schleiermacher's views on language. Heinz Kimmerle, in his famous introduction to his 1959 edition of Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutik*, claims that the "early" Schleiermacher held a "language-centered" hermeneutics, identifying thought with language, thinking with speaking. By attempting to incorporate his hermeneutical theory into scientific disciplines which distinguish the ideal, inner essence from the empirical, external appearance, the "late" Schleiermacher moved toward a "subjectivity-centered" hermeneutics, separating the mental process of thought from language.⁹

This distinction between the "early" and "late" Schleiermacher, however, misses the point. The issue is not the relation of language to thought or thinking to speaking, but rather the status of pre-linguistic consciousness or non-linguistic qualities in Schleiermacher's perspective. The Kimmerle controversy focuses on the scope of such consciousness and the broadening of this scope from the "early" to the "late" Schleiermacher. We are concerned with the fact that a pre-linguistic consciousness is posited, as well as with the epistemological status of this fact, and how this fact becomes the basis of the fundamental identity and commonality needed to support his hermeneutics.

It is undeniable that the "early" Schleiermacher allowed for, indeed, lauded, pre-linguistic consciousness. This consciousness is discussed, not only in the "early" Schleiermacher's hermeneutical reflections in the "Aphorisms" of 1805 and 1809-10, but also in the "young" Schleiermacher in his classic work, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799) and his *Soliloquies* (1800).

In *On Religion*, pre-linguistic consciousness (or non-linguistic experience) is depicted as immediate awareness of our relationship with the Infinite and the Eternal. Schleiermacher describes this awareness as "the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal."¹⁰ Schleiermacher separates this immediate consciousness from knowledge, e.g., ideas, concepts, language, and holds that "In itself it is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God."¹¹ The key word in this passage is "seen." God is somehow "seen." But, who "sees"? Surely the person or individual affected. But isn't this "seeing" a species of knowledge; a knowledge of one's true self and of a relationship which makes known one's true self? This seems to be what he meant when Schleiermacher beckons his opponents to,

descend into the inmost sanctuary of life . . . There alone you discover the original relation of intuition and feeling from which alone this identity and difference is to be understood. But I must direct you to your own selves. You must apprehend a living moment . . . What you are to notice is the rise of your consciousness and not to reflect upon something already there. Your thought can only embrace what is sundered.¹²

In captivating prose, Schleiermacher portrays this immediate consciousness as, fleeting and transparent as the vapour which the dew breathes on blossom and fruit, it is bashful and tender as a maiden's kiss, it is holy and fruitful as a bridal embrace. Nor is it merely like, it is all this. It is the first contact of the universal life with an individual.

It fills no time and fashions nothing palpable. It is the holy wedlock of the Universe with the incarnated Reason for a creative, productive embrace. It is immediate, raised above all error and misunderstanding.¹³

At this point, Schleiermacher's intuitions resemble those of Kant's in that both are "blind," i.e., pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic, yet still manage to "see" quite a bit. Just as Kant's intuitions "see" a manifold of diversity, so Schleiermacher's intuitions "see" an original unity of the self and the Infinite. In one passage, Schleiermacher equates this "seeing" with a species of knowledge,

At length your consciousness is finally determined as one or other, as intuition or feeling. Then even though you have not quite surrendered to this division and lost consciousness of your life as a unity, there remains nothing but the knowledge that they were originally one . . .¹⁴

And immediately after this equation of intuitive insight and a kind of knowledge, Schleiermacher reveals his assimilationist position by further defining immediate consciousness and feelings, intuitive insight and "privileged" knowledge, as a series of sensations and nothing else.

The chief point in my Speech is now uttered. This is the peculiar sphere which I would assign to religion — the whole of it, and nothing more . . . Your feeling is piety in so far as it is the result of the operation of God in you by means of the operation of the world upon you. This series is not made up either of perceptions or of objects of perception, either of works or operations or of different spheres of operation, but purely of sensations and the influences of all that lives and moves around, which accompanies them and conditions them. These feelings are exclusively the elements of religion, and none are excluded. There is no sensation that is not pious, except it indicate some diseased and impaired state of the life, the influence of which will not be confined to religion. Wherefore, it follows that ideas and principles are all foreign to religion . . . If ideas and principles are to be anything, they must belong to knowledge which is a different department of life from religion.¹⁵

From our reading of *On Religion*, we can conclude that for the "young" Schleiermacher immediate consciousness or non-linguistic (non-conceptual) awareness consists of feelings and intuitions which yield a "seeing" of the original unity of the self and God. This "seeing" is unmediated by ideas, concepts or words. It is a "privileged" knowledge which rests on a series of sensations activated by the presence of the Infinite. Somehow therefore these sensations ground an immediate knowledge without the help of ideas, concepts, or words. In this way, the "young" Schleiermacher subscribes to The Myth of the Given and upholds assimilationism.

In *Soliloquies* (1800), Schleiermacher draws a connection between his version of The Myth of the Given, his assimilationism and the universal element in human expressions which will undergird his hermeneutics in the future.

Thus there dawned upon me what is now my highest intuition. I saw clearly that each man is meant to represent humanity in his own way, combining its elements uniquely, so that it may reveal itself in every mode, and all that can issue from its womb be made actual in the fullness of unending space and time.¹⁶

The universal element in human expressions is posited owing to our ability to "see" or "know" the life-unity of the self. This life-unity establishes one's membership in a community of spiritual individuals.

In Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, this pantheistic metaphysics of individuality is the foundation for the identity and commonality of human beings. This identity and commonality makes understanding possible. Without non-linguistic consciousness or immediate awareness of the life-unity of the self—Schleiermacher's version of The Myth of the Given—there is no pantheistic metaphysics of individuality. Without his pantheistic metaphysics of individuality, there is no identity and commonality of human beings, hence no grounds for human understanding. So we are forced to conclude that without The Myth of the Given, Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is in deep trouble.

C. *Attacking The Myth of the Given*

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is in jeopardy because it relies on an unacceptable

epistemological viewpoint. This viewpoint, commonly held by Cartesian and Kantian thinkers, gives privileged epistemic status to certain intuitions, feelings and sensations, or immediate consciousness and awareness. It can account for this “knowledge” only by appealing to the Myth of the Given.

I shall argue that The Myth of the Given is untenable. This argument will take the form of examining three trenchant critiques of The Myth of the Given: those of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein. These critiques constitute the most challenging philosophical viewpoints in the twentieth century. They not only call into question The Myth of the Given (any versions of it), but also the conception of philosophy (and theology) which rests upon The Myth of the Given.

It is significant to note that these three thinkers represent three distinct philosophical traditions and backgrounds. Heidegger is rooted in classical thought and German hermeneutics; Derrida, in French phenomenology and Saussurean linguistics; Wittgenstein, in British analytic philosophy and his own brand of Viennese-baked existentialism. The common consensus of these three giants in contemporary philosophy against The Myth of the Given should cast some suspicion on this Myth.

D. Heidegger's Critique

We shall begin with Heidegger since he directly confronts and transforms the hermeneutic tradition initiated by Schleiermacher. For Heidegger, the locus of hermeneutics is not the phenomenon of understanding, but rather what it means to be. By directing hermeneutics to the meaning of Being (the *Seinsfrage*), Heidegger discards Schleiermacher's conception of understanding. Understanding is no longer a cognitive act which occurs when there is a point of contact between speaker and listener, interpreter and author; rather it is a mode of existence which reveals the ontological structure of human existence.

The phenomenology of *Dasein* is a *hermeneutic* in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates this business of interpreting. But to the extent that by uncovering the meaning of Being and the basic structures of *Dasein* in general we may exhibit the horizon for any further ontological study of those entities which do not have the character of *Dasein*, this hermeneutic also becomes a 'hermeneutic' in the sense of working out the conditions on which the possibility of any ontological investigation depends.¹⁷

Heidegger holds understanding to be a mode of existence which enables self-reflective human beings to be aware of the existential “fact” that they have possibilities. And understanding itself is one of these possibilities. Understanding, as an existence-possibility, projects potentiality-for-Being (*Seinkönnen*). As Heidegger states, “The kind of Being which *Dasein* has, as potentiality-for-Being, lies existentially in understanding.”¹⁸ The projection or throwing forward (*Entwurf*) of possibilities before human beings does not occur in a historical vacuum. Rather it is colored by *Dasein's* (or self-reflective individuals') Being-in-the-world. To-be-in-the-world is first and foremost to view the world as ready-at-hand (*Zuhanden*), as available for human use. All projections are limited by the range of service possibilities the world presents to *Dasein*; all understanding occurs within a matrix of potentiality dictated by *Dasein's* situation and environment.

As a disclosure, understanding always pertains to the whole basic state of Being-in-the-world. As a potentiality-for-Being, any Being-in is a potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world. Not only is the world, *qua* world, disclosed as possible significance, but when that which is within-the-world is itself freed, this entity is freed for *its own* possibilities. That which is ready-at-hand is discovered as such in its *serviceability*, its *usability*, and its *detrimentality*.¹⁹

For Heidegger, interpretation presupposes understanding in that it tries to shed light on or lay bare certain possibilities projected by understanding. All interpretation or attempts to illuminate particular possibilities proceeds from a fore-having (*Vorhabe*), fore-sight (*Vorsicht*), and fore-conception (*Vorgriff*), from something we have, see and grasp prior to the act of interpretation.

Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, foresight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us.²⁰

Since all interpretation operates within a specific set of presuppositions, pre-judgments, and prejudices, it is circular. But it is not a vicious circularity, capriciously arriving at preconceived results. Instead it is a productive and unavoidable circularity making explicit what was implicit, obvious what was obscure, familiar what was strange without ever completely removing what is implicit, obscure and strange. This circularity characterizes the conditions under which interpretation takes place, thereby creating the possibility of self-conscious interpretations and nonarbitrary conclusions.

If the basic conditions which make interpretation possible are to be fulfilled, this must rather be done by not failing to recognize beforehand the essential conditions under which it can be performed. What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential *fore-structure* of *Dasein* itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing.²¹

Heidegger's conception of understanding and the fore-structure of interpretation rules out The Myth of the Given. His emphasis on the *Dasein's* Being-in-the-world as the context of all knowledge does not permit the epistemic status of immediate awareness or privileged assertions, representations or states of consciousness.

The "given" for Heidegger is the radical historicity of human existence, the perennial entrapment of human beings in particular circumstances and situations to which they must respond. He attacks The Myth of the Given by trying to show, on ontological grounds, that all knowledge is mediated by history. According to his view, Schleiermacher's attempt to ground the fundamental identity and commonality of people in a pantheistic metaphysics of individuality and to base this metaphysics on immediate awareness of the life-unity of the self is not only epistemologically misguided, but, more importantly, ontologically impossible.

E. Derrida's Critique

Jacques Derrida, a leading French philosopher, attacks The Myth of the Given from another angle. Instead of claiming that all knowledge is mediated by history, he holds that all knowledge is mediated by texts. His famous slogan, "There is nothing outside the text" (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*),²² roughly summarizes his viewpoint.

For Derrida, The Myth of the Given is at the core of the Western metaphysical tradition which gives priority (or privilege) to speech over texts, voice over writing. This metaphysics of presence or epiphany constitutes Western logocentrism, namely, the belief that the origin and telos of things are the Logos, the Word, the creative subject, or the self-presence in consciousness. This metaphysical tradition rests upon a human desire to posit a privileged reference, fixed origin, absolute *archē* or unchanging center upon which to ground knowledge-claims.

Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms and names. The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix --- if you will pardon me for demonstrating so little and for being so elliptical in order to bring me more quickly to my principal theme --- is the determination of being as *presence* in all the senses of this word. It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence --- *eidōs, archē, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth.²³

Derrida's famous deconstruction program is an attempt to reveal the illusory status of the center and dissolve The Myth of the Given in texts. This program discovers that in place of a necessary center, we find contingent "traces". These "traces" are not the result of a previous presence or loss of center, but rather of the linguistic play of differ-

ences (of sounds and meanings), of irreducible aftereffects and delayed effects of a perennially deferred presence or postponed center.

The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace. Effacement must always be able to overtake the trace; otherwise it would not be a trace but an indestructible and monumental substance.²⁴

This play of differences — forever holding “presence” at arm’s length — is made possible by what Derrida calls “différance.” It is neither a word nor a concept. Instead, it is “the movement by which language or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes ‘historically constituted as a fabric of differences.’”²⁵

Derrida opposes the privileged status of speech over texts and voice over writing because this status assumes that the spoken voice insures the intuitive presence of the speaking subject. He argues that since a spoken sentence must have universal application in order to be understood (that is, understood by someone presently absent) it presupposes the absence of the speaker. Therefore its status is the same as a written sentence. In his lengthy argument against Husserl’s conception of presence (as the phenomenological structure of the voice), Derrida writes,

When I say “I” even in solitary speech, can I give my statement meaning without implying, there as always, the possible absence of the object of speech — in this case, myself? When I tell myself “I am,” this expression, like any other according to Husserl, has the status of speech only if it is intelligible in the absence of its object, in the absence of intuitive presence — here, in the absence of myself. Moreover, it is in this way that the *ergo sum* is introduced into the philosophical tradition and that a discourse about the transcendental ego is possible.²⁶

Derrida’s attack on The Myth of the Given takes the form of an all-out assault on not only the priority of the spoken word, but also the speaking subject. His attack cuts at the very roots of Schleiermacher’s version of The Myth of the Given: the intuitive awareness of the life-unity of the self. Like the French structuralists (whom he often criticizes), Derrida holds that the subject is a function of language in that he or she becomes a speaking subject only by conforming his or her speech to an already given linguistic code or system. This system is a play of differences which precludes the self-presence of the subject prior to speech or its signs.

We thus come to posit presence— and, in particular, consciousness, the being-next-to-itself of consciousness — no longer as the absolutely matrical form of being but as a “determination” and an “effect”. Presence is a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of différance²⁷

Despite his hostility to The Myth of the Given, Derrida’s ambitions are much less than those of Heidegger. Whereas Heidegger wants to overcome and “destroy” Western metaphysics, replacing it with a new philosophical epoch in which we wait and harken for “the first word of Being,” Derrida only wants to show that the logocentrism of the Western metaphysical tradition is an integral and inescapable part of our language. For him, the task is not to initiate a new non-metaphysical discourse, but rather to reveal the untenable, yet necessary, participation in a metaphysics of presence. In response to critics on this point, he states,

Here and there I have used the word *deconstruction*, which has nothing to do with destruction. That is to say, it is simply a question of (and this is a necessity of criticism in the classical sense of the word) being alert to the implications, to the historical sedimentation of the language which we use — and that is not destruction

First of all, I didn’t say that there was no center, that we could get along without the center. I believe that the center is a function, not a being — a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable. The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don’t destroy the subject; I situate it.²⁸

Derrida believes that some version of The Myth of the Given is necessary for language-usage. Yet, it is unexcusable for one to be unaware of the groundlessness of any version. This unawareness bespeaks a philosophical false consciousness and reflects a yearning for security and certainty. It results in an “ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins,

an ethic of archaic and natural innocence of a purity of presence and self-presence in speech."²⁹ In its place he offers a kind of tragicomic alternative, a celebration of one's freedom while succumbing to one's linguistic fate. He recommends,

... the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin ... This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as loss of the center. And it plays the game without security.³⁰

The "given" for Derrida is the radical textuality of human existence, the continuous play of differences of already-existing marks (*déjà écrit*) on paper. Derrida's viewpoint deems Schleiermacher's version of The Myth of the Given as philosophically groundless, like his own, but unlike his own in that Schleiermacher is unaware of this status. Schleiermacher, like Derrida, participates in a metaphysics of presence or epiphany. But, for Derrida, only his deconstruction program frees one from its "spirit of gravity" and permits one to no longer take The Myth of the Given seriously.

F. Wittgenstein's Critique

Wittgenstein's attack on The Myth of the Given is, I believe, more profound and persuasive than those of Heidegger and Derrida. Instead of embarking on an ontological investigation to defend the claim that all knowledge is mediated by history or engaging in an ironic deconstruction program to show that all knowledge is mediated by texts, Wittgenstein describes ordinary language-usage in order to illustrate that all knowledge is mediated by linguistic, intersubjective agreement. In short, Wittgenstein criticizes The Myth of the Given by viewing epistemology as social practice.

Wittgenstein discards The Myth of the Given by highlighting the fact that special, felt, incommunicable qualities of immediate experience play no role whatsoever in justifying our employment of concepts, utterance of sentences, or intelligent use of words. He does not deny the existence of such qualities, (e.g., thoughts and sensations) but he claims that the "innerness" of these qualities or our special accessibility to them does not give them privileged status as the basis of our employment of concepts, utterance of sentences, or intelligent use of words. There is no need to draw a philosophical line of demarcation between objects in the external world and special qualities (or mental states) in the human mind. Our attempts to justify both rest on public conventions or social practices. The criteria for such justification consists of the circumstances, behavior and utterances of human beings.

Wittgenstein's viewpoint can be best illustrated by examining his famous treatment of how we justify the use of "mental state" words, e.g., "pain" in association with the behavior of other people. For Cartesians, this justification can never be certain since only immediate experience yields certainty and we can never "feel" the mental states of others. In reply to Cartesians (or supporters of The Myth of the Given), Wittgenstein proposes to provide public standards for justifying mental states in people. His slogans are, "... justification consists in appeal to something independent,"³¹ and, "... an 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria."³²

Wittgenstein begins by trying to characterize what it would be like to be caught in the Cartesian view of immediate experience (or the *cogitatio*).

Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. — I will remark first of all that a definition cannot be formulated. But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. — How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation— and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. —But what is this ceremony for? for that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. — Well, that is done precisely by the concentration of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connection between the sign and the sensation. But "I impress it on myself" can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right.'³³

Cartesians would reply that Wittgenstein is correct to say that any private ostensive definition is objectionable if we cannot act in accordance with it. But Wittgenstein has provided no reasons for denying that we cannot rely upon memory as the basis for such a definition. Wittgenstein would quickly answer,

... But what do we regard as the criterion for remembering it right? — When we work with a sample instead of our memory there are circumstances in which we say that the sample has changed color and we judge of this by memory. But can we not sometimes speak of a darkening (for example) of our memory-image? Aren't we as much at the mercy of memory as of a sample? . . . Suppose that the color struck you as brighter on one day than on another; would you not sometimes say: "I must be wrong, the color is certainly the same as yesterday?" This shows that we do not always resort to what memory tells us as the verdict of the highest court of appeal.³⁴

Cartesians are forced to account for public knowledge of mental states in other people by arguing that since we have mental states—justified by our immediate experience of them—it is probable that persons with bodies like our own also have them. Since it is impossible to have direct evidence for (or immediate experience of) the mental states of other people, we can only rely on an analogy argument to establish the existence of such mental states. Wittgenstein wants to show that The Myth of the Given, or justifying the intelligent use of words by appealing to immediate experience, would lead one to think that knowledge of mental states in other people can be arrived at only by inferring from the unwarranted assumption that what holds true for one's own case must hold true for other persons or other bodies.

The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether other people also have *this* or something else. The assumption would thus be possible — though unverifiable — that one section of mankind had one sensation of red and another section another.³⁵

In his particular argument for public criteria for the existence of pain-events in other people, Wittgenstein can be viewed as refuting Cartesians as well as undermining The Myth of the Given. For him, the meaning of the word "pain" in our language does not derive from pain being an entity, a stuff or a something in the minds of others; rather its meaning can be ascertained by examining its place in the language game of pain, by describing the linguistic practices which involve the use of the word "pain." This is the only way to escape Cartesian agnosticism about the existence of mental states (in this case, pain-events) in other people.

If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means — must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case so irresponsibly?

Now someone tells me that *he* knows what pain is only from his own case! — Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle". No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. — Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. — But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language? — If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*: for the box might even be empty. — No, one can 'divide thought' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.³⁶

In disregarding the notion that the only way knowledge of mental states in other people is acquired is by our being acquainted with special, felt, incommunicable qualities, Wittgenstein allows the possibility of our having direct access to our mental states without relying on this access as the sole basis of our knowledge of mental states in other people. He notes that if we investigate the language-game of pain, we discover that the expression of doubt—doubt generated by Cartesians and The Myth of the Given—has no place in it. This doubt arises only if we talk about pain independent of human behavior and in terms of immediate experience.

... expression of doubt has no place in the language-game; but if we cut out human behavior, which is the expression of sensation, it looks as if I might *legitimately* begin to doubt afresh. My temptation to say that one might take a sensation for something other

than what it is arises from this: if I assume the abrogation of the normal language-game with the expression of a sensation, I need a criterion of identity for the sensation; and then the possibility of error also exists.³⁷

Once we make this Cartesian move, the identification of the sensation as pain becomes an intermediate step between the occurrence of pain and the expression of it in the words, "I am in pain." But this intermediate step is superfluous; pain is self-intimating—to have it is to know it! And people's behavior shows it.

"Imagine a person whose memory could not retain *what* the word 'pain' meant — so that he constantly called different things by that name — but nevertheless used the word in a way fitting in with the usual symptoms and presuppositions of pain" — in short he uses it as we all do. Here I should like to say: a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism.³⁸

Wittgenstein believes that a public language which describes and reports presupposes general agreement in judgments. Judgments involve the "correct" application of a word or phrase in association with shared experiences. The "correct" use of the word "pain" is connected with the shared experience of observing pain-behavior. This renders the status of pain-events irrelevant when trying to justify our knowledge of them in other people.

"But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behavior accompanied by pain and pain-behavior without pain?" — admit it? What greater difference could there be? — "And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*" — Not at all. It is not a *something* but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said.³⁹

It follows from Wittgenstein's view that mental states are distinct from physical objects, not because they are different sorts of things or inhabit two separate realms, e.g., inner/outer, subjective/objective, but because it is publicly accepted that certain knowledge-claims about them cannot be overridden.⁴⁰ People engage in the language-game of mental states, making claims about the mental states of others, by following the particular social practice or public linguistic convention that first-person present-tense reports of mental states are taken as the most reliable evidence for their own truth. It is difficult to acknowledge this convention as contingent and subject to the social practices in the culture because it is rarely questioned and has a long history of acceptance.

The contingent character of this convention can be brought to light by drawing an analogy between unobservable mental states in people and unobservable molecules. Just as Brownian motion serves as evidence in the current scientific community for the existence of molecules, so first-person present-tense reports of mental states serve as evidence in the present linguistic community for the existence of mental states in people. And just as Brownian motion might turn out to be the result of certain newly discovered forces which have nothing to do with molecules, so cerebroscopes might come to override first-person present-tense reports of mental states. In each case, new conventions arise owing to more reliable evidence. Therefore the justification of our knowledge of mental states (as well as physical objects) is based on the state of scientific inquiry (especially neurology and physics) and our linguistic practices.

Wittgenstein demythologizes The Myth of the Given by showing that its most cherished qualities (e.g., thoughts and sensations) are best understood by describing how words which refer to them, e.g., pain, are used in our language. This usage, like any other social practice, is revisable and replaceable, e.g., by brain-state words, neurological-state words. In this way, Wittgenstein deciphers Cartesian hieroglyphics and dissolves the pseudo-problems generated by The Myth of the Given. It is the uncovering of ever-changing social practices by his brand of philosophy, concealed by Cartesian and Kantian thinkers, which Wittgenstein refers to in this metaphilosophical passage:

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. — Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain . . .

One might also give the name "philosophy" to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions.⁴¹

The “given” for Wittgenstein is the radical intersubjectivity of human existence, especially the various agreements on rules of language and their interpretation. These agreements occur most often in homogeneous linguistic communities, forms of life (*lebensformen*), or cultures.

What has to be accepted, the given, is — so one can say — *forms of life*.⁴²

Wittgenstein’s viewpoint holds that Schleiermacher’s version of The Myth of the Given is not only philosophically untenable; it is also itself a social practice which philosophers and theologians must overcome.

G. Philosophy and Theology Without The Myth of the Given: Historical Limits and Existential Leaps

The critiques of The Myth of the Given by Heidegger, Derrida and Wittgenstein share one common theme: the radical finitude and sheer contingency of human existence. Human beings are trapped in either a historical, textual or intersubjective web from which there is no escape. By discarding The Myth of the Given, the quest for certainty and security comes to an end. Philosophy’s grand search for the invariable, immutable categories in human experience, expressions and language and theology’s bold attempt to establish veridical reference to a transcendent God must surrender and succumb to the ebb and flow of history, the freeplay of infinite substitutions in the confines of texts, and the transient character of intersubjective agreements.

Two lines of theoretical inquiry remain after the end of modern philosophy and theology: theories of historical limits and theories of existential leaps. The former are required in order to provide accounts as to why and how each generation bequeaths what it does to the subsequent generation (e.g., conflict-ridden systems of production, social and political arrangements, beliefs about the self, world and God, values for conduct, attitudes toward particular artifacts). The latter are needed in order to view ourselves as active historical persons consciously engaged in the difficult business of coping with the vertiginous character of human life. Both kinds of theories, working in conjunction with one another, allow us to weigh historically possible and potent allegiances to particular religious, political and/or moral traditions and communities which evolve around specific types of existential valuing — and, most importantly, enable us to make choices in regard to joining ranks with certain traditions and communities, regardless of the risk and insecurity this commitment involves.

Without The Myth of the Given, philosophers and theologians are forced to adopt simultaneously a theory of historical and social change which explains the limits of the past and present and a theory of existential valuing that illuminates the depths of our capacity to love, hate, hope and despair and our inescapable need to make leaps of faith. In this way, the attacks of Heidegger, Derrida and Wittgenstein on The Myth of the Given may be seen as preparing the way for a creative synthesis of two disparate, yet complementary thinkers—Marx and Kierkegaard.

1. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1974), Vol. II, p. 52.
2. F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle and trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 98.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Kimmerle's argument can be found in Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, op. cit., "Editor's Introduction", pp. 21-40 and his essay "Hermeneutical Theory or Ontological Hermeneutics", *History and Hermeneutics*, ed. Robert Funk, trans. Friedrich Seifert (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 107-121. For a persuasive critique of Kimmerle's argument, see John Edward Benson's "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia Univ., 1967) esp. pp. 334-407. 17.
10. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion, Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman, intro. Rudolf Otto (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 36.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 45-46.
16. *Schleiermacher's Soliloquies*, trans. of *The Monologen*, Horace Leland Friess (Chicago: The Open Court Pub. Company, 1926), p. 31.
17. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 62.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 191-192.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 194-195. Heidegger believes that only by becoming aware of the fore-structure of interpretation—bringing it to light and subjecting it to scrutiny — does one minimize the arbitrariness of one's results. We can never suspend all our presuppositions, prejudgments and prejudices at once, but we can call some into question, thereby leaving ourselves open to various possibilities and further transformation of one's biases. This process is perennial, but also productive. Although it never yields the correct interpretation, it provides new and novel ones. Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, develops this viewpoint in a profound and provocative way in his work, *Truth and Method*, ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975), esp. pp. 225-274; 325-341.
22. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), p. 158.
23. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *The Structuralist Controversy, The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenic Donato (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1972), p. 249.
24. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern, 1973), "Differance," p. 156.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
28. Derrida, *The Structuralist Controversy*, op. cit., p. 271.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Co., 1958), No. 265, p. 93.
32. *Ibid.*, No. 580, p. 153.
33. *Ibid.*, No. 258, p. 92.
34. *Ibid.*, No. 56, pp. 27-28.
35. *Ibid.*, No. 272, p.95.

36. Ibid , No. 293, p. 100.
37. Ibid., No. 288, p. 99.
38. Ibid., No. 271, p. 95.
39. Ibid., No. 304, p. 102.
40. This formulation is put forward by the most subtle and sophisticated Wittgensteinian philosopher on the scene today, Richard Rorty, in his well-known article, "Wittgenstein, Privileged Access, and Incommunicability," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 3, July 1970, pp. 203-204. For the "spirit" behind Rorty's claim and my own viewpoint, see the classic essay by Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 1, Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven, (eds.), University of Minnesota Press, (1956). Sellars is responsible for coining the phrase "The Myth of the Given."
41. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., No. 126, p. 50.
42. Ibid., p. 226.