

# Philology and Freedom

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## Abstract

If as many observers believe the very survival of philology is in doubt across much of the globe, what are appropriate responses? Answering that question requires answering two others: what is philology, after all, and why should it be preserved? A new definition is offered here for the disciplinary form of philology: its distinctive subject is making sense of texts, its distinctive theoretical concept is interpretation, and its distinctive research methods include text-critical, rhetorical, hermeneutic and other forms of analysis. The point of preserving philology is to preserve the core values it encourages us to cultivate: commitments to truth, human solidarity, and critical self-awareness. The redefinition is meant to help free philology from itself, and identifying core values is meant to help us understand how philology can free us, both as scholars and as citizens.

## Keywords

Philology—History and Theory of – Disciplinarity – Ethics of Reading

Respected colleagues, distinguished guests, dear students.

It is a distinct honor, and a distinct pleasure as well, to have been invited to speak to you this evening on the topic of philology. In my view, without doubt the single most important institutional development in the recent

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history of philology—certainly in the history of philology viewed as a global phenomenon—has been the creation and execution of the research program “Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Scholarship,” under the auspices of the Forum Transregionale Studien, with funding from the Senate of Berlin these past three years. Thanks to this program, dozens of postdoctoral students and junior professors have had the chance to pursue their studies, to learn from each other, and to publish exciting new scholarship both on their own and through the new journal of the project, *Philological Encounters*. And hundreds more, students, scholars, and interested outsiders, have had the chance to listen to public lectures about philology and come to grasp something of the importance of this form of knowledge. I speak from experience, since in December, 2012, at the invitation of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and the Zukunftsphilologie program, and in their joint international winter school on “Philologies across the Asias,” I addressed an audience of some two hundred in New Delhi, India, on this topic. It was one entirely unfamiliar to everyone in the hall (aside from those participating in the school, of course), something astonishing, and more than a little depressing, given the centuries-old traditions of philology in India. I see this as yet another sign of the threat philology is facing, not just in India but globally. For if there is arguably no form of knowledge that is more central to our lives, there is also none more poorly understood and more endangered.

It is entirely fitting, given the modern history of philology in Europe, that Zukunftsphilologie should originate in Germany, and more particularly in Berlin. For as many of you know, it was in Germany in 1777 that Friedrich August Wolf, future editor and critic of Homer, invented philology in the West as a modern academic discipline when he insisted on enrolling under that disciplinary title (rather than under “theology,” like classicists before him) as an eighteen-year-old student at the University of Göttingen. And it was in these very precincts, at Wilhelm von Humboldt’s new Universität Unter den Linden (to which Wolf too would eventually be called), that Franz Bopp, who became Berlin’s first professor of Sanskrit in 1821, invented the sub-discipline of comparative philology, with enormous consequences for European learning, as Foucault argued in his celebrated collocation of Ricardo, Cuvier, and Bopp.<sup>1</sup> (What you may not know is that Bopp’s best Sanskrit student was in fact von Humboldt himself.)<sup>2</sup> It was in the universities of Germany, too, in the latter

1 See “Labour, Life, and Language,” chapter eight of the *Order of Things* (Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, 1966).

2 Von Humboldt’s preoccupation with Sanskrit is on full display in his correspondence with August Wilhelm Schlegel, which dates to the period when he was creating the Berlin

half of the nineteenth century that philology achieved a degree of intellectual and institutional dominance that it had never before known in world history, with the possible exception of late-imperial China, where “evidential research studies” (*kaozheng xue*) set the agenda for much of the best scholarship after 1700 until the rise of Western learning.<sup>3</sup>

This is a dominance, however, that philology has been losing ever since, and losing almost everywhere. Just consider: as of 2012, and for the first time since Bopp, Sanskrit is no longer being formally taught at any university in Berlin. And the Berlin situation is by no means unique. Indeed, the Zukunftsphilologie program itself was conceived precisely in recognition of a vast, indeed global, erosion of which the Berlin Sanskrit case is symptomatic. A very sobering prospect is now opening before our eyes of a world without philology for the first time in three millennia.

### A Post-philological Future?

I am well aware that humanists in general and philologists in particular have been perceiving, or imagining, a crisis ever since there were humanists and philologists. “The age of criticism and philology has passed and one of philosophy and mathematics has taken its place,”<sup>4</sup> exclaimed the French philologist Ismael Boulliau in 1657. Philology, we have recently been told, has always, “inherently,” been lamenting “its present decline.”<sup>5</sup> But even if what we are now observing has aspects of repetition rather than revolution, recent developments, once fully grasped, must appear as worrisome as they are without clear historical parallel. The most important of these developments is the fact that knowledge of languages, without which there can be no philology deserving of the name, is being lost across the world in a way that bears comparison to the global loss of biological diversity. Let me give just two examples, one from India and the other from Europe itself.

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university (see Albert Leitzmann, ed., *Briefwechsel zwischen Wilhelm von Humboldt und August Wilhelm Schlegel* [Halle: Niemeyer, 1908]).

- 3 Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2001).
- 4 Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 3.
- 5 Seth Lerer, *Error and the Academic Self: The Scholarly Imagination, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 6.

In India, which as recently as the midnight of freedom from colonial rule in 1947 could boast of world-class academic achievement in dozens of classical literary languages, from Assamese to Oriya and Persian to Urdu, it is today next to impossible to identify scholars who have deep competence in any of them. You cannot study classical Hindi, for example, at any of the universities in India's capital city (despite Hindi's being India's *rashtrabhasha*, or national language); Persian has virtually disappeared as an academic subject, and even Sanskrit boasts few scholars of the stature of those of the pre-Independence era. Rare is the Indian (or South Asian) philologist who writes for an international audience. There is no institute in all of India devoted to philology or classical studies. All the great series that during the first half of the twentieth century published editions of classical texts have ceased to exist. There are today no Indian scholarly journals devoted to philology that have international stature. In short, every datum I can find and every measure I can use indicate that if current trends continue, it is entirely conceivable that within a generation or two at most, the number of people capable of reading the historical languages of India—three thousand years of literature, the longest continuous and richest multicultural literary record in world history—will have reached a statistical zero.

The same is increasingly true even in Europe. Look again at recent developments in the case of Sanskrit. In the last few decades at least eleven chairs in Sanskrit philology in Germany have been lost; in the Netherlands, all but one of twenty. At Cambridge and Edinburgh, longstanding professorships have been replaced by lectureships with no clear future. And Sanskrit is not the exception but the rule. I am not the only one, and certainly not the first, to take note of these developments. In 1969, Erich Auerbach, widely viewed as the consummate practitioner of philology of the post World War II era, warned of the imminent disappearance of philology, saying “Der Verlust des Blickes auf dieses Schauspiel [he is referring to the ancient and medieval literature of Europe, to which philology alone can give access] . . . wäre eine Verarmung, für die nichts entschädigen könnte.”<sup>6</sup> And the situation today bears out his warning, with academic posts in philology—from Sumerian to Syriac to Slavic to Sanskrit (and that's just the S's!)—under pressure in every country in the European Union, pressure that seems to increase with every passing year.

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6 Erich Auerbach, “Philologie der Weltliteratur,” in *Weltliteratur: Festgabe für Fritz Strich*, ed. W. Henzen et al. (Bern: Francke, 1952): 39-50, 41 (“The loss of such a spectacle . . . would be an impoverishment for which there can be no possible compensation”). Translated by Maire and Edward Said in *The Centennial Review* 13: 1-17.

To summarize all this by a suitably dramatic—if for some, no doubt, an overly dramatic—formulation: we may well be standing on the verge of a historic event, the inauguration of a world (or much of a world) without philology for the first time since the rise of philological knowledge three thousand years ago in the Babylonian and Assyrian text commentaries.<sup>7</sup> This is, in fact, the very point behind the name “Zukunftsphilologie” as used in this context: Does philology have a future at all?

In offering this judgment I would be the first to acknowledge that I have made two unwarranted assumptions. One is that we all know what philology is, and the second, obviously related to the first, is that we all understand why it should be preserved. I myself am convinced neither is the case. No doubt, the current state of our philological malaise is in part the malaise of the human sciences in general at a time of world-wide risk and scarcity: risk caused by global problems of an unprecedented sort, such as climate change or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; scarcity caused by the justifiable redirection of intellectual and financial resources toward efforts to address those problems. But the malaise is also in part a problem of our own devising, a result of philologists’ own failure to make the case for philology. Yes, it is easy to repeat platitudes: that the unexamined life is not worth living, that an enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic, that the humanities have a unique capacity to foster critical and creative thinking so as to make us better workers or managers. But what we philologists are not very skilled at doing, surprisingly, is making a case for philology on *philological* grounds, in accordance with Friedrich Schlegel’s injunction that “Der Philolog soll (*als solcher*) *philosophieren*.” (“Ganz etwas anders,” he went on to add, “sagt der Satz: Der Philosoph soll die Philosophie auch auf die Philologie anwenden.”)<sup>8</sup> This failure comes in part from the fact we philologists have not fully grasped let alone celebrated the fact that philology may well represent the exemplary disciplinary form for the twenty-first century global university, and that in its best aspects it encourages the cultivation of values central to our intellectual, social, and ethical lives: commitments to truth, human

7 See most recently Eckart Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011).

8 Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 16, ed. Ernst Behler et al. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1959-1990), 39-42. See also Robert Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation: Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany, 1750-1800* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 283 (“The philologist ought to philosophize *as a philologist*. [Something totally different is stated by the sentence: ‘The philosopher should apply philosophy also to philology.’]”).

solidarity, and critical self-awareness. These two assumptions, regarding the nature of philology and the values of philology, are at the heart of what I want to try to clarify for you this evening. When I speak of “Philology and Freedom,” accordingly, I will be concerned with, first, how to free philology from itself—perhaps from us philologists!—and second, how philology can help free us, both as scholars and as citizens.

### What has Philology been, and What is it now?<sup>9</sup>

The institutional fate of philology in the modern West—there are very different stories to tell about India, China, the Arab world and elsewhere that I will not have time to tell this evening—has been intimately connected with its own sense of its nature and purpose, that is, its disciplinary self-understanding. Historically viewed, a close correlation can be observed: the more profound philology’s grasp of its powers and the more ambitious its intellectual aspirations, the more prominent its institutional presence—and the reverse. One can chart the history of this correlation, and philology’s concomitant rise and fall, from the time it was first understood as a distinct academic discipline.

Philology is thought to have emerged as an independent form of academic knowledge when, as I earlier noted, Wolf declared upon entering the University of Göttingen that he was a “philologist” (*studiosus philologiae*), thereby becoming the first official student of the subject in Europe. Things are of course much more complicated than the legend of Wolf suggests, given that a philological seminar had been founded in Germany a generation earlier, and Wolf’s own teacher, the remarkable classicist Christian Gottlob Heyne, was already busy at Göttingen transforming the “ancient philology” (*Altphilologie*) of recitation, reconstruction, and disputation into a genuinely historicist and hermeneutical discipline.<sup>10</sup> But questions of chronological precedence do not diminish Wolf’s importance, for this lies less in his firstness than in his quest to secure the autonomy of philology by separating it from theology. It was no longer to

9 A more detailed discussion, from which the following is drawn, is given in Sheldon Pollock, “Introduction,” in *World Philology*, ed. Sheldon Pollock et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

10 For the intellectual-historical complexities here, see Marcel Lepper, “Deutsche Philologie im 18. Jahrhundert? Ein Forschungsbericht mit Bibliographie,” in *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert* 36 (2012): 71-105.

be a mere propaedeutic, a handmaiden, to theology, but an independent form of knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Two decades later the Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel sketched out a “philosophy of philology” (1797), in which the discipline encompassed far more than Wolf’s new triad of grammar, text-criticism, and historical analysis. For Schlegel, philology comprises nothing less than *Sprachgelehrsamkeit* itself, “all erudition in language”; it has “an extraordinary and almost immeasurable”—indeed, an *ungeheuer*, or “monstrous”—extent.<sup>12</sup> In this Schlegel may have been anticipated by Giambattista Vico, who a half-century earlier had claimed (in *New Science*, 1725) that philology comprised not just the “awareness of peoples’ languages and deeds,” but “the science of everything that depends on human volition: for example, all histories of the languages, customs and deeds of various peoples in both war and peace.”<sup>13</sup> But Schlegel’s definition was aiming to make a conceptual point rather than simply to offer an alternative organization of knowledge. And his principal conclusion, in keeping with his call for a philological philosophy, was that philology and interpretation as such are identical: “Man nennt die Philologie auch oft *Kritik*, insofern bei der Sprachgelehrsamkeit auf richtiges Verständnis im Erklären und Deuten . . . alles ankommt.”<sup>14</sup> The pithiest reduction of this grand vision of philology as a kind of total knowledge of language-based human thought, comes from August Boeckh, student of Wolf and another Humboldt professor (from 1811 until his death in 1867): “Die eigentliche Aufgabe” (“the actual task”) of philology is, in Boeckh’s lapidary formulation, “das Erkennen [des vom menschlichen Geist Producirten, d. h.] des Erkannten” (“[re-]cognizing [what the human mind has produced—that is] what has been cognized.”)<sup>15</sup> It

11 A memorable account is offered in Mark Pattison’s essay on Wolf (cited in Gregory Crane, “Rediscovering Philology” (2013), Online available at <http://sites.tufts.edu/perseusupdates/2013/04/15/rediscovering-philology/> Accessed February 17, 2015).

12 See Thomas Schestag, “Philology, Knowledge,” *Telos* 140 (2007): 28-44, 36, referring to Schlegel’s Cologne lecture (1805-1806), “Propädeutik und Kritik.”

13 Giambattista Vico, *New Science* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 79, 5.

14 Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 16, 42 (“We often refer to philology as *critique*, since in language-based erudition everything depends on correct understanding in matters of explanation and interpretation”).

15 August Boeckh, *Encyklopedie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, ed. Ernest Bratuscheck (Leipzig: Teubner, 1877), 10; see also Axel Horstmann, *Antike Theoria und Moderne Wissenschaft: August Boeckh’s Konzeption der Philologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), 103.



was disciplinary self-understanding of this magnitude, found in Wolf, Schlegel, Boeckh, and others, that correlated, according to some complex dialectic to be sure, with philology's ability to achieve the kind of institutional leadership mentioned earlier.

From these lofty heights of the early days of the conceptualization and institutionalization of philology, where its domain stretched limitlessly before the mind's eye and, more important, its theories and methods structured the very self-understanding of academic research and the scientific enterprise, from anatomy to zoology,<sup>16</sup> later nineteenth-century scholars sought to occupy a more modest and indeed reasonable middle ground. For Friedrich Nietzsche, the most visionary and critical philologist of his age, philology constituted, as he proclaimed in a celebrated passage in the preface to *Morgenröte*, the practice of "langsamen Lesens": "eine Goldschmiedekunst und -kennerschaft des Wortes," and "gerade dadurch zieht sie und bezaubert sie uns am stärksten, mitten in einem Zeitalter der 'Arbeit,' will sagen: der Hast, der unanständigen und schwitzenden Eilfertigkeit, das mit Allem gleich 'fertig werden' will."<sup>17</sup> But it should not be thought that this is somehow simply a contrarian, *unzeitgemäß*, or anti-modern, construction of the knowledge form. Far from it. For Nietzsche, philology teaches us something primal: "*gut lesen*, das heisst langsam, tief, rück- und vorsichtig, mit Hintergedanken, mit offen gelassenen Thüren, mit zarten Finger und Augen lesen."<sup>18</sup> In the less poetic language of one of his last published works he describes philology as above all a style of hermeneutics: "Philologie als Ephexis in der Interpretation"—philology as constraint (or restraint) in interpretation, by which we learn "Tatsachen ablesen können, ohne sie durch Interpretation zu fälschen, ohne im Verlangen nach Verständnis die Vorsicht, die Geduld, die Feinheit zu verlieren." And Nietzsche's "gut lesen" pertains not just to Greek or Latin classics (or Arabic or

16 See Denis Thuard et al., *Philologie als Wissensmodell / La philologie comme modèle de savoir* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, „Morgenröte,“ [1881] in *Sämtliche Werke: kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, vol. 3, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980): section 5 ("slow reading": "the leisurely art of the goldsmith applied to language," and "precisely for that reason the highest attraction and incitement in an age of 'work': that is to say, of haste, of unseemly and immoderate hurry-scurry, which is intent upon 'getting things done' at once"). Translated by J. M. Kennedy (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913).

18 Ibid. ("how to read well: i.e., slowly, profoundly, attentively, prudently, with inner thoughts, with the mental doors ajar, with delicate fingers and eyes").



Chinese or Sanskrit), but rather “handle es sich nun um Bücher, um Zeitungs-Neuigkeiten, um Schicksale oder Wetter-Tatsachen,—nicht zu reden vom ‘Heil der Seele.’ ”<sup>19</sup>

The descent from this strong middle position began already in the early twentieth century. Representative here is William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894), the American Sanskritist and protolinguist (“proto” because linguistics was as yet no separate discipline) in his contribution to the celebrated 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. While defining philology in an almost Vico-like manner as “that branch of knowledge which deals with human speech, and with all that speech discloses as to the nature and history of man,” Whitney was exclusively concerned, both in the article in question and throughout his long scholarly career, with “the instrumentality of [thought’s] expression,” that is, with language, while entirely ignoring “the thought expressed,” that is, literature and other forms of textuality, about which he was very little concerned.<sup>20</sup> And in this he was fully representative of developments underway.

Split down the middle in Whitney’s fashion, the grand nineteenth-century palace of philology would soon see one of its “two principal divisions” expropriated by the new science of linguistics.<sup>21</sup> The other was quickly subdivided up and all its most desirable rooms seized by the new subdisciplines mentioned earlier: comparative literature and more recently literary theory. What was left of the palace was turned into a tenement and rented out to a congeries of regional or national philology departments (East Asian, Middle

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Antichrist,” [1895] in *Sämtliche Werke: kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, vol. 6, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980): section 52 (“the capacity for absorbing facts without interpreting them falsely, and without losing caution, patience and subtlety in the effort to understand them . . . whether one be dealing with books, with newspaper reports, with the most fateful events or with weather statistics—not to mention the ‘salvation of the soul’”). This text, written in 1888 (published 1895), seems far more representative of Nietzsche’s views about philology than his “Wir Philologen” (1873-1875). Translated by H. L. Menken (New York: Knopf, 1918).

20 W. D. Whitney, *Atharva-Veda Samhitā: Revised and brought nearer to completion and edited by Charles Rockwell Lanman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1905), 414. In his version of the *Atharvaveda*, for example, the translation was meant to be “wholly subordinate” to his commentary, which was meant to be “prevalingly linguistic” (1905: xxxvii, xxi).

21 The history of the differentiation of linguistics from philology in the US (especially after 1925, with the founding of the Linguistic Society of America), and the growing marginalization of the latter as non-science in contrast to the former, is charted in Winter and Nathan 1992 (for the US) and Chang 2014 (for Europe and East Asia).

Eastern, Romance, Slavic, South Asia, Uralic-Altaic . . . and of course English and Classics), with worse quarters given to those thought to be lower on the cultural-evolutionary scale, India being near and Africa at the bottom. It is hardly surprising if in consequence of all this fragmentation philology should have been so thoroughly denigrated and brought to its present-day position, in the academy's basement. To the degree it even remains alive today—a "protohumanistic empirical science . . . that no longer exists as such," according to one dim-eyed observer but no doubt speaking for many—philology leads a pale, ghostly existence.<sup>22</sup> All that is left to it, if we are to believe the philologists themselves, is what others have left behind: text-criticism, bibliography, historical grammar, corpus linguistics. These are by no means unimportant methodological components of philology, but they are parts, not the whole; means, not the end. And making them into the end and the whole, as our much despoiled philology has been forced to do, has trivialized the discipline beyond recognition, and turned its vaunted rigor, its last refuge, into a kind of *rigor mortis*.

As the Zukunftphilologie research program implicitly recognizes, this is a history from which we must free philology if we are to liberate its true powers as a discipline both for knowledge and for life.

### What can Liberated Philology be?

If, to borrow a phrase from Antonio Gramsci, there is reason for us to be deeply pessimistic in intellect about the fate of philology today, is there any reason to be optimistic in will? What is really at stake in philology is not the mere ability to locate information in a text—that will be preserved one way or another without philology—but something much larger: it is the practice of *making sense of texts*. This is the definition I want to claim for philology—a redefinition, I am quite aware, that affiliates me with a long line of scholars who have tussled over the name and nature of the discipline.<sup>23</sup> But when I move from today's narrow construction of philology to this enlarged understanding as I do in the last section of my talk when turning to the nature of interpretation,

22 Michael Dutton, "The Trick of Words: Asian Studies, Translation, and the Problems of Knowledge," in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 100.

23 See for example Nadia Altschul, "What is Philology: Cultural Studies and Ecdotics," in *Philology and Its Histories*, ed. Sean Gurd (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2010).

which I take to be philology's proper theory, I am only recovering its actual historical development, as Wilhelm Dilthey (like Schlegel before him) made clear: "Die Kunst der Interpretation . . . entstand und erhält sich in der . . . Virtuosität des Philologen."<sup>24</sup>

I have long felt that, properly understood, philology in this large sense—the application of interpretation to the understanding of texts based on their original language—would naturally appear to academic administrators and "decision-makers" to be an intellectual activity as central to education as philosophy or mathematics. If philosophy is thought critically reflecting on itself, philology is the critical self-reflection of language. If mathematics is the language of the book of nature, philology is the language of the book of human being. And in fact, philology under this description has been as ubiquitous a discipline in time and space as either philosophy or mathematics, however little studied its historical dispersion has been.<sup>25</sup> This history itself is only the first of several qualifications that make philology a leading candidate for the disciplinary prize in any twenty-first century university that takes globalism seriously as a form of knowledge and not just as a marketing tool.

First, philology is truly a universal (*not* "universalistic") knowledge form—wherever there have been texts there has been philology (though not all philologies are identical or claim universality)—and not a particularistic form of knowledge masquerading as universal (like say political science, which as practiced today, in the US at least, is basically a mathematized species of American studies). Second, as a result of this history, philology is constitutively reflexive, awake to its own factitiousness and historicity as a knowledge form, and hence infinitely adaptable; in true disciplinary character it "treats its own nature as the subject of reflexive analysis" (unlike say economics, which has naturalized itself and strategically erased its own disciplinary past).<sup>26</sup> A third qualification results from this self-awareness: philology is by nature methodologically and conceptually pluralistic, because part of making sense of texts, as I will show,

24 Wilhelm Dilthey, "Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 320 ("This art of interpretation . . . originated in the personal and inspired virtuosity of the philologist, where it continues to flourish"). Translated by Fredric R. Jameson and Rudolf A. Makkreel in *Hermeneutics and the Study of History* (Selected Works, vol. 4), ed. Rudolph A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

25 The contributors to Pollock et al. 2014 hope to help rectify this state of affairs.

26 G. Squires, "Interdisciplinarity in Higher Education in the United Kingdom," in *European Journal of Education* 27 (1992): 202; Brad DeLong "Is Economics a Discipline?" (2011) Online available at <http://delong.typepad.com/sdj/2011/03/is-economics-a-discipline.html> Accessed February 17, 2015.

is learning how others have done so, and often done so very differently—which makes philology inherent comparative as well.

Philology has other virtues beyond these general disciplinary traits of universality, reflexivity, and conceptual pluralism and comparativism that I always felt would impress administrators if they knew about them. Philology promotes the best pedagogy, especially and perhaps unexpectedly radical pedagogy (recall Gramsci's philology courses for workers in the 1920s), for it is resistant—in fact, it is the last outpost of resistance—to the direct instrumentalization of knowledge and to profiteering from knowledge that have turned today's universities into businesses.<sup>27</sup> Philology stimulates care for memory, never more necessary than today when humankind as a whole seems to be succumbing to an Alzheimer's pandemic, a condition as crippling to a people as to an individual. By "care for memory" I mean shaping a usable sense of the past, at once preserving memory from its enemies, charting the instability and fluidity of memory itself, and opening the past to responsible critique. Philology also enables us to acquire new "equipment for living," to revive a phrase from the American thinker Kenneth Burke, by making available to us different conceptions, sometimes startlingly different conceptions, of what it has meant to be human.<sup>28</sup> And finally philology makes possible not only an encounter with the enduring intelligence and beauty of texts that embody the creative labor of millennia of human consciousness, but the incomparable intellectual experience of speaking with the dead. You lose all of this—pedagogy, memory, access to forms of life that modernity has destroyed, the mystery of communicating with the past—if you lose philology, the discipline of making sense of texts that only real command of language and real care for interpretation make possible.

Aside from these general traits and particular virtues, there is a specific disciplinary unity to this form of knowledge. It is surprising how rarely, if indeed ever, this has been fully argued out. What is not surprising is that as a result, philology has never and nowhere, not even in its moment of glory in late nineteenth-century Germany, achieved the institutional unity it merits—and needs.

What warrants do we need to provide to establish philology's disciplinary autonomy? Any discipline has to include at least three features. The first is

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27 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: International Publishers, 1971), 37–38, and more generally Harold Entwistle, *Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

28 Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 296, 304.

a distinctive object of study. Philology has such an object, namely language as concretized in texts—all texts, “everything made of language” (Sanskrit’s lovely term *vānīmaya*), whether the texts are oral, written, printed, or electronic; expressive or prosaic; ancient or contemporary. It is not the theory of language as such—that’s linguistics—nor the theory of truth in language—that’s philosophy—but the theory of language-as-used-in-texts. Texts, their history, their mode of existence, their very textuality, to say nothing of their content and, above all, as *primum movens*, the language itself in which they are composed, for all flows from the study of language itself, not as mere medium to some contentual end but as an end as such. Such is the object of study of philology.

The second disciplinary requirement is a distinctive theory. Philology has such a theory, as already noted, namely “interpretation,” or more grandly “hermeneutics.” Such theory was developed not only in Europe but in the Ancient Near East, the Arab world, India, China, and elsewhere in order to make sense of texts, and it has a multidimensionality that, once adequately understood—and I will describe in a moment what I think an “adequate” understanding of this multidimensionality comprises—is critical to the discipline’s regeneration. Third, a set of distinctive research methods is required. Philology has such methods, namely grammatical analysis, text-critical analysis (and codicological, paleographical, papyrological . . . or other analysis, depending on the area of study), rhetorical analysis, historical analysis. Philology thus possesses precisely the “distinctive subject, distinctive theoretical concepts, distinctive methods” that a discipline requires, as the anthropologist John Comaroff recently pointed out.<sup>29</sup> What it currently lacks is only Comaroff’s fourth component, a distinctive place in the disciplinary division of labor. Like mathematics, philology’s subject and theoretical concepts and methods are used across the academy; unlike mathematics, philology has an academic home nowhere.

The future of philology as an academic practice depends to a large extent on establishing that home and thereby ensuring its institutional freedom to survive, grow, and diversify. This call for a disciplinary home might seem to run counter to the incessant celebration one hears these days of interdisciplinarity. But you cannot unleash the interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary powers of philology or any other form of knowledge if you do not first unleash its disciplinary powers, and those cannot be developed and preserved in the absence of an institutional location. (Indeed, for the

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29 John Comaroff, “The End of Anthropology, Again: On the Future of an In/Discipline,” in *American Anthropologist* (2010): 527.

historical, intellectual, and conceptual reasons I have already given it is clear that the academic disciplinization of philology might begin right here in Berlin!)

The future of philology and the elaboration of its powers, however, also depend on explaining clearly and unequivocally that second assumption I made a moment ago, that we understand why philology is so important to preserve—that we understand, that is, how it can help free us, as citizens and human beings. Here we encounter something far more basic about philology than anything I have already mentioned, its capacity for radical pedagogy, or care for memory, or whatever; something Nietzsche captured when he said that philology “lehrt gut lesen,” that it is “die Kunst, gut zu lesen.” Nietzsche told us what he thought “gut lesen” means: “langsam, tief, rück- und vorsichtig,” and so on. I for my part believe there is a great deal more than this to say about “good reading.” For me, this is reading in accordance with what I will call three-dimensional philology, and it is a process that can help us cultivate broader commitments that are of crucial significance for freedom today: commitments to truth, solidarity, and critical self-awareness.

### Philology and Freedom in History

The heroic age of philology—the ongoing quest to make sense of texts—was marked by almost Promethean gestures toward human liberation in the political no less than in the spiritual realm. One figure who will be well-known to most in the audience is Lorenzo Valla in the fifteenth century, who in his *Declamatio* on the Donation of Constantine used a new historical understanding of language change to prove that the decree of Constantine, which effectively granted future popes the right to appoint secular rulers in the West, was actually written centuries after Constantine. Another is Erasmus, who a few generations after Valla produced the first edition of the Greek text of the New Testament, and by showing that the Latin version, long viewed by the Church as sacrosanct, was riddled with errors, helped pave the way to the Reformation.<sup>30</sup> A third is Spinoza, who, while not widely recognized as a philologist as well as a philosopher, wrote the most important philological treatise of early modern Europe, the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*. This “book forged in hell,” as it was called soon after it appeared, was the most energetic attempt to undermine “belief in Revelation, divine providence and miracles, and hence ecclesiastical

30 For a fuller account of Bible criticism, philology, and truth (though of a sort different from that described below), see Luciano Canfora, *Filologia e Libertà* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008).

authority.”<sup>31</sup> But the work signifies far more than this for the history of philological thought. Had it not been written a century before Wolf’s disciplinary gesture, its title might well have been *Tractatus Philologico-politicus*, because the argument that lies at the heart of the work is the conviction that good reading makes good polity: that, in this particular case, learning a philological method for reading the Bible can transform relations of knowledge and power in the commonwealth and produce an egalitarian and just republic.

Heroic philologists were not to be found only in Europe in the early modern period. Like Valla, proponents of the new evidential research in late-imperial China sought new ways to read. In the highly charged political climate of the early Qing, with the fall of the Han dynasty and the imposition of “barbarian” Manchu rule, traditional literati felt compelled to make new sense of their tradition—and wound up demonstrating the spuriousness of whole texts hitherto regarded as classics. When, in his “shocking” late-seventeenth-century work “Evidential Analysis of the Old Text Documents,” Yan Ruoju proved that chapters in the *Documents Classic* were a later addition, his reply to outraged traditionalists was, “My concern is only with what is true. If the *Classic* is true and the *History* and *Commentary* false, then it is permissible to use the *Classic* to correct the *History* and the *Commentary*. If the *History* and the *Commentary* are true and the *Classic* false, then can it be impermissible to use the *History* and the *Commentary* to correct the *Classic*?”<sup>32</sup> In India, Narayana Bhatta of Kerala, an almost exact contemporary of Spinoza and Yan Ruoju, challenged two millennia of Sanskrit thinking about language—the language of the gods, after all—by arguing for the first time that “It is by relying on established usage, previous grammars, but also by reasoning that intelligent people establish authority.”<sup>33</sup> Related to Narayana’s goal of restoring to Sanskrit its historicity and thereby its humanity is the conceptual renovation of religious thought that found expression in his literary work, in an era marked by powerful social challenges from the new devotionalism (by contrast, the imposition of the new Mughal imperium, unlike that of the Manchus, was generally not viewed as a barbarian crisis). The philological and religious/social orders for Narayana

31 Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.

32 Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology*, 33.

33 Narayana Bhattapada, “Apāṇinīyapramāṇyasādhana,” in *Sri Venkateswara University Oriental Journal* 8 (1965): section 33, 2-3.



were clearly homological, and reconstructing the former would help reconstruct the latter.

As this homology suggests, and what Promethean philology everywhere demonstrated, is the close connection between “gut lesen” and freedom, whether religious, political, or other. The social is embodied in part in language and texts, and a better understanding of both should produce a better society—or so the assumption. There are, of course, a few problems here. An obvious one is that the heroic age of philology is past; none of us philologists today has the aspiration to be, let alone the chance of becoming, another Valla or Yan Ruoju. We do not need philology departments so they can produce philology heroes. Less obvious but more worrisome is the fact that there has not always been a straight line connecting good reading with good polity, as the low barbarism of high civilization in twentieth-century Europe—to which philology, however forcibly and *unphilologically*, actually contributed—all too clearly demonstrated.<sup>34</sup> A third problem is that the kind of reading practiced by our heroes, to unmask oppressive authority, is not the only kind of good reading there is, and not the only kind that makes for better polity. There exists, in addition, what we might call a civic in contrast to an heroic philology, a way of reading, and hence of understanding the world, that strives to make us better members of the human community, a philology that aims toward what the late American philosopher Richard Rorty once called “the possibility of, or the obligation to construct, a planet-wide inclusivist community.”<sup>35</sup> Such a civic philology—let’s call it philology for the anthropocene, the epoch of potential planetary consciousness—is what I want to turn toward next.

### Three-Dimensional Philology<sup>36</sup>

When Nietzsche defined philology as the practice of “langsamen Lesens,” he should have meant (though I do not think he did mean) reading in a state of self-awareness about what exactly we are doing when we are reading. Such self-awareness arises in direct proportion to the time-space distance that separates us from the origins of the text we have taken up. The closer it is—this morning’s *FAZ* (or *TAZ*), for instance—the less conscious we are of the pro-

34 See most recently Markus Messling and Ottmar Ette, *Wort Macht Stamm: Rassismus und Determinismus in der Philologie* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2013).

35 Robert Brandom, *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 1.

36 Further detail in Sheldon Pollock, “Philology in Three Dimensions,” *postmedieval* 5 (2014), from which this section is adapted.

cesses by which we make sense of it; the more distant the text, conversely, the more present to our awareness those processes become. We may naively believe the contemporary text to be transparently accessible, but making sense of it is always a matter of the meta-, or second-order, judgments made possible only by philology. The more present to our consciousness these practices of sense-making become, the more effective they become. Thus, reading texts maximally distant in time and space, such as non-modern non-Western texts, arguably makes philology maximally present—hereby the extraordinary intellectual vitality imparted by historically dead languages. And for someone thus disciplined, philology can become maximally present for all texts, however near. When you are trained to read philologically, you could never say, as a US Supreme Court justice said recently, that “Words mean what they mean.”<sup>37</sup>

This time-space distance can be plotted along the three different planes, that of (1) the text’s genesis; (2) its earlier readers; (3) me reading here and now. And this suggests that there are three dimensions of meaning—the author’s, the tradition’s, and my own—and thus three forms, potentially radically different forms, of textual truth. My own struggle with “good reading” over the course of my professional life has been about reconciling these dimensions—indeed, what I offer you this evening is less a grand theory of reading than a mere autobiography of reading, made up of my three lives: a classicist trained as a hardcore historicist; a Sanskritist who felt himself heir, in however complexly mediated a way, to a great tradition of reception; and a student who when young always raised the very 1960s question, “What is the contemporary relevance of this ancient text?” and who later came to realize this was the very question asked by philosophical hermeneutics.

I now know that my struggle is not peculiar to me but recapitulates a much longer history. The tension between planes 1 and 3—the meaning of the text for the author or the author’s first audience, and the meaning of the text for me in the present—has preoccupied European scholars since the Renaissance. Historicism seeks to vindicate the claim that the one true meaning of the text is the meaning of the text at the historical moment of its origins. Philosophical hermeneutics seeks to vindicate the claim that, as Gadamer has

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37 Antony Scalia, cited in Peter Ludlow, “The Living Word,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2012. He recently elaborated: “Words have meaning. And their meaning doesn’t change. I mean, the notion that the Constitution should simply, by decree of the Court, mean something that it didn’t mean when the people voted for it—frankly, you should ask the other side the question! How did they ever get there?” (cited in Jennifer Senior, “In Conversation: Antonin Scalia,” *New York Magazine*, October 6, 2013. Online available at <http://nymag.com/news/features/antonin-scalia-2013-10/> Accessed February 17, 2015.

put it, “dann erst [wird] die Bedeutung [eines Textes] erfahrbar [wenn wir] von der Überlieferung *angesprochen* [sind]”).<sup>38</sup> The contest here, between historicist and presentist reading, remains a source of continuing dispute today in every act of historical textual interpretation. We need only think of Biblical literalism or what in the US is called constitutional originalism to get a sense of the stakes.

What is excluded from the usual binary account of philological reading, however, is the second plane of philology, the senses of a text made by readers who came before us—presentist readings themselves, of course, until they enter the stream of history and reach us as “traditional” (they are at the same time texts in and of themselves, of course, that evoke historicist and presentist assessment). Most scholars, beginning in fact with our Promethean philologists, have simply ignored these, as my classics teachers always did, for whom no traditional interpretation, whether of Hellenistic scholiasts, Roman commentators, or medieval scribes, could make any claim to truth. Even those who do not ignore them, like my Indian teachers or Sanskrit colleagues, rarely offer a strong account, or any account, of their interpretive validity.

This indifference to, if not dismissal of, the reading of tradition has a particular history, and is not just the outcome of a kind of epistemological naturalism. It is connected with the intellectual revolution of early modernity, typified by the seventeenth-century *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, and more generally by the rise of the Enlightenment. But its first specifically philological manifestation is a text already mentioned, Spinoza’s *Tractatus*. For Spinoza, the “true” or “genuine” meaning of a text like the Bible—what he calls the “scientific” meaning—is to be discovered only if we readers, first, liberate our thinking from the interpretations of other, earlier members of the tradition (“free our minds from . . . the blind acceptance of human fictions as God’s teaching”), and, second, “take care especially not to be blinded by our own reasoning . . . (not to mention our preconceptions).”<sup>39</sup> For the scientific philologist Spinoza, in other words, all earlier readings of plane 2, the tradition and their possible truths were to be erased, along with plane 3, the present-day reader’s own truth. The only thing that counted was the truth of plane 1. This view of

38 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972), 266 (emphasis in the original; “Is it not true of the objects that the human sciences investigate, just as for the contents of tradition, that what they are really about can be experienced only when one is *addressed* by them?”). Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1996).

39 Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne, ed. and transl., *Spinoza: Theological-Political Treatise*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 98, 100.

philology, no doubt unimaginable before early-capitalist Amsterdam (and in some certain, if as yet unexplained, way linked to that economic transformation), was truly a revolution at the level of thought, whereby the whole “Gefolge von altherwürdigen Vorstellungen und Anschauungen” were “aufgelöst” at a stroke.<sup>40</sup> And the capitalist-modernist philological values that animate the treatise became values for every philologist in the West. We are all Spinozists now; his truths have become ours, for better or worse, and the purest of our pure common sense buried deep below the threshold of critical awareness.

It was neither this intellectual history, however, nor philosophical hermeneutics and its concern with the historicity of every reader’s consciousness, including the historicist’s, that pressed upon me the problem with common-sense philology. Instead it was something I suppose I should call postcolonialism, a word I do not often use but that in this context seems appropriate. I felt either I had to declare that every Indian reader who came before me was invincibly ignorant and knew nothing about the world, even their own world—the prevailing view of British colonialists, who simply and without ado “disqualified” Indian tradition<sup>41</sup>—or I had to ask what their own truths could have been and what claims if any they make upon me today. Adjudicating this, however, after centuries of disqualification, is clearly no simple thing.

Virtually all scholars who have bothered to think about the meanings given on plane 2 have been animated by the notion of past reading as the history of error. By contrast, I have gradually found myself willing to defend just the opposite position, and to argue on behalf of those meanings and truths of tradition—*any* tradition, whether the deep, millennial commentarial histories of Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Sanskrit, to the shallower traditions captured in publications like the *Variorum Shakespeare* or the *Norton Critical Editions*—that there can be no such thing as an incorrect interpretation. I mean this in a very particular sense: all interpretations are embodiments of actual human consciousness, which have been called into being by certain properties in the text, and such forms of consciousness cannot be either correct or incorrect *in*

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40 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* [1848] (Hamburg: tredition, 2012), 33 (“[All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with] their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away”). Translated by Samuel Moore (London: William Reeves, 1888). I am drawing here on the work of Tzvetan Todorov, who was the first to intimate—though he did not develop—the linkage between early capitalism and the conceptual revolution of which Spinoza’s philology is an example (Tzvetan Todorov, *Symbolism and Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 165).

41 Sudipta Kaviraj, “The Sudden Death of Sanskrit Knowledge,” in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33 (2005): 132.

*their historical existence.* What we philologists in part aim to grasp and understand when we read along the plane of tradition are those forms themselves and, in addition, not only what it may be about their world that shaped their view of the text, but also, and more important, what it may be about the text itself that summoned those forms of consciousness into existence. Reading upon plane 2—and for the narrower philology of textual criticism this would include establishing and editing texts along plane 2—is not something practiced to bring us closer to a more rational philology. It is not a means toward the one real and true interpretation of the work (or the one true text). It ends in real and true interpretations of its own.

These claims about reading tradition and the truthfulness of what from the perspective of the first or third plane appears to be sheer error, may sound perverse, but they have a respectable if somewhat distant pedigree. In a celebrated lecture of 1854 meant to provide a critique of progressivism and of what is actually a kind of Whig interpretation of history *avant la lettre*, Leopold von Ranke strongly opposed the view “dass . . . jede Generation die vorhergehende vollkommen übertreffe, mithin die letzete die bevorzugte, die vorhergehenden aber nur die Träger der nachfolgenden wäre.” “Eine solche gleichsam mediatisierte Generation,” he goes on to argue, “würde an und für sich eine Bedeutung nicht haben.” It would have no direct relationship to the divine; on the contrary, such a historical conception would presuppose divine injustice, since it would be evidence of the inequity of God in apportioning historical significance. For Ranke—and here is the famous phrase that people remember from this lecture if they remember anything—“Jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott, und ihr Wert beruht gar nicht auf dem, was aus ihr hervorgeht, sondern in ihrer Existenz selbst, in ihrem Eigenen selbst.”<sup>42</sup>

For a secular Rankean philologist like myself—“Rankean” at least in seeking to make sense of texts along plane 2 as an inseparable, essential part of the three-fold time-space matrix—every interpretation must, accordingly, be correct in some nontrivial sense. This is so, however, not because to dismiss the reading of tradition as misunderstanding would offend God or suggest divine injustice or violate the respect we owe the dead to take them as seriously as

42 Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epochen der Neueren Geschichte* [1854] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1971), 59-60 (“that . . . each generation may be thought of as completely surpassing the previous, with the most recent given the most preference, while the earlier is supposed to function merely as a conduit for the later.” “Such an as it were instrumentalized generation would have no meaning at all in and of itself.” “Every epoch has a relationship to God that is unmediated and its value in no way depends on what it has produced out of itself, but in its existence itself, in its own self”).

we ourselves hope, in similar circumstances, to be taken. But rather because to reject them would offend against truth—the truth of the fact that every reading is evidence of a once actually existing human consciousness activated by the text in the search to make sense of it.

The meaning of a text can be nothing but the assemblage of meanings it has had for particular persons at particular times and places; the truth nothing but the assemblage of truths. What we philologists should care about is what has been held to be true at those times and places, and why *that* was held to be true; we should not be concerned with what is absolutely true, since absolute truth has no place in the realm of making sense of texts. “The notion that there is something a given text is *really* about, something which rigorous application of a method will reveal, is as bad as the Aristotelian idea that there is something which a substance really, intrinsically, *is* as opposed to what it only apparently or accidentally or relationally is.”<sup>43</sup> Put another way, all interpretation is not misinterpretation (to adopt, and adapt, Harold Bloom’s formulation);<sup>44</sup> instead, all “misinterpretation” is *interpretation*, an attempt at textual understanding that embodies a historically determined moment of human consciousness. The objective of philology is not to determine whether that interpretation is true or not according to some transcendent standard; it is to understand it in its existence as such and in relation to the text that produced it.

In the first instance my call for three-dimensional philology, aside from the autobiographical reality it has for me, derives from its phenomenological reality. This is how we do in fact read, whether or not we are fully aware of it and whether or not we try to suppress it. Indeed, it is philology itself that, as Schlegel demanded, has produced this “philosophy” of reading. For one thing, we moderns inescapably think historically, hence the now naturalized character of historical reading, and readiness for historicist reading. For another, we receive our texts only through tradition, hence the necessity to acknowledge the presence of the traditionist reading—not out of Gadamerian piety toward its supposed authoritativeness (tradition, let us say it openly, is usually “the story of the winners”), but from the simple recognition of its human reality.<sup>45</sup>

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43 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 141-142.

44 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*. 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 30, 43.

45 For the quote see John Caputo, “Gadamer’s Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique,” in *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, ed. Diane Michelfelde and Richard Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 254.

And last, our subjectivities are shaped by our historicity, hence the ineradicability of the presentist reading.

It is, to be sure, easy to reduce all three dimensions of meaning to historicism itself, with appreciation of traditionism as assessed above a kind of historicism<sub>2</sub>, and that of presentism a historicism<sub>3</sub>, the historicism of the historicist-physician aware he must heal himself. But such conflation makes it far more difficult or even impossible to disaggregate the three dimensions and to learn to read across them simultaneously, self-awarely, and generously (something that would be clearly demonstrated by a history of historicist interpretation, starting with Spinoza himself, whose interpretation of the Bible turned out, *mirabile dictu*, to confirm his own philosophy). And that is precisely what three-dimensional philology invites us to do, though admittedly it is a very delicate and difficult balancing act to practice. It is largely unfamiliar to contemporary philologists themselves, let alone to jurists, clerics, politicians, and anyone else dealing with texts, to allow all three dimensions to remain in play and to represent forms of truth. They cannot but help feel the need to rank or at least to reconcile them, but we are no more called upon to do this, from the quasi-pragmatist point of view adopted here, that we are called upon to rank the different tools in a toolbox. Rorty was again right in this and when he said, about such conflicts, that they do not even exist because their objects serve different ends: “Plato was wrong: you don’t have to get everything to get together.”<sup>46</sup>

In the second instance my call for this sort of philology derives from an ethical conviction. If we make that phenomenological actuality into a conscious, explicit method, it might also promote the kind of civic goods I will discuss in a moment. If, that is, we accept the fact of how we actually do read, we will have to temper the absolutist notion of truth (that there is only one meaning and I have found it) and begin to think of the goal of inquiry as, additionally, a hopeful quest, not to reconcile—nor even, I think, to “fuse”—but to hold in a single thought the multiple interpretations and their own claims to truth. We will no longer be seeking only to get things right according to correspondence with some supposedly invariant (textual or other) reality, but also and simultaneously to arrive at some consensus about the *uses* of our text. What ends, we will ask, are we aiming to achieve with our ways of reading? Do other people have other ends that we can learn to understand and live with, to the degree at least that granting such ends to one person does not wind up limiting

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46 Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 186, and Richard Rorty et al., *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), 63.



another's? And, in the grandest scheme of things, can those uses of interpretation be directed toward minimizing pain and maximizing well-being?

Mastering this interpretive balancing act, which simultaneously respects the scientific value of historical truth, the pragmatic value of pluralism through tradition, and the hermeneutical necessity of asking, "What possibility does the text give me to understand my own being?"<sup>47</sup> is for me the great intellectual challenge of a critical philology, and the source of one of its most powerful gestures toward freedom.

### Philology and Freedom in Practice

In closing I want to turn to the ethical goods just mentioned, and suggest how these three dimensions of philology when seen as a necessary whole can promote the cultivation of values that are more important today than perhaps they ever have been. To point toward a potential ethical dimension of philology is not—as should be clear from everything I have said so far—"to make an invidious distinction between getting it right and making it useful," still less to advance the "fantastic claim" that the millennium of universal peace and justice would come "if all men and women became good readers." My concern is more with hermeneutical operations than with discursive outcomes, with how texts are understood and used rather than with what they are taken "ultimately" to mean. The point is not, to repeat, merely (or even) to get behind appearances to the true reality (like the many other ethically oriented reading strategies, from Hillis Miller to Edward Said to Peter Brooks), but to understand the true reality of appearances, the modes of their relationship to the text, and what work they do.<sup>48</sup> In its ethical dimension philology is no longer simply an

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47 Rudolph Bultmann cited in Hans Robert Jauss, "The Limits and Tasks of Literary Hermeneutics" *Diogenes* 28 (1980): 105.

48 Rorty's criticisms (*Philosophy and Social Hope*, 146, 129) were directed toward arguments like those of Miller (1989), with which my own have nothing in common. Said's plane 1 reading (which he calls "reception") is purely historicist; his plane 3 reading ("resistance") is no longer philology but "humanism" and purely political, and between the two he in fact draws little connection (thus illustrating his own career, where, he boasts, "understanding and teaching of great works of . . . art" was conducted "separately" from "social and political engagement and commitment," Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 57-84, especially 62. For Brooks's recent project (which not all of his contributors seem to have fully grasped), see Peter Brooks, ed., *The Humanities and Public Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

academic discipline but, instead, becomes a way of life: You are how you read, and learning to read differently means, potentially, learning to be differently.

The values that critical philology of this sort helps us cultivate—I say “help” because the context of a broader set of commitments, social, political, ethical, must always be presupposed—can be framed both negatively and positively. I will just touch on each in turn. As a sort of negative capability, philology on plane 1 (historicism) helps us to discipline the arrogance of the reader-as-consumer who wants only what pleases him, and whose own life is taken to be the standard of all previous lives. Philology on plane 2 (traditionism) helps us to counter the insularity of monologists who believe that meaning must be singular—and that they alone are in possession of it. Philology on plane 3 (presentism) helps us to dispel the illusions of historicists who believe historicism applies to everyone but themselves and who refuse to believe that they can—in fact, that they must—measure the text by their own experience.

At the same time, and more positively now, philology on plane 1 helps us to better comprehend the nature, or natures, of human existence and the radical differences they have shown over time—the vast variety that history offers of ways of being human. Philology on plane 2 helps us to better understand and develop respect for the views of others—often very different others, such as those far distant from us in time and space—and in that way to expand the possibilities of human solidarity. Philology on plane 3 helps us to foreground the historicity of our being and our relationship to earlier historical interpretations, and thereby to enhance our sense of humility in the face of the limits of our capacity to know, and our sense of the importance to keep trying.

It may well be there are other forms of knowledge that can teach us these negative and positive lessons—lessons about truth, solidarity with others in the past as well as present, and critical self-awareness—upon which a certain measure of our freedom depends. But I know of none that can do so as consistently and immediately as *gut lesen* through the discipline of critical philology. When we learn to free philology we will at the same time be learning one more way to free ourselves.

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