

From Understanding to Testimony: Reconstructing the Philosophy of Testimony through Hermeneutics

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Article

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Abstract: Contemporary discussions in the philosophy of testimony have predominantly concentrated on the epistemological domain, focusing on the conditions of epistemic justification and the mechanisms of knowledge transmission, thereby obscuring the more fundamental hermeneutical premises underlying the acceptance of the discourse of others. However, investigations into the issue of testimony should shift their central focus from the question of “how knowledge is possible” to “how understanding is possible,” thereby revealing its inherent intersubjectivity. By introducing Heidegger’s structure of *Mitsein* (Being-with) and Gadamer’s dialogical theory grounded in historicity and tradition, it becomes evident that the reception of testimony is fundamentally predicated upon a primordial trust and an openness toward the speech of the other. Building upon this foundation, Jean Nabert’s philosophy of reflection regarding “original affirmation” and Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “attestation” further illuminate the ethical dimensions of testimony. Testimony is not merely a medium for transmitting objective facts; rather, it constitutes an ethical commitment characterized by reciprocal responsiveness and the assumption of responsibility among subjects. This is particularly salient in the context of modern historical traumas, where testimony bears the profound mission of speaking on behalf of the voiceless absent and resisting oblivion. Consequently, testimony transcends its role as a mere epistemic medium, emerging as a hermeneutical practice deeply rooted in understanding, *Mitsein*, and the ethics of alterity.

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Over the past three decades, the philosophy of testimony has progressively established itself as a central problematic within contemporary epistemology. Scholars have engaged in rigorous debates concerning whether testimony constitutes an autonomous source of knowledge, the criteria requisite for its epistemic justification, and its function within knowledge transmission, thereby constructing an intellectual genealogy of testimony that spans from Plato and Augustine to Hume. Within this dominant research paradigm, testimony is construed primarily as a mechanism for knowledge acquisition and justification, with the core inquiry centering on how it can

serve as a reliable epistemic source. However, this research paradigm, centered exclusively on epistemic justification, betrays inherent theoretical limitations. Whether adopting a reductionist or anti-reductionist stance, debates concerning testimony invariably presuppose a more primordial question: why are subjects willing to listen to the discourse of the Other before rendering any judgment regarding its propositional truth? If every instance of testimony demanded a priori proof before it could be accepted, communication itself would collapse into an infinite regress of skepticism.

In human praxis, the reception of the Other's discourse frequently precedes its verification. That testimony can enter the hermeneutic process of understanding relies not merely on propositional truth-judgments, but rather upon a more primordial intersubjective relation. This problematic thus transcends the strictures of traditional epistemology, entering the proper domain of hermeneutics. Testimony is fundamentally not a question of how information is transmitted, but of how understanding itself is rendered possible—it concerns the mutual understanding between subjects dwelling within a shared world. Consequently, testimony implicates not merely the epistemic question of truth, but the ontological dimension of intersubjectivity. Within the Continental philosophical tradition, although this problematic has rarely been systematized under the explicit rubric of a "philosophy of testimony," it has persistently animated reflections on understanding and the relation between the self and the Other. Heidegger, through the ontological concept of *Mitsein* (Being-with) and the call of conscience, revealed that *Dasein* is always already situated within a co-existential structure with others; Gadamer, through his expositions on historicity, tradition, and authority, demonstrated that understanding invariably unfolds within an ongoing dialogue between subjects. Subsequently, Jean Nabert reexamined how the subject affirms itself in a movement of self-transcendence via "original affirmation," while Paul Ricoeur further integrated reflexive philosophy with hermeneutics through the concept of "attestation," thereby establishing testimony as a crucial pathway to self-understanding. Tracing this intellectual lineage, testimony no longer appears merely as an epistemic mechanism for knowledge acquisition, but emerges as a hermeneutic phenomenon rooted in intersubjective understanding. Consequently, the philosophical

examination of testimony gradually shifts its central pursuit from the epistemological question of “how knowledge is possible” to the hermeneutic question of “how understanding is possible”.

Being-with and Understanding: The Hermeneutic Turn in Testimony

While contemporary epistemology of testimony has successfully rehabilitated the philosophical standing of testimony, its core problematic remains narrowly focused on how testimony generates knowledge and what epistemic justification subjects possess to believe the statements of others. However, traced through its intellectual genealogy, the phenomenon of testimony has always been inextricably bound to profound issues such as truth, authority, faith, character, and community. Testimony is never merely a transactional exchange of information between isolated cognitive subjects; rather, it fundamentally unfolds within intersubjective relations. Consequently, a fundamental question emerges: if testimony is not merely a mechanism for knowledge transmission, upon what foundation is this intersubjective relationship established? In other words, prior to evaluating the testimonial content, on what grounds is a subject already capable of understanding another’s discourse and engaging in communication?

Traditional epistemology typically presupposes the subject as an autonomous, self-contained knower, subsequently investigating how this subject acquires information from external sources. Hermeneutics, in contrast, seeks to interrogate this fundamental presupposition. From a hermeneutic perspective, human beings do not exist primarily as isolated subjects; rather, they are always already embedded within a world of meaning constituted by language, history, and tradition. Heidegger elucidated the ontological structure of human coexistence through the concept of *Mitsein* (Being-with), while Gadamer further articulated that understanding invariably unfolds within an ongoing dialogue with tradition and the Other. Consequently, testimony is recontextualized: it is no longer conceived merely as a vehicle for knowledge transmission, but as a vital mode through which humans relate to both the world and the Other. Through this hermeneutic lens, testimony transcends its purely

epistemological framework, progressively revealing the intersubjectivity and ethical significance inherent in its structure.

(1) Conscience as Ontological Testimony: The Heideggerian Call of Dasein

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger critiques the subject-centered paradigm that has dominated modern philosophy, positing that human beings are not, first and foremost, cognitive subjects, but rather *Dasein*—a “being-in-the-world” (In-der-Welt-sein). *Dasein* does not confront the world in isolation; rather, it always already exists within the world in coexistence with others—a structure Heidegger designates as *Mitsein* (Being-with). Building upon this foundation, Heidegger further explores how *Dasein* can recover itself from its everyday absorption in the “they” (das Man). He contends that no phenomenon other than conscience can summon Dasein back to its authentic existence (Polt, 1999a). Consequently, conscience (das Gewissen) emerges as a crucial phenomenological access point for disclosing authentic existence. In his analysis of conscience, Heidegger states that “what is sought is an authentic potentiality-for-Being of *Dasein*, which will be attested by *Dasein* itself in its existential possibility” (Gesucht ist ein eigentliches Seinkönnen des Daseins, das von diesem selbst in seiner existenziellen Möglichkeit bezeugt wird) (Heidegger & von Herrmann, 1977a). It is significant that Heidegger eschews the term *reden*—which typically denotes ordinary speech or discourse—in favor of *bezeugen* (noting that *bezeugt* is the past participle forming the passive voice with *wird*). The distinction is crucial: whereas *reden* entails persuasion, wherein a speaker utilizes rhetorical techniques to compel a listener’s agreement, *bezeugen* relies upon the direct manifestation of evidence (*Zeuge*) to bring about conviction.

What constitutes this evidence? In its everydayness, *Dasein* has always already fallen into the mundane existence of the “they” (das Man). It remains perpetually absorbed in worldly affairs, public opinion, and idle talk (*Gerede*), interpreting itself in accordance with how “one” generally understands things. In such a state, it is not that *Dasein* cannot hear itself; rather, its ownmost voice is incessantly drowned out by the clamorous voices of the public realm. However, at certain decisive moments, Dasein hears a voice that is ordinarily concealed. Heidegger designates this voice as the “call”

(Ruf) of conscience. This call does not emanate from God, nor is it the counsel of another, nor the dictate of some universal moral code. It originates from *Dasein* itself, yet it appears to issue from an uncanny stranger (der Fremde). Therefore, Heidegger asserts: “The call comes from me and yet from beyond me” (Der Ruf kommt aus mir und doch über mich)(Heidegger & von Herrmann, 1977b). Conscience does not dictate what *Dasein* ought to do, nor does it impart any factual knowledge about the world. It merely summons *Dasein*—which has fallen into the everydayness of the “they”—back to its ownmost self, awakening it to the realization that it must assume responsibility for its own existence. Here, conscience must not be reductively construed as a psychological sense of guilt arising from the violation of some normative moral code. While everyday understanding typically equates guilt with acts of moral commission or omission—having done what ought not to be done, or failing to do what ought to be done—what conscience actually bears witness to is no empirical moral fact, but rather *Dasein*’s own authentic potentiality-for-Being. It discloses not “what I have done wrong,” but the fundamental imperative: “I must become myself”(Polt, 1999b). This call awakens *Dasein* to the realization that it can no longer conceal itself within the conventional anonymity of “how one acts” or “what one thinks”; rather, it must resolutely assume responsibility for its own existence. The testimony of conscience, therefore, does not serve as an epistemic proof of established facts, but constitutes an ontological summons to—and an affirmation of—*Dasein*’s ownmost potentiality-for-Being. Consequently, Heidegger reclaims “testimony” (Zeugnis) from the juridical realm of objective evidence and restores it to the core of fundamental ontology. He posits that *Dasein* requires a “testimony” that does not merely prove facts, but rather attests to its authentic potentiality-for-Being. Here, testimony is no longer construed as the transmission of external information; rather, it is an existential disclosure that summons *Dasein* to take over responsibility for its ownmost existence. Conscience serves as this primordial “testimony” not by furnishing empirical evidence about worldly affairs, but by awakening *Dasein* to resolutely own its Being. The essence of testimony thus undergoes a radical paradigm shift: from epistemological verification to ontological self-attestation. By laying bare this profoundly ontological dimension of

testimony, Heidegger cleared the theoretical pathway for its subsequent hermeneutic elaboration in the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

(2) Authority, Tradition, and Dialogue: Gadamer's Intersubjective Foundation of Testimony

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer builds upon Heidegger's ontological turn in hermeneutics, yet deliberately shifts the theoretical focus from the authentic existence of *Dasein* to the phenomenon of understanding (*Verstehen*) itself. For Gadamer, understanding is not a mere cognitive procedure through which a subject epistemically grasps an object, but rather the primordial mode of human existence. Human beings are always already embedded within language, history, and tradition; it is exclusively through these historically mediated horizons that they come to understand themselves and their world. Consequently, Gadamer radically dismantles the paradigm of the ahistorical, "pure subject" presupposed by modern epistemology. From the standpoint of traditional epistemology, understanding is conceived as an instrumental process wherein a subject employs methodological procedures to objectively apprehend an object. Gadamer, however, argues that all understanding is inescapably conditioned by its historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*). The interpreter does not occupy an Archimedean point outside of tradition from which to objectively scrutinize it; rather, they are always already characterized by a profound belongingness (*Zugehörigkeit*) to that very tradition (Gadamer, 2004).

Understanding is not a sovereign appropriation of meaning by a cognitive subject, but rather an ontological event (*Geschehen*) that unfolds within historical continuity. In this sense, the act of understanding is fundamentally intersubjective, as all understanding implicitly entails a dialogue with the Other. Gadamer famously modeled the structure of understanding on a "conversation" (*Gespräch*): in a genuine dialogue, interlocutors do not merely assert their preconceived subjective opinions; rather, they jointly give themselves over to the subject matter (*die Sache*) to be understood. Understanding, therefore, is not a contest between rival subjective consciousnesses, but rather a "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*)—a dynamic event wherein meaning is continuously constituted and disclosed to the interpreter. Gadamer further

acknowledges that the hermeneutic enterprise inherently confronts a specific structural difficulty. Unlike living, face-to-face dialogue, a text, once committed to writing, acquires an objective autonomy, existing independently of its author's original intention.

This detachment is especially pronounced in historical texts, whose authors have long since passed away and are thus powerless to clarify their meaning or defend against subsequent misinterpretations. When misunderstandings arise, the text itself appears to lapse into a profound silence: it cannot dynamically respond to interrogation as a living interlocutor would, nor can it actively rectify the misreadings of the one seeking to understand (*der Verstehende*). Precisely for this reason, historical understanding is never a mere epistemological apprehension of a static object; rather, it is a dynamic event that continually unfolds across temporal distance (*Zeitabstand*). However, this does not imply that the text has been rendered entirely defenseless. In Gadamer's view, while the text may lack the living presence of its author, it never relinquishes its fundamental claim to truth (*Wahrheitsanspruch*). The very reason the person understanding willingly enters into a dialogue with the text is predicated on a prior acknowledgment—an “anticipation of completeness” (*Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*)—that the text may possess insights and truths that transcend their own subjective horizon. Therefore, understanding does not begin with skepticism, but with a sense of openness. In this sense, while historical texts cannot mount a direct defense, the tradition they mediate continues to exert a normative claim upon the one seeking to understand, demanding a responsive engagement.

It is precisely at this juncture that Gadamer undertakes his radical rehabilitation of the concept of “authority” (*Autorität*). Since the Enlightenment, authority has systematically been construed as the diametrical opposite of reason, predicated on the assumption that acknowledging authority necessitates the abdication of autonomous judgment. Gadamer, however, contends that genuine authority rests not on dogmatic coercion or blind subjection, but on an act of conscious recognition (*Anerkennung*). One concedes to authority not because one is forced into submission, but through the rational realization that the Other—or the tradition itself—possesses a superiority of insight and judgment that transcends one's own finite horizon (Gadamer, 1992).

Authority, therefore, does not foreclose understanding; on the contrary, it constitutes a fundamental ontological condition for the very event of understanding. Genuine understanding becomes possible only when the one seeking to understand relinquishes the illusion of being the sovereign arbiter of meaning, acknowledging their own hermeneutic finitude and remaining radically open to the normative claim of tradition and the voice of the Other. This signifies that, concerning the phenomenon of testimony, belief is not a derivative act posterior to understanding, but rather functions as the ontological prerequisite for understanding to even unfold. Whether engaging with historical texts, traditional narratives, or the testimony of the Other, the one seeking to understand must first accord them the hermeneutic right to speak. Because all genuine understanding intrinsically entails letting the Other be heard, encountering testimony emerges as a far more primordial hermeneutic experience. Ultimately, to authentically understand the Other, one must first ground that understanding in an originary trust of their testimony.

(3) Beyond Epistemic Justification: From Ontological Openness to Ricoeur's Ethical Attestation

It becomes evident that the hermeneutic trajectories of both Heidegger and Gadamer converge upon a primordial trust that fundamentally precedes understanding, serving as its indispensable ontological precondition. This revelation, however, precipitates a critical subsequent inquiry: what precisely constitutes the intentional object of this trust? From the standpoint of traditional epistemology, trust is typically construed as a propositional attitude—an epistemic assent to the factual truth of a given statement. In this conventional paradigm, the epistemic subject accepts testimony solely because they possess sufficient justification to believe that the speaker is neither deceiving nor deceived, and draws upon a reliable source of information. For Heidegger and Gadamer, however, the intentional object of hermeneutic trust is radically different. Prior to the actual event of understanding, the one seeking to understand is structurally unequipped to evaluate the truth-value of any proposition; indeed, in many instances, one has yet to even cognitively grasp the semantic content of the Other's utterance. Nevertheless, one remains fundamentally disposed to listen, granting the Other's

discourse entry into the unfolding hermeneutic process.

Consequently, this primordial trust is not anchored in the propositional content of the utterance, but constitutes instead a radical openness toward the Other as such. In this hermeneutic register, to trust does not signify a cognitive assent that “what the Other asserts is factually correct”; rather, it is the fundamental acknowledgment (*Anerkennung*) that “what the Other speaks is inherently worthy of being heard.” For Heidegger, this fundamental openness is structurally constitutive of *Dasein*’s “always-already” Being-with others in the world. For Gadamer, it is actualized through the active acknowledgment of tradition and the voice of the Other by the one seeking to understand. Despite their distinct theoretical emphases, both thinkers demonstrate that the intersubjective encounter between Self and Other does not commence with a Cartesian posture of methodological doubt, nor with a hermeneutics of suspicion, but rather with a far more primordial trust. Crucially, this trust is not a transient psychological affect or an empirical attitude, but an irreducible ontological condition (Bernstein, 2011). Just as an infant does not delay language acquisition until it has epistemically validated the mother’s trustworthiness, human beings do not enter the shared intersubjective world contingent upon the prior empirical verification of the Other’s reliability. On the contrary, human beings always already dwell within language, tradition, and the discursive horizon of the Other. Openness to the Other is not a subsequent, deliberative act of volition, but rather the very ontological condition of possibility for any understanding whatsoever. It is precisely in this profound sense that primordial trust structurally precedes epistemic proof, responsiveness precedes theoretical judgment, and existential understanding strictly precedes objectifying knowledge. This constitutes a foundational hermeneutic truth: the ultimate telos of interpretation is not to merely decode external facts, but to allow *Dasein* to understandingly unfold and transparently appropriate its ownmost potentiality-for-Being (Grondin & Weinsheimer, 1994).

Thus, Heidegger and Gadamer successfully lay bare the ontological conditions of possibility for understanding. They demonstrate that human beings are always already constituted by their Being-with others, and that any act of understanding

presupposes a primordial openness to the address of the Other. Yet, a crucial phenomenological question remains inadequately resolved: if understanding is structurally founded upon trust, toward what, precisely, is this trust directed? In other words, when a concrete, singular Other addresses me directly, issuing the demand to believe their word, how ought I to ethically and hermeneutically respond to this specific appeal?

It is at this critical juncture that Paul Ricoeur significantly advances the hermeneutic trajectory. He observes that within the lived reality of human interaction, trust does not point abstractly toward an anonymous tradition or an overarching linguistic structure, but is always actualized through the concrete act of testimony. When an individual bears witness, they do not merely transmit objective information; rather, by pledging their very selfhood as a guarantee, they issue a profound ethical appeal to the Other: “Believe me” (*Croyez-moi*). Consequently, testimony is never a mere epistemological statement of fact, but a performative act encompassing commitment, ethical responsibility, and the resolute assumption of oneself. Ricoeur designates this fundamental structure as “attestation” (*l’attestation*), deploying this concept to demonstrate that genuine trust is neither the deductive outcome of logical proof nor a submission to blind obedience. Instead, it is a fundamentally ethical relationship grounded in the speaking subject’s own self-commitment.

Primordial Affirmation and Self-Transcendence: Nabert’s Philosophy of Reflection

Prior to engaging directly with Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of testimony (*herméneutique du témoignage*), it is imperative to delineate the broader theoretical horizon within which his thought crystallized. Ricoeur’s radical reorientation of the problem of testimony—transposing it from a strictly epistemological domain into an explicitly ethical and ontological register—did not originate from an isolated analysis of testimony per se. Rather, it emerged organically from his critical appropriation and transformation of the French tradition of reflexive philosophy (*philosophie réflexive*), driven most specifically by his profound intellectual engagement with the work of his

mentor, Jean Nabert.

(1) Beyond Cartesian Transparency: The Hermeneutics of Action and “Original Affirmation”

As Ricoeur would later explicitly acknowledge, Nabert served not merely as a vital wellspring for his early philosophical formation, but profoundly shaped his enduring meditations on the nature of the subject, the hermeneutics of self-understanding, and the central problematic of attestation (Ricoeur, 2004). In stark departure from the Cartesian tradition, which posits the subject as a consciousness entirely transparent to itself, Nabert’s reconstruction of reflexive philosophy commences precisely with a radical interrogation of this assumed transparency. Within the Cartesian paradigm, the self ostensibly secures unmediated, apodictic certainty of its own existence through the *cogito*, operating on the premise that the subject is capable of instantaneously and exhaustively apprehending itself in an act of pure reflection. Nabert, however, contends that authentic lived experience fundamentally belies this metaphysical postulate of subjective transparency. Within the sphere of concrete existence, the subject does not encounter a self in perfect, unmediated coincidence with itself, but rather a being ceaselessly traversed by finitude, failure, and existential rupture. Particularly when confronted with the profound negativities of guilt, radical evil, suffering, and injustice, the subject discovers an irreducible opacity at the very core of its own agency. It finds itself unable to fully rationalize the origins of its actions, nor can it exhaustively ground the ontological meaning of its own existence. It is precisely at this nexus of existential rupture that Nabert fundamentally redefines the philosophical task of reflection. In his formulation, reflection is no longer conceived as an unmediated, introspective gaze into one’s isolated consciousness; rather, it constitutes a necessary detour—a circuitous, mediated movement that returns to the self only by traversing the objective realm of its actions and their tangible consequences. The subject does not preexist its worldly engagement as a fully constituted, transparent self-presence merely awaiting empirical corroboration. On the contrary, self-apprehension is only ever attained indirectly, achieved through the arduous hermeneutic mediation of the subject’s concrete actions, its externalized works (*œuvres*), and the objective traces it inscribes upon the world.

Consequently, the self is never the apodictic point of departure (archē) for reflection, but rather its regulative telos—an asymptotic horizon toward which the reflective movement must ceaselessly strive (Nabert &), 1971).

Nabert emphasizes the philosophical significance of so-called “negative experiences” (expériences négatives). In *Essai sur le mal* (On Evil), he conceives of evil as a specific opportunity for the subject to reflect upon itself. For Nabert, the problem of evil is significant not merely because human beings commit evil acts, but because it exposes a fundamental fissure between the subject and itself. On the one hand, the subject understands itself as the source of free action; on the other, it finds itself constantly implicated in acts that ought not to have occurred. It is precisely through the experiences of guilt, remorse, and responsibility that the subject realizes it cannot fully coincide with its own actions, nor can it adequately explain, through any objective knowledge, why it acts as it does. Evil thus becomes the starting point from which reflection unfolds: it reveals that the subject is not a transparent and self-sufficient consciousness, but one perpetually in a state of self-questioning. The subject finds that it can never fully coincide with its actualized self, but is instead always oriented toward some as-yet-unrealized possibility. By choosing among these possibilities, the self constitutes itself as a moral subject; yet, these very possibilities demonstrate that it has already chosen itself through the actions for which it bears responsibility. It can only regard this as an irreversible decline of the pure self, committing itself to discerning, correcting, and mitigating the consequences—without succumbing to the illusion or fantasy of self-justification (Ricoeur, 1957).

Thus, the philosophical question is no longer how the subject acquires certain knowledge of itself, but how it reaffirms itself amidst the constant experience of finitude and rupture. For Nabert, the subject cannot attain a Cartesian absolute certainty through acts of self-knowledge; rather, it can only actualize itself by continually responding to an inner call to value. Where exactly does this hermeneutic movement of continual response and self-affirmation lead? If Heidegger grounded this movement in the structure of Dasein’s Being-with, and Gadamer conceived it as the ceaseless effective history between tradition and interpretation, Nabert attempts to probe further into the

ultimate foundation upon which it occurs. Underlying this constant reflection, remorse, and self-transcendence lies an “originary affirmation” that enables the subject to continually transcend its given state and become itself anew. In this sense, Nabert’s thought faintly retains a Fichtean legacy: at the depths of every reflective movement lies an “I am” (Je suis) that continually affirms itself (Doucy, 2000). Amid the irrefutable and inescapable reality of evil, within the encounter between the self and the world, the subject continually confronts its own finitude and becomes aware of the persistent gap between the self as it is in reality and the self it aspires to become. Within this experience of failure, a more primordial force emerges. The subject is able to acknowledge its flaws, bear its guilt, and continually question what it ought to become not because it already possesses certain knowledge of itself, but because it is constantly summoned by a demand that transcends its existing state of being (Canullo, 2019).

Thus, primordial affirmation constitutes a structure of trust that is more fundamental than cognition. The subject is able to respond to the call of the Other, tradition, or conscience, not primarily because it has verified the authenticity of these calls, but because it has, at a deeper level, affirmed the significance of the response itself. In other words, prior to the formation of any concrete judgment or knowledge, the subject already believes in its capacity to understand, to respond, and to become itself through that response. This trust in the possibility of existence constitutes the essential intellectual backdrop against which Ricoeur’s later concept of “testimony” emerged.

(2) The Hermeneutics of Testimony: Reconstructing the Subject through the Absolute Other

The starting point of this original affirmation is self-reflection—an absolute reflection and an absolute beginning within a specific movement of consciousness. Ricoeur interprets this as follows: through the original affirmation of absolute experience, the individual—as a finite perspective, a situated viewpoint, and a being embedded within a particular context—establishes connections between its own possible perspectives and those of others. Only in this way can the individual recognize its finitude; indeed, only by transcending this finitude can the individual come to truly

understand it(Ricœur & Ricoeur, 1965). Reflection is not a self-enclosed return to oneself, but rather a movement of continual self-transcendence. The more the subject attempts to understand itself, the more it discovers that it cannot fully coincide with itself; this very inability to coincide signifies that a deeper affirmation is at work. Original affirmation does not eliminate finitude, but rather sustains within finitude the possibility of transcending it; it enables the subject to consistently set out from its actual self while remaining open to its as-yet-unrealized self. This affirmation is not an arbitrary assertion by the subject about itself, but rather an absolute affirmation that precedes all concrete experience and judgment. It is precisely within this affirmation that the subject discovers and continually transcends itself. The subject always enters the world from a finite perspective, a concrete historical situation, and a particular mode of existence; yet, it is precisely through its participation in the Absolute that it is able to recognize the limitations of its own horizon and connect its viewpoint with other possible viewpoints. Finitude is not given at the outset, but is discovered in the process by which the subject transcends its limited horizon. Only when the subject participates in the Absolute in some way can it recognize its own finitude.

Here, Ricoeur employs the phenomenologically charged term *dépouillement*, a form of stripping away that is closer to a phenomenological subtraction; it does not eliminate the question of the Absolute, but rather alters the mode of its appearance(Ricœur & Mudge, 1980). It points both to an ethical form of *dépouillement*—that is, the subject's renunciation of any attempt to objectify the Absolute or appropriate it—and to a speculative form of *dépouillement*—that is, a condition in which thought, having lost the support of a metaphysical transcendental object, is compelled to acknowledge its own finitude and fragility. In this dual detachment, the Absolute no longer appears in the form of a graspable object, but can only manifest—in a contingent and non-necessary manner—as a symbolic encounter. Thus, all the subject can do is “affirm”—that is, empty the self in order to encounter the Other(Wright, 2024).

But how can a finite individual achieve absolute affirmation? Through an encounter with what kind of Other? For Ricoeur, this question ultimately leads to the

dimension of testimony (témoignage). The subject is able to transcend itself not because it possesses an absolute foundation within itself, but because the Absolute has first borne witness to it. In other words, original affirmation is not the subject's active appropriation of the Absolute, but a response to a testimony given in advance. It is precisely in this sense that Ricoeur reinterprets the classic passage on testimony in the Book of *Isaiah*, where God declares, "You are my witnesses":

Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them can declare this, and show us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, It is true. "You are my witnesses," says the Lord, "and my servants whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses," says the Lord. "I am God, and also henceforth I am He there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it?" (Isaiah 43:8-13 RSV)

What Ricoeur reveals here is not merely a religious proposition, but an ontological structure: testimony does not originate from the subject itself, but from a call that precedes it. The witness bears witness not by possessing absolute truth, but by first being called by the truth—becoming a witness in the very act of responding to that call. Therefore, within the Christian tradition, the foundation of testimony is not the certainty of the subject, but the reality of God. It is precisely because God is understood as the absolute Being that human witness finds its ultimate foundation. The witness does not create truth, but responds to it; does not possess the Absolute, but bears witness to it. The subject's self-affirmation is grounded not in the transparency of self-consciousness, but in its response to this prior testimony.

Furthermore, for Ricoeur, the importance of testimony lies precisely in providing a concrete manifestation of what Nabert calls the "original affirmation." This original affirmation is not an object the subject can directly grasp through reflection; rather, it points to an absolute dimension that transcends the subject itself. Within the Christian tradition, this absolute dimension ultimately takes the form of God. God, however, does not present Himself to the subject as a directly knowable object, but rather enters the

human realm of experience through testimony. Precisely for this reason, bearing witness to God—and the testimony that arises from this act—becomes the concrete manifestation of the original affirmation in history. Here, Ricoeur effectively reinterprets the question of the subject in a manner entirely distinct from Descartes' "I think." The subject no longer attains certainty through the transparency of self-consciousness, but rather discovers itself in responding to a call that precedes it.

I do not become myself primarily through "I think, therefore I am"; rather, I bear witness to myself in the encounter with an absolute Other. The self is not the starting point of philosophical reflection, but rather the outcome revealed in the act of bearing witness. Since God is the absolute Witness, human testimony is no longer merely a statement of fact, but a response to the Absolute. The witness is able to bear witness not by possessing the truth, but by first being moved by it. Therefore, the significance of testimony does not lie in conveying a completed body of knowledge, but in drawing the witness into the very content of what is witnessed; the witness not only speaks of something, but simultaneously bears witness to it through their very self.

In this sense, the core of Ricoeur's hermeneutics is not the subject's immediate apprehension of itself, but rather the attainment of the self through the other (Amalric, 2011). Self-understanding is never achieved in isolation; it always unfolds through the process of responding to, listening to, and bearing witness to the other. The subject does not discover itself through mere introspection, but gradually becomes itself through encounters with the absolute Other and the concrete other. It is precisely along this path that Ricoeur ultimately transforms reflective philosophy into a hermeneutics of testimony: the path to the self must necessarily pass through the other. Ricoeur articulates the triadic relationship between the self, the other, and discourse as follows: "The shortest path from oneself to oneself is through the discourse of the other." (Ricoeur, 1986) For Ricoeur, the self cannot be attained directly through isolated introspection, but must instead return to itself through the discourse of the other. The subject's self-understanding is inherently mediated, unfolding through the process of listening to, responding to, and interpreting the other. Consequently, the discourse of the other does not merely convey information; rather, it constitutes the very condition for the

formation of the self.

From Reflection to Witness: Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Testimony

Consequently, if the self must attain itself through the discourse of the other, why should the subject believe the "other's" discourse? After all, discourse is always susceptible to error, misunderstanding, or even deception. If the subject cannot extend even the most basic trust to the other, the path to the self through the other risks being severed at any moment. As epistemology has repeatedly asked: on what grounds is testimony valid? And why is the speech of the other worthy of belief? Hermeneutics does not evade this question; it simply approaches it differently.

(1) Testimony in the Absence of the Absolute: From Epistemological Proof to Ethical Commitment

For epistemology, the task is to find sufficient reasons to validate testimony; for Ricoeur, however, the primary issue is understanding how belief is even possible. In his early thought, this question was inextricably linked to the testimony of the Absolute. The subject is able to transcend its finitude because it participates in an original affirmation that precedes it, responding to the Absolute's call through testimony. However, if the biblical testimony to God is understood merely as a religious experience of revelation, it struggles to account for the relationships of testimony between human beings in the concrete world. The question is not merely "how God reveals Himself to humanity," but "how one person bears witness to another." Here, the ethical dimension underlying biblical testimony gradually comes to the fore. Ricoeur recognizes that any testimony must ultimately be conveyed through a specific speaker, and that every utterance contains an implicit request. When the witness speaks, they are in fact making a request to the listener: "Believe me (*Croyez-moi*)." This statement is not a proof of fact, but rather an ethical appeal. It cannot be guaranteed through logical deduction, nor can it be fully validated through empirical verification; rather, it relies on the listener's response to the speaker. Therefore, testimony here is no longer primarily a question of how propositions are justified, but rather of how trust is established between individuals.

“Believe me” does not express the certainty of knowledge; rather, it manifests the witness’s willingness to take responsibility for their own words and to place themselves at the risk of being trusted or rejected. Testimony thus shifts from an epistemological problem to an ethical one: truth does not emerge primarily through proof, but gradually manifests itself within the relationships of trust, response, and responsibility.

At this point, the final question facing the hermeneutical philosophy of testimony emerges: in an age where the Absolute Other is absent, what can still sustain this trust? If Plato relied on the gods’ testimony to truth, Augustine appealed to the authority of God, and even the early Ricoeur still sought the foundation of the original affirmation in the testimony of the Absolute, then in the context of modernity, such transcendent guarantees no longer seem capable of functioning directly. Thus, the question returns to the realm of human relations: Why am I still willing to believe the testimony of “the other”? Ricoeur did not turn to epistemology to seek new mechanisms of proof. For the very phrase “Believe me” already indicates that testimony is not a form of knowledge that can be thoroughly proven. The witness can never provide the listener with absolute assurance; all they can offer is themselves. It is precisely in this sense that testimony possesses an irreducible ethical structure. When a witness says, “Believe me,” they are not stating a fact but making a commitment: “I am willing to take responsibility for what I say.” The reliability of testimony does not ultimately stem from any external standard, but from the consistency between the witness and their words. True testimony is not provided by a person who merely possesses the truth and states it, but by a person who is willing to bear witness to their claims with their own life, actions, and very existence. Testimony is believed not because it has been proven, but because the witness places themselves in a position to be tested.

Heidegger once sought this possibility in the call of conscience (*der Ruf des Gewissens*); conscience is not a command from some external authority, but a summons arising from *Dasein* itself. It causes *Dasein*, which has sunk into the world of “they” (*das Man*), to return to itself and assume responsibility for its own existence. For Ricoeur, although this call reveals that the subject is not a self-enclosed entity, it ultimately remains confined to the relationship between *Dasein* and itself (Lewis, 1991).

Ricoeur sought to remove the existentialist limitations Heidegger imposed on conscience, thereby initiating a hermeneutic study of the origins of the phenomenon of testimony (Kasowski, 2012). The real question is not how the subject hears its own call, but why the subject is willing to respond to the speech of the Other. Human beings are capable of trust not because they already possess absolutely certain grounds, but because they possess the capacity to respond, to promise, to remember, to narrate, and to assume responsibility. This approach effectively sidesteps the infinite spiral of interpretation faced by hermeneutics: if understanding always unfolds through further understanding, then any interpretation requires subsequent explanation, and any meaning may be supplanted by a new one. Consequently, interpretation seems forever unable to reach its endpoint, as it is continually deferred into new interpretations. In Ricoeur's view, testimony precisely constitutes a temporary pause in this cycle; the core of interpretation lies in this very inexplicability (Alloa, 2015). Testimony is not an infinite proliferation of meaning, but rather a speech act that assumes responsibility—an ethical commitment. It demands a response from the listener and requires the speaker to accept accountability. Testimony thus constitutes an ethical moment within the interpretive cycle: amidst the infinite generation of meaning, there is always someone who steps forward to declare, "This is what I have witnessed," and who is willing to bear the consequences of that statement.

(2) The Ethical Responsibility of the Witness: History, Memory, and the Absent Other

Consequently, this hermeneutics of testimony reveals a strong ethical orientation: "Believe me" simultaneously implies "I have something to say." This signifies a person's desire to speak on behalf of another—a heartfelt wish to act for the sake of others—which can only arise from profound experiences that touch the depths of the soul. In the Bible, the source of this necessity is the love of God for humanity, of humanity for God, and of people for one another—an unconditional and absolute voice. In this world, it manifests as speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves.

In the final chapter of *The Republic*, Plato recounts the story of how the gods permitted the soldier Er to return from the realm of the dead and bring back to the living

a harrowing account of the afterlife(van der Heiden, 2020). What is noteworthy here is that people in the mortal world cannot see or know what happens after death; death represents an absolute dividing line. Yet, through the testimony Er brought back, he recounted what he had witnessed, thereby offering others an experience they could never have obtained on their own. In this sense, Ricoeur links testimony to historical events. History requires testimony not because the past lacks facts, but because the past itself has fallen silent; history is the story of the dead(Ricoeur, 2014).

Historical events do not speak for themselves; the dead do not speak again, nor can the victims return to the scene. Therefore, history can only enter public memory through the testimony of witnesses. The responsibility borne by witnesses is precisely to restore a symbolic presence to those who are absent, to make the silenced heard once more, and to give a voice to those who cannot speak. This is the recurring theme in Ricoeur's hermeneutics of testimony: the Other, testimony, and responsibility. Since the twentieth century—and especially after Auschwitz—the issue of testimony has taken on unprecedented importance. People are now faced with a profound question: when certain historical events exceed the scope of what ordinary experience and language can bear, how should they be articulated? The Holocaust has placed the philosophy of testimony within a new historical context. For survivors, bearing witness is no longer merely a matter of stating facts, but a moral obligation(Kearney, 2017). Those who have died can no longer speak for themselves, and survivors are compelled to shoulder the responsibility of speaking on their behalf. The issue concerns not only what happened in the past but also whether those who have vanished can continue to exist in public memory. Holocaust testimony always contains a paradox: those who experienced the catastrophe most fully are often already dead, while those able to bear witness are precisely those who did not sink completely into destruction(Agamben, 1998). Testimony always carries a substitute structure; survivors do not merely bear witness for themselves but speak on behalf of those who have fallen silent—their testimony speaks for the absent. Thus, the significance of history lies in the fact that the dead are speaking: the words uttered by those who are no longer present may be understandable to their contemporaries, but to those no longer in that context, they can appear

unbelievable—yet they are, in fact, true. History is not a simple accumulation of past facts, but a process of continually re-entering the present through testimony. The past has not completely vanished precisely because there are always those willing to shoulder the responsibility of bearing witness, ensuring that voices that would otherwise remain silent continue to be heard.

(3) Testimony as a Mode of Coexistence: Responsibility, Remembrance, and the Ethics of the Other

At this point, the significance of the philosophy of testimony as a branch of hermeneutics gradually becomes clear. From Plato's distinction between truth and rhetoric to Augustine's reflections on faith and authority; from Hume's examination of the witness's character and social context to Heidegger's revelation of the structure of Being-with and the call of conscience; and further to Gadamer's reinterpretation of tradition and authority, as well as Ricoeur's ethical interpretation of witness, responsibility, and the Other—testimony has always been more than merely an epistemological issue.

Although different thinkers have adopted distinct interpretive approaches to testimony, they collectively reveal a fundamental truth: testimony is never an isolated subject's judgment of a proposition, but always occurs within the context of human relationships. Therefore, the development of the philosophy of testimony is not merely a continuous effort to answer the question, "Why do we have reason to believe others?" but rather a persistent inquiry into, "Why are the voices of others worth listening to?" If epistemology is concerned with how testimony becomes knowledge, then hermeneutics is concerned with how testimony becomes understanding; and when testimony further enters the realm of ethics, its core question transforms into: why are people willing to speak on behalf of others, and why are they willing to respond to the calls of others?

In this sense, testimony is not merely a supplementary form of knowledge but a fundamental mode of human coexistence. Every act of bearing witness implies that a subject places themselves within the discourse and takes responsibility for their own words; every act of listening also implies a response to the other's appeal. Testimony

sustains not only the transmission of truth but also the trust, responsibility, and commitment between people. Perhaps what the philosophy of testimony ultimately points toward is not an ultimate foundation of knowledge, but rather an ethics of the other. In the plea “Believe me,” what is truly upheld is not the truth of a particular proposition, but the connection between people that must not be severed; what is truly preserved is not merely historical facts, but the people who once existed, suffered, cried out, and left their mark. Precisely for this reason, testimony concerns not only how truth is articulated, but also how the other is not forgotten.

Conclusion

The rise of the philosophy of testimony originally stemmed from a reexamination of the sources of knowledge. Within an epistemological tradition long dominated by perception, memory, and reasoning, testimony has been reinterpreted as a vital source of human knowledge. Heidegger’s analysis of the structure of Being-with and the call of conscience, Gadamer’s reinterpretation of historicity, tradition, and authority, and Ricoeur’s hermeneutic elaboration on witness, commitment, and responsibility collectively reveal a broader hermeneutic horizon. Before people begin to judge whether a proposition is true, the relationship between individuals already exists; before any proof unfolds, people are already situated within a shared world of understanding, trust, and response.

Testimony is possible not merely because it provides knowledge, but more importantly because it is grounded in an intersubjective relationship that precedes knowledge. Consequently, the focus of the philosophy of testimony has gradually shifted from “why believe” to “why listen.” When a witness says, “Believe me,” they are not only stating a fact but also assuming a responsibility; and when the listener responds, they are not merely judging a proposition but responding to another person. Testimony is thus no longer merely a medium for the transmission of knowledge, but becomes a vital means by which people establish connections with others, assume responsibility, and sustain a shared world. This is particularly evident in the context of modern historical trauma: in the face of war, genocide, and various historical

catastrophes that cannot be personally experienced, testimony bears the mission of preserving memory and bearing witness to suffering.

Historical events do not speak for themselves; the dead cannot return, and the victims cannot speak again. Precisely for this reason, witnesses always bear a vicarious responsibility: to speak for the absent and to preserve the voices of the silenced. The significance of testimony, therefore, lies not merely in conveying facts but in maintaining an ethical tension between forgetting and remembering, enabling the past to continue making its appeal to the present. In this sense, the ultimate concern of the philosophy of testimony may extend beyond how knowledge is acquired to how people coexist with one another—and how those who once existed, suffered, and cried out may not be forgotten. Testimony preserves not only events that actually occurred but also the possibility of mutual response and shared responsibility among people. It is precisely through this continuous process of bearing witness and responding that a shared world is sustained, and the Other continues to speak to us.

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