Heidegger's notion of truth as Alethia: a critical exposition

Itohowo Ignatius*, Inioobong Umotong, Otto Dennis
Department of philosophy, Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper is a critical exposition of Heidegger's concept of truth. The concept of truth has been an age-long discourse amongst scholars. This is because the notion cannot be extrapolated from man's being as a knowledge-seeking being. However, after many years of articulation and scholarship, questions like 'what constitutes truth?' or 'what is the nature of truth?' are yet to receive satisfactory answers. Every definition of truth tends to give rise to other perplexing philosophical problems. The three outstanding theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic theories) seem inefficient in answering the questions above. Heidegger then admonishes that we go back to the ancient Greek understanding of the notion, which meant 'unconcealment.' Upon this return, this research employs critical and analytic methods to expose the notion of truth as Aletheia, from Heidegger's perspective and its objections. Heidegger's truth is tied to the being of Dasein. He believes that truth only exists because Dasein exists to show it. This research asserts that when truth is regarded as Aletheia (disclosure), there are at least three repercussions of this character of truth. Truth is not limited to propositions; rather, it is discovered via many forms of Being-in-the-World. Second, truth is not only a matter of language and thought, but also the revelation of worldly creatures. Lastly, the truth, as Aletheia is constantly simultaneously exposing and hiding current events; that is, the truth is always in the process of becoming, as it is always in the process of being.

© 2022 The Author(s). This is an open access article under Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license.

1. Introduction

Philosophy is etymologically defined as the “love of wisdom.” It has also been viewed as the tool to come to know reality as it is (Umotong, 2007). It is the search for the ultimate truth about reality (Essien, 2011). Western philosophy has always been preoccupied with the notion of truth from antiquity, yet "it is paradoxical that, whereas philosophy is regarded as the search for truth, few philosophers have inquired deeply into the question of what truth is" (Macomber, 1967). Truth is the most fundamental ingredient of knowledge since we cannot admit that false knowledge is true knowledge per se.

Plato in the Theaetus, suggested that for knowledge to be knowledge, it must possess, and perhaps, pass through three criterions, namely: justification, belief and truth. It was Plato who emphasized the inclusion of truth in the criterion (Etuk, 2018). In other words, whatever that counts as knowledge must then be truth. Plato argued that knowledge is different from mere true belief by the knower having an account of the object of true belief. However, he maintained that true belief can be raised to the level of knowledge if justified. Thus, Plato defines knowledge as justified true belief (Dancy, 1991; Umotong, 2007; Essien, 2011; Etuk, 2018). This traditional understanding of knowledge is flawed (as demonstrated by Edmund Gettier) for still being inadequate to provide an incontrovertible true knowledge claim.
However, the notion of truth itself is still farfetched. This is because the concept of truth is controversial. Controversial in the sense that there is no one unanimously acceptable answer to the question "what is truth"? Rather, every definition tends to give rise to a number of other perplexing philosophical problems. Alfred Tarski acknowledged this challenge when he asserted that "much more serious difficulties are connected with the problem of the meaning (or the intention) of the concept of truth" (Tarski, 1994).

In his 1961 lecture titled, On the Essence of Truth, Martin Heidegger associates this difficulty with the abandonment of the pre-Socratic notion of truth. He stresses that the original meaning of truth in ancient Greece was "unconcealment, the revealing or bringing of what was previously hidden into open as indicated by the word Aletheia (Heidegger, 1961). It is this notion of truth as unconcealment, which is based on his fundamental ontology, that this paper seeks to investigate.

2. The Concept of Truth

According to the New World Encyclopedia, the term 'truth' has its origin in the old English "(gi) triewe, cognate to old Saxon "(gi) triuul", and old High German "(ga) triaruw" which means "faithful" (qtd. Etuk, 2018). However, the ancient Greek origin of the word 'truth' is Aletheia, which means exposing something that was hidden or not to hide something. It is worthy of mention here that there is no generally accepted definition of truth, even though there are several definitions. However, our purpose in this paper is not to carry out a historical excursus on the various conception of truth as held by scholars over the years but to streamline it to Heidegger's concept of truth as unconcealment (Aletheia).

3. Theories of Truth

The search for truth is the ground on which philosophy strives. Philosophy seeks to unravel what prepositional claim can be counted as true. To this end, a number of philosophical theories of truth have been developed upon common pre-philosophical intuitions. However, there are three main truth theories: correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic. Each of these theories characterizes truth as a substantive property but faces serious objections which render it apparently untenable. Dissatisfaction with these theories has led to theories developed upon more sophisticated philosophical considerations (Newhard cited in Etuk, 2018). Some of the newly developed theories of truth include Epistemic theory, simple theory, semantic theory, redundancy theory, Frege's theory, the Disquotational theory, Tarksi's theory, the minimalist theory, the prosentential theory, the revision theory, vagueness theory, etc. It is worthy of note here that theories of truth are many and that here, we may not have mentioned all the theories that there are. This is because we are mainly interested in discussing the three main theories of truth as they relate to Heidegger's Aletheia notion.

4. Correspondence Theory of Truth

Correspondence as a theory of truth was historical, the most popular of the theories. The theory was first articulated in a vague form by Plato and later by Aristotle in his Metaphysics. This realist theory says that "truth is what propositions have by corresponding to a way the world is. The theory says that "a proposition is true provided there exists a fact corresponding to it" (Dowden, 2016). In other words, a true proposition is only true if it corresponds to a fact. For any proposition p, for example, p is true if and only if p corresponds to a fact. That is to say that the only condition in which p can be true is if there is a fact that p corresponds to (Etuk, 2018; Audi, 2011).

5. The Coherence theory of truth

The coherence theory of truth maintains that "a judgment is true if it is consistent with other judgments that are accepted as true" (Titus, Marilyn & Richard, 1979). According to Ozumba, to cohere means to agree and fit into a logical system or system of beliefs (Cited in Etuk, 2018). For something or proposition to be coherent, it requires that all its parts fit together well (Hornby, 2010). In further explication, Allen White succinctly captures the thesis of the Coherents when he avows that "to say that a statement (usually called a judgment) is true or false is to say that it coheres or fails to cohere with a system of other statements" (White, 1972).

6. Pragmatic theory of truth

Pragmatism as a philosophical theory has an American origin. It was founded by Charles Sanders Pierce and was developed and further popularised by William James and John Dewey methodologically implemented it into the affairs of American institutions (Obioha, 2020). This theory holds that a proposition is true if it is practically functional. That is to say; a statement is true if and only if its use leads to beneficial result (Umotong, 2007). Therefore, pragmatists believe the "test of truth is utility, workability, or satisfactory consequence" (Titus, Marilyn & Richard, 1979). For instance, if an object is called "pen", such object must be able to perform the function of a pen, namely, writing. Otherwise, such an assertion like "this is a pen" would be false. We have succinctly introduced the basic notion of each of the theories of truth. We did this for the readers to acquaint themselves with the theories and what they all stand for as this will be quintessential in understanding Heidegger's notion of truth as Aletheia (unconcealment).

7. Heidegger's Critique of the notion of Truth in Modern Epistemology

Heidegger, in his Being and Time adopts the method of phenomenology in analyzing the notion of truth. He claims that in modern epistemology, truth is conceptualized as the relationship between a knowing subject and a known object (Heidegger, 2008). That is, conceiving of truth as attaching to propositions and involving some correspondence between propositions and states of affairs. However, whereas for the tradition (as Heidegger characterizes it), propositional truth as correspondence exhausts the phenomenon of truth, for Heidegger, it is merely the particular manifestation of the truth that is operative in those domains, such as science, which concern themselves with the Real (Wheeler, 2020). Modern investigation into the existence of truth becomes
preoccupied with the nature of the relationship between two separate creatures, regarded as two distinct substances: intellectus et res; that is, mental concepts and exterior things (Reddan, 2009; Beck, 2005).

Modern epistemological inquiry does not seek for the grounds of the agreement relation; instead, it presupposes the relation and then uses this as a basis for an investigation into how and if we might bridge the gap, i.e., know and attain truth (Heidegger, 2008).

Heidegger, however, is concerned with the question of how an object and a statement may be claimed to coincide. According to Heidegger, “my statement can agree with the thing when my assertion makes visible that thing as the very thing before me” (Heidegger, 1998). That is, there must be a sort of unconcealing which is based on a relational agreement in a phenomenological way (Beck, 2015).

8. Truth as Unconcealment and Correctness

Heidegger, in his Being and Time posits that Dasein as disclosedness “is the most primordial phenomenon of truth” (Heidegger, 2008). Therefore, the return to this openness leads to the original essence of truth only if it can be shown beforehand that accuracy already in some manner includes the essence of truth, even if not initially (Heidegger, 1994). It is Dasein who gives meaning to all other entities in the world. Thus, Heidegger maintains that a proposition is true by conforming to the unconcealed, to what is true” (Heidegger, 1971). This implies that what is revealed is what is true, and what is true conforms to what has been revealed (disclosed). With this, Heidegger has established a link between unconcealment and truth as correctness to the way the world is.

According to Heidegger, every significant thinker in the West since Plato has interpreted reality, Being, truth in a subjectivistic manner in which reason and logic dominates. As a result, thinking became mere representation and calculation. Calculative thinking is used to solve problems and is inferior to meditative thinking (Alawa, 2013). Heidegger traces the notion of truth and unconcealment to the meaning of "essence" as understood and used in Plato and Aristotle’s era, where ‘essence’ was defined in terms of and in relation to four elements.

According to Heidegger, although Plato regarded the ideas as existing "untouched by all change and perishing…in a place above heaven", he and Aristotle, together with the other Greek thinkers, interpreted and understood the notion of essence not as something "manufactured" or as a present-at-hand thing, but that which is brought for in a "productive seeing…out of invisibility into the visible, out of what is unthought into what is henceforth to be thought" (Heidegger, 1994). However, this understanding, according to Heidegger "was later somehow distorted when "idea" was understood as a representation.

The essence was regarded as the perspective provided by the item, its "whatness" or prevailing appearance (1994). Heidegger asserts that Aristotle offered no support for his belief that the essence of truth rests in the correctness of a statement and that this correctness is "the concept of truth" (1994). According to Heidegger, truth in Aristotle is a correspondence of knowledge with an object, where "knowledge" encompasses representation, thinking, or statement (Cerbone, 2009). Here, Heidegger objects, asserting that such a definition of truth as correspondence "assumes a common ground between internal mental representations and the exterior objects they relate to" (Reddan, 1994). However, Heidegger argues that there is no possibility of connection or agreement between an idea and an object; as something relating to the "soul," representation is not of the same "type" as a stone, for example (Heidegger, 1994).

9. Heidegger’s Interpretation of Aletheia

Heidegger’s understanding of truth is linked to the early Greeks interpretation of Aletheia, which meant "coming forth and emerging" (Heidegger, 1994). Heidegger took this to be the most original and adequate understanding of truth. For him then, truth means the unconcealness of beings (Umotong, 2000; Essien, 2011). What Heidegger proposes here, as presented in his Basic Question of Philosophy, is that unconcealment or disclosure is the truth adequetio which is the metaphysical view of truth as correctness (1994).

In Heidegger’s view, man (Dasein) is the only being that discloses Being. This is because only Dasein understands the being or the essence of entities it encounters. Dasein is the only entity that is capable of and demonstrates mastery and rationality which enables him to take disclose or take other entities out of their concealment. This form of disclosure as understood by Heidegger is "ontological truth" whereas; propositional truth or correctness is defined as ontic (Reddan, 2009). According to Heidegger,

Heidegger furthers his argument that the disclosure or unconcealment of Dasein is both "in the truth" and also "in the untruth". This according to him is because of the interplay of certain things in the ontological being of Dasein. That is, although Dasein’s disclosedness is "in the truth", the ontological state of falleness and thrownness makes the disclosure to also be "in the untruth" (Heidegger, 2008). In other words, the being of Dasein is in constant conflict between revealing and concealing; correctness and falsity, and this struggle constitutes the ontological ground of Dasein’s being. Heidegger’s ontological truth does not concern the question of correctness but is the basis on which a proposition can be determined as being either true or false (Reddan, 2009).

Heidegger’s notion of discoveredness of beings relates to his concept of understanding. Heidegger speaks about understanding with respect to the discoveredness of beings, whereby "Dasein is the ontic condition of the possibility of the discovery of beings" (Heidegger, 2008). Dasein "is cleared in itself as being-in-the-world, not by another being, but in such a way that it is itself the clearing" (Heidegger, 2008) As Heidegger writes, "Dasein is its disclosedness" (Heidegger, 2008). Without being open to things in the world that show themselves, without the possibility of Dasein discovering them and speaking about them, there cannot be propositions concerning them.

Heidegger’s concept of truth is connected to the potential of discovery and discoveredness of things, which is rooted in
an original occurrence (Heidegger, 2008). On the basis of being-in-the-world, Dasein discovers things in the world. This is due to the fact that Dasein is the sole basic structure to find. Heidegger writes that “by disclosedness, this being (Dasein) is “there” for itself together with the world's there-being Dasein” (Heidegger, 2008). In other words, we are constantly thrust ahead of ourselves into the world. We find the objects and people around us based on the past revelation of the world; that is, we comprehend things based on our prior phenomenological involvement with them. Heidegger explains further that “the discoveredness of inner worldly entities is rooted in the revealedness of the world” (Heidegger, 2008). Only through being-in-the-world does Dasein reveal the world, and only via revelation is the discoverability of beings conceivable. Hence, truth. Therefore, in his fundamental ontology, Heidegger opines that

Dasein (man) is the locus where truth becomes evident, since only Dasein can raise the question about his being or about Being itself. That is, man is the only being who becomes aware not only of his own being but being itself. Man is the only being who is capable of self-interrogation. The very fact of asking the question of being is Dasein's mode of being. (Etuk, 2018).

10. Dasein as being "in truth" and "in untruth"

According to Heidegger, Dasein is ultimately "in truth." According to him, the definition of truth is "the disclosure of its ownmost" Existence is part of...existential Dasein's constitution (Heidegger, 2008). Accordingly, Heidegger believes that the basic meaning of truth is openness. This leads to the most fundamental phenomena of truth as the revealing of the world, of the "there," which is the original foundation upon which finding truth is first conceivable. In this passage, Heidegger asserts that Dasein is "in the truth." (Heidegger, 2008). Being "in truth" in this context does not imply that Dasein is always honest in the sense of being accurate. According to Heidegger, "Dasein is in truth" and "Dasein is in falsehood." The fact that we are "thrown" into the world and that we are already positioned in it and enmeshed in our relationships with objects is significant, such as ideal talk, ambiguity, falleness and others, points to our nature of being as "untruth" (Heidegger, 2008). Therefore, within the ambience of the existential being of Dasein lies truth and untruth.

However, Heidegger cautions that although man has an implicit understanding of truth, truth is usually concealed or forgotten when man exists in "inauthentic" mode. Only when man restores its authentic mode of existence, he becomes a being where truth is manifested (Etuk, 2018; Cerbone, 2009). That is, Dasein is "in truth" when he lives in his authentic mode; and "in untruth" when he lives in inauthentic mode. To live in authentic mode requires man to be aware and live his true self and not hide in the “anonymous they”, the Dasman. Man is a historical being, coming from the past and moving towards the future, which he shapes with the present (Cerbone, 2009; Essien, 2011; Etuk, 2018). Therefore, Heidegger understands the truth in this context of revealing or manifesting the historicity of Dasein and his authentic mode of being (Etuk, 2018).

11. Critical Assessment of Heidegger's Justification of his Theory of Truth

According to Heidegger, truth is ontologically grounded. He defends this position in his Being and Time, using the history and development of scientific enterprise to justify his position. Heidegger argues that even scientifically revealed truth is susceptible to this kind of relativistic limitation. Thus, he asserts that “any factual science is plainly subject to historizing” (Wheeler, 2020). The conclusion is that, according to Heidegger, one cannot simply submit the truth of one period to the standards, which implies, for instance, that both modern and alchemical chemistry may be genuine (Dreyfus, 1990). He asserts that scientific facts are given significance based on their fundamental nature (2008). In addition, this sort of interpretation or meaning making is a priori and establishes the character of the fact that will serve as the topic of the scientific investigation. That is to say, in Heidegger's perspective, science is not only a product of observation and experimentation; rather, but the historical evolution of science also indicates that its growth is due to different projections of being, as only ontological truth can be altered via practical experience (Reddan, 2009).

However, Wheeler (2020) contends that even if this more radical viewpoint is ultimately Heidegger's, there is still room for realism. Wheeler argues that, given the transcendental relationship between domains of intelligibility and science that Heidegger posits, the proposed perspective might nevertheless sustain a historically conditioned kind of Kantian empirical realism regarding science. Nonetheless, it seems that it must reject the scientific realism commitment to the notion that the history of research is governed by progress towards some ultimate and unchallengeable collection of scientifically confirmed facts about nature, by a journey towards God's science (Haugeland, 2007).

While it is true that science has profited from a priori judgment, it is equally important to note that many scientific assumptions are based on anomalous experimental results. Also, the prevalence of contradictory viewpoints among modern scientists indicates that their knowledge of the things they study is not a priori or predetermined, as Heidegger asserts, but rather the product of a theoretical evaluation of the relative merits of alternative techniques (Reddan, 2009).

Ontic facts, according to Heidegger, are a derivation of ontological truth. To buttress his viewpoint, he develops the meaningless notion of uncoveredness, according to Reddan (2009). Reddan contends that Heidegger gives us several definitions of the term in various instances. Reddan (2009), for instance, argues that in certain passages, Heidegger equates the word with both disclosedness and ontic truth, but in other passages, he equates it with either type of truth. This suggests that Heidegger's contention that ontological truth is the foundation of truth as correctness lacks support. Therefore, Heidegger's primary difficulty with his theory of truth is his failure to demonstrate persuasively how ontic or propositional truth derives from ontiical truth, interpreted in terms of Dasein as an unconcealable being (Cerbone, 2008).
12. Tugendhat's Response to Heidegger's Analysis of Truth

Enrst Tugendhat is the one person that gave the most radical attack on Heidegger's truth claim. Being a student of Heidegger, he had benefitted from the master's teaching. Moreover, like Aristotle to Plato, he analyzed Heidegger's theory of truth and pointed out anomalies contained therein. In his seminal paper "Heidegger's Idea of Truth" Tugendhat raises the objection that Ultimately, Heidegger's definition of original truth does not qualify as a type of truth (Tugendhat, 1992). Moreover, he argues that a separation between what is said or intended and how things are in themselves is a realistic need for the acceptance of any suggested account of the truth (Wheeler, 2020). However, Tugendhat argues that it is difficult to understand how original truth as unconcealing may justify a separation between what is said or intended and how things are in nature (Beck, 2005; Reddan, 2009). In any case, uncovering is partially the process by which things are made understandable to Dasein so that the distinction in issue may be applied (Wheeler, 2020). Tugendhat believes that despite the possibility that unconcealing is a true phenomenon constituting a transcendental prerequisite for there to be truth, it is not a species of truth. (For more on Tugendhat's Critique, see Dahlstrom 2001 and Overgaard 2002.)

Karl-Otto Apel understands Heidegger's definition of truth as Aletheia as a rejection and replacement of the idea of truth as accuracy. In his article "Regulatory Concepts or Actuality? An Attempt to Respond to the Question Concerning the Conditions Necessary for Valid Understanding ", he accuses Heidegger of failing to differentiate correctness from incorrectness in his view of truth as Aletheia (Apel, 1997). He argues that Heidegger's concept of truth as Aletheia provides us with no objective basis for determining whether our judgments are true or wrong, leading to relativism. He contends that even Heidegger realized in his later book 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" that Aletheia was not sufficient to account for truth (Apel, 1997).

In her book Heidegger, Language, and World-Disclosure, Cristina Lafont interprets Heidegger's admittance of the inadequacy of Aletheia as a sufficient condition of truth as correctness (Lafont, 2000). She argues Heidegger conceding to the insufficiency of Aletheia is because of the Critique casted upon Heidegger's work by his student Tugendhat.

Jurgen Habermas his work "On the Pragmatics of Communications" interprets and reviews Heidegger's discussion on the notion of truth. His major criticism comes from his claims that Heidegger's notion of truth does not break free from idealism (Habermas, 1998). He argues further that since Heidegger has not been able to distinguish between meaning and validity in his theory of truth, he can offer no account of a possible leaning process that can explode a totality of meaning (Kolb, 1992). However, reacting to the criticism by Habermas, Kolb (1992) argues that although Habermas has a point to make, part of Habermas' criticism of Heidegger, stems from lack of proper interpretation and understanding of Heidegger's thought. These are some of the criticisms that have been taken against Heidegger's notion of truth. However, these criticisms notwithstanding, there are still some scholars who believe that Heidegger's theory is sufficient for truth as correctness.

13. Conclusion

There are at least three repercussions when the truth is recognized as Aletheia (disclosure) (Inwood, 2010). The first is that truth is not restricted to propositions and theoretical mental activities, such as judgements, beliefs, and relationships. Truth rather explores the world via many modes of Being-in-the-world and types of comprehension. Truth is not simply a matter of language and thought, but also the exposure of worldly entities. Inwood concludes by emphasizing that truth as Aletheia is always unearthing and documenting current occurrences. Truth and falsehood are inseparable, because truth requires both revealing and concealing. Falsehood may refer to an error, concealment, or disguise. However, both exist in Dasein's being.

Heidegger as an existentialist, places man at the center of the universe in his fundamental ontology (Umotong & Dennis, 2018). This emphasis placed on the being of man (Dasein) permeates all the works of Heidegger, little wonder then why he placed man at the center of his truth theory. In Heidegger's truth theory, man is the being without which there would be nothing like truth. In fact, it is a man who discovers the truth. Heidegger's attack on the correspondence theory of truth (as well as his repudiation of all the other theories) is grounded in ontology and the static nature they place on truth. For Heidegger, truth is dynamic, not static. A proposition qualifies as being true not because it is useful (like the pragmatist), its judgment is correct (like the coherentist), or it corresponds to fact. Rather, it is true based on a revealing, an unconcealment which is only made possible by Dasein, who by virtue of being in the world has been condemned to conceal or unconceal beings. Heidegger's theory of truth can then be rightly said to be 'Daseincentric'.

References


