

# Hermeneutics and Human Finitude



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著者:P. Christopher Smith

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Having thought out the Enlightenment project of individualism, privacy, and autonomy to its end, Anglo-American ethical theory now finds itself unable to respond to the collapse of community in which the practices justified by this project have resulted. In the place of reasonable deliberation about the goals to be chosen and the means to them, we now, it seems, have only what MacIntyre has aptly called "interminable debate" among "rival" positions, debate in which each party merely contends with the others for its own advantage. And this circumstance MacIntyre himself seems unable to

escape despite his best efforts. In further elaborating Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical reception of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and Hegel, and in referring simultaneously to Edmund Burke's parallel political rhetoric, among other tradition-oriented arguments in the English language, this book seeks a recollection of shared ethical principles, a recollection which alone, it is argued, might prevent the devolution of discussion into war with words and make possible some measure of consensus, however provisional and shadowed by dissent it will be.

Since these shared ethical principles are not invented by isolated, autonomous persons, but inherited collectively in a tradition transmitted to us in language, Smith, following Gadamer's and Plato's lead, probes our ways of speaking to each other, our logoi, or the assertions we make to each other. For in them is to be found an ethical truth that is not "mine" or "yours" but "ours," and which, in face, is constitutive of the reasoning we can carry on with each other, and indeed, constitutive of who we are. We define ourselves, that is to say, only as participants in the language community within which we always already find ourselves speaking to each other.

This means that ethical principles are not known in the way mathematical principles are, and, consequently, that discursive reasoning starting from them cannot be the sort of inference leading to definite conclusions that mathematical reasoning is. This book asks, therefore, just what is the special nature of our ethical reasoning, of our reaching and understanding with each other about what we ought to do.

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