

SUMMARY OF PART ONE

If the immediate experience of life in its manifold expressions becomes the sole province of truth, then the claim of anyone expression to truth is greatly narrowed. The concepts of history, of philosophy, and of tradition cannot make an absolute claim. Only life can do so, given the postulate above, and life refuses any final expression in concepts. This doctrine reflects what can be called a spiritualization of the idea of truth. It acknowledges that no discipline can encompass the truth, whether empirical science or transcendental philosophy. Truth is rather a spirit, which blows where it will, eluding any human effort to manipulate it. Such a doctrine, implicit in the *Lebensphilosophie* of the later nineteenth century, well merits the serious attention it has been given. It reminds us of the depths of truth, waiting to be explored, and offers a healthy skepticism toward the absolute claims of a doctrinaire positivism and of an overconfident speculative idealism.

In particular, it serves as a useful antidote to the Enlightenment's intoxicating ideal of human freedom. Our brief surveys of Bacon, Descartes, and Kant suggest that these thinkers had put their faith in the possibility of a full emancipation from the errors of the past, as well as in a limitless freedom to exercise human reason. For Bacon, this faith took the form of an interpretation of nature. He would find his firm basis in sense perception, rather than in general axioms (whose authority is often removed from the nature which is the axiom's supposed foundation). Descartes took this principle a step further. By doubting even the perceptions of the senses, he would provide a metaphysical ground for knowledge, entirely free of past doctrine and present empirical measurement. Kant secured this foundation, we can say, with his critique of judgment. Judgment, the faculty by which free choice becomes effective in the realm of nature, brought together the certitude of the Cartesian ego and the empiricism of Bacon's experimental method. In each of these three thinkers, the concept of freedom from received opinion and from the misleading perceptions of the senses was methodologically secured, and situated within the whole of the human faculties.

That is not to say, of course, that this concept of freedom was presented without qualification. Bacon exposed the idols of human understanding – language, custom, subjectivity – which almost inevitably shape and prejudice our thoughts. Descartes refused to apply his mathematical reasoning to the moral law, preferring the classical teachings on the subject to a wholly new and rational foundation for ethics. Kant limited to the understanding the capacity for prescribing a priori principles of knowledge, conceding that practical reason and judgment are incapable – or not free, by virtue of their nature, to engage in – such prescriptions. These thinkers, despite their rather uncritical embrace of the ideal of human freedom, nevertheless refined our understanding of it. They revealed its limits in the very presentation of its limitless potential. But they also insisted upon the need to free humanity from misleading doctrines of the philosophic tradition. They failed to acknowledge the profound sense in which the past is always with us. Because the constitutive role of tradition for human understanding, its presence in language, morals, and education, received scant attention, the concept of tradition was impoverished.

The spiritualizing of truth, due to an appropriation by the historical school of speculative idealism's notion of spirit, balanced the rather scientific doctrines of the Age of Reason. Neither Bacon's *interpretatio naturam*, nor the Cartesian *ego*, nor the *a priori* regulations of Kant, seemed to the nineteenth century a wholly satisfactory foundation for the truth. Rather, in the study of history, one glimpsed the truth's obscure depths. It was discovered that truth had more to do with spirit than with technique or incontrovertible first principles. The historical school asserted that the truth of the past had to account for the necessity as well as the freedom of history. The true meaning of a historical situation had to be regarded not just in terms of the Enlightenment's ideal of freedom, but also in terms of that which preceded and thus necessitated the situation. Meaning could not be confined to the apparently free choices which left their mark upon subsequent history. In the play of freedom and necessity, one could see that the truth of history called for attention to what could only be defined as the historical spirit.

The question then arose of how the historian could grasp this spirit. The question is a subtle one, because the historical school had largely abandoned the separation between subject and object, according to which historians might have been viewed as dispassionate scientists, wholly neutral toward the object of their investigation. Instead, the representatives of the historical school freely acknowledged that they were a part of the history they studied. How then could they claim for the results of their investigations the status of objective knowledge? Ranke defined his efforts in what we have come to call historicist terms. History itself provides a standard of value for interpreting events within history, and earlier events can be gauged by means of those which follow. Droysen asserted that the historian understands history through its expression in human moral power. By participating in the moral powers of a community, the free choices of individuals become effective in a historical sense. For Dilthey, the expressions of history offer the historian an immediate experience which cannot be doubted. Although the interpretations of this experience may vary, the historian's experience itself offers a certitude. In this way, the historical school linked the knower to the known. The labor of its representatives could lead to historical knowledge, not because of a rigidly enforced objectivity, but because they investigated that by whose spirit they themselves were animated.

The historical school, however, became entangled in the contradictions of historicism. History cannot provide the ultimate standard for evaluating the events of history, as we saw, because history is not itself a completed whole. Rather it is underway, and the full context in which the parts might be assessed lacks finished form. Moreover, the expressions of history – the battles, councils, civilizations, and great individuals in which history becomes concrete – do not offer an immediate truth. Instead, one could view them as manifestations of more profound historical forces which also demand consideration, and whose truth is only present in the expressions which mediate it. To speak of history as that in which the panorama of the past opens itself fully, as a whole and as parts which interpret each other reciprocally, is to ignore Hegel's dialectic of force and its expression. Historicism obscures this dialectic, postulating instead a direct access to history.

Dilthey helped clarify the sense in which history is directly accessible. It is accessible in the experience of past life which it offers to the historian. Such an experience is to be understood within that tradition stemming from Kant's third critique. The Kantian doctrine of aesthetic judgment, according to which the experience of beauty animates the imagination apart from concepts, was taken up by Schiller in his letters on aesthetic education. The aesthetically educated person does not interpret the works of the past as the media by which the ancient world makes a claim to truth upon the present. Instead, they are seen as offering an experience which activates the powers of the imagination, giving aesthetic pleasure.

This doctrine was extended by Schleiermacher to a universal romantic hermeneutics. Hermeneutics was universal, not because Christian and classical texts form a common deposit to be interpreted within a dogmatic tradition, but rather because they both offer an experience of the alien past. This experience enables the interpreter to divine the psychology of the ancient author apart from the dogmatic content of the author's thought. As taken up by Dilthey, this hermeneutic had important consequences. It meant that, although the interpreter could err in assessing the philosophic or religious claims of the ancient text, that text offered an imaginative, aesthetic, divinatory, and ultimately unmistakable experience. The experience of life, and not speculative thought, makes history accessible, according to Dilthey. It alone is the indubitable basis for a theory of historical knowledge.

It is ironic but just that the philosophic effort from Descartes to the beginnings of the twentieth century, an effort aimed at freeing humanity from prejudice, should be understood more and more today as the expression of a prejudice against prejudice. Dilthey, despite his subtle insight into the reflexivity of historical thought as the self-encounter of the human spirit, nevertheless retained a Cartesian fascination with what could not be doubted. His search for the bed rock of historical experience seems today less an emancipatory act than a link with the thought of the Enlightenment. For our ability to view this thought in context we can thank Jankowitz and the school of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Jankowitz' exploration of prejudice, defined as the realm of self-evident presuppositions which are given in language and tradition, has shown the inescapably mediate nature of all judgment. In his thought the Enlightenment ideal of absolute freedom from tradition and its errors appears illusory.

But the decline of tradition did not come about simply because the Enlightenment failed to acknowledge the borders which tradition legislates around human reason. To characterize the decline in this way might suggest that tradition has only a negative force: that it hinders a freedom which, if it could only overcome the history that has shaped it, would be fully realized. But this is inaccurate. Tradition declined, it would be more fair to say, because the thinkers of the Age of Reason and of the historical school ceased to regard it as constitutive for human understanding. They failed to see that tradition, rather than a hindrance to the immediate transparency of reason, is both a source for true reflection and a context within which reflection is true.

This is the double dimension which Gadamer has opened up in his treatment of the question of truth in the humanities. His thesis, that the rise of aesthetic consciousness and romantic hermeneutics narrowed the understanding of truth by shifting attention from the content of historical knowledge to the form of the experience in which that knowledge is given, has illuminated the concept of tradition central to the present investigation. We can now answer the question posed at the beginning of this chapter. That is the question of the extent to which our understanding of truth has been narrowed as a result of tradition's decline. It has been narrowed to the extent that tradition is regarded as that from which we can free ourselves, and insofar as that freedom has become a prerequisite for true knowledge.

If the question of truth does not clearly appear when tradition declines, we must ask a new question. This is the question of a genuine rehabilitation of tradition. Genuine is a key word here, for any such rehabilitation cannot, so to speak, re-write history – it cannot refuse to assimilate the Enlightenment's critique of tradition, as if that were merely a chapter of intellectual history that could be excised to shape a better text. Rather, a renewed concept of tradition must appropriate it critically. To rehabilitate tradition means to assess the Enlightenment critique within a context which tradition itself provides. Critical assessment takes as its own measure the measure of tradition, that is, the standards which have been transmitted and conserved within history. This poses, however, the problem of self criticism – how can we gain a perspective on our own tradition in order to evaluate it? – and returns us, once again, to our opening question. The understanding of truth was indeed narrowed by the decline of tradition. But is it clear how a rehabilitation of tradition will broaden the question of truth?