

SUMMARY OF PART II

Our treatment of the decline of tradition concluded with the question of how a rehabilitation of tradition might broaden our understanding of truth. An answer to that question may now be ventured. To rehabilitate tradition, we can say, makes sense only because truth is historical. In the exposition of the historical nature of truth lies the philosophic value of the rehabilitation of tradition.

Truth is historical, first of all, in Hegel's sense: in history one encounters the manifestations of spirit. Spirit is the human effort to erase the distinction between what one thinks and what one longs to think. This effort can be seen throughout history, within which every particular truth finds its context.

Truth is historical in Heidegger's sense as well: the possibility of uncovering truth is bequeathed to human beings by a kind of destiny. What is concealed may or may not be revealed. When it is revealed, destiny is at work, enabling something to move out of obscurity, and bestowing a glimpse of destiny itself, within which being has its meaning.

Truth is historical, finally, in Gadamer's sense: a heritage which relentlessly asks that we incorporate it into ourselves. We err whenever we think that a methodical self-alienation from the past enables us to grasp its full meaning. On the contrary, understanding arises mainly in the recognition of our selves in the matter of history.

Tradition is rehabilitated with the acknowledgment, foreign to the Enlightenment, that truth is historical. But this is, we must say, a rehabilitation of tradition in general philosophic terms, rather than the advocacy of particular traditions. Although Hegel regarded Aristotle as the philosopher most worthy of study, and although he saw in Christ the first perfect example of the human realization of spirit, nevertheless he regarded all history as rational, not just Greek antiquity or the first Christian century. Heidegger displayed a similar ambivalence toward tradition. In the philosophy of the early Greeks, he said, being appears as the universal which is neither genus nor species. Yet the Greek emphasis on judgment as the locus of truth sowed the seeds, in Heidegger's view, of that forgetfulness of being which has been the subsequent fate of Western thought. The Greek thought which Heidegger sought to rediscover is also the ground of the ontological tradition which he set out to destroy. In Gadamer, we see a rehabilitation of a particular tradition, that of Graeco-Christian thought. But this tradition turns out to be an idea in a quasi-Platonic sense. It is intelligible, as the unity of multiple traditions, but cannot be fully embodied in any one of them. Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition, like that of Hegel and Heidegger, aims at something more abstract than concrete. One can no more summarize in a definitive way the Graeco-Christian tradition than one can the rationality of history or the fate of Western thought.

Although the thinkers we have examined have served the philosophic rehabilitation of tradition in general, and have not usually advocated the recognition of particular (least of all religious) traditions, nevertheless their concepts of historical truth

have led them to hint at what might be called a natural theology. Hegel's emphasis on the correspondence between being and thought is such a hint. Being corresponds to thought, Hegel implied, because thought or mind is the source of all that is. Traditions, by consequence, are traces of the Hegelian rationality of history, signs of an intelligence which has always been present. Heidegger's treatment of being and destiny strikes a similar note. Destiny, which has been sent to a community as its portion in life, ties being to the beings which disclose it. Such disclosure depends upon what destiny grants: being manifests itself only within the constellation of beings brought about by destiny. Thus destiny is encompassed by the reverence which, in Heidegger's writings, belongs to being. Gadamer, too, strikes a theological note when he sketches the refinement of Greek philosophy by Christian thought on the incarnation. As a result of that thought, the logos or word ceased to be merely that in which eternal verities were mirrored. Instead, it was seen as the very presence, the incarnation, of those truths. Just as Christ becomes genuinely present through the words of Scripture, preaching, and ritual, so by analogy all truth becomes present in language. In Hegel, Heidegger, and Gadamer, philosophical thought on how the transcendent reveals itself – in history, through beings, and in language – anticipates theological thought.

But to speak of theology is not to speak of tradition in a general philosophical sense. Theology arises in particular historical forms, i.e., in concrete traditions. In comparison to these, the general philosophic rehabilitation of tradition appears unsatisfactory. To be sure, philosophy is not theology, and it strays beyond its rightful borders when it examines matters of faith. But when philosophy asserts the correspondence of being and thought, has it not already raised a theological question which Christian theology has plumbed at length? When it inquires about the meaning of being, should it neglect the discussion of this question within Christian metaphysics? And when it emphasizes the importance of the incarnation in the development of philosophical anthropology, has it not embraced the very soul of Christian theology? In order to answer these questions, let us turn from our philosophical discussion to a theological one. Let us examine tradition as it has been developed in Roman Catholic theology.