

CHAPTER XIII
AUTHORITY AND THE DISTINCTION
BETWEEN FORMAL AND MATERIAL SUFFICIENCY

The full dimensions of the problem of the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition emerged in the aftermath of the Protestant reformation. Catholic theology had to formulate the relation between Scripture, whose unique and primary dignity has been affirmed since earliest Christianity, and the traditions of the Church, whose justification does not lie exclusively in the Bible. One solution to this problem was the distinction between the formal and material sufficiency of Scripture.¹ The Tridentine decree on the canon of Scripture, promulgated in 1546, stated that Scripture and tradition form a unity. But although it insisted that the two contain every saving truth of the gospel, it did not clarify how that truth is contained.² The distinction between formal and material sufficiency can be said to illuminate the matter. According to this distinction, the Scriptures are materially sufficient in that they contain all the truths necessary for salvation. Truth has its formal existence in the mind alone, however, and so the Scriptures, because they can be misinterpreted, are formally insufficient. Formal and material sufficiency belongs only to the entirety of what has been transmitted from Christ and the apostles. We shall have to ask the question of the extent to which tradition possesses this full sufficiency.

Catholic theologians point out that the material sufficiency of Scripture has been acknowledged in Christian literature since the time of Irenaeus and Tertullian. Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260 ca. 339) and Vincent of Lerins (d. before 450) recognized that the Scriptures can only be properly interpreted by appeal to the mind or tradition of the Church.³ Nevertheless, it was not until the twelfth century Decretum of Gratian, a Camaldolese monk and canonist, that theologians began to teach that many of the Church's moral teachings and customs have their origin partly in Scripture and partly in tradition.⁴ And even in that medieval age, the explicit distinction between the formal and material sufficiency of Scripture may have been unknown. Authors who have treated the matter, such as Geiselman, Congar, and Mackey, do not date the initial use of the formal-material distinction. But it is clear from Geiselman's exposition that, by the time

¹ See above A Reconsideration of the Modern Theology of Tradition, esp. the section entitled "The Sufficiency of Tradition and Scripture."

² Ibid., esp. the section entitled "The Tridentine Decree."

³ Ibid., esp. the sections entitled "Sufficiency and Authority" and "The Etymology of Sufficiency."

⁴ Ibid., esp. the section entitled "Geiselman's Interpretation."

of Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), the limited sufficiency of Scripture had become a major point in Catholic polemics against the reformers.⁵

The first general controversy discussed in Bellarmine's De controversiis Christianae fidei, produced between 1581 and 1592, has to do with "the unwritten word of God." While it cannot be said that Bellarmine uses the exact terms formal and material sufficiency, he spells out the distinction with some precision. His remarks arise in a polemic against the Protestant theologian, Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586). In Chemnitz's Examen Concilii Tridentini (1565-1573), the reformer had criticized his Catholic opponents for refusing to base their arguments on Scripture. He set out to prove that, contrary to the claims by Catholics that the Scriptures are insufficient, the evangelists included everything said and done by Jesus Christ which the apostles deemed necessary for the later Church. In support of his thesis, he alludes to the concluding verse of the Gospel of John, which states that Jesus did many things unrecorded by the evangelist, and that those things which are recorded were written so that the reader might believe that Jesus is the Christ. Chemnitz adds that his interpretation of the Johannine verse follows that of St. Augustine. Augustine had paraphrased, in his lectures on the Gospel of John, the concluding verse of the Gospel in the following way: of the many things which Jesus did, "such were chosen for record as seemed to suffice for the salvation of believers."⁶ Chemnitz seized on Augustine's use of the word "suffice." The Holy Spirit, he wrote, "selected and assigned for writing that of the doctrine and miracles of Christ which He judged to be sufficient and necessary for true faith and eternal life."⁷ In the view of Chemnitz, nothing necessary is excluded from Scripture. The unwritten traditions may be true if they do not contradict Scripture; but since their authenticity is

⁵ Josef Rupert Geiselman, Die Heilige Schrift und die Tradition. Zu den neueren Kontroversen über das Verhältnis der Heiligen Schrift zu den nichtgeschriebenen Traditionen, vol. 18 of the series Quaestiones Disputatae, ed. Karl Rahner and Heinrich Schlier (Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 1962), pp. 215-221.

⁶ "Nam cum multa fecisset Dominus Iesus, non omnia scripta sunt; sicut idem ipse sanctus Iohannes euangelista testatur multa Dominum Christum et dixisse et fecisse quae scripta non sunt; electa sunt autem quae scriberentur, quae saluti credentium sufficere uidebantur." Augustine, In Iohannis evangelium (tract 49, chap. 1) in Aurelii Augustini Opera, part 8, ed. Radbodus Willems, in Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina, vol. 36 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Typography (Pontifical Editors), 1954). Translation: Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John, trans. James Innes, 2 vols., in The Works of Aurelius Augustine (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1874), 11.122.

⁷ "[S]ed de doctrina et miraculis Christi ea selegit et dictavit conscribenda, quae ad veram fidem, et vitam aeternam sufficere et necessaria esse iudicavit." Martinum Chemnicium, Examen Concilii Tridentini (first part, locus 1, section IV, article i, chap. 15) secundum ed. 1578 Francofurtensem, collata editione A. 1707 denuo typis exscribendum curavit, indice locupletissimo adornavit, ed. Ed. Preuss (Berlin: Sumtibus Gust. Schlawitz, 1861), p. 24, col. B. Translation: Examination of the Council of Trent, trans. Fred Kramer, 2 vols. (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1971 and 1975), 1.94.

unproveable, they can be dispensed with. Only the Scriptures suffice. It is this conclusion which Bellarmine contests.⁸

He begins by reinterpreting the words of Augustine. Augustine did not mean, Bellarmine contends, that everything sufficient for faith was written by the evangelist. Rather, the Bishop of Hippo meant that John's Gospel sufficiently expresses everything which Christ desired to be read. Some things necessary were not written, however, and among these are the interpretation and understanding of Scripture.⁹ Christ did not desire that these things be read, Bellarmine suggests, but that they be received from the Church. This does not mean, however, that they are foreign to the Scriptures. Rather, Bellarmine teaches that the Scriptures contain these things in a universal way (if not in every particular), and one should consult the Church when doubts arise.¹⁰ The exposition of Bellarmine clarifies what Catholic theologians mean when they speak of the material sufficiency of Scripture. The Scriptures contain the gospel, at least in a general way. To be sure, Bellarmine obscures this point with his exegesis of Augustine – the Scriptures, according to this exegesis, contain only those things which Christ desired to be read. We cannot be sure whether the things which Christ desired to exclude from Scripture are, in Bellarmine's view, present "in universali" or not. Insofar as Bellarmine suggests that the Scriptures lack gospel truths which are only in tradition, he departs from the teaching about material sufficiency. But he does bring out what alone are materially and formally sufficient: the truths taught by and through Christ, present in the Scripture, and rightly interpreted by the Church.

It must be admitted that Bellarmine's interpretation of Augustine is anything but persuasive. The Augustinian passage does not say that, of the matters recorded in John's Gospel, those few things were sufficiently expressed which Christ desired the evangelist to write. There is no reference in Augustine's text to Christ's desires one way or the other. Chemnitz, the opponent of Bellarmine, expresses the matter more accurately by saying that the Gospel of John includes that which suffices for true faith and eternal life. Bellarmine's instinct for the central role of the Church, considered as the locus of Christian understanding, drives him to distort the meaning of Augustine's text. Still,

⁸ Roberto Bellarmino, De controversiis Christianae fidei adversus hujus temporis haereticos, in Roberti Bellarmini Opera Omnia, ex editione Veneta, pluribus turn additis turn correctis, iterum edidit Justinus Fevrè, 12 vols. (1870-1874), reprint edition (Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1965), vol. 1.

⁹ "Cum enim quaedam scribenda essent, quaedam sine scripto tradenda, ac praecipue interpretatio, at que intelligentia Scripturarum; in libris sacris continentur sufficienter omnia, quae scriptis mandanda erant, sive (ut Augustinus loquitur) quae Christus legi voluit." Ibid., 1. 221: first general controversy, book 4 ("De verbo Dei non scripto"), chap. 10 ("Solvuntur objectiones adversariorum, quae ex Scripturis petuntur").

¹⁰ "Alia enim non legi in divinis Litteris, sed ab Ecclesia accipi voluit, quae tamen suo etiam modo in Evangelio continentur, non quidem in particulari, sed in universali, quia Evangelium monet, ut de rebus dubiis Ecclesiam consulamus." Ibid.

Bellarmino makes the point which is relevant to the theology of tradition: the correct understanding of Scripture does not belong to Scripture itself. Instead, it belongs to the reader. While Bellarmine is wrong to try to derive his point from Augustine, he rightly emphasizes the importance of human understanding. But we must ask in what sense understanding can be said to belong to a reader. Is right understanding a personal possession? Is it some thing which one reader has and uses, and which another lacks and wants? Bellarmine's answer to this is ambiguous. He states only the general maxim that, when exegetical doubts arise, one should consult the Church.

Such advice poses the problem of authority. Scripture is an authority, but it is not, in the Catholic view, absolute – at least, not in the sense of being fully sufficient. Its material sufficiency needs to be completed in the understanding of the Church. The tradition of the Church is also an authority. But tradition can be reformulated, while Scripture cannot. And tradition is only the context for interpreting Scripture, not its replacement. So tradition is no more absolute than Scripture. Both Scripture and tradition, however, contain what Trent called the saving truth whose source is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The expression “saving truth” (*veritas salutaris*) distinguishes itself from philosophic terminology. A saving truth is a matter for theology as well as epistemology.

This preliminary orientation enables us to state, in terms of authority, the issues raised by the distinction between formal and material sufficiency. First, there is the gospel of Jesus Christ and the media of that gospel, Scripture and tradition. The latter are subordinate to the former, yet can be called authoritative. What is the relation between their authority and that of the gospel itself? Second, there is the truth of Scripture and tradition and the salvation which they effect. Truth is a question for science. Salvation is a question for theology. What is the relation between the understanding of Christian truths, that is, the impersonal claim upon us of the historical “things themselves” of Christianity, and the salvation which is effected through these truths? What makes an understanding salvific, and so authoritative?¹¹ To these questions we now turn.

XIII.1. Scripture, Tradition, and the Speculative Structure of Language

The questions raised about the formal and material sufficiency of Scripture and tradition may be reformulated in general philosophical terms. The first question about the authority of the media of revelation and the authority of the revelation itself is akin to the philosophic question of the media of truth. What is the relation between truth and its expression? Can any concrete expression suffice for the truth? What is achieved, and what is lost, when one expresses the truth? These philosophic issues underlie the first theological question about the authority of the revelatory media. The second theological question about saving truth can be restated in philosophic terms as the question of fact and value. Christianity insists that its tradition is grounded in a revelation of God given in history through Jesus Christ. Its truths, then, are accessible to historical science. We have already treated this in terms of historical and dogmatic tradition. But the saving truth of Christianity seems to elude the nets of historical criticism. For the historical

¹¹ The nature of saving truth will be more clearly exposed in the section below entitled “The Authority of Saving Truth.”

critic who is not a member of the Church, the facts have a different value than they do for the Christian. What is, philosophically speaking, the relation between historical truth and the value it possesses?

To these questions the central figures of the rehabilitation of tradition make a contribution. Our analysis shall now follow Gadamer's discussion of "The Centre of Language and Its Speculative Structure." There Gadamer proposes the thesis that every interpretation is dialectical in two senses of the word.¹² An interpretation is dialectical, first of all, because every statement about the meaning of something elicits another statement which balances the first. No one statement seems to suffice. Second and more importantly, every interpretation is dialectical in the sense of speculative. It reflects not only the meaning of the object interpreted, but also the relation of the object to the whole of reality. Such a reflective or speculative interpretation is dialectical in that, through the finite words of the interpretation, the infinite whole of the interpreted object is expressed. Gadamer's exposition of the speculative structure of language encompasses the two philosophical questions – truth and its expression, fact and its value – which we have drawn from the theological issues of the media of revelation and the understanding of saving truth.

Gadamer illustrates his doctrine of the speculative structure of language by means of Hegel. It was Hegel who realized the speculative nature of the philosophical proposition and, indeed, of all discourse. To the nature of historical truth belongs the experience that, although one interpretation elicits another, every interpretation reflects the whole of the matter to be interpreted. This finds a parallel in the work of Heidegger. The polemic against the tendency to regard all being as present at hand and manipulable, the polemic of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, can suggest that the things through which being manifests itself are subordinate to it. But Gadamer shows that Heidegger's work of the 1950s bestows a dignity upon beings which is absent in his earlier writings. In the following treatment of the philosophic issues raised by the theological problems of the media of revelation and the understanding of saving truth, we shall pursue those aspects of the thought of Hegel and Heidegger essential to Gadamer's discussion of the speculative structure of language.

XIII.1.A. Revelatory Media and Hegel's Philosophic Proposition

Gadamer applauds Hegel's characterization of the logic of the philosophic proposition. In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel distinguishes between "Raisonnement" or rationalization and "begreifendes Denken" or conceptual thought. In the former, thinking is trivially conceived in terms of mere predication. To a given subject, certain predicates are applied. These mark the boundaries of the subject. In conceptual thought, on the other hand, thinking is not conceived in terms of a passive subject supporting active predicates. Hegel says that subject and predicate change places. What was thought to be fixed, firm, and self-evident, i.e., the subject, goes over into the predicate, and itself becomes a matter for further thought. It suffers, in the expression of

¹² Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 441; trans., p. 423.

Hegel, a counter-thrust.¹³ In contrast to mere “Raisonnement,” within which the predicates assigned to a subject remain external to it, the proposition in conceptual thought insists upon the intrinsic relation of subject to predicate. The thinker does not proceed from a taken-for granted subject, adding to it a number of accidental qualities or predicates. Instead, the predicate is allowed to put the subject itself in question. Without a doubt, the form of the proposition in conceptual thought is no less a judgment than Raisonnement. But the identity of the external form masks an internal difference. Hegel, in the words of Gadamer,

shows that the philosophical proposition is a judgment only in its external form, ie to assign a predicate to a subject-concept. In fact the philosophical proposition does not pass over from the subject-concept to another concept that is placed in relation to it, but it states in the form of the predicate the truth of the subject.¹⁴

To state the truth of the subject, in short, is not simply to yoke a predicate to a subject. It is rather to surrender to the movement of the subject matter itself, Hegel and Gadamer would say, allowing the predicate to refine the subject, thus giving rise to a new subject and to new predicates.

One implication of this Hegelian doctrine is the doubtful adequacy of any propositional formulation of truth. If the value of conceptual thought lies in its capacity to regard subject and predicate as a unity, in which the predicate puts the subject in question and leads to a deeper understanding of it, then any act which would bring conceptual thought to an end – such as the concretion of thought achieved by means of a proposition – is to be avoided. That is why Hegel argues that to mediate the infinite by finite means (such as language) is to pervert the truth.¹⁵ Instead, the philosophic task of his day, he says, is to break down the determinate thinking of propositions, actualizing and spiritualizing the universal which they embody.¹⁶ Gadamer has expressed Hegel’s intention as the very abolition of the “Satz” or statement. “Properly speaking,” Gadamer writes, “the philosophical statement is no longer a statement at all.”¹⁷ This means that the

¹³ Hegel, Phänomenologie, in Werke, 2.56; trans., p. 119.

¹⁴ “Er zeigt, dass der philosophische Satz nur seiner äusseren Form nach ein Urteil ist, d.h. einem Subjektbegriff ein Prädikat beilegt. In Wahrheit geht der philosophische Satz nicht von dem Subjektbegriff zu einem anderen Begriff über, der zu ihm in Beziehung gesetzt wird, sondern er spricht in der Form des Prädikats die Wahrheit des Subjekts aus.” Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 442; trans., p. 423.

¹⁵ Hegel, System der Philosophie (Glockner’s title for the Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse, 1830 ed.), par. 62, in Werke, 8.165. Trans.: The Logic of Hegel, pp. 121-122.

¹⁶ Hegel. Phänomenologie, in Werke. 2.35; trans., p. 94.

¹⁷ “Er ist überhaupt nicht mehr im eigentlichen Sinne Satz.” Gadamer. “Hegel und die antike Dialektik,” in Hegels Dialektik. p. 18; trans.. p. 18.

philosophical proposition, the expression of conceptual thinking, is no longer something separate from that which is thought. The proposition is not about what is thought, but is rather the movement of thought itself. Every time one considers a proposition in abstraction from the matter it expresses, one slips into *Raisonnement*, transforming language into a fixative for the display of something lifeless.

Indeed, Hegel himself is not immune to the disease of regarding language in too fixed a way. His treatment in the *Phenomenology* of the object of perception and its deceptiveness insists upon a dialectical reversal in understanding which is almost mechanical. Every object of understanding, Hegel writes, contains aspects of truth and their opposites.¹⁸ The very essence of such an object is to negate itself.¹⁹ And when one attempts to grasp the opposing elements as a unity, by asking in what respect the object of understanding is self contradictory, one is simply, from Hegel's point of view, avoiding the process through which contradictions are "aufgehoben," that is, cancelled and transcended.²⁰ Hegel reiterates that every philosophical proposition must display this dialectical quality. The reason for this, according to Gadamer, is that Hegel (and Plato as well) considers philosophy too much in terms of what the Germans call the "Aussage," the statement or assertion. Hegel's concept of the statement, Gadamer writes, "the dialectical accentuation of it to the point of contradiction is, however, in extreme contrast to the nature of the hermeneutical experience and the linguistic nature of human experience of the world."²¹ This passage from *Truth and Method*, in which Hegel and Plato are united in their over-emphasis on the statement, becomes clearer in Gadamer's essay of 1961, "Hegel and the Dialectic of the Ancient Philosophers." There the criticism of Hegel and Plato is more pronounced. Both were preoccupied, in Gadamer's opinion, with the bewilderment to which language can give rise. Plato's concentration on the sophists is matched only by Hegel's analysis of the inevitable contradictions of dialectic. But the linguistic analyses of the two philosophers – and, more to the point, any linguistic analyses – do not suffice to guarantee the truth. "Philosophy cannot be distinguished

¹⁸ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*. in *Werke*, 2.101; trans., p. 172.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.103; trans., p. 174.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.107; trans., p. 178. Gadamer (*Hegels Dialektik*, p. 21; trans., p. 22) has shown that the argument of Hegel, namely, that the identical must be recognized in every respect as different, is based on a misreading of Plato (*Sophist* 259b). Plato's Eleatic stranger says that not-being "is" in respect to the being in which it participates. Hegel wrongly paraphrases this by stating that not-being and being are identical in one and the same regard (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, in *Werke*, 18.233; translation: *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 2.64).

²¹ "Der Begriff der Aussage, die dialektische Zuspitzung zum Widerspruch, steht nun aber in einem äussersten Gegensatz zu dem Wesen der hermeneutischen Erfahrung und der Sprachlichkeit der menschlichen Welterfahrung überhaupt." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 444; trans., p. 425.

from sophistic *raisonnement*,” Gadamer asserts, “if attention is paid only to what is stated as such.”²² An over-emphasis on the statement as a formula can blind one to the truth which is always more than its expression.

If Hegel succumbed to the temptation to treat language too exclusively in terms of statements, however, it must be said that his illumination of the speculative dialectic more than redeemed him. Hegel saw that a philosophical proof cannot simply be the one-sided construction of logical arguments. Instead, it must be dialectical: the proof must itself express the contradictory aspects of the subject matter which would be brought out by interlocutors in a dialogue. Such a dialectic, we have seen, is no mere imitation of the give-and-take of conversation, but the movement of the subject matter itself.²³ The matter of justice, for example, must prove itself in terms of adherence to the letter of the law and of breaking the letter of the law in order to conform with the spirit of justice. Every philosophical proof must be dialectical, according to Hegel, and when proof is separated from dialectic, philosophical demonstration vanishes.²⁴ The dialectical movement of the philosophical proof is nothing other than the concrete expression of the speculative attitude, which seeks to mirror in a single thought the multiplicity of phenomena. It belongs to the greatest of Hegelian insights, in Gadamer’s opinion, that philosophy demands the transition from the speculative attitude to a dialectical presentation.²⁵

There are two extreme consequences which could be inferred from the Hegelian doctrine. The first is one we have already seen, namely, that every propositional statement of truth is inadequate to the speculative dialectic of thought. The statement is a concretion of the matter, rigidifying what ought to remain fluid. The second extreme consequence stems from Hegel’s analysis of the relation between the subject and the predicate in conceptual thinking. If the two are properly understood, a philosophical statement is perfectly adequate to the truth which it expresses. The subject, passing over to the predicate, becomes the predicate; and the predicate, in turn, delivers the subject from its seeming fixity and self-evidence. No one could accuse such a proposition of bringing thought to an end. Yet it remains a proposition or statement. From Hegel’s doctrine a seeming paradox arises: the philosophical statement is both adequate and inadequate.

²² “Philosophie und sophistisches Raisonement sind nicht aus einanderzuerkennen, wenn man nur auf das Ausgesagte als solches gerichtet ist.” Gadamer, *Hegels Dialektik*, p. 23; trans., p. 25.

²³ See above *The Philosophical Rehabilitation of Tradition*, Chapter IV, esp. the section entitled “The Dialectic of Appropriation.”

²⁴ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, in *Werke*, 2.60; trans., p. 123.

²⁵ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 443; trans., p. 425.

Gadamer dissolves the paradox in the following way. On the one hand, he insists upon the efficacy of language. The word, he says, enables an infinity of meaning to be grasped. The form of a proposition presents that infinity as a unity. Thus people with something to say can make themselves intelligible to others.²⁶ Through the speculative nature of language, claims Gadamer, a multitude of experiences is synthesized and reflected in relatively few words. On the other hand, language is, in Gadamer's eyes, more than the statements which comprise it. This is the basis for Gadamer's critique of the statement or "Aussage," which will be taken up at greater length below.²⁷ To say what one means, according to Gadamer, is not only to give verbal expression to certain things, but also to recognize, at least implicitly, that some things do not need to be said in a given situation. In contrast to the statement, to which one can return again and again, language proceeds by means of a succession of utterances, from which interlocutors synthesize a unity of meaning. Each utterance does not stand alone, but is determined by what has gone before.²⁸ Gadamer suggests that conceiving language in terms of statements overlooks the historical situation in which language arises. It removes language from the place where it is most at home, in conversation, and fixes it in immovable propositions.

This analysis is significant for the theological issue of the relation between the media of revelation, Scripture and tradition, and the gospel itself. Very briefly, it suggests what a false understanding of Scripture might be: Scripture as a series of propositional statements. The same can be said about a tradition which regards it self in terms of dogmatic propositions. Such statements, taken out of their historical context, may bring thought to an end, insofar as the subjects of the statements are taken for granted as self-evident entities to which one applies certain predicates. Viewed in this way, Scripture and tradition would scarcely have even a material sufficiency. The Hegelian analysis of the philosophical proposition, we can say, tends to undervalue the authority of the media of revelation. But it does suggest how the relation between subject and predicate might be made more fluid, and how the predicates in theological propositions can put the subjects in question. Does this mean that the full sufficiency of the statements of Scripture and tradition arises only when they are viewed in Hegelian fashion as part of a speculative dialectic? No, because the Hegelian analysis is too greatly oriented toward the statement as that which always, in every case, dissolves into contradiction. By contrast, the language of interpretation follows the logic of conversation, Gadamer argues, in which one need not always strive for a dialectical reversal. Indeed, there are cases in which such striving, like the rigid application of any method, would not serve the cause of the gospel. Instead of applying to the statements of Scripture and tradition a timeless dialectical method, Gadamer suggests that the statements ought to be seen in their historical context.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 441, 442, 444; trans., pp. 423, 424, 426.

²⁷ See the section below entitled "Irreverence toward the Assertion?"

²⁸ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 445-7; trans., pp. 426-9.

Only within such a context, Gadamer claims, can one accurately speak of the criterion for correct understanding and of the completion of understanding. What is that criterion? “It is the content of the tradition itself,” writes Gadamer, “that is the sole criterion and expresses itself in language.”²⁹ Gadamer speaks here of tradition in the general sense as that which encompasses all traditions. He does not refer to a particular tradition, such as that expressed by the Catholic magisterium. Only within the fluidity of tradition in general, according to Gadamer, do particular criteria, each representing tradition in the concrete, manifest themselves. And none of these criteria, Gadamer emphasizes, grant an eternal or omniscient perspective. How then can one affirm them, or pledge one’s allegiance to a concrete tradition? The answer to this question is that one always inevitably does. Everyone has been thrown, to use Heidegger’s term, into a situation. Within that situation, we have seen, certain criteria assume an authoritative status, and one can affirm a tradition as one’s own.³⁰ The further question is, what is the relation between that particular tradition, those limited criteria, and the universality of what is true? Hegel adumbrated the answer with his doctrine of the speculative dialectic: within the finitude of a philosophical proposition, one can mirror an infinity of meaning. But a clearer insight into the matter was achieved by Heidegger’s analyses of reflection and the nature of the thing.

XIII.1.B. Heidegger’s Θεωρία and Christian Interpretation

Gadamer alludes to Heidegger’s analyses at the conclusion of the treatment in Truth and Method of “Language as Experience of the World.” There he advances the thesis that language is not simply a means of communication, but its fulfillment. Human beings do not first decide to agree upon a set of communicative signs, and only then proceed to share their thinking. On the contrary, the shared thinking which is scientific would be impossible without a basis of common premisses supplied by language, as Aristotle suggests in the Posterior Analytics (99b). The Aristotelian passage is one we have already examined in connection with the mind’s ability to synthesize and unify a number of particular experiences.³¹ For Gadamer, it recalls the fact that language and cognition stand upon a foundation which can never be exhaustively analyzed. No more than one can detail the countless adventures and perceptions which make a human being experienced is language susceptible to a movement of reflection, even by the most learned student of linguistics, which would render it a mere tool, an object wholly at one’s disposal. Language is rather the experience of the world, in Gadamer’s phrase, for every synthesis of experience can find expression through it. One may even say, following Gadamer, that language is humanity’s participation in the world, akin to the

²⁹ “[E]s ist der Gehalt der Überlieferung selbst, der allein massgeblich ist und sich zur Sprache bringt.” Ibid., p. 448; trans., p. 430.

³⁰ See above The Philosophical Rehabilitation of Tradition, Chapter VI, esp. the section entitled “Historicality and the Superficial Method.”

³¹ See above The Philosophical Rehabilitation of Tradition, Chapter IV, esp. the sections entitled “The Alternative of Empiricism” and “Overcoming Subjectivity in Absolute Knowledge,” and Chapter VII, “Models of Discourse.”

sacred communion underlying the Greek concept of theory.³² It is in this connection that Gadamer mentions Heidegger.

Heidegger's treatment of theory in Being and Time (1927) is colored by a polemic against those who would claim for natural science a theoretical attitude, i.e., an attitude of studied objectivity and disinterestedness. Such claimants would say that the glory of the scientific enterprise lies in its immediate refusal to be guided by practical, technical, or economic goals. Against them, Heidegger insists that the modern theoretical attitude overlooks significant phenomena by treating reality as brute data, removed from human concern.³³ Furthermore, he argues that the theoretical attitude is not really unconcerned; the scientist, for example, has a practical concern for the matter to be investigated as an object of scientific inquiry.³⁴ The thrust of Heidegger's analysis is that the traditional understanding of the Greek concept of theory – namely, that it is an attitude of wholly disinterested inquiry, taken up when, as Aristotle remarks in the Metaphysics (982^b22-27), all the necessities of life have been secured – is seriously misleading. By reducing all matter of study to objects which are merely present at hand, it overlooks those phenomena, such as the fear of death, which cannot be experienced in an attitude of detachment.³⁵ And the theoretical attitude overlooks its own concern with the objectivity of its method.

Yet by 1954, when Heidegger first gave the lecture entitled "Science and Reflection," he had rehabilitated the concept of theory. Advancing from a twofold etymological analysis of θεωρία, Heidegger contrasts the Greek notion of theory with the modern theoretical attitude. In his first analysis, Heidegger derives theory from θεά (view or aspect) and ὁραω (to see or look). Hence to theorize is to look at the outward appearance of something through which the thing's essential form (Heidegger uses the Platonic term εἶδος) becomes visible. The Greek concept of theory means, first of all, the way in which one penetrates beneath mere appearance to reality. Heidegger's second analysis derives theory from θεά (goddess) and ὄρα (care or concern – Heidegger translates this as reverence). The Greek word for goddess calls to Heidegger's mind the truth which appeared to Parmenides as a goddess. Heidegger then posits a second etymology, according to which theory means a reverent concern for the goddess, truth. The emphasis of this second etymology lies not with how the truth appears, but with how

³² Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 118; trans., p. 111.

³³ Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, p. 138.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 357-363.

³⁵ We have already touched upon the Heideggerian concept of presence at hand above in The Philosophical Rehabilitation of Tradition, Chapter VI, esp. the section entitled "The 'Radicality' of Substance."

it ought to be greeted.³⁶ The Heideggerian analyses point to the Greek distinction between matter and the unseen form which provides it with its identity, and to the reverence which belongs to truth as something divine. One consequence of this is the breakdown of the division between fact and value. Such a division cannot stand when the fact is regarded as an occasion for the encounter with divine truth, the highest value.

What is remarkable about Heidegger's essay is that it distinguishes between the Greek concept of theory and the modern theoretical attitude. The modern attitude, which Heidegger traces back to the Latin "contemplatio" (the study of something cut off, in Heidegger's view, from its ordinary context), is only foreshadowed by the Greeks.³⁷ They preserved the sense of the hiddenness of and the reverence due to truth, a sense which the moderns have lost. No longer does Heidegger make the virtual equation, which we see in Being and Time, of Greek theory and the modern theoretical attitude. "The later Heidegger himself emphasised," Gadamer can remark, "that the experience of the thing has as little to do with the mere establishing of simple being present-at-hand as with the experience of the so-called experimental sciences."³⁸ The experience of a thing in the Greek concept of theory does not take it out of its context and make it a mere object of detached analysis. Theory, in the Greek sense, restores to the thing a certain dignity, the dignity of that through which one glimpses the divine.

Heidegger has emphasized this very point in his essay of 1951, entitled "The Thing." The essay is a polemic against a kind of scientific attitude which diminishes reality by deciding in advance the terms, such as quantifiability, in which the reality of every "thing" is to be grasped. Against such an attitude, Heidegger argues that a thing must be understood in its own terms. The clay wine-jug, which is Heidegger's example, is more than a mere container. Uniting the earth (from which the clay comes and in which the vine is rooted) with the sky (as the source of rain and sun), the jug, pouring out its contents in a liturgy, symbolizes the unity of the human and the divine.³⁹ The thing becomes, in Heidegger's view, the occasion for insights which a cursory examination, or even a detailed scientific inquiry from a theoretical perspective, would never yield. This

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Wissenschaft und Besinnung," in Vorträge und Aufsätze, pp. 52-54. Translation: "Science and Reflection," in The Question Concerning Technology, pp. 163-166.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54; trans., pp. 165-166.

³⁸ "Dass die Erfahrung des Dinges mit der blossen Feststellbarkeit des puren Vorhandenseins so wenig zu tun hat wie mit der Erfahrung der sogenannten Erfahrungswissenschaften, hat gerade der spätere Heidegger selber betont." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 432; trans., p. 413.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Das Ding," in Vorträge und Aufsätze, pp. 171-172; translation, "The Thing," in Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. with an Introduction by Albert Hofstadter (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1971), p. 173.

is significant for our question of the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition. The Hegelian analysis of the philosophical proposition, we saw, tended to undervalue all fixed propositions. Such propositions fail to do justice to the speculative dialectic of thought, and can only be properly understood when the predicate serves to put the subject of the proposition in question by making explicit the contradictions which all reality entails. Heidegger's analysis suggests another approach. It is to see the reality of the thing as an occasion for an encounter with the truth, the truth of which the thing itself is a locus, not a proof. If this can be called a method, it is only to follow, in Hegel's phrase, the movement of the concept itself.⁴⁰

The application of this idea to the question of the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition yields the following train of thought. One could say, in terms of the Hegelian analysis, that the media of revelation, Scripture and tradition, are subordinate to the gospel itself. They are the propositional statements which, although admitting a speculative interpretation by which the predicate would put the subject in question, nevertheless threaten to bring thought to an end. Heidegger, however, suggests that Scripture and tradition also have the dignity of things. They are occasions for the discovery of what is hidden, and are worthy of reverence as epiphanies of truth. Through their concrete reality, one is connected with all that is not concrete. The problem with the Heideggerian analysis is that it might suggest that the truth, shining forth from the thing which is its occasion, has no intrinsic connection with the thing. What does a clay wine-jug, some one might ask, have to do with earth, sky, divinity, and humanity, except in the most far-fetched metaphorical way? Does Heidegger not suggest that the thing is no more than an occasion for thinking whatever comes to mind? And does this not pose a problem for the interpretation of Scripture and tradition, namely, that they might become mere metaphors for truth or the raw material for subjective free association? The Christian believes that Scripture and tradition are not just occasions for an encounter with truth, but are the very media of a once and-for-all revelation of God. Would Scripture and tradition, according to the Heideggerian analysis, not lose the value which Paul ascribes to Scripture, its value for teaching, reproof, correction, and training (2 Tim. 3.16)?

The answer to these objections, it seems to me, lies in tradition itself. Tradition, we have seen, has at least two meanings. In its first meaning, tradition functions in a transcendental sense as that which embraces all traditions, transcending them all as the condition for the possibility of participating in or studying anyone of them. From this perspective, we can say that the connections which Heidegger draws between the clay wine-jug and the realities of human and divine life are not capricious. Instead, they are the possibilities which tradition itself has bequeathed. By analogy, every interpretation of Scripture and tradition is the unfolding or actualizing of what, in those historical realities, was merely potential. Not everything can be drawn from the media of revelation, but

⁴⁰ See above The Philosophical Rehabilitation of Tradition, Chapter IV, esp. the section entitled "The Limits of External Reflection." The best example of Heidegger's "method" is his treatment of the history of ontology. He destroys it in order to grasp its truth (ibid., Chapter VI, esp. the section entitled "Historicality and the Superficial Method").

only that which emerges from tradition (in the transcendental sense) as a possibility for interpretation. Tradition circumscribes possibility.

In its second meaning, tradition functions in a variety of concrete forms, such as Catholicism and Protestantism. In the first case, only those interpretations of Scripture and historical tradition are sanctioned within Catholicism which do not contradict the teachings of the magisterium, which mark the juridical limits of the dogmatic tradition. But within that criterion there is ample room for maneuvering, as the reforms of Vatican II made clear. The Protestant world, in the second case, lacks a doctrine of tradition comparable to the Catholic, but embodies a number of traditions which exert a quasi-judicial force. There are, above all, the documents of the Protestant congregations, such as the Augsburg Confessions of Lutheranism, which define the faith of believers. Moreover, there are the unspoken traditions, which could perhaps be called the mores of a congregation, which shape its life and polity. Last of all (and this is perhaps most difficult for everyone, Catholic as well as Protestant, to see), there is the virtual identification of exegetical method with the tradition of historical criticism. The Protestant reformation coincided with the rise of experimental science, and this particular scientific approach to Christian reality – an approach which, after Heidegger’s critique of the ontology of what is present at hand (an ontology constitutive for the scientific method), we can call a particular “tradition” of inquiry – legislates its own canons of truth and falsehood. Catholicism is by no means innocent of the charge of confusing a scientific world-view with the essence of reality. But it has at least warned, no doubt in its own self-interest, of the pretensions of an all-embracing science. In short, the concrete traditions of the churches prevent the interpretation of Scripture and Christian tradition from becoming an exercise in critical ingenuity. They achieve this result not by wielding an authoritarian power (although there is ample evidence of this), but by embodying authority in Gadamer’s sense of the word. They are a source of insight which has proved itself and continues to do so.⁴¹

XIII.2. The Authority of Saving Truth

Let us summarize the contribution of Hegel and Heidegger to our question of the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition. Hegel, we have seen, regards the philosophic proposition as the focal point of speculative thought. In order that the proposition not bring thought to an end, he emphasizes that it must be interpreted dialectically, i.e., that the predicate be allowed to put the subject in question. This emphasis tends to devalue the proposition, almost making it a mere starting-point for the speculative dialectic. For our purposes, the Hegelian analysis suggests why the propositions of Scripture and tradition have only a material sufficiency. They need to be interpreted rightly in order that their truth remain vital. Heidegger’s emphasis on the dignity of the thing offers a corrective to the Hegelian view. Heidegger suggests how the media of revelation are not simply objects upon which thought performs its scientific operations, but the very places at which humanity can participate, according to the Greek concept of theory, in realities

⁴¹ See above The Philosophical Rehabilitation of Tradition, Chapter VII, esp. the section entitled “Effective Presence and Neglected Claim.”

which are inaccessible to scientific manipulation. Scripture and doctrinal tradition are the expression of the Christian truths which, without those media, would not be known.

The danger posed by Heidegger's analysis, that of severing the intrinsic connection between the thing and the truth it manifests, is defused by the Gadamerian concept of tradition. Seemingly capricious interpretations of Scripture and doctrinal tradition find their transcendental limit in the finite possibilities which tradition in general provides. And they find their concrete limits in the traditions of the churches, which legislate and embody a number of criteria. Gadamer attempts to mediate between Hegel and Heidegger. From Hegel he derives an appreciation for the dialectical movement of thought whose decisive early expression is the Platonic dialogues. From Heidegger he gains an insight into the mystery of beings, among whom are Scripture and tradition, in which being itself is manifest. Gadamer's fundamentally Platonic orientation⁴² – which, however, does not neglect the critique (founded in Aristotle and renewed by Heidegger) of the ideas – tends to subordinate the expressions of truth to the movement of the truth itself.

One sees this, above all, in the Gadamerian concept of authority. According to this concept, an authority is acknowledged as one who has a superior insight into the truth of a matter. Those who acknowledge the authority do not possess an equivalent insight, but recognize that the authority's insight is superior. This means, however, that those who acknowledge authority are in an ambiguous position. They are knowledgeable insofar as they appreciate the authority's knowledge, and ignorant insofar as they do not share that knowledge. Their recognition is an act of knowledge. But they are not masters of the insight which the authority possesses. To their active knowledge corresponds a passivity: they suffer the authority to guide them in matters about which the authority clearly knows more. Gadamer's doctrine of authority suggests one way in which truth is never fully at the knower's disposal. Catholics, for example, who acknowledge the authority of Scripture and tradition, imply by their acknowledgment that they have sufficient insight to recognize the authoritative character of the revelatory media. This disposes Catholic interpreters to be guided by those media. At the same time, the interpreters insist that their interpretations do not usurp or replace the authority of Scripture and tradition. As long as the interpreters remain Catholic, their interpretations will confirm that authority. This does not mean, of course, that new interpretations will not criticize old ones. But it does suggest that, in the relation between Catholic

⁴² In addition to the discussion above in The Philosophical Rehabilitation of Tradition, Chapter VII, "The Idea of Tradition," see Pierre Fruchon, "Herméneutique, langage et ontologie. Un discernement du platonisme chez H.-G. Gadamer," Archives de Philosophie 36 (1973): 529-568; 37 (1974): 223-242, 353-375, 533-571. Hilberath (p. 290) regards Gadamer's Platonic and Christian thought as a sign of the death of the "tragic theology" implicit in Heidegger. And a recent dissertation by a student of the Free University of Amsterdam connects Gadamer's linguistic idea of being-in-the-truth, as a kind of confession of faith, with Plato's opposition to sophistry. See Louise Dorothea Derksen, On Universal Hermeneutics: A Study in the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer (Amsterdam: VU Boekhandel/Uitgeverij, 1983), pp. 217,224.

interpreters and the media of revelation, something like a hermeneutical circle is at work. Gadamer also alludes to this circle-structure when he states that authority already has been acquired and yet always must be acquired again.⁴³

The concept of saving truth, expressed in the Tridentine decree on the canon of Scripture, may serve as an illustration. Saving truths, it must be said, do not save because we show how they save. On the contrary, Christians first believe that salvation has been achieved, and then undertake the theological task of expounding the meaning of their belief. In that exposition, much remains unsaid: the authority of the revelatory media, the manner in which the theologian has come to faith, and the relation of the particular theological exposition to the whole of Christian life. These are matters which belong to what Gadamer would call the effective history of Christianity. Even when one addresses oneself to them, they never come fully to light. Effective history, the term which encompasses those historical forces which remain effective above and beyond a conscious grasp of them, and which accords well with what we have called Gadamer's Platonic orientation, provides a clue to the subordination in Gadamer of expressions of truth to the movement of the truth itself. All assertions about a matter, according to Gadamer, find their context in a historical movement which they never fully express. From this one can infer that theological interpretations or statements of saving truth, while always striving to mirror or grasp their authoritative claim, never exhaust the thought for which they are the authoritative expression. That authority has been acquired independently from the theological exposition of it, and the Christian believes that the media of revelation will continue to acquire it.

XIII.2.A. The Circle-Structure of Understanding

To say that Scripture and tradition shall continue to prove themselves is to anticipate a future which will confirm their authority. This is a point we have already glimpsed in the work of Pannenberg. Following the Heideggerian analysis of "anticipatory resoluteness," Pannenberg draws the conclusion that an anticipation of the future is a part of every historical inquiry. In particular, an anticipation of human destiny shaped by Christian tradition will regard all history as, on the one hand, the unfolding of the consequences of the resurrection and, on the other, a virtually endless opportunity for revising prior interpretations of what the resurrection means.⁴⁴ The Christian interpreter, we would infer from Pannenberg, anticipates that history will illumine the testimony to the resurrection in Scripture and tradition. In that illumination, the media of revelation, whose authority has already been accepted, will prove themselves again.

Such an inference, however, oversteps the boundaries which Pannenberg himself has laid down. Pannenberg's concern is not primarily tradition or authority, but rather the unity of theology and history. He does indeed argue that the Christian interpreter's grasp of history within an eschatological perspective provided by the resurrection is no violation of historical methodology. Rather, it corresponds to the anticipatory structure

⁴³ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 264; trans., p. 248.

⁴⁴ See the section above entitled "The Anticipatory Nature of Understanding."

of all understanding. But Pannenberg does not draw the explicit conclusion that understanding is circular.⁴⁵ He avoids the inference that Scripture (not to mention tradition) possesses an authority for the Christian who, on the basis of its testimony to the resurrection, seeks to interpret the entirety of history in light of that central point, and in that history finds the authority of Scripture corroborated. On the contrary, Pannenberg's aim is to show that a Christian interpretation of history does not violate the canons of critical thought. This follows from his leading idea that Christian theology is an account of what is inherent in the historical testimony to Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁶

As a consequence, Pannenberg returns again and again to what he calls the reflectively liberated critical thought embodied in theology. Theological thought is reflective, according to Pannenberg, because it recognizes its own historical relativity. It is liberated from every concrete manifestation of itself because the anticipatory nature of theological thought denies its own access to the full presence of truth. Hence it is critical because it measures the concrete forms of Christian tradition against the fullness of an anticipated truth, and so constantly revises those forms.⁴⁷ Instead of insisting, with Heidegger, on the circular structure of understanding, Pannenberg is clearly at pains to demonstrate the philosophic and scientific rigor of theology. In this he is pursuing a genuine insight. It is the insight which Catholic theology has also attempted to grasp in its reiteration of the origin in a historical revelation of Christian dogma. There is no point in the theological enterprise where one can say that history ceases to be of any use. On the contrary, theologians must always return to the historical sources in order to deepen the understanding of dogma. The key word, however, is deepen. Theologians do not find in history the basis for faith, as if an impartial historical investigation would lead to it of necessity. Rather, faith comes first, and history confirms it. Pannenberg's program, expressed in the phrase "revelation as history," is comprehensible as an answer to the dialectical theology of early twentieth-century Lutheranism, which eschewed a sole reliance on historical criticism in favor of an encounter with the matter of theology in the word of Scripture.⁴⁸ But in its emphasis on the public character of revelation, that is, the

⁴⁵ Although Pannenberg does use the Gadamerian and Heideggerian term pre-understanding, he denies that the pre-understanding which the interpreter brings to the text necessitates any narrowing of the view of the text. This, however, is implied by the concept of the hermeneutical circle: our understanding of a matter is narrowed (or, more precisely, focused) by the concerns which motivated our investigation in the first place. See Pannenberg, *Grundfragen*, 1.108; trans., 1.118-119. For the view that Pannenberg does approve the hermeneutical circle, cf. Ted Peters, "Truth in History: Gadamer's Hermeneutics and Pannenberg's Apologetic Method," *Journal of Religion* 55 (1975): 36-56, esp. pp. 48, 55.

⁴⁶ See the section above entitled "The Adequacy of the Expressions of Tradition."

⁴⁷ Pannenberg, "Über historische und theologische Hermeneutik," in Pannenberg, *Grundfragen*, 1.149, 151, 152; trans., 1.171, 173, 175.

⁴⁸ See *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg in association with Rolf Rendtorff, Trutz Rendtorff, and Ulrich Wilkens (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht,

openness of revelatory history to impartial historical inquiry, the program of Pannenberg gives relatively little attention to the faith which leads one to read the Scripture as something other than a testimony to the mythical world view of first-century human beings.

XIII.2.A.1. Irreverence toward the assertion?

Having noted this, we are in a position to understand Pannenberg's critique of Gadamer in the 1963 article, "Hermeneutic and Universal History." The critique falls within a generally appreciative Pannenberg's major thesis, with which review of Truth and Method. Gadamer himself agrees, is that every interpretation of history involves, at least implicitly, a projected anticipation of universal history, within which alone the particular event has its ultimate meaning. Furthermore, Pannenberg argues that such an understanding of universal history originated in the Biblical tradition and received its decisive formulation in the reception of the testimony to the resurrection.⁴⁹ Although Pannenberg charges that Gadamer abandons the task of universal history with his insistence on the finitude of human understanding, Gadamer replies that he abandons only the pretension to absolute knowledge of a universal history such as Hegel's. And because Pannenberg does not propose to renew the claim of a Hegelian universal history, says Gadamer, he and the theologian are not, at least in this point, antagonists.

What Gadamer does not reply to is Pannenberg's allegation that "Gadamer would like to separate the language event of understanding from the predicative function of language."⁵⁰ He does not reply because Pannenberg's allegation is true. We have seen that Gadamer, in opposition to Hegel and Plato, argues that an over-emphasis on the "Aussage" or assertion can blind the interpreter to the truth which is always more than its

1961); translation: Revelation as History, trans. David Granskou (New York: The Macmillan Company, and London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd, 1968). Further discussion, with the focal essay "The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth" by Pannenberg, is contained in Theology as History, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., vol. 3 of the series New Frontiers in Theology: Discussions among Continental and American Theologians (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967).

⁴⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Hermeneutik und Universalgeschichte," in Grundfragen, 1.121; trans., 1.135-136. Gadamer refers to this essay as among the valuable responses to his work in the Foreword to the second edition of Truth and Method. In two subsequent essays, Gadamer has stated that he and Pannenberg do not disagree on the unavoidability of universal historical conceptions, at least in practical terms of an inevitable projection into the future of the possibilities of every interpretation. See Gadamer, "Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik," in Kleine Schriften, 1.126-127 (translation: Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 37); and "Das Erbe Hegels," in Gadamer and Habermas, Das Erbe Hegels, pp. 79-80 (translation: Gadamer, Reason in the Age of Science, pp. 60-61).

⁵⁰ "Gadamer möchte nämlich das Sprachgeschehen des Verstehens von der Aussagefunktion der Sprache lösen." Pannenberg, Grundfragen, 1.112; trans., 1.124.

expression.⁵¹ Such an over-emphasis suggests that all knowledge can come to one's explicit awareness, and that language is simply the reflective play of a dialectic which the mind grasps in concepts. In contrast to this Hegelian notion, which regards the interplay of subject and predicate within the assertion as the model of philosophical thought, Gadamer proposes the model of conversation. According to this model, truth is not attained primarily in the formulation of ever-more-precise assertions, whose value consists in their applicability to a variety of situations, but in the dialogue of question and answer which is always adjusting itself to a new historical situation. "To make oneself understood," Gadamer remarks, "means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in the unity of one meaning and to ensure that it be understood in this way."⁵² An assertion, which (by definition) is a sentence taken out of the historical context in which it first arose, differs from the living speech of one who, in every moment, tries to gauge what needs to be said. Pannenberg's argument against Gadamer is based on a sound insight, namely, that the assertion is not Gadamer's idea of the essence of language.

Pannenberg then criticizes Gadamer's thesis that the assertion stands in opposition to the essence of hermeneutical experience. He argues that every experience of language is constituted by assertions. Although Pannenberg concedes that Gadamer's exposition of the unspoken background of every assertion is correct, he denies the conclusion drawn by Gadamer that the background cannot be made fully explicit. In Pannenberg's view, the interpreter must

convert into the form of assertion the unspoken horizon which accompanied the original assertion. Precisely by means of interpretation, to the extent that interpretation really intends to understand the author, *everything* must be turned into assertion; everything that was involved in the formulation of a text – nuances, or frames of reference, of which the author himself was partly unaware – must be made explicit.⁵³

⁵¹ See the section above entitled "Revelatory Media and Hegel's Philosophical Proposition."

⁵² "Sagen, was man meint, sich verständigen, hält im Gegenteil [zu der Aussage] das Gesagte mit einer Unendlichkeit des Ungesagten in der Einheit eines Sinnes zusammen und lässt es so verstanden werden." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 444; trans., p. 426.

⁵³ "Folgt man also dem Argument Gadamer's, wie es in der Tat geboten ist, dann gelangt man nicht etwa über die Aussageform der Sprache hinaus oder hinter sie zurück, sondern dann bringt man – als Ausleger – auch das noch zur Aussage, was in der ursprünglichen Aussage an Ungesagtem mitschwingt. Gerade durch die Auslegung, sofern sie den Autor verstehen will, soll nun erst wirklich *alles* zur Aussage gebracht, ausdrücklich gemacht werden, was an Nuancen und Verweisungszusammenhängen bei der Formulierung eines Textes, zum Teil auch dem Autor unbewusst, mit im Spiele war." Pannenberg, Grundfragen, 1.114; trans., 1.126-127. The translation, according to which one "converts" into an assertion the unspoken horizon which "accompanies" the original

The interpreter is never to hold back, Pannenberg says, from making explicit what the text suggests. The unspoken horizon which moves with the assertions of a text should be made plain. Indeed, this is the very point which Gadamer, in Pannenberg's opinion, fails to see. The unspoken horizon remains unspoken only when the text is treated abstractly, Pannenberg claims, by one who pays no attention to that horizon. The attentive reader, however, will heed what is implied by the text, even when the implication is not fully intended by the author. The reader is under a moral imperative to make every nuance explicit. Everything, Pannenberg insists, must be turned into an assertion.

Pannenberg's imperative is motivated by a concern for scientific rigor. If the meaning of the interpreted object cannot be brought to expression, then the object is of dubious value to science. Only insofar as one can objectify the meaning of a text can one make valid historical inferences from it. This is of inestimable importance for the task of understanding theology as history. If Christian theology is not grounded in a revelation which opens itself to an impartial historical investigation, Pannenberg would say, then such theology loses its public character and its right to a hearing within the scientific community. The apologetic thrust of Pannenberg's work is that Christian faith is based upon an affirmation of the Biblical witness to God, a witness which is rationally credible.⁵⁴ The demonstration of this is a common concern of many modern theologians, who strain to deny that Christianity is anything other than an undogmatic appeal to mind and heart.⁵⁵ They want to detach Christianity from every superstitious accretion which might have survived the Enlightenment's critique of religion. The question, however, is whether an emphasis on the assertion and on the public character of theology does justice to Gadamer's insight into the unexpressed context of every assertion.

XIII.2.A.2. The limits to Pannenberg's imperative

Pannenberg is doubtless correct to emphasize that without assertions, no understanding is possible. This is trivially true in the sense that assertions comprise every conversation. It is profoundly true in that, debating the meaning of propositions, interlocutors unfold the reality which in the assertion becomes present. Pannenberg's

assertion, conceals the implication of Pannenberg that one must first detach the unspoken from the spoken words with which it moves, and bring it (not simply convert it) to expression.

⁵⁴ Peters, "Truth in History," Journal of Religion 55 (1975): 55.

⁵⁵ David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), p. 177. Although Tracy states (p. 214) that Christianity is both a proclaimed word (or appeal) and a manifestation of a reality in which Christians participate, his sympathies lie with Christianity as proclamation. The proclaimed word, he says, mitigates against the communal myths which participation in a community entails. In this emphasis on proclamation, Tracy draws close to Pannenberg's insistence on the assertion as the model for the hermeneutical experience.

assertion is like Heidegger's thing, the occasion for an encounter with what is present but unsaid. Heidegger, however, would never demand what Pannenberg does. He would never insist that every implication of a text be made explicit. The reason for refusing such a demand is not simply that it cannot be achieved due to human finitude. Pannenberg himself realizes that.⁵⁶ More to the point, Heidegger would refuse the demand to make every implication an explicit assertion because such a willful demand is an expression of the forgetfulness of being. Pannenberg's demand overlooks the fact that every interpretation manifests only the possibilities which destiny has bequeathed. One can only express what one sees, and one cannot see everything.

This is integral to Gadamer's conception of language as the horizon of a hermeneutical ontology. When Gadamer says that language has the capacity to reflect not just beings, but a relation to the whole of being, he is not trying to overstep the Heideggerian problem.⁵⁷ His aim is not to show that being is identical to language, and can be come patent or present at hand in it. He means instead that one expresses in language, without even trying to do so, a participation in being itself. Such participation, which includes the theologian's faith and acknowledgment of the authority of the media of revelation, underlies every explicit Christian assertion. If one could fulfill Pannenberg's demand that the unspoken horizon of every assertion be turned into assertions, then perhaps one could say that both Scripture and doctrinal tradition contain salvific truth with a sufficiency that is formal as well as material. Yet who could fulfill such a demand? The one who tries to do so would find that the world itself, to paraphrase St. John, does not contain the books which would have to be written.

It must be admitted that Pannenberg's imperative well formulates the moral task of interpreters. They are morally obliged to express what is apparent to them in the media of revelation, even when that expression will incur the displeasure of others. This is an important and admirable part of the theologian's Protestant heritage. But the demand of Pannenberg to express all, as if that would guarantee the reflective, liberated, and critical status of theology, does not do justice to the circle-structure of understanding. According to that structure, every interpretation is based at least in part on unexpressed pre-understandings which, if not irreformable, nevertheless guide the interpretation. They help constitute tradition, guide all knowledge of it, and significantly form the interpreter's historical being.⁵⁸ This marks the transcendental limit to Pannenberg's

⁵⁶ It is due to his appreciation of human finitude that Pannenberg claims that the choice between absolute objectivity and non-objectifying discourse is a false alternative. See Pannenberg, *Grundfragen*, 1.114 footnote; trans., 1.127 footnote.

⁵⁷ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 445; trans., p. 426.

⁵⁸ Tradition can be called a principle of knowledge in that concrete traditions manifest, and enable the induction of, Christian tradition in general; this general tradition then becomes a model for all efforts to discriminate between traditions. See Walter Kasper, "Tradition als Erkenntnisprinzip. Systematische Überlegungen zur theologischen Relevanz der Geschichte," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 155 (1975): 198-215, esp. pp. 203-204, 213.

demand. To that circle-structure, I would say, belong the Christian interpreter's faith and willingness to acknowledge the authority of the media of revelation. These are the sine qua non of every Christian interpretation, and play a part in all theological understanding. "In understanding," writes Gadamer, "we are drawn into an event of truth and arrive, as it were, too late, if we want to know what we ought to believe."⁵⁹ This remark can wrongly be taken to mean that belief is irrational, but that is hardly Gadamer's point. He would be the last to suggest that humanity surrender to the irrational and relinquish the task of clarifying, by critical scrutiny, what we believe to be true. What Gadamer means is that all knowledge is based upon prior beliefs, and that one cannot know what to believe without already believing. Knowledge of beings is based on an unthematized relation to being itself. This is a truth to which Pannenberg, with his emphasis on making all unspoken assumptions manifest, pays insufficient heed.

XIII.2.B. The Sufficiency of Tradition

Gadamer's remark, that we come too late if we want to know what we ought to believe, clarifies the presuppositions of the question of the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition. That is not to say, of course, that Gadamer thematizes those presuppositions. Rather, he points to their inevitability. The existence of beliefs precedes every attempt to catalogue them and submit them to the bar of reason. In every case, Gadamer says, explicit knowledge stands upon a foundation of inexplicit presuppositions. Some of these stem from our participation in family, society, and a linguistic milieu. Others, the beliefs with which we are here concerned, stem from Christian religious faith. It is the task of theology to explicate the foundations of that faith by means of an interpretation of the media of revelation. But the value of Gadamer's analysis lies in the reminder that the explication of belief is itself founded upon beliefs which never yield to full thematization. One can well assert that Christian dogma is rooted in a historical revelation, and that the history of revelation is open to general inquiry. But the inquiry will not suffice to explain why Christians believe the testimony of the media of revelation. And it is no shortcoming of historical methodology that Scripture and traditions do not awaken faith in every historian.

The Gadamerian insight into the presuppositions of all knowledge also enables us to see why the theological phrase "material sufficiency" can mislead. One might interpret such a phrase, in the application of it to Scripture by Catholics, as signifying that all the truths of the gospel are implicit in Scripture but not yet understood. The corollary would be that they need understanding to be formally sufficient. But such an interpretation would raise, from Gadamer's perspective, the following question: how could one affirm even the material sufficiency of Scripture if one did not first understand the Scripture, at least to the extent that one acknowledged its authority? The problem with the material sufficiency of Scripture is not that the Scripture has not been understood, but that it has been wrongly understood. The Catholic insistence on the

⁵⁹ "Wir sind als Verstehende in ein Wahrheitsgeschehen einbezogen und kommen gleichsam zu spät, wenn wir wissen wollen, was wir glauben sollen." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 465; trans., p. 446.

merely material sufficiency of Scripture is not intended to raise an artificial distinction between the truth of Scripture in itself and our appropriation of it. Rather, it aims to clarify the fact that, even for those who insist that their Christianity is based upon the Bible, it is the understanding of the Bible which is paramount. That alone can explain why different people, appealing to the same book, can mean different things.

The issue of a proper interpretation of the media of revelation involves the question of tradition. An understanding is proper only in terms of the criteria which tradition has bequeathed. This is as true for the interpretation of Scripture as it is for the interpretation of the doctrines of dogmatic tradition. Both are assessed according to historically-mediated criteria. Upon those who would challenge this thesis, as one which leads to a nihilistic relativism, falls the burden of showing an alternative to it. The school of Heidegger and Gadamer has demonstrated that there are no criteria which have not been shaped by tradition. The only persuasive criticism of the norms which are accepted within a tradition, it seems to me, is one which shows that some norms have become incompatible with other norms which are equally a part of the tradition. A good example of this is the criticism of certain traditions (such as the tradition of Latin as the liturgical language of Roman Catholicism) in the light of other traditions (such as that of Christian celebrations in the vernacular). There was, in the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (December 4, 1963), no implication of a break with the general tradition of the Church in making provisions for use of vernacular languages. The documents of Vatican II never suggest that Catholics can wholly extricate themselves from one way of looking at the Christian life and freely embrace another way. For this reason it is better to understand the thought of the council as a reform rather than a revolutionary shift in paradigms.⁶⁰ The council fathers were not persuaded to completely overthrow traditions, but to revise them in terms of other practices, equally a part of tradition, as a new situation demanded.

Tradition has been used in this discussion in two ways, and we can see that Christian tradition has to do with both of them. There is, first of all, tradition in the general sense, akin to the movement of history itself, within which all traditions have their place. Secondly, there are the particular traditions which manifest tradition in the first sense. Christian tradition is part of the movement of history itself, and so belongs to

⁶⁰ The problem with using the term "paradigm shift" to explain reforms in Christian tradition is that, while the formula rightly connotes the slow development of change, it can also suggest that change is ultimately a matter of purely rational choice. This suggestion contradicts the Gadamerian notion of effective history. See Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd enlarged edition, vol. 2, no. 2 of the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 92-93.

For some Catholic commentators, however, this limitation of the term "paradigm shift" poses no problem. They would prefer a theology of change to a theory of accumulated tradition. See T. Howland Sanks, Authority in the Church: A Study in Changing Paradigms, American Academy of Religion Dissertation Series, number 2 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars' Press, 1974), pp. 116, 175.

tradition in general. But it has manifested itself in a multitude of ways, among which are the particular confessional traditions and their teachings. These traditions are examples of tradition in the second sense. One advantage of the Catholic treatment of dogmatic tradition is that it makes plain the nature of tradition as teachings. Such a tradition involves a truth, fully expressed in an assertion, and an understanding of the truth, which cannot be so expressed. These correspond to the scholastic terms matter and form. To be sure, the formal understanding of the matter of truth can and must be expressed. Such expression of the truths of Christianity is the essence of theology. But such expression cannot logically compel another to share that understanding. This is among the insights which Gadamer has drawn from the Seventh Letter of Plato. It corresponds to the theological doctrine of the “*potentia oboedientialis*,” according to which every person is only potentially obedient to the dictates of the conscience.⁶¹ With this in mind, one can understand why the Scriptures enjoy only a material sufficiency in Catholic theology. They contain all the truths necessary for salvation, but do not compel an understanding of them. Such truths are materially and formally sufficient only when they are rightly understood. One achieves this understanding within the general Christian tradition extending back to Christ and the apostles. Is this tradition formally and materially sufficient? And is it equivalent to the teaching of the magisterium?

An affirmative answer necessitates a revision of the scholastic terminology. Without a doubt, one can assert that Christian tradition formally and materially contains the truths of salvation, in that it has transmitted those truths intact and understands them. When theologians of tradition, such as Franzelin, define tradition as doctrine, they do not mean just doctrinal formulations. Rather, they include the objective truth and the act of transmitting it with understanding. But the force of this doctrine is somewhat impeded by the insistence that the magisterium alone transmits the tradition in a juridically authoritative way. The Catholic does believe this. But such an insistence can be misunderstood to suggest that only the magisterium fully grasps the truths of faith, and that other Catholics must hold to the truths in blind obedience. This is the danger of a scholastic definition of tradition as doctrine which assigns the authoritative transmission of tradition to the magisterium alone. It must be said that the theologians of the period before Vatican II did grant to the faithful a role in the activity of tradition, and even infallibility insofar as the faithful participate in the “*consensus fidelium*.”⁶² Yet by stressing that only the magisterium possesses the charisma of juridical guarantor of the tradition, the so-called modern theologians of tradition frequently conveyed the impression that the faithful play no part in active tradition. Today, in a post-Vatican II situation, we can put the juridical power of the magisterium in a broader context. The activity of understanding and transmitting Christian tradition, an activity which embraces the whole of the Scriptural testimony, belongs to the entire Church, and encompasses in a

⁶¹ Karl Rahner, Hörer des Wortes. Zur Grundlegung einer Religionsphilosophie (1940), newly annotated by J. B. Metz (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1963), esp. chap. 1. Translation: Hearers of the Word, trans. Michael Richards (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

⁶² Mackey, The Modern Theology of Tradition, pp. 116-122.

sufficient way the truths of the gospel. The magisterium expresses them authoritatively, but this expression by no means exhausts their meaning.

The Protestant objection to the doctrine of the sufficiency of tradition stems largely from the conviction that an authoritarian church could propose anything as divine tradition and compel acknowledgment of it. The Protestant Scripture principle appears in this light as a criterion for Christian truth which stands over against tradition. While Protestants freely concede that the documents of Scripture are merely the letter as opposed to the Spirit, and that the Scriptures must be rightly understood to serve as a criterion, nevertheless they remain for Protestantism the final criterion for distinguishing between the genuine Christian tradition and distortions of it.⁶³ The value of the Scriptures as criteria consists in their independence from tradition. Gadamer's doctrines of effective history and application, however, put the independence of the Scriptures in question. Effective history suggests that, in every Scriptural interpretation, historical forces are at work of which the interpreter is not aware. Application suggests that there is always an accommodation of the Scriptures for the present. Gadamer would insist that the interpretation of scripture belongs to the working-out of tradition. In what sense, then, are the Scriptures independent? Their independence consists in their irreformability. Unlike Scriptural interpretations and the dogmatic tradition, which must always be newly expressed in terms of a changing situation, the Scriptures exist in a fixed form. They are the unique and positively inspired word of God. Catholics hold to this as well as Protestants. But Catholics insist that the Scriptures, conceived in and of themselves, are only materially sufficient. They are not independent of tradition in the act of understanding. And the act of understanding is always for the Christian already shaped by the Church.⁶⁴

To assert that Scripture achieves full sufficiency only when understood within the Catholic tradition may wrongly suggest that the only criteria for Christian truth are historically relative. The Catholic theologian acknowledges on faith the authority of the media of revelation. Subsequent study of those media confirms their authority as criteria. What one believes becomes the criterion for belief. This is indeed a hermeneutical circle. But it is not relativistic, unless one can propose a kind of theology or thought which escapes such a circle. Gadamer suggests that there is none. Those who seek a criterion for truth apart from the historical movement wherein truth reveals its authority are pursuing an illusion. This Gadamerian insight marks a contribution, however indirect, to

⁶³ "Scripture, Tradition and Traditions," report of The Theological Commission on Tradition and Traditions of the World Council of Churches, in The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal, 1963, ed. P. C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer (New York: Association Press, 1964), pp. 50-61, esp. pp. 51-53. Brian Gaybba's analysis of the W.C.C. report is correct to infer a rift between the divine and the human in the Protestant position. See Gaybba, The Tradition: An Ecumenical Breakthrough? (A Study of a Faith and Order Study) (Rome: Herder, 1971), pp. 104, 249.

⁶⁴ Walter Kasper, Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1965), p. 118.

the theology of tradition. It suggests that *the acknowledgment of the authority of Scripture and tradition as the media of revelation is an act of reason, which is always an expression of belief*. Gadamer would doubtless reject the Catholic tradition principle, according to which Christian tradition is authoritatively transmitted by the magisterium. But he would not deny that every interpretation belongs to tradition, within which even the Catholic acknowledgment of magisterial authority plays a part. In short, there is no objection within philosophical hermeneutics to the Catholic claim, and many features (such as the doctrines of application, effective history, and authority) which illuminate it.