

## CHAPTER VII GADAMER AND THE IDEA OF TRADITION

In the rehabilitation of tradition proposed by Gadamer we find a synthesis and reconciliation of Hegel and Heidegger. Such a thesis is hard to prove, however, for while Gadamer may have enlisted the thought of his predecessors, drawing them into the ranks of his philosophical hermeneutics, still the question may be asked as to whether Hegel and Heidegger have been conscripted of their own free will. Clearly they stand together only in tension. Hegel, we have seen, emphasized the rationality of history, a rationality embodied in tradition. The discrepancy between then and now, between what has been transmitted from the past and present belief, is overcome by means of the Hegelian dialectic. Thought corresponds to what is and was, grasping them in such a way that they are absorbed into it and lose their alien character. Hegel's train of thought culminates in the optimistic vision of absolute knowledge, a knowledge which dissolves the opposition between the knower and the known. But this absolute knowledge has its dark side, as Gadamer has observed, for it seemingly renders superfluous the experience of the new.

In contrast to Hegel, Heidegger insisted upon the sobering perspective of human finitude. He regarded the Cartesian effort to discover ultimate self-certainty, the Kantian proposal to restructure metaphysics along natural-scientific lines, and the Nietzschean rejection of the Platonic ideas, all as part of the growing culmination of metaphysics. That culmination, beginning with Hegel's absolute knowledge, corresponds to the forgetfulness of being. Through such forgetfulness, in which the difference between being and beings almost disappears, being secretly waxes stronger. It threatens to overpower humanity as the fate of the will to will, that is, the will that a finite humanity shall blindly will, heedless of its fate. Heidegger, rejecting the Hegelian view of a knowledge in which the difference between the knower and the known is abolished, contemplated instead the meaning of being which can never become an object of knowledge. He saw that when being becomes an object of knowledge, it ceases to be what it is: that which all knowledge presupposes. Rather than objectifying it, he sought to evoke it in its difference from other beings, to make it present in its seeming absence from the tradition of Western thought. Therein lies Heidegger's contribution to the rehabilitation of tradition. Yet, as Gadamer plainly suggests, the mantle of a rehabilitator of tradition would weigh heavily on Heidegger's shoulders. Even at the end of his life, he regarded himself as some thing of a revolutionary who broke with tradition.

It is the great merit of Gadamer's work to have demonstrated the compatibility of Hegelian and Heideggerian thought. An early acquaintance with Plato enabled Gadamer to understand Hegel's dialectic other than as a skeptical weapon aimed at the dissolution of all positivity. That was, after all, how the sophists employed dialectic. Instead, the work of Hegel came to be seen by Gadamer as the systematic exposition of the way in which Socrates himself unfolded the dimensions of whatever question was brought to his attention. Against Hegel's absolute knowledge, which would make further experience superfluous, Gadamer can invoke the Heideggerian critique of Hegel. According to this critique, knowledge could never do without further experience, for only in such

experience does that upon which knowledge is based manifest itself. But Heidegger, far from being merely an antidote against Hegel, offered Gadamer an insight into the productive power of human finitude. The limits of absolute knowledge in such finitude have another, positive side. This side shows itself in the realization that the same phenomenon means different things at different times. The same statement may be appropriate at one moment and inappropriate at another. Heidegger expressed this, as we saw, in his treatment of the hermeneutical circle, according to which our temporal anticipation of the whole molds our interpretation of the parts, and the parts shape our temporal anticipation of the whole. Was Hegel not pursuing the same truth when he discussed the dialectical unity of being and nothingness?

Gadamer's synthesis of Hegel and Heidegger has determined the shape of his own contribution to the rehabilitation of tradition. From Hegel's critique of Kant, in which the acknowledgment of the limits of reason are shown to be already a transcending of those limits, Gadamer gained a critical understanding of epistemological theories of knowledge. Knowledge, he realized, always outstrips our ability to give a theoretical justification of it. Gadamer's doctrine of effective history, which expresses the effect upon human beings of a past of which they may not even be aware, and which may thus escape theory, is of central importance, as we shall see, to tradition. It suggests that the study of tradition yields a truth which epistemology can justify, but not anticipate.

For that reason, Gadamer willingly acknowledges the authority of tradition. By that he means that in tradition one encounters insights superior to the present insights of modern life. He draws this doctrine of authority indirectly from Hegel, for whom all history expresses the aspirations of the human spirit to realize its true self, and from Heidegger, who discovered in the ontological tradition the spoor of the forgotten meaning of being. Such a meaning cannot be encompassed in description or definition. It shows itself in its difference from that through which it is shown, much as justice shows itself in abstraction from legal decisions. The Heideggerian difference between being and beings also helped Gadamer define his doctrine of application. What truly is can never be grasped purely as an abstract universal, Gadamer teaches, but demands a concrete application. So tradition does not exist as a universal to be understood merely in a theoretical way, but comes to light in the application of particular traditions. We shall contend that, in Gadamer's view, tradition is an idea which reveals and transmits itself in our application of it.

No one would want to assert that the work of Gadamer achieves a perfect reconciliation between Hegel and Heidegger. Too many difficulties remain, such as Hegel's absolute knowledge and Heidegger's revolutionary self-image as the destroyer of tradition. The further question as to whether Hegel or Heidegger would approve of Gadamer's appropriation of them is beyond the scope of our present analysis. But it can be said, as we saw in Chapter V, that both figures were aware of the inexorability of history: history moves independently of our attempts to influence it. It is the cunning of reason to put Hegel's thought to uses he may not have foreseen, and within the fate of being, as Heidegger might put it, all thought, even Heidegger's own, is entangled. The two figures upon whom Gadamer has relied so heavily should not complain about the

uses to which they have been put. The Gadamerian doctrines central to the rehabilitation of tradition – effective history, authority, and application – may not have been foreseen by Hegel and Heidegger, but are certainly foreshadowed by them.

### VII.1. Reception of the Rehabilitation of Tradition

The appearance in 1960 of Gadamer's Truth and Method (subtitled "The Basic Features [Grundzüge] of a Philosophical Hermeneutics) provoked an enormous reaction in the critical world. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics makes a double proposal, the two aspects of which are implicit in the following sentence from the foreword to Truth and Method's second edition: "My starting point," Gadamer writes, "is that the historic human sciences, as they emerged from German romanticism and became imbued with the spirit of modern science, maintained a humanistic heritage which distinguishes them from all other kinds of modern research and brings them close to other, quite different, extra scientific experiences, and especially those proper to art."<sup>1</sup> The first of Gadamer's two proposals, then, is to deepen the understanding of the humanistic heritage. This understanding encompasses the various meanings of hermeneutics: its Aristotelian roots,<sup>2</sup> its Protestant connotations of Biblical interpretation freed from Roman Catholic tradition,<sup>3</sup> its psychological turn in Dilthey,<sup>4</sup> and its phenomenological form in Heidegger.<sup>5</sup> In addition to deepening the humanistic heritage, Gadamer proposes, in his philosophical hermeneutics, to overcome the alienation between the knower and the known characteristic of modern research. Hermeneutics thus becomes not only the preservation of culture, but a corrective to the excesses of scientific methodology. The excesses targeted by Gadamer are aesthetic and historical consciousness. To these he opposes his own hermeneutical consciousness, modeled on

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<sup>1</sup> "Ich gehe vielmehr davon aus, dass die historische Geisteswissenschaften, wie sie aus der deutschen Romantik hervorgingen und sich mit dem Geist der modernen Wissenschaft durchdrangen, ein humanistisches Erbe verwalten, das sie gegenüber allen anderen Arten moderner Forschung auszeichnet und in die Nähe ganz andersartiger ausserwissenschaftlicher Erfahrungen, insbesondere der der Kunst, bringt." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. xvi; trans., p. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter VI above, esp. the section entitled "Merely Formal Dialectics."

<sup>3</sup> See A Reconsideration of the Modern Theology of Tradition, esp. the "Introduction."

<sup>4</sup> See Wilhelm Dilthey, "Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik" (1900), in Dilthey, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 5: Die geistige Welt, pp. 317-331. Translation: "The Development of Hermeneutics," in W. Dilthey: Selected Writings, ed., trans., and introduced by H. P. Rickman (Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 246-260.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter VI above, esp. the section entitled "Historicality and the Superficial Method."

the experience of the work of art.<sup>6</sup> The dual program of philosophical hermeneutics is, in sum, extremely broad. It embraces the nurture of tradition and the critique of scientism.

As such, it has drawn considerable academic attention, including numerous articles and at least two entire books.<sup>7</sup> A full review of this critical reception is beyond the scope of the present treatment of Gadamer. If we confine ourselves to our particular interest, the rehabilitation of tradition, we have ample material for investigation. What is remarkable, in this profusion of material, is the relative absence (outside the theological literature on Gadamer) of appreciation for the rehabilitation of tradition. Most discussions of it, we can generalize, are either merely tolerant or openly hostile. Of those who tolerate it, many do so as a defiant gesture against those who deny the influence of history upon objective understanding. Some even go so far as to advocate a notion of hermeneutics fundamentally at variance with Gadamer's deepest concerns. They regard the rehabilitation of tradition as part of the historical relativism of all interpretation: since all interpreters are bound within the prejudices of their tradition, some have said, why not tolerate those prejudices, treating one's own point of view with the same skepticism one treats the views of others?<sup>8</sup> This kind of reception of Gadamer's doctrine flies in the face of his critique of sophism, apparent in his earliest publications on Plato.

Discussions of Gadamer which are hostile to the rehabilitation of tradition approach that doctrine from two angles. First, there are those for whom the rehabilitation of tradition undercuts the objectivity of interpretation. If human beings are caught in a tradition which shapes their understanding of reality, these critics say, then the notion of truth, secured by firm interpretive canons, must be abandoned. Second, there are those for whom the rehabilitation of tradition means a conservative advocacy of the existing

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<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 336-344; trans., pp. 317-325. See Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, esp. the sections entitled "Aesthetic Consciousness" and "Romantic Hermeneutics."

<sup>7</sup> The two books, Bernd Jochen Hilberath's Theologie zwischen Tradition und Kritik and Heinz Gunther Stobbe's Hermeneutik – ein ökumenisches Problem, treat the significance of Gadamer for Catholic theology, and so shall be discussed in the final section of the present dissertation. It should be noted, however, that Hilberath's book contains a most extensive and accurate exposition of Gadamer's major themes, as well as a thorough review of the critical reception of Gadamer's work in Germany.

<sup>8</sup> This is the argument of Richard Rorty, who regards Truth and Method's discussion of the humanist tradition as providing "a sense of the relativity of descriptive vocabularies to periods, traditions, and historical accidents" (Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 362). Rorty confuses the legitimate opposition to an all-devouring methodology with the repudiation of the belief that there is indeed something "out there in the world" to which thought does conform – which is nothing other than a repudiation of Plato's ideas, and hence anathema to Gadamer. See the section below entitled "The Positive Content of Idealism."

state of affairs. The insight that all understanding is historical may lead to resignation in the face of injustice perpetuated by traditional institutions. The two forms of hostility to Gadamer's doctrine, which might be called the objectivist and the emancipatory, draw from that doctrine consequences which are exact opposites. For the objectivist understanding, the rehabilitation of tradition can make the object of interpretation so fluid that it can mean anything. For the emancipatory understanding, such rehabilitation can so cement tradition in place that nothing can dissolve it. Let us begin by filling out what we have sketched in broad strokes. Why has Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition inspired either tepid appreciation or open hostility?

#### VII.1.A. Tepid Approval in Opposition to Scientific Objectivity

Of those who are receptive to Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition, Richard E. Palmer (b. 1933) is perhaps the most sympathetic. His 1969 Hermeneutics gives a fine explication of tradition in the broad sense as that which constitutes the historicity of human beings. Tradition, in Palmer's paraphrase of Gadamer, is the transparent medium in which we exist ("as invisible as water to a fish") and the context within which reason pronounces judgments.<sup>9</sup> It is, in this respect, very much like an over-arching world view. That is not to say, however, that Palmer is insensitive to tradition as a particular doctrine present in an artifact. He acknowledges that the method appropriate to the hermeneutical situation is one which places the interpreter in an attitude of openness to particular traditions.<sup>10</sup> Far from suggesting that an all-embracing tradition shapes (and so relativizes) our interpretation of particular traditions, Palmer insists that hermeneutical experience is "objective." It is objective in that interpreters conform themselves in ways sanctioned by tradition to the forms which tradition has bequeathed.<sup>11</sup> To this extent, Palmer's understanding of the Gadamerian rehabilitation of tradition is close to Gadamer's deepest concerns.

Yet Palmer's excellent work declines, in its final "hermeneutical manifesto," from an even-handed exposition to a harsh prophetism. There Palmer repudiates the assumptions of Anglo-American "New Criticism" that one can speak with confidence of the objective meaning of literary works. Such an attack has become common in recent years, and Palmer's advocacy of the more comprehensive mode of understanding derived from Heidegger and Gadamer is appealing. But the proclamation of hermeneutical manifestoes is rather foreign to the idea of the rehabilitation of tradition. One may well reject, with Palmer, the will to dominate the interpretive experience expressed in such terms as "mastery of the subject" and "attacking" the matter of the text.<sup>12</sup> But does one

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<sup>9</sup> Richard E. Palmer, Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 177, 183.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

not risk, in renouncing the techniques of the New Critics, a mere replacement of them with another technique, derived from continental theorists? Palmer's decision to prophesy to the New Critics, instead of seeing himself as their heir and inquiring into the truth of their doctrines, clearly marks a limit to his understanding of the rehabilitation of tradition.

A similar reproach can be made against more recent exponents of Gadamer whose interest lies in showing what the rehabilitation of tradition is not, rather than in what it is. David C. Hoy's The Critical Circle (1978), for example, argues that Gadamer's hermeneutics entails neither philosophical relativism nor reactionary conservatism. Hermeneutics is not relativistic, says Hoy, because Gadamer shows that, in every interpretive situation, there is a "nature of the matter" to which disputants can refer.<sup>13</sup> And it is not reactionary, he continues, because Gadamer's appeal to tradition is pragmatic rather than dogmatic.<sup>14</sup> The appeal is not made to reinforce convention, but to suggest that, in every interpretation, tradition is always effective. Hoy spiritedly defends Gadamer from the detractors of the rehabilitation of tradition. But when it comes to showing what that rehabilitation means, Hoy confines himself to expounding its corrective value. Tradition, he says, prevents the interpreter from slipping into arbitrariness, for (without being a norm) it provides the context within which an interpretation succeeds or fails.<sup>15</sup> It keeps thought from becoming totally conscious of the tradition in which it stands.<sup>16</sup> Hoy even goes so far as to give philosophical hermeneutics the essentially negative function of critique, accommodating Gadamer to his opponents on the very matter which most divides them.<sup>17</sup> Hoy's Critical Circle, in brief, portrays the compatibility between Gadamer's thought and that of many popular theorists within post-structuralism and post modernism. But Gadamer's rehabilitation of

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<sup>13</sup> David Couzens Hoy, The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 71, 95.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176, footnote 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130. Hoy quotes Gadamer's "Replik" to Habermas and the critical theorists, in which Gadamer states that philosophical hermeneutics is a "critically reflective knowledge" (Gadamer, "Replik zu 'Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik'," in Kleine Schriften, 4.121). Gadamer defends himself in this essay against those who say that his work leads to an uncritical acceptance of ideology. But, while hermeneutics is reflectively critical, Gadamer's efforts are directed more towards a positive idea of truth than towards the goal of an endless reflectivity in the style of the critical theorists. See the sections below entitled "The Positive Content of Idealism" and "The Subordination of Reason to Reflection."

tradition does not clearly emerge in the book's discussion of contemporary literary criticism.

Nor, can we say, does it emerge against the background of analytic philosophy. This is the starting-point of Roy J. Howard in his Three Faces of Hermeneutics (1982). The first of these faces, analytic philosophy, concerns itself with the necessary logical conditions for any object under discussion. Howard begins by advancing the argument that all efforts to establish a universal causality "are inherently self-defeating."<sup>18</sup> One always begins philosophizing with a set of assumptions which are, in a sense, beyond justification. Howard then draws a connection between this point and Gadamer's concept of the productivity of the interpreter's acquired opinions or pre-understanding.<sup>19</sup> According to Gadamer, the historical situation of the interpreter is not simply a source of prejudices to be overcome, but a productive possibility. Due to the interpreter's temporal situation, which no other interpreter shares in exactly the same way, new dimensions of the interpretive object can be unfolded.<sup>20</sup> Howard appreciates the link between Gadamer and the acknowledgment by analytic philosophers of assumptions which are beyond justification. He notes that such a link opposes the "monomethodologism" of an all-encompassing logical positivism.<sup>21</sup>

But Howard, like Hoy, allows his exposition of Gadamer to be guided to an extreme degree by Gadamer's opponents. This obscures the relevance of the rehabilitation of tradition. In Howard's case, Gadamer is presented as the antithesis to logical positivism. Unlike the logical positivists, described as advocates of the view that all scientific knowledge is reducible to verifiable laws, Gadamer's hermeneutics suggests the limits of law.<sup>22</sup> Those limits were laid out by Aristotle, who offered the concept of *επιείκεια* – reasonableness or Equity – as a corrective to the absoluteness of laws or statements about justice.<sup>23</sup> From this Gadamer draws the conclusion that every question about what should be cannot be answered apart from the concrete Situation of those who are making the decision.<sup>24</sup> Every interpretive issue resists accommodating itself to the

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<sup>18</sup> Roy J. Howard, Three Faces of Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Current Theories of Understanding (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982), p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>20</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 281; trans., pp. 264-265.

<sup>21</sup> Howard, Three Faces, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Howard, p. 25, accepts the analysis of positivism by Georg Henrik von Wright, Explanation and Understanding (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1137<sup>b</sup>24-26.

<sup>24</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 303-4; trans., pp. 285-6.

schemes of those who, standing apart from the issue, attempt to legislate it in advance. Aristotle's analysis is exemplary for Gadamer as a counter-concept to technological thought and as a testimony to the relevance of the Aristotelian tradition.

But for Howard, only the first of these is emphasized. Gadamer becomes the proponent of the heterodox notion that Aristotle's natural law is changeable.<sup>25</sup> Gadamer means that the natural law has to be applied to a concrete and changing situation in order to be truly known.<sup>26</sup> Howard's ambiguous analysis, however, could be interpreted as a suggestion of what Gadamer explicitly rejects, i.e., the notion that natural law is a mere convention. The suggestion arises because Howard is staunchly opposed to the positivistic emphasis on verification, and in this he can legitimately enlist Gadamer as an ally. But Howard never expresses concern that Gadamer may be vulnerable to the charge of relativism. Instead, he seems to feel that this is not an issue, and does not distinguish between relativism and the Gadamerian concept of historical truth. He merely says that Gadamer "does not suppose that truth is timeless."<sup>27</sup> Howard does not elaborate this generalization. But it is, we can say, somewhat rash. The issue of historical truth, within which the rehabilitation of tradition finds its true home, is by no means relativistic.<sup>28</sup> Howard's eagerness to seize the critical elements of the Gadamerian doctrine as a weapon against positivism tends to obscure the conservative impulse which motivates the discussion of historical truth in Truth and Method.

An analogous remark can be made about Palmer and Hoy. Like Howard, they are receptive to the rehabilitation of tradition, insofar as that rehabilitation harmonizes with the general tendencies they admire in Gadamer's thought. The rehabilitation of tradition fuels Palmer's anger toward the New Critics, enables Hoy to be more critical than the critical theorists, and undergirds Howard's attack on logical positivism. But in none of these thinkers does one find the Gadamerian plea for rehabilitation in the sense of a nurture of tradition. The reason for this, one can surmise, is the power of those who are genuinely hostile to such rehabilitation. The fiercest, to whom we now turn, argue that Gadamer undermines the objectivity of interpretation.

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<sup>25</sup> Howard (Three Faces, p. 129) pays little attention to the qualifications with which Gadamer makes such a statement: "Insofar as the nature of the matter [to be interpreted] still contains elbow room within which it assumes concrete form, to that degree is such a natural law changeable." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 302; trans., p. 285. The translation is my own.

<sup>26</sup> See the section below entitled "Application as Transmission."

<sup>27</sup> Howard, Three Faces, p. 150. He notes the vulnerability of both Gadamer and von Wright to the charge of relativism on p. 171.

<sup>28</sup> See the section below, "The Positive Content of Idealism."



### VII.1.B. Open Hostility on Behalf of Verifiable Norms

Among the earliest reviews of Truth and Method was that of Emilio Betti (b. 1890). An Italian historian of law, Betti published in 1955 his monumental General Theory of Interpretation, which includes a series of four canons or criteria by which true and false interpretations can be distinguished.<sup>29</sup> Two years after the appearance of Truth and Method, Betti published a monograph in German entitled Hermeneutics as a Universal Method of the Humanities.<sup>30</sup> In his monograph, Betti points to the paradoxical nature of Gadamer's thesis that prejudices are the conditions for understanding. Gadamer argues that the term prejudice is misunderstood when it is considered a synonym for false judgment. A more correct understanding of the word, one which avoids the distortions of the Enlightenment's critique of religion, would grasp the word's etymological sense: a prejudice is a judgment which occurs before the final testing of every element relevant to the judgment.<sup>31</sup>

Against this Betti directs a twofold critique. First, he argues that the enhanced self-consciousness of the historicity of the interpreter, achieved by Gadamer's insight into the inevitability of prejudice, is no compensation for the loss of objectivity. Second, he argues that the only measure offered by Gadamer for distinguishing between true and false prejudices – Gadamer's "Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit" or "fore-structure of completion" – is unreliable.<sup>32</sup> The Gadamerian phrase describes the meaning of the circular structure of understanding borrowed from Heidegger. The presupposition that, when we read something, the thing we read makes sense – that is, in Gadamer's view, the "fore-structure of completion." We believe that what we read makes sense even before we have understood it all.<sup>33</sup> Gadamer concedes that it is no criterion for truth.<sup>34</sup> But, he

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<sup>29</sup> Emilio Betti, Teoria generale della interpretazione (Milan: Dott. A. Giuffrè, 1955), esp. sections 16-17a. The hermeneutical canons are (1) the independence of the object of interpretation and the immanence of the hermeneutical criterion, (2) the unity of the object and of the hermeneutical judgment corresponding to it, (3) the timeliness of the interpretation which widens the interpreter's horizon, and (4) the adequation of meaning or congeniality between reader and author.

<sup>30</sup> Emilio Betti, Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften, number 78/79 in the series Philosophie und Geschichte (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1962), esp. pp. 38-52.

<sup>31</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 255; trans., p. 240. Gadamer's conception is discussed in Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, esp. in the section entitled "Gadamer's Implicit Standpoint."

<sup>32</sup> Betti, Die Hermeneutik, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 277-8; trans., p. 261.

<sup>34</sup> The concession is in a letter to Betti dated February 18, 1961, excerpts of which are quoted by Betti, Die Hermeneutik, p. 51, footnote 118.

says, he is not offering such criteria, but only describing what is the case. Betti finds scant comfort in that. The task of finding the right situation from which to direct a question is, in Betti's eyes, a task for a theory of knowledge or for epistemology. He is not concerned with what actually happens in any given interpretation, but rather with what ought to happen.<sup>35</sup> In his eyes, the rehabilitation of tradition must seem the very antithesis to scientific interpretation.

Betti found an ally in Eric Donald Hirsch, Jr. (b. 1928), whose 1965 review of Truth and Method follows the direction of Betti's 1962 publication. Betti's definition of hermeneutics (the "universal method of the humanities") receives from Hirsch an application to the American discussion of literary criticism. Hirsch argues that literary meaning is determinate, that is, self-identical and changeless.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, he argues that the norm or standard of correct literary interpretation is the intention, the will, of the author.<sup>37</sup> Given these critical principles, Hirsch's antagonism toward Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition is not hard to understand. Gadamer, according to Hirsch, champions tradition as an alternative – and not a very good one – to the nihilism of indeterminate meaning. "The idea of tradition is essential to Gadamer because it points to a principle for resolving disagreements between contemporary readers," Hirsch writes. "The reader who follows the path of tradition is right, and the reader who leaves this path is wrong."<sup>38</sup> This paraphrase of Gadamer founders on the same point as that of Betti. Gadamer does not claim to be offering a criterion for correct understanding, but only to describe what every interpreter necessarily does. Resolving disputes between contemporary readers as to the meaning of, say, Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," is hardly Gadamer's concern. Hirsch concedes as much, but insists that it is his duty as a critic to judge Gadamer by "extrinsic" criteria, especially because he believes that Gadamer contributes to the "deleterious" undermining of determinate meaning.<sup>39</sup> In a later publication, Hirsch even subsumes Gadamer under the label

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<sup>35</sup> Betti, Die Hermeneutik, p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Validity in Interpretation (1967), reprint ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 44-46.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250. This sentence occurs in the second appendix to Validity in Interpretation, entitled "Gadamer's Theory of Interpretation," which first appeared in the The Review of Metaphysics 18 (1965): 488-507 as "Truth and Method in Interpretation." Hirsch originally wrote, "That reader is more nearly right who follows the path of tradition and that reader wrong who leaves this path." The "more nearly" of the 1965 version perhaps expresses Hirsch's reluctance to ascribe to Gadamer what Gadamer never affirmed, namely, that tradition is a criterion for truth. By 1967, Hirsch had overcome his reluctance.

<sup>39</sup> Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, p. 153.

“cognitive atheist” because Gadamer assumes that knowledge is relative.<sup>40</sup> But it is one thing to say that truth is historical, and another to disbelieve in truth.

Palmer, whose Hermeneutics we have already discussed, performs the office of mediator between Gadamer, on the one hand, and Betti and Hirsch, on the other. Acknowledging the encyclopedic knowledge of Betti and the brilliance of Hirsch, Palmer nevertheless asserts that they ask of Gadamer the criteria of interpretation which Gadamer never promised.<sup>41</sup> As to Hirsch’s insistence on the condemnation of Truth and Method for contributing to the indeterminacy of meaning, Palmer is less gentle. Hirsch has achieved his system for arriving at validity in interpretation, writes Palmer, at the cost of ignoring the development of modern thought on historical understanding. He has failed to come to grips with Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s unfolding of the temporal nature of human existence. Palmer’s evaluation is, in the main, a sound one. He shows a genuine concern for the question of truth which motivates the plea by Betti and Hirsch for objective interpretation. In ultimately siding with Gadamer, Palmer does not become, to use Hirsch’s unfair label, a cognitive atheist. He aims rather at broadening the concept of what a true interpretation is: one which does not exist independently of our experience of it, which unites what the text is with who we are.<sup>42</sup>

Yet it must be said that Palmer, for all his sympathy with Gadamer, fails to grasp the classical, and particularly Aristotelian, roots of Gadamer’s thought. This becomes apparent when he characterizes the position of Betti and Hirsch as a “realistic” perspective over against Gadamer’s “phenomenological” perspective.<sup>43</sup> By “realistic” Palmer means that Hirsch’s quest for objective meaning rests on Aristotelian epistemological assumptions.<sup>44</sup> Hirsch, however, is no friend of Aristotle. One need only read the references to Aristotle listed in the index to Validity in Interpretation. From Palmer one could get the mistaken impression that Gadamer’s hermeneutics are opposed to Aristotelian realism. This impression needs to be corrected by a re reading of Gadamer’s treatment of the hermeneutical relevance of Aristotle.<sup>45</sup> There one finds a discussion of *φρόνησις* or practical wisdom. Aristotle characterizes this as the excellence in deliberation which includes a knowledge, not just of universals, but of those particulars

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<sup>40</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., The Aims of Interpretation (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 36-40.

<sup>41</sup> Palmer, Hermeneutics; Palmer treats Betti on pp. 54-60, and Hirsch on pp. 60-65.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>45</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 295-307; trans., pp. 278

acquired over long experience.<sup>46</sup> Implicit here is the idea, which we touched upon in our discussion of Howard, that knowledge cannot be simply a matter of universal concepts or formal norms. There is, rather, a realm in which genuine knowledge depends upon the experience of the knower. Only the experienced person knows how to apply the universal knowledge which is available to all, the experienced and the inexperienced alike.<sup>47</sup>

Gadamer invokes the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom in order to convey the historicity of understanding: understanding often depends, in practical matters, on the experience of the one trying to understand. This observation is no less realistic than the call by Betti and Hirsch for norms of objective interpretation. Palmer is wrong to suggest that Hirsch relies on Aristotelian epistemology more than Gadamer. But Gadamer's debt to Aristotle is subordinate, as our presentation in this chapter will show, to his appropriation of Plato's philosophy. If there is a realm of knowledge, as Gadamer (following both Plato and Aristotle) suggests, which, while not being wholly without rules or norms, nevertheless cannot be adequately expressed by epistemological rules, then how is the truth of this realm to be characterized? How, in short, can one grasp the truth of an idea?

It has been said that, where truth cannot be subjected to epistemological norms, the critical enterprise must be abandoned. Such a desertion is prepared by Truth and Method, some have alleged, because Gadamer falls into the same trap as Heidegger. This is the trap of focusing so much attention on what is, on the question of being, that the question of what should be, of critique, is neglected. Gadamer's particular contribution to the Heideggerian question, it has been said, is the refutation of the idea of critical distance. The Gadamerian rehabilitation of tradition, say these critics, has resulted in a resigned acquiescence in that historical being from which one is powerless to extricate oneself.<sup>48</sup> Other critics have charged that Gadamer threatens philosophy with a kind of epistemological nihilism. Because, according to Truth and Method, many beliefs are so close to us that we cannot treat them as objects, some have concluded that the work of clarifying the rights and limits of knowledge comes to nothing in philosophical

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<sup>46</sup> Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1141<sup>b</sup>8-10, 1142<sup>a</sup>12-19.

<sup>47</sup> For a further treatment of practical wisdom see the section below entitled "Application as Transmission."

<sup>48</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "Herméneutique et critique des idéologies," in Démythisation et idéologie, Actes du colloque organisé par le Centre internationale d'études humanistes et par l'Institut d'études philosophiques de Rome, Rome, 4-9 Janvier 1973, ed. Enrico Castelli (Paris: Aubier Mouton, 1973), pp. 25-64. Translation: "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," chap. 2 of Ricoeur's Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation, ed., trans., and introduced by John B. Thompson (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press; and Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1981), pp. 63-100, esp. pp. 89-90.

hermeneutics. If there is no secure point from which we can challenge our prejudices and those of others, we run the risk, with Gadamer, of making a virtue of our own unexamined compulsions.<sup>49</sup> These criticisms of Gadamer mark a different kind of hostility to the rehabilitation of tradition. Unlike the hostility aroused by Gadamer's seeming relinquishment of norms of correct interpretation, this hostility springs from Gadamer's apparent satisfaction with the status quo. The rehabilitation of tradition, from this point of view, rehabilitates the entirety of the past, bad as well as good. This point has been expressed with great force by the Frankfurt philosopher and social scientist, Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929).

## VII.2. Habermas' Criticism of Tradition in Gadamer

It must count as one of the greater ironies of recent academic history that Habermas was invited to give a laudatory address on the occasion of the award to Gadamer of the 1979 Hegel Prize by the City of Stuttgart. No one in the world of German philosophy has sustained a critique of Gadamer's Truth and Method longer or with greater success than Habermas. The dispute first came to light in 1967 with the publication of Habermas' Toward the Logic of the Social Sciences.<sup>50</sup> This work, which

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<sup>49</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Holism and Hermeneutics," pp. 20-21.

<sup>50</sup> This was followed, in the same year, by the publication of Gadamer's answer, "Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik" (in Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.13-130; translation, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," trans. G. B. Hess and R. E. Palmer, in Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, pp. 18-43).

Habermas furthered the debate with his publication of 1968, Erkenntnis und Interesse (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968; 2nd ed., with a new Afterword, 1973; translation: Knowledge and Human Interests, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971)). This book situated Gadamer within a movement directed against the all-embracing claims of scientific method (ibid., footnote to p. 359; trans., p. 295).

In 1970, Habermas took issue with Gadamer's essay of 1966, "Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems" (Kleine Schriften, 1.101-112; translation: "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," trans. David E. Linge, in Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, pp. 3-17). Habermas argued that hermeneutic universality meets its limit when the operative intelligence reaches back to pre-linguistic cognitive schemes (Habermas, "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik," in Hermeneutik und Dialektik. Aufsätze, vol. I: Methode und Wissenschaft, Lebenswelt und Geschichte, dedicated to Gadamer on his 70th birthday, ed. Rüdiger Bubner, Konrad Cramer, and Reiner Wiehl (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1970), pp. 73-103; p. 81 cited here).

Also in 1970, Habermas contributed a "Summation and Response" (trans. Martha Matesich) to a series of articles on critical theory collected in the journal Continuum (vol. 8 (1970): 123-133). There he argued that Gadamer imposes a priori limits to philosophical enlightenment, limits incompatible with the insights of depth hermeneutics (pp. 127-128).

In 1971, Gadamer published a "Replik" to Habermas' charge that hermeneutical thought absolutizes tradition (Theorie-Diskussion. Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik, a

appeared as a special volume of the quarterly Philosophische Rundschau – a quarterly co-edited by Helmut Kuhn and Gadamer himself – included, as its eighth chapter, a review of Truth and Method. Habermas’ central criticism is that the rehabilitation of tradition advocated by Gadamer denies the power of reflection. This reflection, which received its decisive stamp from Hegel, sees through and can reject traditions. Gadamer’s rehabilitation of tradition, Habermas charges, shrinks the Hegelian experience of reflection to the consciousness that we have been surrendered to an irrational event.<sup>51</sup> The implication is that Gadamer has not fully understood Hegel. Twelve years later, on the occasion of the award to Gadamer of the Hegel Prize, Habermas re states his theme. Although Gadamer founded the Hegel society, says Habermas, and although he published a book on Hegel’s dialectic, he is no Hegelian.<sup>52</sup> That honor presumably belongs to Habermas himself.

Habermas’ critical essays bring into focus the contribution by Gadamer to the rehabilitation of tradition. It is precisely over this contribution that he and Gadamer are most at odds. Gadamer rehabilitates tradition primarily, we can say in anticipation, by realizing its all-pervasive effectiveness. Tradition, far from being confined to those judgments which are consciously deliberated, also shapes human life in an unreflected way. It is unreflected, according to Gadamer, in that it provides a context within which

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collection of essays by Gadamer (“Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik”), Habermas (the review of Truth and Method from Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften and “Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik”), and others, second in the series “Theorie,” ed. Jürgen Habermas, Dieter Henrich, and Jakob Taubes, redaction by Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971), pp. 283-317 (the “Replik” was republished in Gadamer’s Kleine Schriften, 4.118-141» .

Also in 1971 Habermas republished his 1963 Theorie und Praxis with a new Introduction. The Introduction answered Gadamer’s objection to the proposal by Habermas of psychoanalytic dialogue as a model of emancipatory discourse (Theorie und Praxis. Sozialphilosophische Studien, 4th ed., expanded with a new Introduction (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971). Translation: Theory and Practice, trans. John Viertel (London: William Heinemann, 1974».

Finally, in 1972, the 3rd ed. of Wahrheit und Methode was published with a new Afterword. There Gadamer criticizes the “methodologism” of Habermas and the other advocates of critical rationality (Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 515-520. See also pp. 532-535).

<sup>51</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften, Beiheft 5 of Philosophische Rundschau (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1967), p. 17 (pp. 149-180 comprise Chapter 8, the review of Gadamer). Translation “A Review of Gadamer’s Truth and Method,” translation unattributed, in Understanding and Social Inquiry, ed. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 335-363; p. 359 cited here.

<sup>52</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Urbanisierung der Heideggerschen Provinz. Laudatio au Hans-Georg Gadamer,” in Gadamer and Habermas, Das Erbe Hegels, pp. 11-12.

the rightness of reflected judgments or actions is self-evident. Habermas finds this description of tradition inaccurate and dangerously misleading. It is inaccurate because it fails to do justice to the reflective thought which can see through and reject tradition. And Habermas urges that Gadamer's description of tradition is misleading because it can provoke an attitude of resignation. Since tradition cannot be fully thematized, according to Gadamer, interpreters might abandon the task of reflecting upon what has been given and of freeing themselves from it. They might, in short, renounce what Habermas might call the endless task of critique.

Gadamer nowhere advocates this renunciation in an explicit way. The charge against him is based on inference. Habermas' thesis is that a philosophic rehabilitation of tradition which nurtures a cultural heritage cannot help but legitimate the power structures of that culture. In what follows we shall expound this thesis indirectly. It is based upon certain philosophic propositions to which Habermas would give his assent, propositions which receive less attention than Habermas' major thesis against Gadamer. We shall, in order to illuminate the thesis, analyze the underlying propositions of Habermas. They can be briefly enumerated. First, he argues that the knower must ascertain the conditions of knowledge before trusting what is known. Second, the value of philosophy lies in its power of critique rather than in its positive content. Third, psychoanalytic dialogue provides a model for emancipatory discourse. An analysis of these three propositions will enable us to see the basis for Habermas' critique of Gadamer.

With the exposition of Habermas' propositions we shall juxtapose the counter-propositions of Gadamer. First, Gadamer argues that knowledge (embodied in the pre-judgments which dispose our every conscious act) precedes every critique of knowledge. Second, philosophy cannot be confined to critique, for critique presupposes true knowledge in concepts. Third, the Platonic dialogue is a better model for genuine communication than Freudian analysis. The juxtaposition of proposition and counter-proposition will serve to make clear the scope and limits of Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition. Habermas' theses will highlight the position of Gadamer. Gadamer's counter theses will defend the rehabilitation of tradition from a materialist critique which ultimately cannot brook the admission of spirit into philosophic discourse.

#### VII.2.A. Critique of Knowledge

In his review of Truth and Method, Habermas suggests that the "and" of Gadamer's title could have been an "or." Truth and Method sets up an opposition, Habermas implies, between scientific methodology and that truth which, in Gadamer's view, cannot be reduced to the result of a correct application of method. While Habermas concedes that scientific methodology may absolutize itself, misleading scientists into the belief that their method is autonomous and self grounded, nevertheless the investigator cannot dispense with method.<sup>53</sup> For what else, apart from method, can

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<sup>53</sup> Habermas, Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 172-174; trans., Understanding and Social Inquiry, pp. 355-357.

guarantee that investigators are not simply deluding themselves? Gadamer denies that he ever intended the mutual exclusivity of truth and method.<sup>54</sup> But he admits that the hermeneutical experience is prior to the methodical alienation constitutive of the scientific approach. Hermeneutical experience is Gadamer's term for that confounding of the self which takes place in the encounter with tradition.<sup>55</sup> One can only be confounded by tradition when its claim to be true is taken seriously, that is, when one experiences in surprise that the insight of the past is superior to that of the present. Gadamer contrasts this experience with the apparently scientific method of historical consciousness, in which the encounter with the past is subordinated to the understanding of present consciousness. In this encounter, the past remains alien. But is this method of historical consciousness the method of which Habermas speaks?

Habermas' references to method in his review of Gadamer's book are linked to the concept of scientific reflection. Gadamer, says Habermas, does not appreciate this reflection. The author of Truth and Method is so preoccupied with the proof that understanding takes place within the structure of tradition that he fails to see how scientific reflection alters tradition. It does so by reflecting upon or seeing through the presuppositions inherent in the tradition – Habermas calls them the “Dogmatik der Lebenspraxis” – and replacing unthematized compulsions with rational thought.<sup>56</sup> Reflection is Hegel's word. We have seen, in our analysis of Hegel's dialectic, how reflection dissolves apparent contradictions by grasping them in thought.<sup>57</sup> Hegel is exemplary for Habermas because he saw that the apparent contradiction between a critical and unprejudiced natural science, on the one hand, and a science embroiled in presuppositions, on the other, is not absolute. Even the vaunted critical philosophy of Kant is not without presuppositions. Every critique of science, writes Habermas, “must begin with a prior, undemonstrated criterion of the validity of scientific statements.”<sup>58</sup> Scientific reflection enables the investigator to see, behind the Kantian critique, the presuppositions upon which the critique is based. While the presuppositions are unexamined, they remain effective as a form of dogmatic tradition. Reflection dissolves the tradition.

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<sup>54</sup> Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.119; translation: Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 329-344; trans., pp. 310-325.

<sup>56</sup> Habermas, Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften, p. 174; trans., Understanding and Social Inquiry, p. 357.

<sup>57</sup> See Chapter IV above, esp. the sections entitled “The Dialectic of Appropriation” and “The Unity of Being and Thought.”

<sup>58</sup> “[D]ie nur zum Scheine voraussetzungslose Erkenntniskritik [muss] mit einem vorgängigen, d.h. unausgewiesenen und doch als verbindlich angenommenen Kriterium der Geltung wissenschaftlicher Aussagen beginnen.” Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, p. 24; trans., p. 14.



At this point a question arises. Habermas invokes Hegel as the one who saw that every structure of thought, even the most rigorous Kantian structure, cannot dispense with presuppositions. The Hegelian dialectic provides a model for that scientific reflection which sees through and thus renders transparent the assumptions which, prior to it, were unexpressed. It thematizes and objectifies, for Habermas, the presuppositions which necessarily are always present. Our question is this: if the presuppositions are always and necessarily present, then how can we see through all of them? Doubtless reflection enables us to see through many things which were once unexamined. But does it enable the full transparency of any and all structures of thought? Does reflection mean that knowledge comes to an end by fulfilling itself?

Habermas certainly does not affirm that thesis. Indeed, he criticizes Hegel for implying that the doctrine of absolute knowledge, by abolishing the separation between subject and object, renders the critique of knowledge superfluous.<sup>59</sup> Habermas insists that the knower must reflect upon the origins of knowledge, just as Gadamer insists that the absolute knowledge of Hegel cannot take the place of experience.<sup>60</sup> Neither wants to suggest that any method offers a short cut for thought.

#### VII.2.A.1. The transcendentalism of critique

But Habermas' commitment to the values of the Enlightenment does lead him to affirm the continued necessity of a semi-Kantian critique of knowledge – an affirmation which Gadamer rejects. For Habermas, such a critique means that the knower must establish the conditions of possible knowledge before trusting any cognitions. Without criteria for ascertaining the reliability of our knowledge, we cannot be certain of it.<sup>61</sup> Habermas proposes, as the way to such certainty, a critique of knowledge which is both immanent and transcendent. It is immanent in that it proceeds, not by imposing a framework upon reality from outside, so to speak, but by emerging from the phenomena themselves of cognition.<sup>62</sup> This, we can say, is a moment of genuine accord between Habermas and Hegel's rejection of a merely external reflection. Furthermore, Habermas' critique is transcendent in that it does in fact transcend any particular individual's critique of knowledge, and may transcend the prevailing critique as well. Habermas insists upon a long-term process of inquiry for which his inspiration has been the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce. If this process of inquiry continued long enough in a methodical fashion, says Habermas, it would "necessarily lead to complete knowledge

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-21; trans., pp. 9-12.

<sup>60</sup> See Chapter IV above, especially the section entitled "Overcoming Subjectivity in Absolute Knowledge."

<sup>61</sup> Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, p. 14; trans., p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31; trans., p. 20.

of reality.”<sup>63</sup> He is calling for nothing less than a relentless, vigilant critique of all claims to knowledge. If this critique is pursued rigorously enough, and continues long enough, then it must lead, by transcendental necessity, to full knowledge – a knowledge that fulfills itself.

Now it must be said that Habermas’ transcendental critique of knowledge is not transcendental in the precise Kantian sense. Hegel’s insight into the ability of thought to comprehend and thus overcome its own distinction between appearance and the thing-in-itself was sufficient to put into question the Kantian notion of transcendentalism.<sup>64</sup> Habermas has no desire to propagate a critique of knowledge which aims, with Kant, at an ever-more-precise definition of those concepts of understanding which are the transcendental conditions for the possibility of synthetic judgments. Nor, we hasten to add, is Habermas’ critique a scientific reflection in the full Hegelian sense. Hegel made the fatal mistake, in Habermas’ estimation, of presupposing an absolute knowledge in his very effort to demonstrate the identity between such knowledge and critical consciousness.<sup>65</sup> For Habermas, both Kant and Hegel are subject to critical scrutiny.

Yet if a choice has to be made between Kant and Hegel, we would say that Kant was the more important figure for the development of Habermas’ critique of knowledge. From Kant, not Hegel, came the distinction between form and natural substance so important for the materialist concept of synthesis through social labor. According to this concept, labor shapes matter by imposing upon it a subjective form.<sup>66</sup> This synthesis is the work of human beings who create by it their own existence, and so create history as well. To be sure, nature and its laws stand over against humanity; historical materialism denies the idealist claim that nature is subordinate to mind. But the concept of synthesis through social labor emphasizes that knowledge directed towards technical control of nature is made possible by what Habermas calls the “transcendental structure of labor processes.”<sup>67</sup> These processes transcend the stuff of history of which labor is the heir,

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<sup>63</sup> “Für deren Geltung [die Geltung der Regeln des Forschungsprozesses] spricht zunächst nicht mehr, aber auch nicht weniger, als die fundamentale Überzeugung, dass es bisher einen kumulativen Lernprozess gegeben hat und dass dieser, wenn er methodisch als Forschungsprozess nur lange genug fortgesetzt würde, zu einer vollständigen Erkenntnis der Realität führen müsste.” *Ibid.*, p. 151; trans., p. 118.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-28; trans., pp. 13-18.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-31; trans., pp. 19-21.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48; trans., pp. 34-35.

<sup>67</sup> “[D]en transzendentalen Zusammenhang von Arbeitsprozessen.” *Ibid.*, p. 50; trans., p. 36. Habermas seems to imply – although the English does not quite convey it – that the disparate ways in which labor puts its mark upon nature “hang together” so that the very form of what we call nature can be transformed.

just as the Kantian categories of understanding transcend the matter which is understood. While they cannot change the laws of nature, they can change, for pragmatic and technological purposes, the form in which the laws take effect. It is in this sense that Habermas can affirm that scientific reflection alters tradition.<sup>68</sup>

Gadamer is sympathetic to the immanence which Habermas demands in his critique of knowledge, although he doubtless would express it differently. Hegel's own concept of the movement of the subject matter itself, in contrast to mere "external reflection," provides Gadamer with his notion of method.<sup>69</sup> For Habermas, on the other hand, Hegel's critique does not proceed immanently due to the presupposition of absolute knowledge.<sup>70</sup> Yet both Gadamer and Habermas are in accord that every critique must arise from the phenomena to be criticized, rather than from a critical scheme. Toward the imposition of final solutions they share a common wariness.

The two disagree, however, on the notion of transcendental methodology. Without this notion, says Habermas, the knower would have no certainty that what he or she knows would eventually converge with what others know. While the transcendental logic of inquiry does not ground the conditions of knowledge with transcendental necessity, it does assert that there is no other guarantee of obtaining true statements than following the laws of logic persistently for a sufficiently long time.<sup>71</sup> Hence these laws function transcendently, in Habermas' view, as the condition for the possibility of a future convergence of all knowledge. Just as the materialist concept of synthesis through social labor postulates the human ability to technologically alter the form in which history and nature are presently effective, so the transcendental logic of the research process postulates the ability of human opinion to attain an eventual certainty. To this extent Habermas' critique has an affinity with Kant's.

Against this Gadamer protests, first of all, that truth can not be equated with certainty. Such an equation, with its Cartesian overtones, denies the insight that there is nothing which is – before or after reflection – fundamentally indubitable.<sup>72</sup> Although

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<sup>68</sup> Habermas criticizes Gadamer's dictum that philosophical hermeneutics retraces the steps of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, showing that substantiality defines all subjectivity (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 286; trans., p. 269). In Habermas' view, this substance changes when taken up in reflection; that is, the form of nature changes, if not the matter (see Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, p. 175; trans., *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, pp. 357-358). We shall examine this topic below in the section entitled "The Effect and Our Awareness of It."

<sup>69</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 439-440; trans., p. 421.

<sup>70</sup> Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, p. 21; trans., p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152; trans., p. 119.

<sup>72</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 225; trans., pp. 210-211.

Gadamer's treatment of the question of certainty in Truth and Method does not allude to Habermas, nevertheless one could justly infer that the Gadamerian distinction between the certainty of science and the certainty of the claim of value is applicable to Habermas' theory. Such a theory seeks an eventual certainty by anticipating all doubts beforehand in a methodical way. This bears too close a resemblance to the historicism which subordinates the past to present consciousness, and suggests that Habermas is entangled in historical consciousness. The theory of Habermas overlooks the urgency of immediate claims which cannot await adjudication by the transcendental bench of eventual, scientific certainty.

Moreover, Gadamer objects to the notion of technological control implicit in Habermas' ideal of self-consciousness. According to this ideal, self-consciousness manifests itself in action which has been made transparent to itself. Habermas writes that Fichte had transformed the Kantian notion of self-consciousness from mental representation to an action by which the ego posits – that is, creates – itself.<sup>73</sup> Despite the fact that history has placed human beings in a particular situation, a situation they cannot escape, nevertheless they can comprehend themselves through their labor. In labor, says Habermas, the subject knows itself “to have been produced as by itself through the production of past subjects.”<sup>74</sup> The preceding generations who have bequeathed to humanity its present situation constitute, with the present, a single human species which is self-producing. Through the past, the present is produced “as by itself.” The “as” marks an all-important qualification for Gadamer. Fichte to the contrary, human beings do not make themselves. They can be said to do so only insofar as they affirm what has preceded them as something which is in no final way alien from themselves. This is not transcendental in Kant's sense, but dialectical in Hegel's. The ideal of technological control of human destiny, the ideal which Habermas has drawn through Marx from Fichte, is fundamentally incompatible, in Gadamer's eyes, with the acknowledgment of historicity.<sup>75</sup>

#### VII.2.A.2. The counter-concept of a finite metaphysics

Above all else, Gadamer stands in opposition to the transcendentalism of Habermas' method on account of the effectiveness of history, for which Gadamer has coined the term “Wirkungsgeschichte.”<sup>76</sup> Effective history refers, on a basic level, to the

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<sup>73</sup> Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, pp. 53-4; trans., pp. 38-9.

<sup>74</sup> “In seiner Arbeit begreift sich das gegenwärtige Subjekt, indem es sich durch die Produktion der vergangenen Subjekte als durch sich selbst hervorgebracht weiss.” Ibid., p. 55; trans., p. 39.

<sup>75</sup> On historicity, see Chapter VI, esp. the section entitled “Historicity and the Superficial Method.”

<sup>76</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 284-290; trans., pp. 267-274. See also the section below entitled “Effective History as Idea and as Manifestation.”

history which is effective in one's own life. Every self-conscious investigator knows that prejudices can influence an investigation. These prejudices are translated from the past, guiding the direction taken by the investigator, often preventing an unobstructed view of the matter to be studied. The responsible investigator acknowledges these prejudices as an element of effective history and strives in the name of truth to free the investigation from them.

But on a deeper level, effective history refers to the effectiveness of history which lies beyond our ability to free ourselves from it. Regardless of the honesty of the investigator, his or her investigation will bear the stamp of history, a history which has shaped the choice of research topic, the investigative approach, and the possibilities for applying the knowledge to be gained. At the most profound level, effective history becomes a dialectical concept. It signifies the continuous exchange between that history of which we are conscious and that which remains effective despite all efforts to make ourselves aware of it.<sup>77</sup> Habermas is troubled by the concept of effective history. It seems to absolutely limit the capacity of scientific reflection to alter tradition,<sup>78</sup> counseling instead a surrender to irrationalism.<sup>79</sup> Habermas would prefer to emphasize only the basic meaning of effective history, namely, the history whose effectiveness can be made transparent by means of reflection. Such reflection enables the thinker to break through – to transcend – the constraints of effective history. Gadamer, however, criticizes the distinction between the constraints of history and the life of the self-conscious historian. The distinction, he says, is itself dogmatic.<sup>80</sup> In his view, it posits a standpoint which is, after a fashion, beyond history. The creation of such a standpoint is more the product of neo-Kantianism than of Kant himself, Gadamer argues, whose great merit lay in the creation of a finite metaphysics. For Gadamer, Kant showed the limits of knowledge in order to secure a place for faith.<sup>81</sup> The concept of a transcendental standpoint, outside history, from which one can judge the effect of history upon those less reflective souls who are enmeshed in it, is fundamentally un-Kantian.

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<sup>77</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, "Vorwort zur 2. Auflage," p. xvi; trans., p. xvi.

<sup>78</sup> Habermas, Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften, p. 174; trans., Understanding and Social Inquiry, p. 357.

<sup>79</sup> Habermas detects an irrational impulse in Heidegger's treatment of poetic myth as well. See Jürgen Habermas, "Martin Heidegger: zur Veröffentlichung von Vorlesungen aus dem Jahre 1935," in Habermas, Philosophisch-politische Profile (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971), pp. 67-92. Translation: "Martin Heidegger: On the Publication of Lectures from the Year 1935," trans. Dale Ponikvar, Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal 6 (1977): 155-180.

<sup>80</sup> Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.121; trans., Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> Gadamer, "Kant und die philosophische Hermeneutik," Kleine Schriften, 4.197.

Gadamer's argument has apparently had a telling effect on Habermas. The latter expressed a certain embarrassment, in his 1971 Introduction to Theory and Practice, over the formula "quasi-transcendental," by which Habermas had described the interests which direct the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>82</sup> He does not mean, he wrote, to suggest that the logic of inquiry can be reduced to a kind of long term empiricism or to a natural history of the human species. To the extent that "quasi-transcendental" does imply such an empiricism it is infelicitous. And by 1976, Habermas was only willing to use the word transcendental (in describing the structure of all coherent experiences) provided that the claim to be able to demonstrate this transcendence a priori be dropped.<sup>83</sup> He is evidently sensitive to the accusation that a critique of knowledge which proceeds by transcendental necessity may itself be ultimately inaccessible to reflection.

The persuasiveness of Gadamer's concept of effective history is not due to the irrationalism which Habermas sees in it. On the contrary, the concept is itself a rational one. It emphasizes the human ability to know more than can be subjected to a critique of knowledge. With Hegel, Gadamer wants to say that knowledge always outstrips its own reflected premises. The consequence of this for tradition, which we shall explore below, is that the effort to anticipate the claim of tradition emerges from a context which tradition itself provides. Habermas, it must be said, is willing to concede this in a qualified way. The critique of knowledge, he admits, follows a preliminary acceptance of knowledge.<sup>84</sup> Only when that preliminary knowledge is tested does it prove itself as trustworthy. Testing that knowledge is the job of philosophy. This brings us to our next question. Is philosophy only valid as critique? Does it have no positive content?

#### VII.2.B. The Rights of Philosophy

After extolling the power of reflection, in his review of Truth and Method, Habermas evokes the specter of a Germany full of pretensions to world superiority. He then suggests Gadamer's complicity in the German self-delusion:

This experience of reflection is the unforgettable legacy bequeathed to us by German Idealism from the spirit of the eighteenth century. One is tempted to lead Gadamer into battle against himself, to demonstrate to him hermeneutically that

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<sup>82</sup> Habermas, Theorie und Praxis, 1971 ed., p. 21, trans., p. 14.

<sup>83</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Was heisst Universalpragmatik," in Theorie-Diskussion. Sprachpragmatik und Philosophie, ed. Karl-Otto Apel, in the series "Theorie," ed. Jürgen Habermas, Dieter Henrich and Jakob Taubes; redaction by Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976), pp. 174-272 (pp. 198-200 cited here). Translation: "What Is Universal Pragmatics?" in Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, trans. and intro. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), pp. 1-68 (pp. 21-22 cited here).

<sup>84</sup> Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, p. 16; trans., p. 8.

he ignores that legacy because he has taken over an undialectical concept of enlightenment from the limited perspective of the German nineteenth century and that with it he has adopted an attitude which vindicated for us (Germans) a dangerous pretension to superiority separating us from Western tradition.<sup>85</sup>

This passage is full of ironies for the reader who is familiar with the Gadamer-Habermas debate. First of all, there is Habermas' enthusiasm for the legacy of German idealism – the idealism of a Kant, whose distinction between the forms (or categories) of understanding and the matter (or phenomena) of intuition would be given, at Marx's hand, a materialist turn. Habermas implies that the legacy of idealism is so “unforgettable” that it had, seemingly of necessity, to become materialism. Secondly, there is Habermas' reference to the nineteenth century's “undialectical concept of enlightenment” which vindicated a “pretension to superiority.” The last phrase is doubtless an allusion to Hegel's absolute knowledge, toward which both Gadamer and Habermas are skeptical. The irony lies in the link between the “undialectical” concept of enlightenment and Hegel, who reinvigorated the dialectic of Plato. The perspective of the nineteenth century, dominated as it was by Hegelian thought, is certainly a limited one; but no one should accuse it, without qualification, of being undialectical. Thirdly, there is Habermas' concern for the separation between a deluded Germany and the genuine traditions of the West. This is a point one would expect more from Gadamer, the rehabilitator of tradition, than from Habermas.

The greatest irony, however, lies in the position taken by Habermas as the true champion of German idealist philosophy. Habermas might seem to imply that the experience of reflection, bequeathed by idealism, offers a positive content. He even speaks of the “right” of reflection. It is the right to go beyond the framework of tradition, to recall the yoke of authority and break it, to dissolve compulsions and replace them with insight and rational decision. But to equate the right of reflection with the positive content of idealist philosophy cannot be Habermas' aim. He is, after all, not an idealist but a historical materialist. In his view, philosophy (whether idealist or materialist) has

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<sup>85</sup> “Diese Erfahrung der Reflexion ist das unverlierbare Erbe, das uns vom Deutschen Idealismus aus dem Geist der 18. Jahrhunderts vermacht ist. Man ist versucht, gegen Gadamer ins Feld zu führen und ihm hermeneutisch nachzuweisen: dass er jenes Erbe ignoriert, weil er einen undialektischen Begriff von Aufklärung aus der beschränkten Perspektive des deutschen 19. Jahrhunderts übernommen habe – und mit ihm einen Affekt, der uns einen gefährlichen Überlegenheitsanspruch vindiziert und von westlichen Traditionen getrennt hat.” Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, p. 176; trans., *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, p. 358.

The translation of “unverlierbare” as “unforgettable” misses the sense in which the idealist legacy cannot be refused; to say that it is “unforgettable” suggests that it can be, despite our memory, set aside in reflection – which perhaps accords better with Habermas' intention than the word “unverlierbare” explicitly states. The phrase “that. . . he has adopted” is the translator's addition. The word translated as “tradition” is really in the plural.

no positive rights, but only a negative one: the right of critique.<sup>86</sup> In contrast to this modest right granted by Habermas to philosophy, his grand gesture toward reflection as the unforgettable legacy of idealism seems slightly incongruous.

Habermas opposes a conception of philosophy as “Erkenntnistheorie,” i.e., theory of knowledge or epistemology. He equates epistemology with the search for an ultimate and presuppositionless basis for knowledge. Because there is no such basis, in Habermas’ view, the search for it, even the repudiation by Hegel of Kant’s search for a truly critical philosophy – a repudiation which in turn was founded on the ultimate of “absolute knowledge” – is misguided.<sup>87</sup> It deludes the inquirer into supposing that the true reconciliation between humanity and an alien nature lies in thought. This is the concept of synthesis developed by German idealism. But Habermas, who finds idealism’s legacy of reflection unforgettable, would prefer to forget the idealist concept of synthesis. It achieves itself in thought alone, he says, generating a logical (rather than material) structure. In its place, Habermas proposes the concept of synthesis through social labor, synthesis in the materialist sense anticipated in the writings of Marx. The reconciliation between (or synthesis of) humanity and nature can only be achieved by means of the labor of those who are willing to re-make nature in a human form. This is a genuine synthesis, according to Habermas, and not an illusory reconciliation merely achieved in thought.<sup>88</sup>

The clearest exposition of Habermas’ thesis that philosophy (apart from critique) has no rights can be found in the 1960 essay “Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique.” Marxism distinguishes itself from science, according to this essay, because it cannot be reduced to a propositional logic subject to empirical testing. More important, for our purposes, is the way in which Habermas distinguishes Marxism from philosophy. Marxism, he says, willingly relinquishes the presuppositions of philosophy – namely, that it can “furnish the rational grounds for its own origin” and that it can “realize its own fulfillment by itself.”<sup>89</sup> Historical materialism, in short, forces philosophy to confess the poverty of its own self-consciousness. It does so, first of all, by means of Hegel’s insight into the critical philosophy of Kant: such a philosophy, far from being without

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<sup>86</sup> “Aber ausserhalb der Kritik bleibt der Philosophie kein Recht.” Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, p. 86; trans., p. 63.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-18; trans., pp. 8-10.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-45; trans., pp. 30-32.

<sup>89</sup> Die “kritische Leistung [der materialistischen Kritik] besteht ja zunächst darin, die Philosophie in die Armut ihres Selbstbewusstseins, und war in die Einsicht hineinzutreiben, dass sie weder ihren Ursprung in sich selbst begründen, noch ihre Erfüllung durch sich selbst wirklich machen kann.” Habermas, “Zwischen Philosophie und Wissenschaft: Marxismus als Kritik,” chap. 6 of Theorie und Praxis (1971 ed.), p. 234; trans., p. 201.



presuppositions, assumes a normative concept of science and a Cartesian self-certainty of the ego. There is no such thing, Habermas rightly concludes from Hegel, as a thought whose presuppositions are absolutely transparent. Second, the materialist critique insists that philosophy, defined as idealist epistemology, is without content. It is a theory about knowledge, rather than true knowledge. But this true knowledge, the goal of the materialist critique, must not be regarded as a positive content. It would then be subject to a critique analogous to Hegel's critique of the positivity of religion.

In order to guard itself from such criticism, philosophy ought to reconstitute itself, Habermas argues, as nothing other than critique. It would then be the endless task of reflection upon what has been given, a reflection whose consequence becomes the basis for further reflection. Only insofar as philosophy subordinates itself to the task of a critique of ideology, says Habermas, can it transcend the realm of pure thought and become effective. Only then will it regain, however indirectly, "its access to material problems."<sup>90</sup> Apart from critique, and as a merely logical (that is, non-material) structure, philosophy has no rights. The unforgettable legacy of idealist philosophy, to which Habermas regards himself as the rightful heir, has been transformed in his hands into reflection: reflection as materialist critique.

#### VII.2.B.2. The positive content of idealism

Nothing could be further from the thought of Gadamer, for whom idealism still retains its old features. Gadamer expounded upon these, interestingly enough, in a lecture given in 1945, while he was rector of the East German University of Leipzig. The lecture, entitled "The Meaning of Philosophy for the New Education," asks what lesson is to be learned from the experience of the war years. Gadamer proposes the lesson that reason, far from being what recent history may suggest – namely, a word to be invoked by the powerful in order to compel obedience, or the label bestowed by the majority upon the prevailing world-view – is a powerful sign of humanity. It must not be subordinated to a power or interest which is contemptuous of it.

In a prefatory footnote, Gadamer explains that he sought, as university rector, "to advocate the autonomous claim to knowledge by philosophy over against the tendencies of the state leadership of that locale."<sup>91</sup> The difficulties inherent in the phrase "the autonomous claim to knowledge by philosophy" we have, in another context, already

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<sup>90</sup> "Das Erbe der Philosophie geht . . . in die ideologiekritische Einstellung über . . . . In dem Masse, in dem die Wissenschaft vom Menschen materiale Erkenntniskritik ist, gewinnt auch die Philosophie, die als reine Erkenntnistheorie aller Inhalt sich beraubt hatte, mittelbar ihren Zugang zu materialen Fragen wieder." Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, p. 86; trans., p. 63.

<sup>91</sup> "Der Verfasser . . . versuchte gegenüber den Tendenzen der dortigen Staatsführung den autonomen Erkenntnisanspruch der Philosophie zu verteidigen." Gadamer, "Die Bedeutung der Philosophie für die neue Erziehung," part 1 of "Über die Ursprünglichkeit der Philosophie," Kleine Schriften, 1.11 footnote.

discussed.<sup>92</sup> Gadamer does not mean that philosophers are a law unto themselves and without obligation to their fellow human beings. He is far from advocating that departments of philosophy free themselves from university rules or the laws of the state. His intention is rather to suggest that philosophy, as the search for a common understanding based on truth, cannot find its understanding on any other basis, not even on the emancipatory goals of a nascent socialist state.<sup>93</sup> At the time Gadamer gave this lecture, Habermas was sixteen years old. Yet one is struck by the similarity between the argument Gadamer opposes – the argument that philosophy must subordinate itself to the interests of society<sup>94</sup> – and the argument advanced by Habermas fifteen years later, namely, that philosophy order itself to a materialist critique of ideology.

Gadamer, in the lecture of 1945, opposes this argument by recalling the importance of idealism. By this he means not just the form which German philosophy took in the eighteenth century, but the philosophic basis for a unified vision of the world which prevailed from Greek antiquity to the time of Hegel. He begins by relating idealism to the Platonic idea. This is defined not only as the true, but also as what truly exists and is effective.<sup>95</sup> The fate of idealism then becomes Gadamer's theme. He describes the concept of the "Weltanschauung," the world-view which judgment presupposes and which relativizes judgment, and sketches the struggle over the "Weltanschauungen" which followed the death of Hegel. Both left-Hegelians and right Hegelians stood under the banner of concrete-historical existence, opposing that to Hegel's idealism.<sup>96</sup> Their criticisms resulted, according to Gadamer, in the genuine insight that truth is historical. But they also resulted in the nihilism of a Nietzsche, for whom truth was simply a slogan used to legitimate the will to power. The central question for Gadamer then becomes, what is historical truth? "Where is the sense and the long-nurtured idea of the one truth," he asks, "and where is the norm and the

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<sup>92</sup> See Chapter 4 above, esp. the section entitled "Opposition to the Hegelian Unity," where we took up the question of reason as its own foundation.

<sup>93</sup> To this extent, Gadamer is (from Habermas' point of view) enmeshed in the presupposition that philosophy can furnish the rational grounds for its own origin. See my comment on Gadamer's assertion that reason grounds itself (Chapter 4, footnote 77).

<sup>94</sup> Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.20.

<sup>95</sup> "Die Idee also ist nicht nur das Wahre, sondern auch das eigentlich Seiende und Wirkliche, und der Geist, welcher die Idee schaut, ist der wirkliche Geist." Ibid., 1.14.

<sup>96</sup> See Karl Löwith, Von Hegel zu Nietzsche. Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts. Marx und Kierkegaard (1941), 5th ed. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1964), pp. 70-71. Translation: From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought, trans. David E. Green (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 83.

effectiveness of reason as the insightful completion of this truth?”<sup>97</sup> The notion of historical truth implies that truth is dependent upon the temporal nature of our very humanity. What we affirm in one situation we may not affirm at another.<sup>98</sup> If this is so, then how can Gadamer speak of “the one truth”?

In his answer, he tends to endorse the Aristotelian maxim, expressed in the first sentence of the Metaphysics, that all men by nature desire to know. Above and beyond this lies the insight into anamnesis of Plato’s Meno, that we do not learn primarily through demonstrable proofs, but rather that the certainty of our knowledge is at one with the certainty of ourselves. In short, Gadamer asserts the unity of truth not by dispelling its dependence upon history. Instead, he suggests that such unity can be seen due to the innate tendencies of reason. Gadamer puts it this way:

Even if it is right that this reason is not self-empowering, that it cannot bring itself to maturity, but rather is matured by a social-historical fate, by its realities, and by the traditions of our thought and values, even then it remains true that reason, as that which is matured and dependent, nevertheless wants in the end to be an insight into the true continuities of reality.<sup>99</sup>

What reason wants to be, namely, a true insight into reality, is not the expression of reason’s willfulness. It is rather the power ascribed by Plato to the ideas, the capability of subsuming exemplary experiences of reality under unified conceptual thought. The Platonic roots of idealism enable us to understand Gadamer’s later formulation, in Truth and Method, of what he calls the ancient claim of philosophy, the claim to be knowledge in concepts.<sup>100</sup> Such a claim stands in contrast to the argument of Dilthey’s philosophy of life, that philosophy is an expression of the life of its times. According to Dilthey, philosophic expressions of life can be grasped in historical consciousness, but make no

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<sup>97</sup> “Wo bleibt da der Sinn und die alte verpflichtende Idee der einen Wahrheit, und wo bleibt da die Norm und Wirklichkeit der Vernunft als des einsehenden Vollzugs dieser Wahrheit?” Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.17.

<sup>98</sup> See Chap. VI above, “The Categorical Link Between Temporality and Truth.”

<sup>99</sup> “Auch wenn es richtig ist, dass diese Vernunft nicht selbstmächtig ist, dass sie sich selber nicht zeitigen kann, sondern gezeitigt wird von dem gesellschaftlich-geschichtlichen Schicksal, seinen Realitäten wie von den Überlieferung unseres Denkens und Wertens, auch dann bleibt wahr, dass die Vernunft als Gezeitigte und abhängige am Ende dennoch Einsicht in die wahren Bestände der Wirklichkeit sein will.” Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.19. My translation does not convey the sense in which “zeitigen” suggests not just the “maturity,” but also the “coming into its own time” of reason.

<sup>100</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 216; trans., pp. 202-203.

dogmatic claim to truth.<sup>101</sup> Gadamer asserts the opposite. He says that philosophy is the search for a common understanding of reality. Such an understanding is common because it unites a community. Despite the differences by which ideas (in Plato's sense) manifest themselves, the existence of such ideas, and the human longing to know them, provide the basis for a community of understanding. One cannot provide a compelling proof for the existence of ideas, and Socrates admits as much. But it is Gadamer's conviction that the ideas enable the epiphany of truth in the philosophic dialogue. In such dialogue the truth arises, and knowers are reconciled, in Hegelian fashion, to what is known. The insistence upon a positive content of truth distinguishes Gadamer's concept of philosophy from that of Habermas, for whom philosophy has no rights apart from the negative right of critique.

Habermas has expressed his view in terms of what he calls knowledge-constitutive or cognitive interests. These are the basic orientations of the human being, obscurely linked to instinct and evolution, which aim at the solution of problems.<sup>102</sup> The technical interests of the empirical-analytic sciences serve the human aspiration to control reality.<sup>103</sup> The practical interests of the cultural sciences foster the maintenance of mutual understanding between present and past, as well as among diverse groups in the present.<sup>104</sup> Most importantly, the emancipatory interests of the social sciences aim at the pursuit of that reflection by which human beings become transparent to themselves.<sup>105</sup> This takes place in the recollection of past experience, the acknowledgment of the compulsions present in that experience, and the dissolving of those compulsions by rational insight. Reflection, in Habermas' view, is thus a self-forming (or self-reforming) process. "Methodically it leads to a standpoint," he writes, "from which the identity of reason with the will to reason freely arises."<sup>106</sup> In reflection, one achieves that which one

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<sup>101</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, esp. the section entitled "Dilthey and the Experience of History."

<sup>102</sup> Habermas (see the next footnote) quotes C. S. Peirce's essay "Why Study Logic?" with admiration. There Peirce extols the human instincts which reason serves as a help-mate. Charles Sanders Peirce, Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 2nd printing, 8 vols. in 6 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), vols. 1-2 (two vols. in one), paragraphs 176,178.

<sup>103</sup> Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, pp. 172-3; trans., pp. 134-35.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222; trans., pp. 175-176.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 243-244; trans., pp. 197-198.

<sup>106</sup> "[M]ethodisch führt sie [die Erfahrung der Reflexion] zu einem Standpunkt, von dem aus die Identität der Vernunft mit dem Willen zur Vernunft zwanglos sich ergibt." *Ibid.*, p. 244; trans., p. 197.

wants to achieve, reason itself. The differences between Habermas' view of reason, achieved by the will to reason, and the view of Gadamer are patent. Against Habermas, Gadamer reiterates the human finitude which prevents the full understanding demanded by the Enlightenment – or, to put it in Habermas' terms, the obscurity of instinct which never achieves the lucidity of cognitive interest. There is much apart from what humanity explicitly wills which concerns the understanding, we can infer, and so escapes the will to reason.<sup>107</sup> This is a point which Gadamer has seen much more clearly than Habermas.

The goal of Habermas' doctrine of cognitive interests, however, is not the achievement of reason. Such an achievement stems from reflection, to which reason is subordinate. In sum, reason "obeys an *emancipatory cognitive interest*," Habermas writes, "which aims at the pursuit of reflection."<sup>108</sup> Two points must be noted here. First, Habermas makes reason the instrument of interest – the very thing against which Gadamer argued in his lecture of 1945. Second, Habermas subordinates reason to interest because he believes that the emancipatory interest in reflection is more important than reason. Reason may content itself with idealism's search for logical structures. Its advocates may lose the disposition to see through their bourgeois ideology.<sup>109</sup> The emancipatory interest in reflection, however, issues in a critique of ideology, and thus gains access to material problems. Such an interest, unlike impotent reason, affects the political sphere. Arising from humanity's unconscious and instinctual urge to preserve itself, the emancipatory interest gives rise to the ideal structure of reflection. Such reflection has a material effect in that it seeks to dissolve compulsions which have hitherto remained unconscious. Habermas advocates a movement which can be called enlightening in the truest sense: from the obscurity of instinct it draws us to the brilliance of reason.

#### VII.2.B.2. The subordination of reason to reflection

Why then does he subordinate the end, reason, to the means of reflection? This is the quandary within which, according to Gadamer, Habermas is caught. It is clear that reason is, for Habermas, a genuine goal. He equates the will to reason, in his 1965 Frankfurt inaugural lecture, with the emancipatory cognitive interest.<sup>110</sup> He argues that

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<sup>107</sup> See above, footnote 77.

<sup>108</sup> "Wir können sagen, dass sie [die Vernunft] einem emanzipatorischen Erkenntnisinteresse folgt, das auf den Vollzug der Reflexion als solchen zielt." Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, p. 244; trans., p. 198. It would be more literal to say that reason "follows," rather than "obeys," the cognitive interest.

<sup>109</sup> Habermas, Theorie und Praxis, p. 33; trans., p. 27.

<sup>110</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Erkenntnis und Interesse," in Technik und Wissenschaft als "Ideologie" (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968), p. 164. Translation: "Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective," in Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 314.

authority must be replaced by rational decision.<sup>111</sup> And he recommends, as the task of a universal pragmatics, the rational reconstruction of the conditions for discourse.<sup>112</sup> But reason is merely the instrument of reflection, for Habermas, rather than that which guides it. Reason cannot be sovereign because it smacks of positivity. Although Hegel's early works had shown how one could be freed from this positivity through dialectic, nevertheless Habermas laments that, with the concept of absolute knowledge, Hegel fell back under the positivistic spell.<sup>113</sup> The spell needs to be broken. Habermas regards his task as the creation of a critical philosophy of science which escapes the snares of positivism.<sup>114</sup> Between positivism, with its emphasis on the invariant relations of natural phenomena, and the positivity criticized by the young Hegel, a parallel can be drawn. The critical philosophy of Habermas is directed against both conceptions. What this means is that everything which stands over against the knowing subject, everything which (in Hegel's sense) is positive, everything which cannot be understood as natural, must be dissolved in thought. This is as true for reason as it is for superstition. Reflective thought brooks no standing structures, rejecting what it cannot comprehend. To submit to positivity, even the positivity of reason, is, according to Habermas, to be ensnared.

Gadamer concedes that reflection can free human beings from blind obedience to unjust authorities. But he emphatically denies that the task of reflection is the universal one of replacing obedience with full insight. First, he argues that reflection does not and can not require full insight. It does not require it, for one need not fully understand something in order to appreciate its value; and it cannot require it, because the full comprehension of all is beyond the reach of finite humanity. Second, Gadamer argues that reflection, even when it is effective, does not always lead to a repudiation of legitimate authority. The mature human being can appropriate by insight what is already held in obedience. This opinion, the basis for Gadamer's rehabilitation of authority and tradition, we shall pursue at greater length below.<sup>115</sup> Here the question is whether reflection is compatible with positivity, that is, with what the human being accepts from

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<sup>111</sup> Habermas, Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften, p. 176; translation: Understanding and Social Inquiry, p. 358.

<sup>112</sup> Habermas, "Was heisst Universalpragmatik," in Sprachpragmatik und Philosophie, pp. 183-198; trans: Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, pp. 8-20.

<sup>113</sup> Habermas, Theorie und Praxis, pp. 232-233; trans., p. 200. On Hegel's critique of positivity, see Chapter 4 above, esp. the section entitled "The Problem of Reason in History."

<sup>114</sup> Habermas, Technik und Wissenschaft als "Ideologie", p. 155; trans., Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 308.

<sup>115</sup> See the section below entitled "Authorities and the Rehabilitation of Authority."

tradition without hope of ever being able to fully explain it.<sup>116</sup> Gadamer argues that it is compatible. He says that to affirm, as Habermas does, that reflection can turn whatever it scrutinizes into a thematic object, into a manifestation of positivity, is to misinterpret it.<sup>117</sup> Gadamer makes a distinction, which Habermas does not employ, between effective reflection and expressive or thematic reflection. The latter is the reflection which expresses or thematizes what is meant in scientific concepts. The choice of the concepts in which the meaning is expressed, as well as the meaning itself, is the result of reflection. Effective reflection, on the other hand, occurs in the unfolding of speech or discourse.<sup>118</sup> It is effective in the sense that it brings about or mediates conceptual knowledge, without itself becoming an object of reflection. The native speaker effectively reflects a reality in discourse without necessarily having to make the discourse itself an object of reflection by thematizing it. Such thematization can, of course, take place. Indeed, it can be said that the two kinds of reflection enjoy a dialectical relation, in that what is effective can be thematically expressed, and that what is thematized can become self-evident, and thus effective in a non scientific way. The other case, expressive or thematic reflection, which is more akin to what Habermas is talking about, is a particular scientific exception.

If such reflection were the norm, if it were possible that a given matter and its expression could become fully transparent to thought, then Habermas' conception of philosophy would be more persuasive than Gadamer's. But the full transparency-to-itself of intention contradicts the experience of human finitude. Habermas acknowledges as much when he criticizes Hegel's absolute knowledge and demands a philosophy which eludes positivism. Yet his subordination of reason to reflection (defined as materialist critique), a subordination required for the establishment of an organized enlightenment,<sup>119</sup> would achieve, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the end of reflection. A reflection which does not serve the truth grasped by reason ultimately discredits reflection. It is not surprising that the sole reference to Habermas in Truth and Method occurs in the discussion of the philosophy of reflection. There Gadamer remarks that "The left

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<sup>116</sup> Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.124-125; trans., Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 34. The translation deletes a sentence in which Gadamer acknowledges that reflection can dissolve unjust authority by means of rational insight, and in which he questions whether this rational insight can be reduced to a social-scientific doctrine.

<sup>117</sup> Gadamer notes that Hegel's critique of positivity is not what the epigones of Hegel make it out to be: the raising of all things to consciousness for the sake of emancipation (see the untranslated "Nachwort" to Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 533-534).

<sup>118</sup> Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.125; trans., Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 35. Gadamer attributes the distinction to Johannes Lohmann, Philosophie und Sprachwissenschaft, vol. 15 of the series Erfahrung und Denken (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1965).

<sup>119</sup> Habermas, Theorie und Praxis, pp. 33-37; trans., pp. 28-32.

Hegelian critique of a mere reconciliation in thought which may have nothing to do with the real changing of the world, the whole doctrine of the turning of philosophy into politics, must in self-cancellation level itself to the ground with philosophy.”<sup>120</sup> In an appended footnote, Gadamer refers as an example to Habermas’ published discussion of philosophical literature on Marxism.<sup>121</sup> Gadamer’s argument is that the philosophy which is transformed into politics – the organized enlightenment of Habermas – still remains beholden to reason. If politicians assume that, once the ideal state has been established, they can dispense with philosophy, then a reflection provoked by reason asks another question. It is the question of whether the ideal state is truly ideal, or whether it only seems so in the thought of the politicians who have created it. The question arises not because the questioner has attained a critical position more reflectively scientific than that of the politicians, but because experience prompts a reflection as effective as it is true. In this way, Gadamer suggests a view of enlightenment at least as dialectical as that of Habermas. The source of the Gadamerian dialectic is the restlessness of reason. The source of Habermas’ dialectic is the endlessness of reflection.

Habermas’ subordination of philosophy to critique appears, from the viewpoint of a sovereign reason, less reflective than Gadamer’s own. To be sure, the advocate of historical materialism insists that reason follow an emancipatory cognitive interest which aims at reflection. By that he means that reflection, which springs from the urge to be free from the problems in which one has been enmeshed, demands cultivation. But at the same time he suggests that the power of reflection to dissolve falsehood be given an absolute autonomy. Habermas overlooks the danger that an autonomous reflection might turn upon itself, leading to a sophistic skepticism. Against this, Gadamer’s affirmation of the claim of philosophy to be knowledge in concepts leads to a more profound, yet more modest, idea of reflection. This is a reflection committed to the unfolding of the unity of truth in its multiple manifestations, a unity which reason grasps.<sup>122</sup> Habermas charges

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<sup>120</sup> “Die linkshegelianische Kritik an einer blossen Versöhnung im Gedanken, welche die reale Veränderung der Welt schuldig bleibe, die ganze Lehre vom Umschlag der Philosophie in Politik muss auf dem Boden der Philosophie einer Selbstaufhebung gleichkommen.” Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 327; trans., p. 308. The translation above is my own. The published translation, correct in its general tendency, misses Gadamer’s indictment of a critical politics which must not only destroy philosophy, but itself as well.

<sup>121</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Literaturbericht zur philosophischen Diskussion um Marx und den Marxismus,” appendix to Theorie und Praxis, pp. 387-463 (first published in Philosophische Rundschau, fifth year, number 3/4 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1957), pp. 165-235). This work is not included in Theory and Practice.

<sup>122</sup> Such a concept of reflection provides the counter-argument to Hubert L. Dreyfus’ charge that Gadamer is a “theoretical holist,” i.e., one who, starting from the assumption that all data are “theory laden,” proceeds to the belief that all understanding is a question of theoretical knowledge (Dreyfus, “Holism and Hermeneutics,” pp. 3-6). Because there are as many ways of theorizing as there are theorists, one can infer from Dreyfus,



Gadamer, as we saw at the outset of this section,<sup>123</sup> with ignoring the idealist legacy of reflection and conceiving enlightenment in terms which are not dialectical. It now seems that one could turn this charge back upon Habermas. Does his all powerful reflection not serve ultimately to weaken the efficacy of reflection with skepticism? And does that weakness not spell the end of dialectic?

### VII.2.C. Models of Discourse

This prompts us to ask how dialectic ought to operate. We have traced this concept in Hegel, for whom dialectic is a process of thought by which oppositions between the self and the other are grasped, dissolved, and become the basis for new dialectical syntheses.<sup>124</sup> And we have glimpsed in Heidegger, the outspoken critic of Hegel and of the formalization of dialectic, a subtle reevaluation of dialectic as that discourse in which being comes to language.<sup>125</sup> In both Hegel and Heidegger, dialectic is thought unfolding itself. Habermas charges that this concept of dialectic is based on an idealist presupposition. It is the presupposition that thought or consciousness, articulated in language, defines the being of material life.<sup>126</sup> Against this, Habermas advances the materialist argument, which we have already seen, that nature and its laws stand over against thought.<sup>127</sup> Nature is not the expression of mind, but rather the context within which mind and language operate. True, we interpret the world according to grammatical rules which are not of our choosing. This is a point made by Gadamer which Habermas freely concedes. But those grammatical rules, Habermas continues, are not absolutes. They have arisen within a nature upon whose form labor has put its stamp, and within which the repressive character of social power structures is effective.<sup>128</sup> A genuine

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theoretical holists such as Gadamer are almost inevitably sceptics or nihilists. They fail to distinguish, says Dreyfus, between the relativity of theory and the level of common, shared practices which cannot be made the object of theoretical analysis, and so which is safe from “theoretical” tampering. Dreyfus (p. 21) subsumes Gadamer under a critique akin to that of Habermas. He neglects Gadamer’s insight that, while nothing is a priori safe from sophistical distortions, nevertheless reason, which cannot be reduced to a set of criteria, can see through falsehood.

<sup>123</sup> See above, footnote 85.

<sup>124</sup> See Chapter IV, especially the section entitled “The Dialectic of Appropriation.”

<sup>125</sup> See Chapter VI, esp. the section entitled “Discourse as the Intelligibility of Being.”

<sup>126</sup> Habermas, Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften, p. 179; trans., Understanding and Social Inquiry, p. 361.

<sup>127</sup> See footnote 66 above.

<sup>128</sup> Habermas, Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften, p. 179; trans., Understanding and Social Inquiry, p. 361.

dialectic, in Habermas' view, is one which overcomes the constraints of language by incorporating, in its reflections, the nature and society which have shaped language.

Habermas' model for the genuine dialectic is the psychoanalytic discourse of Sigmund Freud and the materialist critique of Marx.<sup>129</sup> We have already seen in outline the effect upon Habermas of Marx's dialectical materialism. Marxist thought assumes the Hegelian dialectic without its idealist presuppositions. The word "dialectic" describes the never-ending process by which authoritarian structures are acknowledged as authoritarian, the first step towards the replacement of those structures by rational institutions. The rejected idealist presuppositions are those which confine the dialectic to a mental realm, preventing it from being effective in a material way. The "materialism" of Habermas expresses itself, as we noted above, in an opposition to both natural science and philosophy.<sup>130</sup> Unlike science, materialism investigates the historical self-interests of which it is a part. Unlike philosophy, it investigates the action through which it can intervene, instead of remaining purely contemplative. The materialist critique of Marx becomes genuinely dialectical, Habermas wants to claim, because the alienation of those who practice the critique – an alienation presupposed on the basis of instinctually rooted interests in solving problems – enables them to see what others cannot. Its practitioners can then emancipate themselves from social domination.

The psychoanalytic discourse of Freud offers another model of dialectic, Habermas asserts, one which exposes the universal claims of Gadamer's hermeneutics to criticism. The hermeneutical problem, by which Gadamer means the problem of understanding what at first seems incomprehensible, is a universal one. It is universal, he says, in Aristotle's sense: just as, from a number of memories, a single experience is constituted, so, from a multitude of particulars, the universal emerges as the unity of them all.<sup>131</sup> The universality of the hermeneutical problem consists in the fact that all understanding poses the task of synthesizing, from an infinite wealth of perceptions, those experiences which are significant for knowledge, that is, universally significant.<sup>132</sup> Habermas puts this universality in question. In his eyes, it connotes an effort to replace the methodical understanding of the empirical sciences with something unscientific. Particularly irksome to him is Gadamer's assertion that science, insofar as it wants to be practical, is dependent upon rhetoric.<sup>133</sup> By that, Gadamer means that a practical science

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<sup>129</sup> Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis* (1971 ed.), p. 16; trans., p. 9.

<sup>130</sup> See footnote 89 above.

<sup>131</sup> Aristotle *Posterior Analytics* 100<sup>a</sup>5-9. We have discussed this passage in Chapter IV-above, in "The Alternative of Empiricism."

<sup>132</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Kleine Schriften*; 1.109-110 ;.trans., *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 14.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.117-118; trans., p. 24.

must communicate itself not only to the narrow circle of specialists who can prove its claims experimentally, but to the society at large for whom such claims can at most be probable, convincing, and persuasive. In this, Habermas sees a dangerous consequence. He expresses it in this way:

The functions which belong to scientific-technical progress, for the preservation of the system of developed industrial societies, clarify the objective need of setting technically-realizable knowledge in rational relation to the practical consciousness of the life-world. I believe that hermeneutics attempts, by its universal claim, to free itself from this need.<sup>134</sup>

Habermas argues that the hermeneutical claim to reflect all reality in language tends to minimize the need for bringing the practical results of science to rational consciousness. If rhetoric overshadows reason, reason suffers.

#### VII.2.C.1. The psychoanalytic model

Let us put aside the question, which we have already discussed, of Habermas' ambiguous evaluation of reason.<sup>135</sup> Of greater interest is the psychoanalytic theory by which he proposes to extricate hermeneutics from its entanglement with everyday language, i.e., from rhetoric, and turn it toward the scientific language necessary for rational action. Hermeneutics is entangled, in the opinion of Habermas, because its practitioners are not aware of its limits. Those limits consist in the fact that hermeneutics offers no criterion for distinguishing between mere misunderstanding (which it is the task of hermeneutics to clarify) and the false consciousness of systematically distorted communication.<sup>136</sup> In the latter case, the fault lies not with a misuse of vocabulary or grammar, but with the organization of the discourse itself. Habermas' example is the disruption of language evident in the psychotic. This disruption is often not apparent to those in habitual communication with the psychotic. They "make sense" of what the psychotic says, and may not even be aware of the distorted world-view implicit in such speech. This is the situation of the practitioners of hermeneutical philosophy, according to Habermas, who regard themselves as enveloped in a linguistic environment for which there is no exit.<sup>137</sup> Those who speak of hermeneutical consciousness, he continues,

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<sup>134</sup> "Die Funktionen, die dem wissenschaftlich-technischen Fortschritt für die Systemerhaltung entwickelter Industriegesellschaften zugewachsen sind, erklären das objektive Bedürfnis, das technisch verwertbare Wissen zum praktischen Bewusstsein der Lebenswelt rational in Beziehung zu setzen. Ich glaube, dass die Hermeneutik dieses Bedürfnis mit ihrem Universalitätsanspruch zu befriedigen sucht." Habermas, "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik," in Hermeneutik und Dialektik, 1.80.

<sup>135</sup> See the section above, "The Subordination of Reason to Reflection."

<sup>136</sup> Habermas, "Der Universalitätsanspruch," in Hermeneutik und Dialektik, 1. 84.

<sup>137</sup> Jankowitz has named this the "impossibility-of-getting behind," the "Nichtintergebarkeit," of the prejudices embodied in language. See Jankowitz,

conceive of a mental reflection which occurs within natural language. But the interpretation of the sciences must afford an opportunity for mediating between natural language and the more rigorous language of scientific analysis, an analysis which draws the thinker, in Habermas' view, out of the structure of natural language. Freud laid the groundwork for such an analysis.

He did so, according to Habermas, by suggesting two ways of understanding which do not spring from the natural competence in language of the native-born speaker. Such a speaker, Habermas says, presumes that understanding takes place without a theory of understanding. The psychoanalytic situation, however, is based on a particular theoretical premise. It is that the partners in the dialogue, doctor and patient, have distinct roles to play: the patient who is troubled with neurosis brings mental associations to language, and the doctor reflects upon these. The aim of the reflection is to translate the associations of the patient into an intelligible recreation of the scenes in which lay the roots of the patient's troubles. This is, in Habermas' view, one way of understanding – the playing of distinct roles – which does not spring from the natural linguistic competence of a native speaker. A second way of understanding has to do with the presuppositions of the partners in dialogue. The psychoanalyst gives order to the patient's free associations by means of a general interpretation of the ways in which children interact at the various stages of their development. The idea is that, in the process of freely associating, the adult indirectly conveys to the psychoanalyst the point in his or her early history at which the neurosis began. In this case, a specific theory of childhood interaction (just as, in the former case, a specific theory of role-playing) distinguishes psychoanalytic understanding from that available to the competent speaker untrained in psychoanalysis.<sup>138</sup>

From the Freudian theories of role-playing and childhood development, Habermas draws the basis for what he calls a “tiefenhermeneutische Sprachanalyse” or “depth-hermeneutic analysis of language.” This analysis has three advantages which can be seen in the description of the doctor's role. Habermas puts it this way:

The psychoanalyst has a preliminary conception of the structure of undisrupted ordinary-language communication (1); he traces the systematic disruption of communication back to the confusion between two stages, divided in the history of their development, of the pre-linguistic and linguistic organization of symbols (2); he clarifies the origin of the deformation with the help of a theory of deviant models of socialization, which extend themselves to the complex of types of

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Philosophie und Vorurteil, p. 3. Gadamer affirms this positively, suggesting that we can no more “get behind” language than we can get behind ourselves, for we ourselves are nothing other than an endless dialogue directed towards truth (Kleine Schriften, 1.11; the translation (Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 16) wrongly states that we are the truth, rather than the dialogue.

<sup>138</sup> Habermas, “Der Universalitätsanspruch,” in Hermeneutik und Dialektik, 1.87.

interaction in early childhood with the development of personality structures  
(3).<sup>139</sup>

Such an analysis begins when the doctor discerns that the structural conditions for normal communication, visible at the level of symbol, action, and embodiment, are not being fulfilled. Two languages become apparent in psychoanalysis: that of dream-imagery and that of speech. These have a reflexive relation to one another, and constitute a linguistic and pictorial organization of symbols. The analyst's task is to unravel them both by means of a translation. But depth hermeneutics does not confine itself to mere translation, as ordinary hermeneutics does. If it did, then it would itself be trapped in obscurity. This is the obscurity, according to Habermas, which does not simply take place within language (the obscurity which language can clarify), but which rather has to do with language itself.<sup>140</sup>

Depth hermeneutics escapes this trap in two ways. First, it does not presume, as Habermas claims ordinary hermeneutics does, that everything necessary for an interpretation is already at hand. Instead, it employs the concept of resistance to describe the patient's efforts to repress the unconscious. Depth hermeneutics grasps the aspects of the ego, aspects which it has hidden from itself, by means of the symbols through which the alienated self comes surreptitiously to the fore.<sup>141</sup> In this way it first overcomes the limitations to which ordinary hermeneutics is confined. Next, depth hermeneutics proposes a theory of the development of the psychological mechanisms of the ego, its repressions, and its internalized social norms. It interprets the free associations of the patient, generalizing them in such a way that predictions can be made on the basis of the interpretation. Through these predictions, which function like the hypotheses of experimental science, depth hermeneutics tests its conclusions.<sup>142</sup> This enables it to overcome another limitation of ordinary hermeneutic theories, namely, that they offer no criterion by which one can judge whether a given interpretation is genuine. By presupposing an alienated self-understanding on the part of the patient, a methodical distance on the part of the doctor (who is in a position of gauging the patient's health),

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<sup>139</sup> "Der Psychoanalytiker hat einen Vorbegriff von der Struktur unverzerrter umgangssprachlicher Kommunikation (1); er führt die systematische Verzerrung von Kommunikation auf die Konfusion von zwei entwicklungsgeschichtlich getrennten Stufen vorsprachlicher und sprachlicher Symbolorganisation zurück (2); er erklärt die Entstehung der Deformation mit Hilfe einer Theorie abweichender Sozialisationsvorgänge, die sich auf den Zusammenhang von Mustern frühkindlicher Interaktion mit der Bildung von Persönlichkeitsstrukturen erstreckt (3)." Ibid., pp. 87-88.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>141</sup> Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, pp. 291-296; trans., pp. 238-242.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 316; trans., p. 259.

and a method of submitting interpretations to a test, depth hermeneutics avoids the naivety of the competent speaker untrained in psychoanalysis.

### VII.2.C.2. Criticism of the psychoanalytic model

Gadamer, in his response to Habermas, seizes on the privileged position of the psychoanalyst in relation to the patient. The doctor has what the patient does not have: first, technical training; and second, a preliminary conception, in Habermas' terms, of the structure of undisrupted ordinary-language communication. To the doctor alone, if we can generalize, belong psychoanalytic theory and mental health. One of the advantages of psychoanalytic theory, according to Habermas, is that, unlike ordinary hermeneutics, it tests its conclusions. Psychoanalysis does this, we saw, by making predictions on the basis of an interpretation of the patient's free associations. If the predictions are accurate, the interpretation is sound. It seems as if psychoanalysis proves itself pragmatically, becoming believable insofar as it is successful. But Gadamer argues that the psychoanalytic claim to knowledge is not reducible to a pragmatic demonstration. On the contrary, the claims of psychoanalytic theory need themselves to be taken up in reflection.<sup>143</sup> Above and beyond the apparent success or failure of analysis, what can be made of the Freudian theories of dreams, of the pleasure-principle, of the categories "ego," "id," and "super-ego"? Gadamer's first argument is the claims of psychoanalysis cannot be adjudicated on the basis of purely pragmatic criteria.

The reason for this inability lies in pragmatism itself, which refuses to define what is meant by the phrase "it works." What "works" in a successful psychoanalysis? Who decides? For Habermas, the criterion of success is the acceptance of the analyst's interpretation by the patient.<sup>144</sup> Patients acknowledge the analyst's interpretation by acknowledging themselves in it. Why, Gadamer asks, should the patient acknowledge such an interpretation? On what basis should the psychoanalyst's interpretation be accepted before anyone else's? Is it not that the patient accepts the interpretation in part on the basis of the authority of the well-trained and experienced analyst?<sup>145</sup> Training and experience enhance the doctor's authority, and so the willingness of patients to see themselves in the interpretations brought forward by the doctor. Habermas would no doubt object that the psychoanalytic dialogue has nothing to do with authority, which is, in his eyes, just another word for legitimized force.<sup>146</sup> But in the case of psychotherapy, where the patient's trust in the therapist is all-important, where does one draw the line between the therapist's legitimate authority as a knowledgeable practitioner and the patient's willingness to trust only the practitioner who is knowledgeable? Would anyone trust a doctor whose knowledge lacked authority? Gadamer argues persuasively that the

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<sup>143</sup> Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.129; trans., Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 41.

<sup>144</sup> Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, pp. 319-323; trans., pp. 261-264.

<sup>145</sup> Gadamer, "Replik zu 'Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik'," in Kleine Schriften, 4.135.

<sup>146</sup> Habermas, "Summation and Response," Continuum 8 (1970): 127.

acknowledgment of the psychoanalyst's legitimate authority by the patient, far from being inappropriate, is a sign of the patient's own insight.<sup>147</sup>

The technical training and the experience of the psychoanalyst, in brief, pose the problems of verifying a claim to knowledge and of the nature of authority. Against Habermas, Gadamer argues that an insistence on pragmatic verification alone and a refusal to acknowledge legitimate authority hamper the proposal of psychoanalysis as a model for discourse. How reliable a model can it be when it fails to address the question (except in a pragmatic way) of the basis for the psychoanalytic claim to cure the patient by offering plausible explanations for neurosis? This question prompts another. What is the analyst's anticipation of uninterrupted ordinary-language communication? Such an anticipation is essential to the success of any dialogue, Habermas says, and is implicit in the very structure of language. Every linguistic exchange stands upon a background of consensus, that is, on the speakers' acknowledgment of one another.<sup>148</sup> There must be some common agreement even for words to be exchanged. But in Habermas' view, this agreement is minimal. An ideal, non-authoritarian, and universally-practiced dialogue can only develop, he asserts, in an emancipated society.<sup>149</sup> To think that it has been achieved in the present is to succumb to the illusion that there is such a thing as pure theory, i.e., a view of things undistorted by interest or an imperfect social order. The possibility of achieving a Socratic dialogue here and now is, according to Habermas, a "fiction."<sup>150</sup> Hence a problem arises in the creation of a meaningful discourse. Such a discourse presupposes, by its very structure, the realization of a communication based on consensus. But at the same time, this consensus is imperfect, and only anticipates an ideal situation of discourse.<sup>151</sup> The psychoanalytic dialogue remains in tension, both anticipating a future goal of uninterrupted communication, and presupposing such communication as the means by which the goal is to be achieved.

Gadamer sees the quandary, and suggests that the situations of the doctor and the patient are not so far apart as they might seem. To be sure, the analyst is in a position of emancipating the patient from neurotic fetters, and the psychoanalytic dialogue is, in that sense, a genuinely liberating one. But it is not only the doctor who anticipates uninterrupted communication – patients do the same by entrusting themselves to the doctor's care. They anticipate a stage, beyond their present neurosis, in which they will be able to communicate without disruption. At that point, after the patient is healed, the

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<sup>147</sup> Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 4.135.

<sup>148</sup> Habermas, Theorie und Praxis (1971), p. 24; trans., p. 17.

<sup>149</sup> Habermas, Technik und Wissenschaft als "Ideologie", p. 164; trans., Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 314.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Habermas, Theorie und Praxis (1971), pp. 25-6; trans., p. 19.

model of genuine discourse provided by the psychoanalytic conversation breaks down.<sup>152</sup> When no one is ill, then who is to play the role of the patient? On the other hand, if society is deranged, who is to play the doctor's role? A third possibility is that all members of the society minister to each other. But this fails to come to grips with the problem of ideological blindness: some are in a position of insight and some are not. Although Habermas insists that there is a reciprocity in the process of enlightenment, within which all are participants, nevertheless the difference between those who enlighten and those who are to be enlightened is, in his view, "theoretically unavoidable."<sup>153</sup> The value of psychoanalytic dialogue as a model for genuine discourse is based upon the recognition of such a difference. But when the difference is not as clear-cut as it is in the therapeutic context, the value of the psychoanalytic model, as Gadamer has argued, diminishes. It presumes that one member of the dialogue is always in a better position than another to see the truth.<sup>154</sup>

### VII.2.C.3. The Socratic model

What Gadamer proposes is the very thing which Habermas rejects: the model of the Socratic dialogue. The advantage of this dialogue lies in the anti-dogmatic thrust of its paradoxical starting-point, the knowledge that one does not know. This "docta ignorantia" is a common topic in Plato. Socrates appears as the one who, when encountering a logical difficulty in conversation with his friends, is the first to recognize that a problem has arisen. Indeed, he defends himself at his trial by saying that his wisdom consists in this: he does not think he knows what he in fact does not know (Apology 21d). This is a confession of ignorance. But it is also, at the same time, a genuine knowledge. It is knowledge of the limits of knowledge. And the limits of knowledge, as Hegel has shown, are transcended as soon as they are named, for one who names them already anticipates what lies beyond them.<sup>155</sup> In order to name them, one must first recognize them. The confession of ignorance implicit in such recognition does not remain mute or lead to the self-canceling phrase "I know nothing." On the contrary, it is an appreciation of the limit which one wants to transcend. To say "I don't know" is also to raise a question: "what might I learn?"

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<sup>152</sup> Gadamer, Kleine Schriften, 1.130; trans., Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 42.

<sup>153</sup> Habermas, Theorie und Praxis (1971), p. 46; trans., p. 40.

<sup>154</sup> Habermas is sensitive to this criticism, although for reasons different from those advanced by Gadamer. Habermas concedes that the psychoanalytic model is of limited applicability to the Marxist concept of organized class struggle, within which the oppressed class (the analyst?) doubts the ability of the ruling class (the neurotic?) to accept the former's interpretation of reality. *Ibid.*, p. 36; trans., p. 30.

<sup>155</sup> See Chapter 4 above, esp. the section entitled "The Unity of Being and Thought," footnotes 78 and 79.



For this reason Gadamer begins his treatment of the hermeneutical priority of the question, in Truth and Method, with a discussion of the Platonic dialectic. There he writes that the dialectic unfolds with a question: is a given subject matter what I always believed it to be, or is it something different? With the answer, i.e., the recognition that the matter is something other than what was taken for granted, a new question arises. This question Gadamer calls an open question, for the answer is not yet at hand.<sup>156</sup> Such questioning is more important than finding answers, Gadamer implies, for it demonstrates the questioner's willingness to confess ignorance and so to learn. Gadamer's assertion of the superiority of the question to the answer, however, can be misinterpreted. It can suggest that answers are unimportant, or that answers represent, to use the term of the young Hegel, a positivity which must be dissolved by further questions. It can suggest that the only unassailable position is to have no position whatsoever. And it can suggest that Gadamer is in Habermas' camp after all, skeptically emphasizing the need to subject every ideology to a rigorous questioning.

But this is not what Gadamer means by the term "open question." Doubtless he would agree, with Habermas, that ideological blindness ought to be illumined with the piercing rays of criticism. But unlike Habermas, Gadamer does not advocate the dissolution of all positivity.<sup>157</sup> The acknowledgment of legitimate authority, for example, is (in Gadamer's eyes) a true act of cognition. Hence an open question on a given matter cannot mean that a decision is impossible, or that, in order to preserve one's openness, all previous opinions have to be rejected. Gadamer says as much when he notes that the openness of the question is never shapeless.<sup>158</sup> Indeed, the question can only be posed when the questioner is confronted by alternatives: is it this or is it that? The advocacy of a general and indiscriminate attitude of openness is senseless, it could be argued, because such an attitude gives no indication of what one is holding oneself open for. Similarly, the call for never-ending reflection begs the question of why one should reflect further on a matter. Openness is rather the ability to recognize, with Plato's Socrates, that one does not know the answer to a particular question – and it is to the alternative answers to this question that one directs the quest for knowledge.

Habermas would object, no doubt, that this Socratic doctrine is only a negative knowledge. At most it can lead to the confession that our knowledge is finite, erected upon prejudice, and compulsive. If Plato contented himself with such an observation, Habermas would find no fault with him. But Plato's dialogues speak of the ascent to ideas, of Diotima's revelation, in the Symposium, of the very soul of beauty. They speak, in short, of positive knowledge. And there is no criterion by which the truth of such revelations can be validated. Unlike psychoanalysis, which stands or falls on the basis of the accuracy of its predictions, Plato's dialectic offers no criteria by which to test the

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<sup>156</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 345-6; trans., pp. 326-7.

<sup>157</sup> See the section above entitled "The Subordination of Reason to Reflection."

<sup>158</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 346; trans., p. 327.

truth of assertions. The same can be said of Gadamer's hermeneutics. What it lacks, in Habermas' opinion, is the distance between subject and object which method affords.<sup>159</sup>

Gadamer's response to criticisms of this type draws the Platonic distinction between a logically compelling proof and a communication which is correct, i.e., between the irrefutable and the merely unambiguous. This is expounded in Gadamer's essay of 1962, "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*." There Gadamer examines the so-called "epistemological excursus" in which Plato reflects on the reasons why Dionysius, the Syracusan prince, did not profit from his instruction (*Seventh Letter*, 341a-345a). Dionysius' uncle, Dion, had persuaded his friend Plato to visit the young ruler. But Dionysius showed no desire to submit to a philosophic discipline. After a single interview with Plato, during which time he pretended knowledge of the Greek's doctrines, his instruction came to an end. Plato adds that, according to hearsay, Dionysius presumed to write a handbook on topics about which he had instructed him. Why did the young prince not profit from his instruction? Why could he not accurately repeat what he was taught? Plato's answer is that, without συγγενη or an "affinity" for the subject matter, neither receptiveness nor memory are productive.<sup>160</sup> Dionysius may have had (although it is doubtful) good retention and the ability to learn. But the prince lacked an affinity for philosophy. Plato taught his doctrines accurately to the ruler. But, as Gadamer points out, there is a great discrepancy between teaching an insight and demonstrating it in a logically compelling way.<sup>161</sup>

The media by which one conveys an insight, whether language, illustration, or experiment, are incapable of forcing another to understand a philosophical doctrine. The experience of sophism taught Plato that the glib and quick-witted can always twist one's beliefs into a ridiculous posture. He saw that the truth of knowledge has to manifest itself in dialogue against every conceivable objection which can be made. This means that the truth of a matter does not emerge all at once, through a fulfilled prediction, as some claim the value of the psychoanalytic dialogue emerges. Instead, the study of a particular truth must be accompanied, as Plato says, by a study of the truth in general over a long period

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<sup>159</sup> Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, p. 173; trans., *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, p. 355.

<sup>160</sup> ἐνι δε λογῶ, τὸν μὴ συγγενῆ τοῦ πράγματος οὐτ' ἀν' εὐμάθια ποιήσειέν ποτε μνήμη. Plato *Seventh Letter* 344a. In Plato, *Platonis Opera* (1901-1907), ed. with brief annotations and a critical apparatus, by Ioannes (John) Burnet, reprint ed., 5 vols. in 6 (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1937), vol. 5, part 2.

<sup>161</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Dialektik und Sophistik im siebenten platonischen Brief," in Gadamer, *Platos dialektische Ethik und andere Studien zur platonischen Philosophie* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1968), p. 225. Translation: "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*," in Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. and with an Introduction by P. Christopher Smith (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 96.

(Seventh Letter 344b). What might seem compelling proof at one time may, at another time, given another perspective, seem less than persuasive. In the short run, sophism may win the day. Yet truth is a unity, as Gadamer never tires of stating, and cannot be reached in anything partial.<sup>162</sup> A powerful demonstration may sweep all objections away, persuading all of the truth of a particular matter. But then again, such a demonstration may be sophism. Gadamer is susceptible to Habermas' criticism that hermeneutics offers no criterion for distinguishing true from false. Yet Gadamer's reserve is not without reason: every criterion can be twisted by a sophist.<sup>163</sup>

This has consequences of great importance for the rehabilitation of tradition. For the value of cultural tradition, to the nurture of which Gadamer's thought is dedicated, cannot be proven all at once. On the contrary, the Enlightenment has undermined tradition precisely by its insight into the inability of tradition to advocate itself. Habermas' efforts can be situated within the aims of the Enlightenment. His emphasis upon the need for sound epistemology, upon critique rather than positivity, and upon emancipatory, psychoanalytic discourse, all signify a distrust for received doctrine. When Habermas states that philosophy, outside of critique, retains no rights,<sup>164</sup> we can imagine the shudder running down Gadamer's back, committed as he is to a transmission of the doctrines of Plato. Gadamer argues that the tradition must be cherished, not as an abstract doctrine, but as an idea. Such an idea of tradition, like every idea, has to be applied in order to be known.<sup>165</sup> Habermas counters that we ought first to prove the worth of knowledge before committing ourselves to it. But if, as Plato suggests, a true philosophy cannot be proven like a hypothesis, emerging only in the soul of the one who has an affinity for it, a proof is out of place. The search for a genuine confirmation of philosophy is eminently worthy, and the legitimacy of Habermas' teachings lies precisely in such a search. But his emphasis upon the psychoanalytic dialogue as a model for discourse betrays a distrust of the patient's – that is, of our – ability to see the truth.

### VII.3. The Hermeneutical Rehabilitation of Tradition

Our analysis of the differences between Gadamer and Habermas, especially of those differences which underlie the issues raised in their published debates, has brought forward those aspects of Gadamer's thought central to the rehabilitation of tradition. Precisely on account of that rehabilitation, we can now see, Habermas opposes Gadamer. Such rehabilitation undercuts, in Habermas' view, the gains achieved by the Enlightenment and incorporated into Habermas' own doctrines. It threatens to cripple, in his eyes, the achievement along Kantian lines of a critical epistemology which would

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 243; trans., p. 117.

<sup>163</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 327; trans., p. 309.

<sup>164</sup> See footnote 86 above.

<sup>165</sup> Gadamer's doctrine of application will be discussed below in the section entitled "Application as Integral to Tradition."

test knowledge before relying on it. Such a rehabilitation of tradition seeks to establish a positivity which is a priori invulnerable to critique. And it suggests that the universality of language allows no position, outside of the linguistic competence of the native speaker, from which an emancipatory dialogue along psychoanalytic lines can begin. Habermas regards the rehabilitation of tradition, in sum, as a curtailment of the rights of critique.

No one can deny the appeal of Habermas' goal of constructing a social theory with practical aims, that is, of combining insight into the nature of things with a pragmatic sense of what will improve material life. In particular, his insistence upon a logic of inquiry which proceeds immanently seems to avoid the heavy-handedness of technologism. Like Hegel, Habermas rejects external reflection: if true insight is to be achieved, it must repudiate the urge to impose upon reality a preordained critical scheme. Such an urge can spring from the pretensions of an all-embracing philosophy which claims to provide its own ultimate foundations. Habermas, we can say, quite rightly criticizes such pretension. Here again his model is Hegel, whose critique of the dogmatism implied in the distinction between phenomena and reality clearly demonstrates the true nature of reflection. Reflection can grasp what seems self-evident and put it into question. In that sense it is akin to the psychoanalytic dialogue, which interprets the communication of the neurotic in such a way that the neurotic's own distorted assumptions may cease to be self-evident. Habermas' insight into reflection as the medium through which theory becomes practice is incisive and of considerable value.

But Gadamer's response to Habermas, focused as it is on the nature of reflection, reveals the shortcomings of the younger man's approach. While it is necessary, as Habermas has repeatedly argued, to secure our beliefs by all available epistemological means, it must be admitted that every theory of knowledge presupposes knowledge. Gadamer rightly notes that the goal of a total enlightenment, the complete self-transparency of thought, is illusory. That does not mean that anyone can forego, in Hegel's phrase, the strenuous toil of conceptual thought. But it does expose Peirce's dream of complete knowledge of reality, a dream shared by Habermas, to a critical light. Such is the light of reason. Habermas subordinates reason to critical reflection, we saw, in an effort to avoid cementing reason into a form of positivity. He aims at a rationality more rational than that of the positivists, who lack the fluency of reflective thought, and more rational than that of the hermeneuticists, whose emphasis on the circularity of reason can seem to flirt with irrationalism.<sup>166</sup> But it would be hard to justify against Gadamer the latter charge. On the contrary, Gadamer has underlined the effectiveness of reason as the very insight into truth, and stressed that reflection either serves reason or destroys it. Habermas, who champions the rights of reflection over those of reason, may not realize

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<sup>166</sup> This is the position of Martin Jay, in whose eyes Gadamer subordinates reason to tradition and Habermas provides a corrective. Martin Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn?" in Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives, ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 86-110 (esp. pp. 98-99, 110).

the consequences of his partisanship.<sup>167</sup> To be sure, he knows that reason can delude it self. For that reason he proposes reflection as an aid to the process of disillusionment, as the psychoanalytic dialogue suggests. But Gadamer is correct, we must say, in asking to whom reflection is answerable. For what, if not reason, motivates the reflective disillusionment of reason?

In Gadamer's response to Habermas, several themes have emerged which mark the particular contribution of Gadamer to the rehabilitation of tradition. Habermas, who calls for an unconstrained dialogue which would reconstruct what has been suppressed throughout human history, and thus for an emancipation from those constraints embedded in culture, prompts Gadamer to a further consideration of effective history. This concept, central to Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition, has a double thrust. It points, on the one hand, to the shortcomings of historicism; and on the other hand, it broadens our understanding of historical truth. The assertion that truth is historical can lead to skepticism about all philosophical concepts of truth. Habermas sees the problem, and urges the transformation of philosophy into critical reflection. Against this, Gadamer calls for the acknowledgment of reason which, as Hegel taught, is embodied in history. Gadamer's concept of the legitimate authority manifested in the institutions of culture leads to a further rehabilitation of tradition. The institutions of culture, by which Gadamer means the structures of the state, of the arts, or religion and of family, possess a value which, like the philosophy Plato tried to teach Dionysius, cannot be proved in a logically compelling way. They can be understood only by analogy with practical wisdom, the conscience, and good judgment, whose truth emerges in application. Gadamer's doctrine of application suggests the limits of technical knowledge, which can be applied rightly or wrongly. In our treatment of the themes central to Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition, then, the focal points will be effective history, authority, and application.

### VII.3.A. Effective History as Idea and as Manifestation

The first thing to be noted about Gadamer's "Wirkungsgeschichte" or "effective history" is its ambiguity. The term can mean either "the history we know to be effective" or "the effectiveness of history upon us."<sup>168</sup> In the first case, effective history suggests the history of something, transmitted from the past, whose effect we can study in the present. In the second case, it refers to that history whose effect escapes a full thematic treatment. We know, for example, that the Bible has had an enormous effect upon history, but no one can exhaustively gauge that effect. The ambiguity of effective history lies in the ambiguity of history itself: it is the account of who we are as well as that in which we live.

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<sup>167</sup> This is the insight of Jay, who regards Habermas' advocacy of reflection as the somewhat questionable granting of a privilege to nature which is denied to culture (Ibid., p. 109).

<sup>168</sup> Hoy translates it as "hermeneutic consciousness or awareness" (p. 174, footnote 17); Palmer's translation is "authentically historical consciousness" (p. 191).

Gadamer defines it as a counter-concept to historical objectivism. On the one hand, effective history seems to be a mere corrective to such objectivism, regarded as the attempt to methodically free the historian from uncontrolled prejudices. This goal is unattainable in any final sense. Gadamer reminds us that effective history “determines in advance both what seems to us worth enquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there – in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth.”<sup>169</sup> The immediate appearance of what the historian studies does not include the history of how that appearance first became an object of interest to the historian. Effective history corrects historical objectivism by putting the object of study within the context of the historian’s own life and development. It recalls to the historian that the objective study of history must include an acknowledgment of the historian’s own motivations.

But effective history, on the other hand, does more than enable historians to be more objective. It also signifies the limits to objectivity. These limits come into view with the acknowledgment that history is effective especially when we are not aware of its effect. This problem we have already encountered in the discussion of Heidegger’s forgetfulness of being, according to which being, where it is most neglected, waxes stronger as the will to will.<sup>170</sup> Gadamer makes a similar point. “We see that the power of effective history does not depend on its being recognized,” he writes. “This, precisely, is the power of history over finite human consciousness, namely that it prevails even where faith in method leads one to deny one’s own historicity.”<sup>171</sup> Gadamer’s effective history is more than a dimension within the study of history of which historians must take account. It refers instead to an effectiveness of history independent of the historians’ conscious consideration.

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<sup>169</sup> “Sie [Wirkungsgeschichte] bestimmt im voraus, was sich uns als fragwürdig und als Gegenstand der Erforschung zeigt, und wir vergessen gleichsam die Hälfte dessen, was wirklich ist, ja mehr noch: wir vergessen die ganze Wahrheit dieser Erscheinung, wenn wir die unmittelbare Erscheinung selber als die ganze Wahrheit nehmen.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 284; trans., pp. 267-268. The translation uses different expressions to render the two appearances of “vergessen” and of “Erscheinung.”

<sup>170</sup> See Chapter V above, esp. the section entitled “History as the Inexorable.”

<sup>171</sup> “Aber aufs Ganze gesehen, hängt die Macht der Wirkungsgeschichte nicht von ihrer Anerkennung ab. Das gerade ist die Macht der Geschichte über das endliche menschliche Bewusstsein, dass sie sich auch dort durchsetzt, wo man im Glauben an die Methode die eigene Geschichtlichkeit verleugnet.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 285; trans., p. 268. The translation of “durchsetzen” by “prevail” is too strong. History does not prevail over consciousness, but carries through its purposes regardless of our consciousness.

This second aspect of effective history, by which we refer to the history whose effect is beyond our willing and acting, has greatly irritated Gadamer's critics. Some see in it the relativization of all norms. Because such norms are influenced by the effect of history, say these critics, the norms are of only relative value, and the question of truth is abandoned. Other critics see in this aspect of effective history the surrender of all attempts to mount a genuine criticism against present injustice. If the effect of history can never be made transparent, they say, then it can never be subject to critique. But it must be admitted that Gadamer asserts neither the uselessness of criteria nor the impotence of critique. On the one hand, effective history is itself a kind of criterion. The first aspect of it we discussed – effective history as a corrective to historical objectivism – suggests as much. The historian who ignores the effectiveness of history is methodologically naive. On the other hand, effective history hardly renders criticism impotent. It is itself a criticism of historical naivety. Yet it does deny, by implication, the possibility of attaining a supra-historical critical standpoint.

#### VII.3.A.1. The double aspect

The real challenge posed by effective history is to conceptualize its double aspect. Effective history, first of all, defines the recognition and study of the effect of the historian's own situation upon the historical matter under investigation. Secondly, it refers to the effect of history upon the investigator, above and beyond what the investigator recognizes and studies. How can we illustrate these two aspects? Biblical scholarship provides an example. It can be generally said that the effective history of the Bible has manifested itself in the past two centuries through the working-out of historical critical questions. Scholars have grown in consciousness of the history of the Biblical text, of the role of Israel in the history of religions, of the incorporation into the Hebrew Scriptures of traditions of divergent origin, and of the heterogeneous sources and forms of Gospel sayings. This new consciousness arose, we can say, as Biblical scholars became aware of the need to investigate the Bible in the same way that other historians were pursuing the questions of secular history. Effective history, in the first sense of the term, reveals itself in modern Biblical studies as the impact of critical consciousness upon the methods of the exegete. Historical scholars, conscious of the methodological demand for critical distance, began to incorporate in their Biblical studies an acknowledgment of the varying degrees to which Biblical narratives are acceptable as history.<sup>172</sup> They grasped the fact that their own confessional stance had to be accounted for in the quest for objectively true interpretations of the Bible.

If that is an example of effective history in the first sense – consciousness of the effect of history on the interpreter – what then is an example of effective history in the second sense? According to this second sense, history is effective in ways of which the

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<sup>172</sup> See Hans W. Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), esp. chapters 7-8; and Van Austin Harvey, The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), esp. chapter 1.

interpreter cannot be aware. It defines, as we saw in a previous quotation from Gadamer, what arises in research as questionable and as a subject for investigation. How it defines this cannot be laid out in a completely satisfying way, for effective history, in this sense, is more idea than phenomenon. It refers to the totality of forces shaping the historian, unconscious as well as conscious. But Biblical studies can once again provide an example. If it may be said that historical critical questions have dominated Biblical studies in recent history, this dominance has been achieved at the expense of other kinds of questions. One thinks of the approach, critical in a quite different sense, to what Henri de Lubac has called the “spiritual meaning” of the Bible, “understood as figurative or mystical meaning.”<sup>173</sup> This “Christian approach”<sup>174</sup> takes as its inspiration the words of Augustine: the New Testament is latent in the Old; the Old Testament is patent in the New.<sup>175</sup> A detailed description of the so-called spiritual meaning is not necessary here. It is enough to remark that such an exegetical approach, in which the two testaments are regarded as a unity and each is used to explicate the other, is by no means taught as a matter of course in most theological schools. The effective history of Biblical studies, we can say, has tended to exclude the “spiritual meaning” of the Bible, and indeed all the “more than literal” exegetical approaches,<sup>176</sup> from the mainstream of research.

This gives us a clue to effective history in the second sense of the term, the effect of which no one can be fully conscious. No doubt one can provide good reasons for casting the spiritual meaning of the Bible to the periphery of Biblical scholarship. The study of such meaning tends to subordinate literal exegesis to the search for allegories, shifting attention from Biblical history. For that reason, the example of the investigation of spiritual meaning belongs to effective history in the first sense of the term. Scholars should be aware of why they choose to study one thing (the literal meaning) and not another (the spiritual meaning). But the spiritual meaning of the Bible, as a research topic, differs greatly from other forms of Biblical criticism, and this difference concerns

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<sup>173</sup> Henri de Lubac, L'Écriture dans la tradition (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1966), p. 34; translation: de Lubac, The Sources of Revelation, trans. Luke O'Neill (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 20.

<sup>174</sup> Célestin Charlier, La lecture chrétienne de la Bible, with a prefatory letter by His Excellency, Monsignor Weber (Paris: Editions de Maredsous, 1950); translation: Charlier, The Christian Approach to the Bible, trans. Hubert J. Richards and Brendan Peters, Preface by John M. T. Barton (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1958).

<sup>175</sup> “[I]n vetere novum lateat et in novo vetus pateat.” Augustine, Quaestionum in Heptateuchum, 2.73, in Aurelii Augustini Opera, part 5; vol. 33 of Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina, 177 vols. (1953-) projected (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Typography – Pontifical Editors, 1958).

<sup>176</sup> Raymond E. Brown, “Hermeneutics,” in The Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. R. E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, 2 vols. in 1 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), especially sections 32-79.



effective history in the second sense. It represents a wholly different choice than that between, say, the sociology of ancient Israelite institutions, the conceptual world of Pauline literature, and the historical accuracy of the Johannine writings. No one would dispute the scientific value of such studies in the same way that the value of the spiritual meaning might be disputed. There is a general academic consensus that the one kind of study is more appropriate than the other. The two appear incommensurable. Needless to say, the opposition to the study of the spiritual meaning is not unanimous. The fact that certain theologians do advocate such study makes it clear that the assumptions of the mainstream are not universal. Hence the reluctance to make such spiritual meaning a research topic is an imperfect example of the second aspect of effective history. Because such reluctance is a matter of dispute, it suggests that this particular effect of history on the researcher is by no means unknown. It is a concrete critical phenomenon, whereas effective history in the second sense is an idea which, by definition, cannot be fully thematized. But our example does intimate the kind of force which the second aspect of effective history possesses. It is the force of almost unspoken resistance to a kind of research which differs from that of the mainstream. Few would even consider the study of the spiritual meaning, even if the opportunity presented itself. When a matter requires no thought, it can be said that effective history is operating in it.

#### VII.3.A.2. The effect and our awareness of it

If effective history manifests itself in the greater self-consciousness of historians and in the acknowledgment that perfect self-consciousness, the full understanding of the motives for historical study, is an illusion, how then can the relation between these two aspects be characterized? One approach would see the second aspect of effective history simply as the condition for the first. The effective history of which we are not aware provides the context for that effective history to which we can direct our attention. This is akin to Nietzsche's remark, at the beginning of the second essay in his Genealogy of Morals, that forgetfulness enables us to encounter the old as something new. If it were not for effective history as that effect upon us of which we are not conscious, which has provided us with this moment and brought us to present decision, then there would be no historical effects which we could raise to conscious awareness. At the same time, those effects of which we are aware have only a relative value. Relying, as they do, upon a more profound effective history (the full exposition of which is denied to consciousness), those aspects of the past which become a theme for investigation can never claim an absolute value for themselves. The conscious is relativized by the unconscious. If we regard the unconscious only as that vast and unexplored area within which consciousness operates, as that whose pervasive forgetfulness bestows novelty upon remembered things, then that which we know explicitly, the remembered, must always be the target of skepticism.

There is another way, however, of conceiving the relation between the two aspects of effective history. Gadamer describes it in Hegelian terms as the relation between subjectivity and substantiality. The fact that we can never fully reflect upon our own involvement in the history which we study, he says, is not a shortcoming of reflection, but is rather the nature of historical being. Such historical being, which presents us unbidden, as it were, with our very selves, was called substance by Hegel.

His use of the term recalls the Aristotelian substance, the first of the categories. In Hegel's view, substance is humanity's universal nature and purposefulness,<sup>177</sup> its will or fate as opposed to knowledge,<sup>178</sup> and its customs.<sup>179</sup> Hegel's substance, in short, encompasses what Gadamer means by effective history. The author of Truth and Method proposes to come to terms with effective history just as Hegel came to terms with substance. "The task of philosophical hermeneutics," writes Gadamer, "can be from this point precisely characterized: it has to return along the way of Hegel's phenomenology of spirit, insofar as one shows in all subjectivity the substantiality which determines it."<sup>180</sup> It was Hegel's task to show that the universality of human life, its purposefulness, will, and customs – in a word, its substance – was not alien to subjective thought. Hegel fulfilled his task by means of a dialectical exposition of the relation between substance and subjectivity. What seems alien to the subjective consciousness is reconciled, according to Hegel, through the dialectical thought which acknowledges its true self in what appears other than itself. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics suggests something analogous. The relation between the two aspects of effective history (as what we know to be effective and as what has an effect upon us) is to be conceived dialectically.

This means, first of all, that the two aspects do not stand in irreconcilable opposition. The conscious aspect of effective history, which seems within our control, and the unconscious aspect, which apparently controls us, build a unity. But this unity is not self-evident, and some would even deny its existence. Indeed, Hegel has been interpreted as suggesting that the conscious has to appropriate the unconscious, transforming it by means of reflective thought. This is the interpretation of Hegel by Habermas, for example, who criticizes Gadamer's effective history as an argument on behalf of irrational prejudice. For Habermas, the concept of effective history as that which exerts upon the present a force of which human beings can never be fully aware is a denial of the power of reflection. How can there be an a priori unity, he might ask, between what we know and what we do not know? In Habermas' view, the Gadamerian demand that investigators show the substantiality which defines all subjectivity rashly

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<sup>177</sup> Hegel, Phänomenologie, in Werke, 2.339; trans., p. 462.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.459; trans., p. 613.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.535-536; trans., p. 709.

<sup>180</sup> "Die Aufgabe der philosophischen Hermeneutik lässt sich von hier aus geradezu so charakterisieren: sie habe den Weg der Hegelschen Phänomenologie des Geistes insoweit zurückzugehen, als man in aller Subjektivität die sie bestimmende Substantialität aufweist." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 286; trans., p. 269.

The translation is my own, and is far more literal than the published translation. It is worth noting that Habermas, in his critical paraphrase of this passage, uses the stronger "nachweis en" (connoting "to prove," "to authenticate") instead of Gadamer's own "aufweisen" ("to exhibit," "to show"). See footnote 68 above.

assumes that the subjective power of reflection is incapable of seeing through the accumulation of historical substance.<sup>181</sup>

Yet Habermas betrays here his subordination of the mature Hegel to the young Hegel's critique of positivity. His interpretation of Hegel, according to which reflection renders all substance the prey of an omnipotent dialectic, conceals the reconciliatory tendencies of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It wrongly makes Hegel the champion of the Enlightenment's plea for a complete self-emancipation from the thought which has gone before. Gadamer, however, insists with Hegel on the rationality of history, even that of which we are not aware. What compels the human being to see things one way and not another is no irrational compulsion which calls for exorcism, but stands as an element of the person's identity. The rationality of history forges the unity of that which one knows and that which is unknown.

There is, in addition to the unity of substance and subjectivity, a second consequence of the dialectical relation between the two. Such a dialectic does not mean simply that the one helps define the other and that the two are on equal footing. Substantiality, Gadamer says, determines subjectivity. The one is subordinate to the other. In subjectivity, human beings discover the substance which determines the subjective self. This means that within the effective history of which we are aware one learns, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the effective history which escapes one's awareness. To be sure, it is not discovered as one discovers an entity which lies at our disposal. The discovery of effective history in this sense of the term is more akin to Aristotle's grasp of being as neither substance, genus, nor species. Or it is like the Kantian insight into the ego not as a mental representation, but rather as the ground of all representation. Or it resembles Heidegger's discovery of being in its absence, i.e., as that which is no entity. In each of these examples, something is discovered by means of something else, and the something else is subordinate to that which it shows forth. The model for this is Plato's doctrine of ideas, according to which the visible and the sensible enable one to recall what underlies them. Do we not see in Gadamer the suggestion of an analogy between the ideas and effective history? The idea of an effective history, whose full effect we cannot grasp, reveals itself in the effective history which we can grasp.

Gadamer's effective history, in sum, contributes to the philosophical rehabilitation of tradition a way of conceiving the past as effective in the present. Such an effect is both known and unknown, and between these two aspects there exists a dialectical relation. The relation is one of unity and of subordination. What we know of the past is united with those historical effects of which we are not aware. And those effects, which are present as the purpose, will, and customs of historical substance, determine our subjective grasp of history. Traditions, understood as the objects of historical study, are rehabilitated by Gadamer as the very epiphany of a broader concept of tradition. The broader concept shows itself in, and determines, the traditions which we study. The only way to grasp that broader concept of tradition is through the study of

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<sup>181</sup> See footnote 68 above.

traditions. Hence those traditions assume a kind of authority. They are authoritative in that they serve as a kind of author who introduces us to the tradition within which we already stand. This brings us to the rehabilitation of authority, the second contribution of Gadamer to the philosophy of tradition.

### VII.3.B. Authorities and the Rehabilitation of Authority

Gadamer rehabilitates authority by demonstrating that true authority is not opposed to reason. Instead, the acknowledgment of genuine authority is a sign of reason, Gadamer argues, for the one who acknowledges authority recognizes in it a superior insight.<sup>182</sup> Gadamer secures his point with historical examples. Aristotle, he says, realized that politics is learned not simply by the study of laws, but at the feet of those whose experience has given them an authoritative understanding of laws.<sup>183</sup> Descartes provides Gadamer with another example. He excluded the question of morality from those sciences which he aimed to transform by means of his discourse on method. Modern science, Descartes realized, lays no basis for morality, because the basis of morality is the authority which accrues to tradition.<sup>184</sup> Gadamer's final example is German romanticism. The romantics advocated the authority of tradition, which they realized has a power over our actions and behavior, even when that power escapes our rational grasp. In each of these examples Gadamer focuses on the authority which belongs to history, whether it be the history of an experienced individual or of an entire people.

The critics of Truth and Method argue that Gadamer's rehabilitation of authority is anti-rational or anti-intellectual. At best such a rehabilitation points to the limits of rationalism. At worst it legitimates the repressive efforts of those who would preserve an unjust but authoritative social order. Such criticism fails to confront, however, the central Gadamerian thesis that the acknowledgment of authority is an act of reason. Reason manifests itself, Gadamer says, by recognizing the authority of one who has superior insight. Without a doubt, such recognition should never abdicate responsibility for further inquiry. Gadamer would willingly endorse the comment of Thomas (in the eighth article of the Summa Theologiae's first question) that the argument from authority is the weakest argument. The rehabilitation of authority is not to be achieved at the expense of reason, but serves to show that reason displays itself apart from experimental science. In particular, reason displays itself in the acknowledgment of the authority of those historical forces which have always shaped present life.

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<sup>182</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 261-269, esp. p. 264; trans., pp. 245-253, esp. p. 248.

<sup>183</sup> Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1181<sup>a</sup>19-1181<sup>b</sup>13.

<sup>184</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, esp. the section entitled "The Unity of Mathematics and Metaphysics."

Reason, we can say, does not contradict itself by admitting that it is dependent upon authority. If this is the case, if authority has always played an important and necessary role in the life of reason, then two questions arise. First, why does authority, if it has played such a constant role, need to be rehabilitated? Second, is the rehabilitation of authority in general a rehabilitation or advocacy of particular authorities?

#### VII.3.B.1. Effective presence and neglected claim

The first of these two questions stems from the following train of thought. Gadamer's analysis of effective history has shown the effect upon us of a history whose fullness we can never grasp. The romantics perceived this effect and proclaimed the authority of tradition in general. The influence of morality and custom flows from such tradition, which cannot be replaced by rational insight. In traditions, morality, and custom we see an authority which commands and finds obedience. The fact of such authority cannot be denied. Why then does Gadamer speak of the rehabilitation of tradition? Why rehabilitate something whose power is present for all to see?

The immediate answer is that authority had to be rehabilitated from what Gadamer calls the Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice.<sup>185</sup> The longing for a complete purification from the idolatry of prejudice, in Bacon's phrase, a purification to be achieved by means of a rigorous scientific method, is itself a prejudice. It judges that such a purification is possible before the purification has been achieved. It neglects the claim which authority makes. We have seen that this longing to be free from prejudice cannot be realized due to the finitude and historicity of human nature. Yet this finitude is as infrequently acknowledged as our dependence upon authority. The rehabilitation of authority is necessary in order to expose the relation between the individual, overly jealous of a seeming autonomy, and the authority of history, politics, morality, religion, and custom, all of which provide a context for the exercise of individual rights. The rehabilitation of which Gadamer speaks is, first of all, an admission of our allegiance to authorities which have always been authoritatively and effectively present.

But Gadamer means more, by his rehabilitation of authority, than the acknowledgment of what seem to be rather self-evident sources of power in society. In addition, he argues that the recognition of authority is an act of freedom and of reason. Such recognition is not simply the confession of the effectiveness of history which works regardless of our consciousness of it. It is more precisely a conscious commitment to a superior. This commitment is not primarily an admission that one is swayed by historical currents beyond one's control. Rather, it acknowledges that, while the authority's insight into a given matter is superior, one's own reason can see far enough to appreciate that superiority. Our intellectual efforts do not supplant authority, but serve to confirm it. One need not be an expert, in short, to recognize expertise.

This brings us to the most difficult point in the rehabilitation of authority. We have seen that this rehabilitation consists, first, in the admission that we do acknowledge

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<sup>185</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 255; trans., pp. 239-40.

authorities, and second, in the realization that such an acknowledgment is an act of reason. To admit that one acknowledges authority is, on the one hand, to concede that such authority has been earned. To realize that one's acknowledgment of authority is an act of reason is, on the other hand, to insist upon the rights of reason. In other words, reason recognizes authority, but it does so only as long as that authority remains genuine. To continue to acknowledge an authority after that authority has decayed would be a betrayal of reason. So we must always admit that we are both acknowledging and testing authority at the same time. Doubtless, the successful passing of our test does not bestow authority. "Authority cannot actually be bestowed," Gadamer writes, "but is acquired and must be acquired, if someone is to lay claim to it."<sup>186</sup> Here Gadamer relates the fact of authority and the provisional nature of authority by means of the simple conjunction "and." He sees that the two are inextricably bound. The acknowledgment of authority goes hand in hand with the testing of authority.

But this by no means disposes of the problem. Authority, it must first be said, does not depend on an individual's acknowledgment of it. Catholic theologians of tradition have even gone so far as to assert that the authority of the Church enables the faithful to know the truth apart from the insights which belong to the faithful in and of themselves.<sup>187</sup> An authoritative figure may lack all apparent authority in an individual's eyes and still remain truly authoritative. Indeed, even the criticism of an authority can serve to substantiate it. One does not waste time criticizing something which is unworthy of criticism. To criticize is to acknowledge the worth of the object of criticism; disparaging judgments are of little worth.<sup>188</sup>

But it must also be said, secondly, that everyone has had the experience of being over-awed by a reputed authority who, on closer inspection, appears nothing but a sham. It is the merit of Gadamer's rehabilitation of authority that he lays out the complexity of the problem of authority and its claim upon us. Authority is acquired, he suggests, apart from our acknowledgment of it. Yet that authority must continually be acquired, and so must prove itself. What proves itself is not authority in general, but a particular authority. This brings us to our second question. Is Gadamer's rehabilitation of authority in general a rehabilitation of particular authorities?

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<sup>186</sup> "Damit [d.h. mit dem Einsicht dass der andere an Urteil überlegen ist] hängt zusammen, dass Autorität nicht eigentlich verliehen, sondern erworben wird und erworben sein muss, wenn einer sie in Anspruch nehmen will." Ibid., p. 264; trans., p. 248.

<sup>187</sup> See *A Reconsideration of the Modern Theology of Tradition*, esp. footnotes 68 and 70.

<sup>188</sup> The Anglo-American New Critics indirectly made the same point: literary study concerns itself not with the value of one poem in comparison to another, but with the poem's goodness or authority. See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), reprint ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 27.

### VII.3.B.2. An authority indifferent to obedience?

Truth and Method can be seen, from one point of view, as a testimony to the Judaeo-Christian and classical traditions of humanistic study of which Gadamer is the heir. His analysis of the leading humanistic concepts of culture, common sense, judgment, and taste suggests that these concepts mean what they do only within a tradition which, if one is to understand them, one must make one's own. There is no understanding of them apart from the humanist tradition.<sup>189</sup> Gadamer further states that what we mean by good taste is a Greek idea which received its decisive stamp from Christian moral philosophy.<sup>190</sup> Something analogous can be said of the notion of the classic. It is a normative and historical notion, says Gadamer, transmitted and developed within the tradition of humane and liberal education.<sup>191</sup> Finally, Gadamer argues that his concept of hermeneutical experience finds its real basis in the penetration of Greek logic by Christian theology, through which human finitude and divine infinity are mediated.<sup>192</sup> In all of these examples we see a particular tradition, that of the appropriation of Greek thought by Christian Europe, which Gadamer advocates. It is a tradition which needs to be rehabilitated, according to Gadamer, from the decay into which it had fallen as a result of the subordination of humanism to the methodical ideals of natural science.

Gadamer's argument on behalf of this tradition is twofold. He asserts, first of all, that this tradition must be restored to its rightful place over and above the scientific methodology which appears to dominate it. Second, he argues that this tradition has remained effective despite the threat posed by natural science. It is effective as part of the very fate of Western thought. One could not rehabilitate the tradition if it were truly dead – there would then be nothing which cries out for rehabilitation. But the tradition had to be put into question for it to arise from its slumber of self-evidence. Only when the tradition ceased to be self-evidently true, only when critics alleged that one could replace the humanistic concepts with positive and experimental science, did the tradition emerge as something to be rehabilitated. Such rehabilitation is not to be accomplished, Gadamer says, by invoking the eternal orders of nature and natural law. Its achievement lies rather in an inquiry into the nature of an idea, the idea of truth in the humanities. Such an inquiry differs from an examination of eternal orders and natural laws because it recognizes that ideas manifest themselves in different ways throughout history. Gadamer's proposed inquiry would recognize that understanding and interpretation spring not from methodical application of eternally valid principles, but are rather the

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<sup>189</sup> Gadamer brings this out especially in his discussion of common sense as that which founds community. See Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 16-27; trans., pp. 19-33.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37; trans., p. 38.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271; trans., p. 255.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405; trans., p. 388. See the section below entitled "Language and Incarnation."

development of an event whose roots lie in antiquity.<sup>193</sup> Such an event is authoritative in an unusual way: it is an authority seemingly indifferent to whether it commands obedience.

Here arises the ambiguity of Gadamer's rehabilitation of authority and tradition. If the Greek-Christian tradition is a present event whose roots lie in antiquity, if it has developed and continues to be effective despite the absence of a universal, conscious assent to its authority, then it could be said that Gadamer does not advocate a particular tradition. The author of Truth and Method, it would appear, is describing a cultural heritage, rather than an authority which commands obedience. On the one hand, he presents a history of philosophy which could only command the allegiance of a cultured elite. On the other hand, he interprets as a unity a cultural phenomenon which, many would argue, is so diverse as to repudiate all unitary understanding. None deny that Greek antiquity and the Christian heritage have molded Western civilization in a profound way. But multitudes would contest that this tradition represents an authority which they should acknowledge and obey. Even Gadamer would admit that one need not be a classicist or Christian in order to be a cultivated human being. He seems to suggest that the authority which the Western tradition represents ought to be acknowledged and obeyed, but remains effective regardless of humanity's conscious acknowledgment of it.

Hence two questions must be raised. What is the difference, we must ask, between (1) the concession that Greek culture has molded all Western thought and (2) the willingness to believe, for example, Plato and Aristotle before Descartes and Kant? And second, what is the difference between (1) the realization that Christianity has determined our notion of the moral order and (2) the readiness to affirm the absolute truth of the dogmas of the Church? These questions are not explicitly raised in Truth and Method. But the book does offer an indirect answer to them. As a philosopher, Gadamer quite appropriately situates these questions within general philosophical principles. To the first question, he responds that to truly understand a text, philosophic or otherwise, one must strive to be open to what the author is saying, that is, to admit from the outset that the author may be superior in insight. Indeed, that is what the truly experienced interpreter knows, namely, that an encounter with the unfamiliar is a source of new experiential knowledge.<sup>194</sup>

To the second question, that of the difference between acknowledging a Christian heritage and professing Christian faith, Gadamer again answers in general principles. He recognizes that the question of Christianity is a question of truth, and, to the extent that he shares the Christian Platonism of the fifteenth-century theologian Nicholas of Cusa, insists that such a question can be articulated in a variety of ways.<sup>195</sup> It is a single idea

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. xxx; trans. p. xiv.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 338; trans., p. 319.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., pp. 411-415; trans., pp. 393-397.



whose manifestations are infinite. Presumably for Gadamer the truth of Christianity finds expression in the unbeliever who seriously tries to understand the Christian mysteries as well as in the believer. But Gadamer, we must recall, is a philosopher rather than a theologian. He understands that his work differs from theology, for it does not take up the question of faith. Gadamer asserts that the Graeco-Christian heritage is an inescapable part of the destiny of Western life, but the question of faith is beyond philosophic consideration. His rehabilitation of authority contributes to tradition an understanding of how the Western heritage commands and should command the reverence, if that is not too strong a word, of philosophers. It commands this reverence because the tradition cannot be replaced by abstract principles or recovered by means of the application to historical artifacts of scientific methods. To understand why it cannot be replaced brings us to the third Gadamerian doctrine central to the understanding of tradition, the doctrine of application.

### VII.3.C. Application as Integral to Tradition

Application is a problem, Gadamer states, because it seems to refer to a distinct moment within the hermeneutical experience and also to the hermeneutical experience itself. Within Protestant Biblical hermeneutics one has commonly distinguished, since at least the eighteenth century, three stages. These are, first, the understanding of the text; second, the exposition of it; and third, the application of the text to the contemporary situation.<sup>196</sup> But Gadamer points out that the distinction between understanding and the exposition which clarifies misunderstanding is a special case. Ordinarily, understanding and exposition possess an inner unity – one gives an exposition of what one understands, and only on occasion is the text so unclear that one’s exposition is aimed at the clarification of misunderstanding. The presupposition that misunderstanding is more common than its opposite, says Gadamer, is a presupposition that first emerged with Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher, the exemplar of aesthetic consciousness, sought to free himself from the dogmatic tradition within which Biblical understanding was the presumed rule. With Schleiermacher, argues Gadamer, the distinction between understanding (as the natural activity which occurs prior to critical examination) and exposition (as the critical activity which frees one from dogmatic prejudices) first came into its own.<sup>197</sup> Such a distinction should be regarded, from Gadamer’s viewpoint, as a distortion of hermeneutics, insofar as it seeks to free interpretation from the dogmatic tradition within which all Biblical interpretation takes place. Doubtless, understanding of the Bible differs from exposition, defined as the explicit form of understanding. But the two are united within the Christian tradition. That tradition guarantees, so to speak, that the natural understanding is the norm. Only on occasion does it need to be corrected by

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., pp. 173, 291; trans., pp. 163, 274. Gadamer refers to the 1761 Institutio interpretis novi testamenti by Johann August Ernesti (1707-1781), and to the 1723 Institutiones hermeneuticae sacrae of Johann Jakob Rambach (1693-1735).

<sup>197</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 173-184; trans., pp. 162-173. See Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, especially the section entitled “Individual Expressivity, Not Content.”

the scientific application of critical rules. And even in the exceptional case, the critical exposition serves the traditional understanding in general, if not in all particulars.

The eighteenth century theorists, who distinguished application from understanding and from exposition, regarded application as the proclamation and preaching of the gospel. The application presupposes a historical and theological understanding, they would admit, but is essentially different from it. Gadamer contends, however, that the three are a unity. "In the course of our reflections," he writes, "we have come to see that understanding always involves something like the application of the text to be understood to the present situation of the interpreter"<sup>198</sup> In short, there is no understanding free of present concerns. Whenever one understands, one's present situation comes into play. The present situation, to which any text (and not just the Bible) is applied, always shares in the motivation of textual understanding.

This is the kind of Gadamerian statement which critics such as Betti and Hirsch abhor. They oppose it on two counts: first, because it suggests that there is no objectively final interpretation to be validated, and second, because it suggests that every interpretation takes place within a tradition which escapes our grasp as an uncontrolled variable. The problem of application is a genuine problem because, by effacing the distinction between objective understanding and the subjective grasp of what is understood, it threatens the very existence of truth in the humanities. Yet it must be said that Gadamer's solution to the problem, namely, that application is an integral moment of interpretation, by no means acquiesces in relativism. Instead of concluding that the application of the object of study to our present concerns prevents us from saying what the object is, Gadamer insists that it is the way of every true understanding. He means, above all, that one always applies the object to be understood to one's present situation in the act of understanding. And he also means that to acknowledge such application, to acknowledge that one's historical situation is constitutive of the act of understanding, is an advance in clarity. This argument is not without consequences for the rehabilitation of tradition. It suggests that the understanding of tradition is always an application of it to one's own situation, and that the effort to apply tradition is an integral part of tradition itself. Let us examine these suggestions in detail.

#### VII.3.C.1. The unity of cognitive and normative interpretations

Gadamer has noted that, although the hermeneutical theorists of eighteenth-century Protestantism distinguished between the interpretation and application of Scripture, nevertheless the two cannot ultimately be separated. He argues by analogy with legal hermeneutics. The jurist does not simply strive to interpret the law in terms of what it meant at the time it was drafted. In addition, such a jurist aims at the meaning of the law for the concrete situation which the court must adjudicate. The aim of legal

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<sup>198</sup> "Nun haben uns unsere Überlegungen zu der Einsicht geführt, dass im Verstehen immer so etwas wie eine Anwendung des zu verstehenden Textes auf die gegenwärtige Situation des Interpreten stattfindet." Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 291; trans., p. 274.

interpretation is never merely what the law once meant, but what it means in the present. And that differs, more or less, from what it once meant. In a similar way, Gadamer argues that the theologian cannot be content with a historical interpretation of Scripture. Its meaning for the present must be sought. From these examples Gadamer draws a general conclusion: “the text,” he writes, “whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly, ie according to the claim it makes, must be understood at every moment, in every particular situation, in a new and different way.”<sup>199</sup> This sentence hinges on the tension between the proper understanding of the text and the mutability of the proper understanding. Gadamer asserts that there is a proper understanding, namely, that which corresponds to the claim made by the text. He also asserts that every proper understanding must be new and different. How is the tension between the two assertions to be resolved?

Gadamer’s argument must be understood in the context of the Heideggerian anthropology which it directly presupposes.<sup>200</sup> We recall that, for Heidegger, the human being or Dasein is thrown within a particular history and projects itself toward an imagined future. Past and future determine the possibilities which face Dasein in the present. The understanding of the past, by consequence, cannot be an impersonal study of something to which the individual is indifferent. On the contrary, such a past has shaped the present in which Dasein encounters itself. The present is rooted in the past. Furthermore, such a past offers the raw material, so to speak, with which the future is to be achieved. Upon one’s understanding of the past turns an anticipation of both the present and the future.

With this Heideggerian doctrine in mind, we can better resolve the tensions in Gadamer’s sentence. The proper understanding of which he speaks, the understanding which accords with the claim made by the text, is nothing other than a fidelity to the past. This past, out of which the text has sprung, shapes the interpreter as well. Attending to the claim made by the text means acknowledging its past as a part of one’s own past as well. The interpreter who strives for a proper understanding refuses the temptation to deny or be indifferent to history. In other words, such an interpreter admits that between the concerns which motivated the ancient author, and the concerns of the present moment, no complete separation is possible. Past author and present interpreter stand within a history which embraces them both. A proper understanding of the text is an understanding by which interpreters recognize in the ancient writer their own identity, their very selves.

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<sup>199</sup> “Das schliesst in beiden Fällen ein, dass der Text, ob Gesetz oder Heilsbotschaft, wenn er angemessen verstanden werden soll, d.h. dem Anspruch, den der Text erhebt, entsprechend, in jedem Augenblick, d.h. in jeder konkreten Situation, neu und anders verstanden werden muss.” Ibid., p. 292; trans., p. 274.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 293; trans., p. 276.

Yet the identity is not complete. Between author and reader there exists a span of time. The two can share common interests and, indeed, their very selves; but there are a multitude of differences between them, impossible to enumerate, which Gadamer summarizes with the term “Zeitenabstand” or “temporal distance.”<sup>201</sup> Because of that distance, every proper understanding of a text is new and different. It is new because it attends to the claim of the text upon the present which, by definition, has newly arrived. And it is different because no historical moment is identical with another. The novelty and difference of a proper understanding consist in the temporal distance between text and reader. The propriety of the understanding lies in the unity of the truth encompassing past and present, author and reader.

The problem with such a view is that it fuses the cognitive and normative realms. What we know and what makes a claim upon us emerge, in Gadamer’s analysis, as the same thing. The distinctions between cognitive and normative interpretation, upon which Betti had insisted, are virtually abandoned. To be sure, the distinction is by no means empty. There are things which we know whose value is so obvious as to appear insignificant. In these, we could say, the cognitive interest dominates the normative. But Gadamer has good reasons for uniting the two. The first reason, which we shall discuss in greater detail in the next section, is a positive one. Cognitive and normative interpretations should be united, he suggests, because human beings are committed to what they know.<sup>202</sup> The meaning of a text consists in its significance for us and, as Gadamer points out, a knowledge without relation to a concrete situation is essentially meaningless.<sup>203</sup> The knowledge which is a part of us is, like every aspect of our being, a matter of value and concern.

Gadamer rejects the effort to divide cognitive and normative interpretation not only for the positive reason that we are committed to what we know. He also rejects it for the dangers which such a division poses. These dangers are, first, the possibility of a misunderstanding of the relation between past and present; and second, the delusion that the norm has no organic connection with knowledge. One sees the first danger in Schleiermacher’s effort to achieve a universal hermeneutics. He sought a method of understanding free from the dogmatic claims of tradition.<sup>204</sup> Such a hermeneutic fails to acknowledge the constitutive role played by tradition in all understanding.<sup>205</sup> It risks a failure to see that the dogmatic tradition retains an influence upon even those who believe

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., pp. 275-283; trans., pp. 258-267.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 294; trans., p. 277.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 296; trans., p. 279.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p. 309; trans., p. 291.

<sup>205</sup> See Chapter VI above, esp. the section entitled “Historicality and the Superficial Method.”

themselves free from it. They ignore Hegel's insight into history as the manifestation of reason, a reason whose power cannot be erased even by the rejection of that history. And they ignore Heidegger's insight into humanity as thrown into a situation, not of its choice, upon which it depends.

The second danger stemming from the effort to divide cognitive and normative interpretation reveals itself in the tendency to regard normative interpretation as a domination of the text by the interpreter. For an explanation of this point, Gadamer refers to Max Scheler's critique of pragmatism. Scheler argued that the desire to subordinate all knowledge to human goals obscures the service performed by knowledge in the development of person and world.<sup>206</sup> Such pragmatic knowledge wrongly appears as the domination of the known by the knower, that is, as a "Herrschaftswissen." But one need not turn to Scheler for an explanation of the danger inherent in the characterization of normative interpretation as the manipulation of knowledge for pragmatic ends. The work of Habermas provides an equally-clear example of the denial of the claim upon the interpreter of the tradition embodied in the text. Habermas would prefer to see cognitive interpretation separate from the application of the text to the present situation. The tradition present in the text can be no source of values, according to Habermas, because the values of critical theory arise in the present, in a critique of tradition. Following this train of thought, the knowledge of tradition and the value of tradition are wholly distinct.

Such a view, however, regards the choice of norms as the activity of an autonomous individual or society emancipated from the past. This betrays what Heidegger called the forgetfulness of being – a sign of the dominance of the present by the past at the very moment in which the past seems to have been decisively vanquished. But values are not an independent creation. Even the highest laws of a land are not complete in and of themselves. They are subordinate to the idea of justice. Gadamer illustrates this by means of the Aristotelian doctrines of practical wisdom and equity.

#### VII.3.C.2. Application as transmission

To the doctrine of practical wisdom we have alluded in our discussion of those who oppose Gadamer for the sake of verifiable norms of interpretation.<sup>207</sup> Such critics argue that Truth and Method contributes to the indeterminacy of meaning, the view that there are no criteria for a true interpretation. Against this view, Gadamer presents Aristotle's *φρόνησις* or practical wisdom. It is the excellence in deliberation which embraces theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Gadamer's point is that, without practical wisdom, theoretical knowledge does not suffice: interpretive criteria

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<sup>206</sup> Max Scheler, "Die Formen des Wissens und die Bildung" (1925) in Scheler, Gesammelte Werke, ed. Maria Scheler et al., 11 vols. to date (Bern and Munich: Francke Verlag, 1954-1982), vol. 9: Späte Schriften (1976), ed. Manfred S. Frings, pp. 85-119, p. 114 cited here. Gadamer (Wahrheit und Methode, p. 295; trans., p. 278) dates this incorrectly in 1927.

<sup>207</sup> See the section above entitled "Open Hostility on Behalf of Verifiable Norms."

find their fulfillment only at the hands of one who knows how to apply them. Gadamer makes a similar point by means of Aristotle's doctrine of *επιείκεια* or equity. We referred to this in our discussion of those critics who regard Gadamer as a champion of the humanities over the sciences.<sup>208</sup> Aristotle proposed that equity is better than justice. He meant that, although just laws are indispensable, they need to be applied with reason and measure. Gadamer concludes from this that interpretive questions cannot be decided in advance. They can only be adjudicated by means of an interpretation of a concrete object within a particular situation.

These Aristotelian doctrines signify, for the rehabilitation of tradition, that the tradition cannot be known apart from the application of it. Aristotle asserted that there are certain matters which have to be deliberated,<sup>209</sup> and we can say that tradition is among them. Unlike geometry and mathematics, tradition means a variety of things, and this meaning demands elucidation. What it is cannot be stated a priori in general principles. It emerges in deliberation, and there is an art to this, an art which belongs to those with practical wisdom. Apart from deliberation, Aristotle suggested, the ends attainable by practical wisdom – a good to be achieved in action – will not be realized. The good is not an abstract knowledge, but is intimately linked with the concrete human situation. Gadamer says something similar about interpretation. “The hermeneutical problem,” he writes, “also is clearly a different thing from a pure knowledge detached from any particular kind of being.”<sup>210</sup> The interpretation of tradition, he seems to imply, is not an interpretation achieved by the methodological alienation of experimental science. It is, on the contrary, an effort to recover the past in deliberation on its value, a value inextricably fused with the concerns of the present.

Aristotle's concept of equity provides an even better analogy of how tradition is known in its application. Equity, Aristotle taught, must be distinguished from the legally just. The distinction arises in those cases where the legally just is not the absolutely just, i.e., where the law speaks in a universal way which is inappropriate to a particular case. There equity is needed to correct legal justice.<sup>211</sup> It is the correct application of the universal to the particular, before which the universal was less than absolutely just. In the application of law, the justice for a particular case first emerges.

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<sup>208</sup> See the section above entitled “Tepid Approval in Opposition to Scientific Objectivity.”

<sup>209</sup> Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1141<sup>b</sup>8-14.

<sup>210</sup> “Denn auch das hermeneutische Problem setzt sich von einem reinen, von einem Sein abgelösten Wissen offenkundig ab.” Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 297; trans., p. 280. The sentence is italicized in the original.

<sup>211</sup> Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1137<sup>b</sup>11-12.

Gadamer connects this doctrine with that of natural law. Natural laws, he says, are neither inflexible norms nor mere conventions. Instead, “They always have to be made concrete in the situation of the person acting.”<sup>212</sup> Before the natural law becomes concrete in an actual situation, it is not really known. The same can be said about tradition. Before the tradition is applied, before one ventures a judgment as to its significance for the present, the knowledge of it is incomplete. Doubtless the tradition is known after a fashion, and may be known in detail. One can read in a theological curriculum, for example, any number of works on the prophetic tradition, the wisdom tradition, or the penitential tradition. But these traditions assume a genuine relevance above all when one tries to give a contemporary example of prophesy, wisdom, or penance. In application, they achieve a vitality in comparison to which their former selves are mere shadows.

One last point needs to be made. It could be said that the kind of knowledge gained from reading treatises on various traditions parallels the general knowledge gained from reading, let us say, a legal code. In both cases, it seems that the knowledge to be gained is universal, and that the application of it to a particular case merely illustrates what was already known in and of itself. Given this point of view, the particular application may be good or bad, successful or unsuccessful. The application of law, for example, may be just or unjust. And the interpretation of tradition may be appropriate or inappropriate. But in neither case, according to this perspective, does a particular application or interpretation affect the nature of law in general, or of the tradition in which the interpreter stands. Between the universal and the particular, it could be said, there is no direct connection.

Gadamer opposes this view in the name of the history which is effective in application. His critique follows in outline the critique by Aristotle of the Platonic ideas. There is no such thing, Gadamer implies, as a knowledge of the idea of justice apart from the application of particular just principles. And there is no knowledge of tradition apart from the effort to interpret particular traditions. Application, says Gadamer,

is not the subsequent applying of a concrete case of a given universal that we understand first by itself, but is the actual understanding of the universal itself that the given text constitutes for us. Understanding proves to be a kind of effect and knows itself as such.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> “Sie konkretisieren sich immer erst in der konkreten Situation des Handelnden.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 303; trans., p. 286. The translation fails to render Gadamer’s “erst,” which implies that the natural law is “first” known when it is applied.

<sup>213</sup> “Applikation ist keine nachträgliche Anwendung von etwas gegebenem Allgemeinen, das zunächst in sich verstanden würde, auf einen konkreten Fall, sondern ist erst das wirkliche Verständnis des Allgemeinen selbst, das der gegebene Text für uns ist. Das Verstehen erweist sich als eine Weise von Wirkung und weiss sich als eine solche Wirkung.” *Ibid.*, p. 323; trans., p. 305.

When we apply the tradition to a present situation, then that tradition is known. Is this a kind of subjectivism? Does it mean that the tradition has no existence apart from our application of it? No, says Gadamer, because whether or not we apply it, the tradition remains effective. Tradition is effective, Gadamer implies, in our very understanding. Whenever we understand, tradition affects the choice of that to which we turn our attention as well as the means by which we grasp it. The interpretation of traditions is part of the working out of tradition. Through interpretation the idea of tradition – in a sense akin to Plato’s – is known. While we apply traditions to the present, tradition has an effect upon us, who are its very transmission.

#### VII.4. The Idea of Tradition

Throughout this chapter we have referred to the idea of tradition in Gadamer. Tradition appears first as effective history. It transmits the past in a way which can be studied and yet which eludes a complete thematization. The chief insight here is that, even when the effect of tradition is not realized as such, it nevertheless retains its effectiveness. In this lies the authority of tradition, the second of Gadamer’s doctrines which we have noted. Tradition is authoritative in two ways. It is both the author, in a sense, of the present; and an ancient source of insight into truth. The legitimate authority of tradition ought to be recognized. But even when it is not, it remains authoritative. The recognition of the authority of tradition arises in our application of it to the present. This, the third of Gadamer’s doctrines central to the rehabilitation of tradition, has to do with both knowledge and value. The doctrine of application emphasizes that the study of tradition cannot be divorced from our evaluation of it. One knows it only as it becomes a matter of present importance. And the study and application of tradition is also the transmission of it. Thus we can say that, in the doctrines of effective history, authority, and application, the Gadamerian idea of tradition unfolds itself. What does it mean to say that tradition is an idea in Plato’s sense of the word?

In order to answer this question, we need to know what an idea is. Two certain features, according to John Burnet, stand out in the Platonic theory of ideas. The first is that the ideas are more real than anything else, and the second is that they are not sensible.<sup>214</sup> Socrates makes both of these points in the Phaedo, the dialogue which takes place on the day of his death. There he argues that the ideas are more real than the objects of physical perception, because it is to the ideas that objects are referred, just as one refers copies to a pattern (76d). And Socrates notes further that such ideas are not sensible, for the sensible can confuse the senses. That is why the philosopher strives to learn, not through the body, but through the soul (66d; see also Republic 6.507b). If the idea is real but not material, and intelligible but not sensible, how then is tradition an idea?

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<sup>214</sup> John Burnet, Platonism, vol. 5 of the Sather Classical Lectures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1928), p. 41.



Tradition is an idea first, Gadamer suggests, insofar as it can be called the essence of historical existence. History, custom, morality, pedagogy – in all of these, a transmission from the past to the present shows itself, and that transmission is tradition. Gadamer does not argue this point in these exact words, and his references to Plato predominate in discussions of language and dialectic, rather than of tradition. But tradition is clearly a concept which embraces all traditions, in Gadamer’s eyes, and thus an idea to which the various traditions give expression. It is akin to the Hegelian concept of spirit, for example, which blows where it will, offering philosophy, as Gadamer says, the chance to mediate past and present.<sup>215</sup> Just as all truths find their common denominator in the idea of truth, so all traditions converge in the idea of tradition. Within that idea the various traditions participate, and against it they must be measured. Tradition as spirit bequeathes the very possibilities for the study of traditions, which are the traces of spirit. Therein lies the authority of tradition. For this reason we can say that Gadamer’s idea of tradition, the genus of which all temporal phenomena represent species, is the essence of history.

Tradition is also an idea insofar as it is intelligible but not sensible, and this too Gadamer suggests. The suggestion plainly arises in Gadamer’s analysis of Heidegger and the fore-structure of understanding. This fore-structure refers to the predispositions and presuppositions – in a word, the prejudices – which shape understanding. To liberate science from such prejudices was the dream of the Enlightenment. Heidegger showed, however, that such prejudices testify that the interpreter is a creature of his or her age. To free the interpreter from all prejudices, if such an emancipation could be accomplished, would efface the interpreter’s very historical self. Hence Gadamer remarks that prejudices, far more than judgments, are the historical reality of one’s being.<sup>216</sup> In the prejudices which shape our being, and which are so much a part of us that we cannot sense them, tradition is most effective. They are intelligible, as Heidegger suggested, and we freely concede their existence. But we cannot sense them, grasp them, and destroy them. They are, Gadamer says, our historical reality. They are the tradition which grips us as an intelligible idea.

Perhaps the best way to understand Gadamer’s idea of tradition is through the relation between force and its expression described by Hegel. We have examined these terms earlier in relation to history. History, we said, is a force known through its expressions or manifestations. Without them, history would not be known; but, at the same time, historical force is not reducible to them.<sup>217</sup> Hegel doubtless meant more by these terms than an analogy for history. By them, he sought to more accurately characterize the relation between unity and multiplicity for which Kant had employed

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<sup>215</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 161; trans., p. 150.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261; trans., p. 245.

<sup>217</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, esp. the section entitled “Historical Force and Its Expression in Droysen.”

(without success, in Hegel's view), the concepts of phenomena and of the thing in itself. But force and its expression do convey, in an especially persuasive way, the dialectical relation between the unity of the idea and its historical manifestation. On the one hand, Hegel states that force is distinct from its elements or the differences which it encompasses. What a thing is differs from the varying appearances through which it subsists. On the other hand, force includes the entirety of the differences within it. The differing, independent elements by which force unfolds itself are all, Hegel says, constitutive of force.<sup>218</sup> The analogy to tradition is plain to see. Tradition is a force or idea which manifests itself in the traditions, distinct from tradition itself, which express it. Yet tradition encompasses all traditions. What seems to be external to it, the forms in which it appears, spur us to reflect more deeply on the unity which underlies them.

The relation between force and its expression is not simply reciprocal. Force proper comes first, and its expressions, however necessary, are subordinate to it. Similarly, the tradition which encompasses all traditions is more important for Gadamer than anyone of them. One example of this is Gadamer's effective history. Defined as that which affects the interpreter, above and beyond those historical currents of which the interpreter is aware, effective history is a force which never finds complete expression. Here, it must be said, Gadamer parts company with Hegel. Hegel posited an absolute knowledge in which the distinction between force and its expression would be dissolved, while Gadamer denies this doctrine in the name of experience. But the concepts of force and expression win Gadamer's approval. They suggest the reflexive nature of all knowledge which is also self-knowledge, a reflexivity which Plato had portrayed in the Charmides (169a).<sup>219</sup> Gadamer concludes that it is the fate of the historian to study the relation of contingent events, within which freedom operates, to the necessity of history, which has guided the historian's life and subject-matter. This is also the relation between tradition and traditions. The former is the idea, the unity within which the multiplicity of finite and contingent traditions are necessarily contained.

#### VII.4.A. The Aristotelian Critique

Gadamer's idea of tradition is vulnerable to the critique which every Platonic notion suffers: the critique first advanced by Aristotle. Stated in the briefest terms, Aristotle corrected Plato's doctrine of ideas by arguing that actuality is prior to potency. This is an immense topic, and far outstrips our capacity to do it justice within the confines of our treatment of Gadamer. But the allusion to Aristotle helps to situate Gadamer's idea of tradition within philosophic history, and so enables us to evaluate the Gadamerian idea.

When Aristotle argued that actuality is prior to potency, he had a twofold intent. First, he sought to show the weakness of the Platonic ideas. They are, in Aristotle's view, universals considered apart from the particular manifestations. He gave the examples of

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<sup>218</sup> Hegel, Phänomenologie, in Werke, 2.110-11; trans., pp. 183-4.

<sup>219</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 193; trans., p. 181.

science-itself (distinct from any particular act of scientific thought) and movement-itself (distinct from any particular moving thing).<sup>220</sup> The deficiency of such ideas, according to Aristotle, lies in their potentiality. Science-itself is a potentiality for the scientist, who may actually engage in non-scientific as well as in scientific work. And movement-itself is only a potentiality for a motionless object. Aristotle's point is that, although the Platonic Socrates had taught that the ideas are more real than anything else, the reality of the ideas is, in terms of potentiality and act, seriously deficient. As potentialities, the ideas are subordinate to what is actual. Hence Aristotle argues that, if the ideas exist, there are actualities more real than they. Scientific acts are more real than the idea of science, and actual motion is more real than the idea of motion.<sup>221</sup>

Aristotle's second intention in arguing the priority of act to potency was the restoration of dignity to concrete reality. If the ideas are more real than anything else, as Socrates taught, then sensible matter is only a shadow in comparison with the idea it manifests. Against this view, Aristotle proposed that the thing and its essence are identical. He meant that, although some might argue that the essence or substance of a thing differs from the thing itself – as, for example, a concrete human being might differ from the idea of that human being – nevertheless such an argument is specious. Taken to its logical extreme, such a division would abolish all knowledge of the idea or of the thing itself. The essence, if divorced from its idea, would provide no clue as to the nature of the idea. Further more, the essence would actually lose its being, for such being consists in the idea alone. If idea and essence are separated, then being belongs to the idea and not to the essence.<sup>222</sup> Aristotle's argument is a complex one, meriting more attention than this brief overview allows. But the general thrust of the argument is clear. The actuality of concrete substance is greater than, and cannot be separated from, the potentiality of the idea. If one wants to know what the good is, one finds it in actual, substantial goodness. And if one wants to know what tradition is, one turns to the substance of tradition.

An Aristotelian style of criticism of Gadamer's idea of tradition was adumbrated, we saw, in the work of Palmer. Palmer's Hermeneutics characterized the hermeneutical approach of Betti and Hirsch as "realistic" (in the Aristotelian sense) compared to Gadamer's "phenomenological" perspective.<sup>223</sup> It must be said that Betti's major work does not include any extensive treatment of Aristotle, and that Hirsch is plainly antagonistic to the Aristotelian tradition. Nevertheless, Palmer is not wholly wrong. To the extent that the demand by Betti and Hirsch for norms of interpretation accords with

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<sup>220</sup> We have touched upon this in Chapter VI above, esp. the section entitled "Potentiality and Act."

<sup>221</sup> Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1050<sup>b</sup>35-1051<sup>a</sup>1.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 1031<sup>a</sup>28-1031<sup>b</sup>15.

<sup>223</sup> See the section above entitled "Open Hostility on Behalf of Verifiable Norms."

Aristotle's insistence upon the unity of essence and idea, their efforts recall the Aristotelian spirit. Whenever one speaks of the truth or falsehood of an interpretation, one implies that these are manifest – i.e., essentially present – in the interpretation. How they are present is, of course, another question, one deeply entangled with the question (unsatisfactorily treated by Betti and Hirsch) of historical truth.

Perhaps the spirit of Aristotle is evident to a greater degree in Habermas, who rarely alludes to Aristotle, and who would probably be embarrassed by the association with the philosopher of substance and accident. Aristotle's spirit nevertheless can be detected in a number of the concepts employed by Habermas. There is, first of all, the materialist concept of synthesis through social labor.<sup>224</sup> When Habermas asserts the Marxist thesis that, while labor cannot alter the laws of nature, it still can change the form in which the laws take effect, one hears the echo of Aristotle's argument for the priority of actual substance to what is merely potential. (but not, of course, his materialism) strikes an Aristotelian note. Secondly, Habermas' rejection of the Gadamerian effective history is – if not explicitly Aristotelian – unmistakably anti-Platonic.<sup>225</sup> Habermas denies Gadamer's claim that history effects us in ways that are, from the start, unsusceptible to scientific reflection. If there is Habermas' critique of idealism such a thing as the idea of effective history, Habermas might say with Aristotle, then it must manifest itself in ways which can be experienced. No idea can be known apart from its substance, and all substance can be a theme for science. Habermas suggests a similar criticism in his emphasis on reflection. Lastly, an Aristotelian impulse can be detected in Habermas' critique of the Gadamerian claim that the hermeneutical problem is universal.<sup>226</sup> Gadamer means that, to the general human experience of understanding, all specialized forms of understanding, especially the scientific, are subordinate. Habermas objects to this in the name of a strictly scientific attitude. He opposes Gadamer's emphasis on everyday language, stating that scientific language frees us from the presuppositions built into everyday speech. In this he draws close to the controlled linguistic usage apparent in Aristotle's On Interpretation.<sup>227</sup>

In Habermas, then, one can detect a kind of Aristotelian criticism to which Gadamer's idealism is vulnerable. The idea of tradition in Gadamer can be criticized on

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<sup>224</sup> See the section above entitled "The Transcendentalism of Critique."

<sup>225</sup> See the section above entitled "The Counter-Concept of a Finite Metaphysics."

<sup>226</sup> See the section above entitled "Models of Discourse."

<sup>227</sup> It is worth noting that Gadamer advocates the universality of the hermeneutical problem with allusions to Aristotle's treatment of the universal as that which is synthesized in the experience of particulars (Posterior Analytics 100<sup>a</sup>5-9), and to his definition of rhetoric as that which persuades when compelling proof is unavailable (Rhetoric 1377<sup>b</sup>21-24). Although we have been showing the Aristotelian temper in Habermas' thought, Gadamer makes the more explicit use of Aristotle.

epistemological and practical grounds. The epistemological critique follows Aristotle's argument that idea and substance are identical. If the idea of tradition is not identical to (or does not share a relation of identity with) substantial tradition, then the idea of tradition cannot be known. To speak of tradition in a scientific sense, one might object, is to speak of it as substance, not as idea. This epistemological critique has practical consequences. If tradition is known, then it can become a theme for scientific discourse. As such, its effects can be studied. Hence there is no theoretical reason, one could argue, why effective history must remain an idea, beyond the full awareness of historians. If tradition is known, then its effects are knowable.

#### VII.4.B. Language and Incarnation

The Aristotelian critique which one could make of Gadamer's idea of tradition has an answer, if only a partial one. It is the Gadamerian emphasis on the finitude of human understanding. Gadamer has expressed this in a variety of ways. We have seen it above all in his critique of Hegel's absolute knowledge. Although Gadamer approves the Hegelian equation of experience with the dialectic which strives to bring consciousness and its object into accord, nevertheless he criticizes the concept of absolute knowledge, especially when it is conceived as the fulfillment of experience. Such a concept is inappropriate to the human understanding which must always reckon with new experiences.<sup>228</sup> One cannot foresee all experience in advance. Thus while Gadamer is willing to affirm the Platonic doctrine of the concatenation of ideas – the doctrine that, once one has learned some thing, there is no reason why one should not be able to recall all knowledge by a gradual process of association<sup>229</sup> – he does see a definite limit to it. The limit is that of human finitude. No matter how much one knows, new experiences lie ahead. The insight expressed in the term effective history is that absolute knowledge is humanly unrealizable.

The relationship between this insight and Gadamer's commitment to the doctrines of Plato is complex and seemingly paradoxical. How can Gadamer affirm the finitude of human understanding, on the one hand, and the existence of eternal ideas of truth and justice, on the other? No one can doubt the importance of Plato for Gadamer. He devoted his first book to Plato, and has attributed many of the leading concepts in Truth and Method to the life-long study of the Platonic writings. One thinks, for example, of Gadamer's interpretation of Plato's Seventh Letter. There one sees why no final argument against sophistic reasoning can be advanced, for no criterion suffices to demonstrate the existence of truth.<sup>230</sup> Another example is Gadamer's exposition of the logic of question and answer. There he shows that knowledge arises not so much in the giving of correct answers as in the posing of genuine questions. Gadamer even

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<sup>228</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 336-338; trans., pp. 317-319. See also Chapter 4 above, esp. the section entitled "Overcoming Subjectivity in Absolute Knowledge."

<sup>229</sup> Plato Meno 81c-d.

<sup>230</sup> See the section above entitled "The Socratic Method."

subordinates Aristotle to Plato, arguing that Aristotle was a Socratic insofar as he comprehended the essentially moral character of knowledge.<sup>231</sup> Gadamer's insistence on the ability to understand such moral essences, his emphasis on the capacity for knowing eternal ideas, seems incongruous with his acknowledgment of human finitude.

Yet the Platonic thrust of Gadamer's thought has been refined in the tradition of Plato criticism. Even though one can say that Gadamer subordinates Aristotle to Plato, the author of Truth and Method has taken Aristotle's criticisms to heart. One sees this plainly in Gadamer's discussion of the philosophy of reflection. He remarks there that, because no logically compelling argument exists which can finally disprove sophistic skepticism, Plato submits the myth of the pre-existence of the soul. True and false can be distinguished, Socrates argued, by recalling (not proving) everything which one has learned in previous lives.<sup>232</sup> Gadamer observes that the Socratic myth, however enlightening, does not satisfy modern thought.<sup>233</sup> More persuasive is the insight of Aristotle, taken up by Hegel, that knowledge proceeds dialectically. Aristotle had stated that the power of dialectic enables even those who are "separated from what is" to speculate about contraries.<sup>234</sup> He apparently meant that, in the recognition that one item of knowledge may seem to contradict another, the inquirer is already far advanced along the path of knowledge.

The power of dialectic lies in the synthesis of opposites, the subsumption of what appear to be mutually exclusive under a unifying category.<sup>235</sup> Hegel alludes to this aspect of Aristotle's thought when he remarks that the empiricism of Aristotle is speculative in the highest degree.<sup>236</sup> Unlike Plato, for whom only a myth could answer the sophistic arguments, Aristotle turned to what can be empirically grasped, i.e., the logic of propositions. He saw that it is the nature of thought to comprehend assertions which apparently contradict one another. He seemed to understand that, no matter how persuasive sophistry is, the mind can comprehend false arguments. Thought grasps their

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<sup>231</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 297; trans., p. 280.

<sup>232</sup> Plato Meno 80d. See Chapter 4 above, esp. the section entitled "The Unity of Being and Thought."

<sup>233</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 328; trans., p. 309.

<sup>234</sup> ὥστε δύνασθαι και χωρις του τι εστι ταναντία επισκοπειν. Aristotle Metaphysics 1078<sup>b</sup>25-26.

<sup>235</sup> Aristotle suggests this in his discussion of the logical proposition in the Topics 105<sup>b</sup>23.

<sup>236</sup> Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, 3 vols., in Werke, 18.312-313. Translation: Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy, trans. E. S. Haldane, 3 vols. (New York: The Humanities Press Inc., and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1955), 2.131-133.

power, ordering it within a larger conception which embraces an initial thesis, the sophistic objection to it, and relative truth of the two. Hence Gadamer implies that, for Aristotle as for Plato, the pursuit of knowledge is dialectical.<sup>237</sup> But Aristotle's refusal to be satisfied with the myth marks an advance over Plato's thought. It is an advance which even Gadamer, who is committed to Plato, readily admits.

It should be no surprise, then, that the idea of tradition in Gadamer is not a purely Platonic concept untouched by later criticism of Plato's thought. The Aristotelian critique of the ideas has been fully appropriated by Gadamer. We have seen this in Gadamer's employment of the Hegelian dialectic of historical force and its expression, which not only emphasizes the transcendence of force but also the expression by which alone that force is known. And we have seen the Aristotelian spirit in Gadamer's use of the Heideggerian concept of human finitude, of having been thrown into a situation not of one's choice. Heidegger links this experience to what he calls facticity. By this he means that human beings cannot provide themselves with a correct world-view, but receive their world-view as part of the impersonal destiny into which they have been thrown.<sup>238</sup> For Gadamer, this limits all access to a realm of eternal ideas. Such ideas, especially the idea of tradition, can only be known in the way history has manifested them. They come to us in traditions, understood only from within the tradition in which we find ourselves. Gadamer's idea of tradition is not a meta-tradition which, once attained, provides a total criticism of all inferior traditions.<sup>239</sup> It is rather the unity of traditions, a unity which cannot be demonstrated in a logically compelling way. To grasp it, one must have an affinity for the idea, and once grasped, it cannot be forgotten. But this unity is incomprehensible apart from the multiplicity which comprises it, by which past truth announces itself to the present.

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<sup>237</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 347; trans., p. 328.

<sup>238</sup> Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, pp. 56, 179; see also Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, pp. 240, 250; trans., pp. 225, 234.

<sup>239</sup> Roberto Mangabeira Unger has proposed such a "total criticism" of what he calls the liberal doctrine. His total criticism is to be achieved by means of a rehabilitated "classical system" akin to the insight of Anaxagoras that all reality manifests a unified intelligence. "Total criticism," Unger writes, "must begin with an effort to restore that system to light" (Unger, Knowledge and Politics (New York: The Free Press (A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.) and London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1975), p. 2).

It is tempting to situate Gadamer within Unger's program of a critique of liberalism by means of a restoration of classical thought. But for Unger, total criticism can only "begin" with such a restoration. Gadamer, on the other hand, is less interested in total criticism than in the restoration, which for him is the end rather than the means. He does not seek a meta-tradition from which to criticize degenerate traditions, but to nurture an appreciation of tradition, within which all traditions, even liberalism, have a place.

Past truth announces itself in language, and it is the linguistic turn in Gadamer's thought which both unites him to Plato and marks his progress beyond the philosophy of Greek antiquity. Plato's dialectic is the model for Gadamer of all thought, conceived as the dialogue of the soul with itself. In dialectic, thinkers are confronted by what they have not yet thought or considered, and so are propelled along the path of recollection. For both Plato and Gadamer, language links one thought to another, offering the prospect of recalling everything which has been known. But language is not, for Plato, the presence of the fullness of truth. That idea first arose after Plato, in the encounter between Greek thought and Christian theology. Gadamer puts it this way:

[I]n the midst of the penetration of christian theology by the Greek idea of logic something new is born: the centre of language, in which the mediation of the incarnation event achieves its full truth. Christology prepares the way for a new philosophy of man, which mediates in a new way between the mind of man in its finitude and the divine infinity. This will become the real basis of what we have called the hermeneutical experience.<sup>240</sup>

In the event of the incarnation, the Word became flesh. The Word is both the divine self-manifestation and a human being. In the human Word, the people of Jesus' time came face-to-face with incarnate divinity. The reflection of later theologians led to the conclusion that, in the human words of Scripture, of ritual, and of preaching, God is present. That is why Gadamer states, by analogy, that Christian thought created a new anthropology. According to this anthropology, language mediates between humanity and divinity. Plato and Aristotle recognized that, in language, one encounters the truths of knowledge, whether in speaking of the ideal or in proposing the real. With Christianity, however, truth itself becomes incarnate. It abides in language.

Gadamer's idea of tradition, then, is more than a Platonic idea. The Platonism of his conception has been modified by the Aristotelian critique of Plato and by a Christian emphasis on what becomes really present in language. Tradition is an idea in that it is the unity of the diversity of traditions. But that does not mean that actual traditions have only a secondary reality. They are rather the expressions by which the force of tradition is known. In our application of them to the present the tradition appears for the first time as what it is. Such a tradition is no mere object of knowledge. It is, for Gadamer, the effectiveness of history, an effect which can be known, but never subjected to experimental verification. One knows it in the study of history, which strives to say what

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<sup>240</sup> *"In der Mitte der Durchdringung der christlichen Theologie durch den griechischen Gedanken der Logik keimt vielmehr etwas Neues auf: Die Mitte der Sprache, in der sich das Mittlertum des Inkarnationsgeschehens erst zu seiner vollen Wahrheit bringt. Die Christologie wird zum Wegbereiter einer neuen Anthropologie, die den Geist des Menschen in seiner Endlichkeit mit der göttlichen Unendlichkeit auf eine neue Weise vermittelt. Hier wird das, was wir die hermeneutische Erfahrung genannt haben, seinen eigentlichen Grund finden."* Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 405; trans., p. 388. The translator has used two words for "Mitte": midst and centre. The "Geist" of finite humanity has been translated as "mind" instead of "spirit."



the past means, and in which the meaning of the past first emerges. That is why, for Gadamer, tradition can be said to be authoritative. In it we discover who we are, for tradition has shaped us. The interpretation of traditions is the effort to put into words – and so to incarnate – the forces which have made the historical world. Gadamer ascribes to Christian thought the emergence of the possibility for conceiving the interpretive task in this manner.

In so doing, Gadamer adumbrates the theology of tradition. That theology goes beyond the philosophy of tradition in that it refuses to content itself with a vision of Christianity as a potent force within the history of philosophy. Christianity is rather, for the theology of tradition, the result of the decisive event in history, the decisive revelation of God. All previous history prepared for that event, and all subsequent history is the unfolding of its consequences. The incarnation is, for theology, the very destiny of history.

As a destiny, it is a fact of which philosophy can give an account. It is also an element of the effective history which is consequential for all thought, non-Christian as well as Christian. Gadamer's hermeneutics, we must reiterate, takes a clearly philosophic (as distinct from theological) approach. Philosophy does not concern itself with revelation. The tradition of which Gadamer speaks is not tradition in the sense of Catholic theology, for which the ecclesiastical magisterium defines tradition in an authoritative way. By comparison with tradition in the Catholic sense, the tradition rehabilitated by Gadamer is an indistinct idea. One cannot look to a concrete manifestation of it as in any way absolute. But we must admit that Gadamer's philosophy does incorporate Christian thought as an integral part of the thought of the West. Insofar as Gadamer appropriates the Christian theology of the Word as the "real basis" for the hermeneutical experience, his rehabilitation of tradition prepares for an understanding of the theology of tradition. That theology affirms the philosophic experience of the destiny of thought as the very will of God.