

Ever since the rise and prolonged dominance of historicism in the early nineteenth century – initially in higher Biblical criticism, though quickly metastasizing into other fields (politics, law, and aesthetics) – historical inquiry has modeled the study of objects and phenomena on a quasi-scientific, Baconian conception of method. The underlying aim of inquiry here is one of “objectivity” rather than “truth,” as Stephen Gaukroger has remarked with reference to Bacon.<sup>1</sup> In due course, nineteenth-century historicism emulated the impersonal, detached, and critical methodology first pioneered by the empirical sciences. In so doing, a historicist mode of inquiry have consistently foregrounded the need for maintaining distance from the phenomena and practices under investigation and, in so doing, achieve cognitive superiority over its objects. Analyzing this development in Chapter 2 of *Minding the Modern*, I remark how, “under conditions of modernity, all history is merely prehistory” (36) and, as such, is both studied and put to rest by triumphalist and retrospective narratives constructed in the present. That nineteenth-century humanistic and sociological inquiry (in Comte, Durkheim, Ranke, et al.) had originated in seventeenth-century empirical and quantitative methodologies bears keeping in mind for several reasons, not least of which is the fact that the Baconian and Cartesian conceptions of method offer at best a decidedly incomplete account of human knowledge; more about that in due course. For now, let me suggest that the problematic migration of an (inherently problematic) conception of method from the empirical sciences into humanistic inquiry is an important feature of late-Enlightenment thought. Its pivot is found in Kant’s late-Enlightenment idea of “critique,” in particular Kant’s insistence of preserving human cognitive autonomy vis-à-vis forms of “experience” (*Erfahrung*) said to have originated in seemingly inchoate empirical data. Thus, in his 1784 “Ideas for a Universal history from a cosmopolitan point of view,” Kant sharply distinguishes between individual intentions, meanings, and practices (which he deems all but rationally unintelligible) and aggregate patterns of behavior that, unbeknownst to the historical individuals who display them, can be retrospectively invested with an actuarial logic of sorts. On this model, historical meaning is significant precisely to the extent that is *not* available to the individuals or communities said to have inadvertently generated it. Kant here anticipates Hegel’s essentially retrospective model of cognition, namely, as a belated, dialectical salvaging of meanings whose fullness necessarily escapes the individuals and communities that have produced them. Hans-Georg Gadamer is right, then, to view the emergence of historicism, not as a

reaction *against* a supposedly un-historical Enlightenment, but as the apotheosis of its critical and emancipatory idea of secular reason.

In its dominant theological form, that of the so called Higher Criticism first shaped by Wolf, Eichhorn, Ernesti, and the Protestant Tübingen School – developments subsequently extended in the writings of Strauss, Feuerbach, Comte, Renan and others – Historicism secures theological meaning precisely at the expense of its relevance. For like another institutional creation of the Romantic era, the modern museum, Historicism posits that to “know” is precisely *not* to participate in meanings; rather, it is to quarantine them within or, indeed, merge them with putatively separate past contexts. As Gadamer was to point out much later, Historicism fundamentally reenacts the Enlightenment’s vaunted emancipation from history by arresting and inventorying the past, draining it of its relevance, and by “reconstruct[ing] the old because it is old.”<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth-century Historicism marks the culmination of a process long in the making, involving “a kind of detachment of the ‘real’ historical world from its biblical description” wrought by the Enlightenment’s insistence on “a logical distinction and a reflective distance between the stories and the ‘reality’ they depict.” Hans Frei, whom I have just quoted, has offered a compelling account of this development, noting that “once literal and historical reading began to break apart, figural interpretation became discredited both as a literary device and as a historical argument” because it contravened “the elementary assumption that a propositional statement has only one meaning.” The resulting historicist protocol amounts to conceptual naturalism. That is, it confuses “history-likeness (literal meaning) and history (ostensive reference).” As Frei goes on to note, to so conflate the mimetic and referential functions of narrative “meant that one lacked the distinctive category and appropriate interpretive procedure for understanding what one had actually recognized.”<sup>3</sup>

The dilemma just sketched ultimately reduces to this question: does a modern conception of knowledge derived from the univocal, scientific methodologies first developed in the age of Descartes and Bacon have any place for hermeneutic practice, that is, for discerning the layered and interconnected nature of meanings as we encounter them in philosophical and theological traditions? And, if the answer to that question should be in the negative, one would then have to ask whether meaningful hermeneutic activity is even possible in the absence of traditions and genealogies of inquiry. My argument here today, one which I have developed in greater detail in *Minding the Modern*, is that both humanistic and theological inquiry cannot effectively proceed,

and will likely erode their institutional relevance, unless we acknowledge and honor in our hermeneutic practice the indispensable role of tradition. Doing so requires first and foremost to understand the full extent to which a dynamic, evolving, and participatory model of tradition stands in direct conflict with the methodological prescriptions and epistemological assumptions of historicism. For in its methodical commitment to the attenuation of past meanings within a matrix of underlying material causes and background reference, historicism betrays its implicit discomfort with the possibility of meanings issuing from the past and having an enduring and potentially transformative hold on the present. It is this hold that John Henry Newman has in mind when rethinking the idea of tradition under the heading of “development.” Long before Gadamer was to point out that “for the historical school there exists neither an end of history nor anything outside it,” Friedrich Schlegel had already chastised his contemporaries’ eagerness to dissolve history into a wholly adventitious and aimless sequence of secondary causes. With characteristically searing, aphoristic wit, Schlegel skewers “the two main principles of the so-called historical criticism ... the Postulate of Vulgarly and the Axiom of the Average. The Postulate of Vulgarly: everything great, good, and beautiful is improbable because it is extraordinary and, at the very least, suspicious. The Axiom of the Average: as we and our surroundings are, so must it have been always and everywhere, because that, after all, is so very natural.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Schelling only a few years later remarks on “the severing of knowledge from its historical archetype by historicizing scholarship” (*dieses Abtrennen des Wissens von seinem historischen Urbild durch historische Gelehrsamkeit*); and he repudiates a growing tendency within humanistic and theological inquiry to occupy itself with the “mere transmission [of knowledge] without independent mental activity” (*die bloße Überlieferung ohne selbstthätigen Geist*).<sup>5</sup> However cogent, and in time echoed in very different idioms, by Nietzsche, Blondel, Karl Barth, Walter Benjamin, these early, sharply critical responses actions to the ascendancy of historicist method did little to check its predominance from Schleiermacher to Harnack and beyond.

Conceived as a methodical unmasking and dissolving of the category of the unique “event” into its putative background conditions, Historicism perpetuates what Gadamer has called the Enlightenment’s “abstract contrast between myth and reason,” that is, between the opacity of the past and its transparent, objective, and dispassionate reconstruction in the present. Thus the historical consciousness that takes shape around 1800 intensifies the epistemological claims and social aspirations of the Enlightenment. Thus, “nonsensical tradition [*Überlieferung*], which had

been the exception, has become the rule for historical consciousness. Meaning that is generally accessible through reason is so little believed that the whole of the past ... is understood only 'historically.'"<sup>6</sup> As early as the mid-1830s, Newman had begun to raise very similar questions. In Tract 73, on the "Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Religion" (2 February 1836), he identifies another key trait of the historical method, one that also reveals its deep continuity with Enlightenment rationalism. It concerns the claim, implicitly staked by historical and contextualizing method, to an instantaneous and definitive comprehension of its object, as well as the presumption that historical knowledge, properly speaking, is defined precisely by the dissolution, rather than comprehension, of any "mystery" associated with its object. Peter Gordon calls this the contextualism's "premise of exhaustion," which implicitly prohibits the historian "from imagining the possibility of semantic continuities across broad stretches of time" and waxes "especially skeptical of the possibility that ideas from the past might still be available for *critical appropriation in the present*."<sup>7</sup> Given their implicit quest for definitive emancipation *from* the past, historicizing and contextualizing approaches to intellectual traditions tend to disrupt and quarantine the dynamic nature of complex ideas and conceptions and, ultimately, to reject process thinking altogether. Hence they tend to construe all tradition (religious or otherwise) as an obstacle to insight, rather than as an abiding, dialectical source of it.

For a number of reasons, the development I have sketched thus far remains of particular relevance to theological inquiry, particularly as regards its exegetical and speculative manifestations. For it is here that achieving orientation in our own, inevitably damaged and disoriented present requires that we surrender the epistemological pride and *libido dominandi* enshrined in modern, science-derived epistemologies. Indeed, theological inquiry requires our ongoing, reflective participation in the complex interplay of those voices that have preceded us. It is only in virtue of our "background awareness" (to borrow Polanyi's term) of these voices that the hermeneutic quest for substantive meanings can possibly succeed. The key difference between hermeneutic and scientific inquiry has to do precisely with how these two forms of knowing treat those background conditions. Echoing Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, Michael Polanyi also notes how "scientific rationalism has been the chief guide towards all the intellectual, moral, and social progress on which the nineteenth century prided itself." Yet unlike Gadamer, Polanyi not only rejects the applicability of scientific methods to hermeneutic inquiry; he also insists that idea of strictly value-neutral and context-independent, scientific methodology is a

misguided fiction and, “strictly speaking nonsensical. ... Successful induction can be conducted only in the light of a genuine problem. An inductive problem is an intimation of coherence among hitherto uncomprehended particulars.” Hence, if even within the empirical sciences inductive discovery entails “an oscillation between movements of analysis and integration in which, on balance, integration predominates,” the same is even more emphatically true of interpretive fields.<sup>8</sup> For, as Polanyi insists, “no human mind can function without accepting authority, custom, and tradition; it must rely on them for the mere use of a language. Empirical induction, strictly applied, can yield no knowledge at all, and the mechanistic explanation of the universe is a meaningless ideal.”<sup>9</sup> For scientific inquiry to generate not just formally correct information but the kind of knowledge that a community of learners would regard as positively meaningful, a vast and largely unarticulated body of background conditions must be presupposed.

This “tacit dimension,” Polanyi notes, involves a “large area of hidden and yet accessible truths far exceeding the capacity of one man to fathom.” Indeed, in the course of investigating a particular, sharply demarcated problem, the scientist gradually achieves what notably was not itself being sought at all, namely, a fuller awareness of the antecedent coherence and significance of these background conditions. Of critical importance here is Polanyi’s insistence that “focal and subsidiary awareness are definitely *not two degrees* of attention but *two kinds* of attention given to the *same* particulars.”<sup>10</sup> Background awareness attends to the ways in which some particular is embedded, how its texture is revealed and distinguished by its more or less conspicuous and functional relation to and interaction with other particulars. Here, then, the claim can be made that in interpretive fields, background awareness is precisely an awareness *of* tradition absent which our hermeneutic efforts of understanding a text or artifact could not even get underway. Polanyi thus stresses how, even under the strictest methodological protocols, the truly revelatory moments of scientific discovery happen to lie *beyond* what could be anticipated, predicted, or controlled. Both hermeneutic and scientific inquiry exhibit an aleatory or serendipitous quality, one in which focal awareness is found to have depended all along on tacit, background conditions: “Each scientist,” Polanyi notes, “starts ... by sensing a point of deepening coherence. His questing imagination, guided by intuition, forges ahead ... in one continued act of tacit integration – like making out an obscure sight, or being engaged in painting a picture, or in writing a poem.”<sup>11</sup> That this should be so reflects Kant’s insight “that no system of rules can

prescribe the procedure by which the rules themselves are to be applied.” To the extent, then, that human cognition aims at the discovery of new meanings, rather than the confirmation of existing ones, it depends on the constant, if often tacit operation of what Kant calls “judgment” (*Urteilkraft*).<sup>12</sup>

All human inquiry (scientific or interpretive) thus appears indelibly marked by a discretionary and aleatory dimension. The progress of knowledge can be predicted and controlled only up to a point; and where the jurisdiction of scientific method ends, investigation enters a different realm – one where the distinctive “givenness” of its various phenomena, and our responsiveness to it, shapes the progress of knowledge. Here, the quality and meaning of knowledge is found to depend on our participation in what is revealed. To succeed, human enquiry hinges on the unpredictable process whereby our epistemological claims and aspirations are subordinated to the impersonal, revelatory quality of startlingly interconnected phenomena. Within the interpretive fields, such as theology, philosophy, or literary studies, this revelatory dynamic is most acutely felt when we recognize the full degree to which all interpretive knowledge pivots on our undesigning participation in what is called tradition. And yet, historicist approaches to Christian traditions almost without exception tend to disavow from the outset its most essential features: revelation and mystery. The rationalist’s historicizing protocols of inquiry thus do not so much settle the question of tradition as merely beg it. For modern critical and contextualizing method rests on the axiom of Reason as wholly anthropomorphic. Thus, both the sources of knowledge and its eventual articulations are taken to be strictly products of *homo faber*. For Newman, the great weakness of “rationalist principles” is that they preclude human beings from receiving knowledge from the past and from participating within intellectual and theological traditions without first anxiously stipulating that the authority of any tradition resolves itself into finite and ultimately mundane, man-made contexts.

Here it bears recalling how, at the beginning of Western thought, a nearly obverse understanding had prevailed, namely, of tradition as something received, not made, and of divine rather than anthropomorphic character. Thus Plato regards tradition as “a gift of gods to men, ... tossed down from some divine source” (*θεῶν μὲν εἰς ἀνθρώπους δόσις, ὥς γε καταφαίνεται ἐμοί*). A bequest to human communities, rather than an anthropomorphism in its own right, tradition is said both to originate *in* and, in turn, point back *to* its transcendent source: “the ancients, who were better than we and lived nearer the gods, handed down [*παρέδοσαν*] the

tradition that all the things which are ever said to exist are sprung from one and many and have inherent in them the finite and the infinite.”<sup>13</sup> What distinguishes the role of the ancients is not that they originated a tradition (they did not) but that they were closer in time to its source: “anyone who accepts and ‘believes’ that tradition is relying ... not on the ‘ancients’, but on the gods themselves.”<sup>14</sup> Newman evidently concurs, remarking that “when nothing is revealed, nothing is known, and there is nothing to contemplate or marvel at; but when something is revealed and only something, for all cannot be, there are forthwith difficulties and perplexities.” What is most integral to Christianity turns out to be most vexing to modern historical method, namely, that “revelation consists of a number of detached and incomplete truths belonging to a vast system unrevealed, of doctrines and injunctions mysteriously connected together.”<sup>15</sup> Lurking behind historicism’s apparent impatience with a continuously developing tradition Newman sees the hubris of a modern secular epistemology viscerally uncomfortable with the possibility of a knowledge received on terms it does not control.

Yet to surrender the desire for dominion over what we are given is precisely what is required if traditions are to become intelligible at all. Inasmuch as it enjoins the recipient to cultivate humility and gratitude vis-à-vis what it offers, tradition fulfills what Paul Griffiths identifies as the twofold characteristic of the gift: a distinctive group of “things [that] can be given away without being thereby lost to the giver” and that, concurrently, “will be lost if they are not given away.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, inasmuch as historical inquiry proceeds on grounds other than purely quantitative and determinative ones, it remains necessarily entangled with the practice of hermeneutics and, ultimately, the teleologically ordered power of judgment. Meaningful and intellectually sound historical practice finds us involved in a complex and open-ended interpretive process that is dialectical in structured and experientially realized as dialogue. The partners in that dialogue, I submit, are other interpretive voices that have preceded us, and that constitute a living and evolving tradition of inquiry. Historical cognition, on this account, amounts less to a scientific method than an art (*techné*) on the order of Aristotelian *phronesis* in the course of which we come to understand our implication *in*, rather than separation *from*, the true aims of inquiry. So as to break down the implications of what I have just said, let me offer the following, admittedly loose thesis-type propositions:

**THESIS 1:** *The choice of method must be secondary to an understanding of the aims pursued by historical inquiry.* – Working in a discipline whose institutional identity and procedures are well established

carries the risk of allowing prevailing methods to circumscribe not only our practices but, implicitly (and for the practitioner often unwittingly) also to dictate the *aims* of inquiry. Yet deriving the latter from the prevailing methodological habitus of a discipline, amounts to an elemental, logical error. For inasmuch as method furnishes the *structure* of inquiry, it must be preceded by an awareness of the ultimate *function* that it is meant to serve. And that function cannot, in turn, be immanent *to* and derived *from* the methodological procedures of historiography.

**THESIS 2:** *The aim of historical inquiry is not information or “context” but meaning.* - To clarify this distinction, we may recall Husserl’s distinction between two types of truth: the truth of correctness and the truth of disclosure.<sup>17</sup> The first type names a form of knowledge that is strictly predicative of objective states of affairs (say, some mathematical equation or chemical formula). Such knowledge is strictly speaking impersonal. The agent of inquiry is not to have any causal role within the process of discovery, and it is this impersonal quality that the methodological procedures are meant to ensure. Moreover, the *result* of such inquiry effectively supervenes on the process by which it was secured. Where method dominates inquiry, outcome supersedes process, and the role of method is to allow other individuals to reproduce *the same result*. Yet “sameness” and “reproducibility” are not categories commensurable with the idea of “meaning.” As T. S. Eliot puts it, “one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say.” Hence, what Husserl calls “the truth of disclosure” implies a bilateral structure of causality, one in which the agent not only shapes a complex process of inquiry but, in pursuing it, also finds herself to be the addressee of, and often transformed by, the meanings that emerge. Again, Eliot captures the point with admirable clarity:

There is, it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge driven from experience.  
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment  
And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been. We are only undeceived  
Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm.<sup>18</sup>

It is, then, not merely that the insights yielded by certain types of inquiry differ from, or exceed, what was hypothesized, but that the meanings also metastasize to other aspects of both, what we



know and who, in light of such knowledge, we now take ourselves to be. Contrary to the “truth of correctness” – which others may confirm independently simply by adhering to the methodological template that had yielded it – the “truth of disclosure” is characterized by a distinctive (and not obviously reproducible) narrative quality. Narrative meaning can never be fully and conclusively assimilated to any idea of method but, instead, shows inquiry to have a fundamentally *hermeneutic* dimension.

**THESIS 3:** *If historical inquiry belongs to this latter kind, its overriding objective does not consist in accumulating contextual information.* – Here the question becomes whether method in historiography may furnish us with more than procedures for securing context. By its very nature, a method is a form of iteration, an invariant template and, as such, construes the facts, objects, and phenomena to which it is applied as essentially equivalent *types*. For “information” is, logically considered, always an abstraction. Its value pivots wholly on the specific methods whereby it is mined and distilled in retrospective, historical inquiry; it also degrades over time and, hence, is deemed to exist independent of the incidental ways in which it divulges itself. For these reasons, then, I would maintain that method by definition cannot produce meanings but, at best, helps us establish basic preconditions for the discovery of meaning. Articulating the *aims* of historical inquiry and securing historiographic meaning do not *per se* fall under the jurisdiction of a specific method. – To be sure, I am not suggesting that method has no place whatsoever in historical inquiry but, merely, that method is necessarily subordinate to, rather than a substitute for, hermeneutic activity. It cannot relieve us of making the myriad interpretive judgments and pre-judgments that go into the production of meaning – and it would not be a good thing if it could.

**THESIS 4:** *What sets theological, literary, or philosophical inquiry apart from other forms of historical study (e.g., social or economic history), the object of inquiry is itself evidently a complex semantic, rather than value-neutral, material entity.* – This distinction ought to be applied with caution, however, since it seems doubtful that “material” facts or entities could, strictly speaking, ever emerge as focal points or background sources for a historical narrative if they were not already charged, at least implicitly, with symbolic or conceptual meaning. Working on subjects as disparate as the Byzantine Iconoclast Controversy or on the changing conceptions of human agency in ancient, Scholastic, and modern thought, I have often been vexed by a tendency of historical inquiry to dissolve complex philosophical or theological argument the semantic constructs into putatively a-semantic causes and extrinsic contextual forces. In contrast, my approach is shaped by the conviction that

our inevitably fluid, complex, and often bewildering socio-historical reality will disclose its distinctive features, tendencies, and significance only where it is (pre-)filtered through various narrative traditions and their underlying conceptual frameworks. In my most recent book, I have sought to trace the genealogy of a few basic concepts, all of them integral to a robust understanding of human agency: will, person, action, and judgment. The project could be fairly described as a form of intellectual history pursued in the vein of philosophical hermeneutics.

**THESIS 5:** *A philosophical hermeneutic must reject what has long been a prevailing methodological axiom among intellectual historians, viz., that ideas themselves arise in, perhaps even in default of, their “historical context.”* – In a recent essay, Peter Gordon has offered a thorough and compelling analysis of the contextual method dominating so many explanatory schemes in contemporary thought. He specifically scrutinizes “the view that a specific context can *fully* account for all the potentialities of an idea.”<sup>19</sup> As he notes, “if we obey the ideal of containment [of ideas by their context] without restraint, we may end up imagining a context as a self-stabilizing unity inside of which there is no history whatsoever” (35). Paradoxically, the very notion of context “implies “a cessation or ... *slowing down* of historical time” (36) and, in thoroughly question-begging ways, it “presupposes that a context is like a discrete and holistic sphere that englobes the idea in question and sharply delimits its capacity for movement” (39). Gordon moves on to remark on “a certain methodological provincialism” (42), prevalent in intellectual history (though not only there, I would argue). It stipulates that in the end the emergence of ideas and meanings can always be traced back to local conditions at their place of origination. Against this view, Gordon maintains (and I agree) what truly defines meaning are not the material (a-semantic) causes and contexts said to have brought it forth. Rather, the force and significance of meanings pivots on their adaptive potential, their enduring capacity to inspire reflective participation in them in times and settings far otherwise than those from which it issued. Meaning in history is inseparable from the study of its dynamic transmission, inflection, and reception over time. Gadamer’s characterization of “understanding” (*Verstehen*) as the “immersion in a process of tradition” (*Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen*) remains as pertinent to historical inquiry as ever. Indeed, Peter Gordon’s misgivings about the quarantine-like method of contextualism – namely, that it “has the unfortunate effect of inhibiting our appreciation for how ideas transform and ramify over the *longue durée*” (45) – palpably echo Gadamer’s contention that the principal aim of hermeneutic activity is to secure the “effective history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of concepts and ideas. I

concur with Gordon that “intellectual history is by definition not merely a description of perceptible objects but an inquiry into meaning” (43).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Gordon’s analysis concerns what he calls “the premise of exhaustion,” that is, “the view that intellectual history should confine itself to the reconstruction of discontinuous contexts, and discourages the historian from believing in the possibility of long-enduring intellectual traditions” (44). Now, it is precisely this key word of “tradition” that sets limits to the scope and application of method in historical inquiry. For if such inquiry is to yield meanings, it involves a movement of *discovery* (or “disclosure,” to recall Husserl’s term) rather than simply reconfirming our supposed separateness and emancipation from the past; and for that to happen, historical inquiry must begin by specifying the various traditions and cultures of reasoning through which a specific conception or idea has passed, and by which it has been shaped, transformed, deepened, or compromised. The prevailing approach of circumscribing and, ultimately, stifling the complexity and enduring efficacy of ideas in a web of local and putatively determinative context ends up “obstruct[ing] our access to past ideas” and, thus, risks leaving “their potentialities unredeemed” (45).

**THESIS 6:** *Hermeneutic practice entails our essential involvement in the transmission of those meanings and traditions that are its object. Moreover, the fact that no method can (nor should) seek to immunize us against the semantic complexity and dynamism of our objects of (historical) understanding points to both an epistemological and a moral dimension to interpretation. – Phronesis* or good judgment begins with our acknowledging the sheer fecundity and polyvalence of historically conditioned meaning. Inasmuch as inquiry unfolds as a process of hermeneutic participation *in*, rather than methodical emancipation *from*, our object of inquiry, it enjoins a stance of humility. It is worthwhile noting that the genesis of modern scientific method, on which historical inquiry has long sought to draw, coincides with a fundamentally domineering stance vis-à-vis the natural world (as evidenced by Galilei, Gassendi, Hobbes, and Locke); and where inquiry aims at determinative and definitive knowledge, humility is not even an option. And yet, in their shifting and multi-layered import, the concepts and ideas comprising specific traditions (in literature, art, law, theology, and philosophy) reveal themselves less as inert *objects* than as dynamic *agents* of meaning. Anyone inquiring into the “effective history” of concepts such as “person,” “will,” or “action” will find their practical use and reflective application in the course of historical time to undergo subtle and, on occasion, massive alteration. This is not to say that ideas are haplessly conditioned by randomly changing contexts

but, rather, questions engaging and challenging human understanding over long spans of historical time prompt each generation to reappraise the underlying meaning of these conceptual frameworks. Their meaning, then, does not *transcend* history. Rather, it shows each generation to unveil new, unsuspected, and successively deeper semantic potentialities within an idea. This they do precisely because at every stage human, historical existence needs to sharpen its conceptual tools in an effort to achieve a perspective or “view” (as J. H. Newman calls it) on its own existence. A fine instance of this dynamic can be found in the *ressourcement* movement that had crucially transformed Catholic theology during the mid-twentieth century.

**THESIS 7:** *Conceptual frameworks are logically antecedent to the historical situation which they help render intelligible. At the same time, their potential is only ever realized by historically situated humans engaged in a hermeneutic quest for self-awareness and self-legitimation.* – On rare occasions, conceptual and narrative frameworks may be rendered unusually explicit by philosophical or theological reflection. More frequently, though, they constitute a received and oblique “tradition” whose tacit efficacy has been variously characterized as “implicit reason” (John Henry Newman), “background awareness” (Michael Polanyi), “pre-judgment” (Hans-Georg Gadamer), or simply as a tangle of narratives absent which living and breathing human beings would remain bereft of all perspective on their existence; it is a point also and influentially urged by Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Michael Buckley, and Louis Dupre. Hence, the ability of individuals and communities to achieve a reasonably articulate perspective on their very existence pivots on an active and sustained engagement of antecedent, narrative and conceptual frameworks. A hermeneutic analysis of specific conceptual resources and their transformation over time such as I have been advocating here allows us to close in on the discrete features and tensions intrinsic to concepts of human agency. At the same time, such a model of inquiry also alerts us to the tangled and dialectical transmission and inflection of these conceptual frameworks over long stretches of historical time.

**THESIS 8:** *The narrative pattern of any tradition – in which, to say it again, historical inquiry finds itself essentially implicated – will be dialectical in kind.* – For Alasdair MacIntyre, dialectic thus “is the instrument of enquiry which is still *in via*. ... [Whereas] in demonstrative reasoning we argue *from* first principles, in dialectical we argue *to* first principles.”<sup>20</sup> In dialectical inquiry, an as yet unfathomable fullness (*pleroma*) of a conception that has sponsored a coherent and evolving hermeneutic tradition will itself acquire progressively greater clarity as that inquiry proceeds. As

Plato had put it to Glaucon, “when the beginning is what one doesn't know, and the end and what comes in between are woven out of what isn't known ... only the dialectical way of inquiry proceeds in this direction, destroying the hypotheses, to the beginning itself in order to make it secure.”<sup>21</sup> Being integrative rather than disjunctive in its operation, a dialectical narrative implies an apophatic concept of its telos and, consequently, can advance knowledge only by way of retroactive clarification. Inasmuch as it issues from the awareness that first principles are precisely what is *not* known, its underlying ethical stance is one of reflective involvement rather than peremptory skepticism. To be a participant in the dialectical movement of a tradition thus means to recognize oneself as both the agent and the witness of its continued unfolding. Hermeneutic inquiry of any begins with by acknowledging that “we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process – i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us.”<sup>22</sup> Wherever individuals judge and reason about commitments, ends, and goods, they do so by moving (however unwittingly) within some specific tradition of inquiry and, ideally, by becoming progressively more adept in the art (*technē*) of dialogue with the past voices that such a tradition comprises. Knowledge of the past means above all “understanding” ostensibly distant voices as they impinge on our specific situation. Whereas historicism’s long-standing preoccupation with method aims at tabulating verifiable and putatively value-neutral *information*, inhabiting a tradition means acknowledging its proximity to, not distance from, us.

Inasmuch as “interpretation is not an occasional, *post facto* supplement to understanding [but] rather, ... the explicit form of understanding,” hermeneutic practice – of which historical inquiry is a *prima facie* instance – can be broken down into three distinct and complementary types of Aristotelian *phronēsis*: 1) a *subtilitas intelligendi* or “understanding”; 2) a *subtilitas interpretandi* or “interpretation”; and 3) a *subtilitas applicandi* or “application.”<sup>23</sup> Specifically the skill of “application” had been both an integral feature and the ultimate aim of legal and biblical interpretation until its sudden and ill-considered marginalization by the rise of historical method in late Enlightenment and Romantic thought. Gadamer thus considers it “obvious that the task of hermeneutics was to adapt the text’s meaning to the concrete situation to which the text is speaking.” To approach interpretation as a teleological movement comprised of countless reasoned and reflected judgments is to recognize that philosophical, theological, or historical meanings cannot be attained by an agnostic and verificationist approach. Indeed, both legal and

theological hermeneutics tell us that “there is an essential tension between the fixed text – the law or the gospel – on the one hand and, on the other, the sense arrived at by applying it at the concrete moment of interpretation ... [After all,] a law does not exist in order to be understood historically, but to be concretized in its legal validity by being interpreted.”<sup>24</sup> To the extent that any method may claim legitimate standing within historical and, more generally, humanistic inquiry, it will have to acknowledge this *subtilitas applicandi* as its true and indispensable telos. Having been revealed to us through our considered and undesigning participation in a tradition, what we call meaning is *eo ipso* something fulfilled only in the domain of practical and ethical life. Unlike *information*, which one may claim to “own” and “prove” or “disprove,” meaning exists only as something “realized” (*verwirklicht*, as Hegel puts it) insofar as it is acknowledged as constitutive of our overall flourishing as *persons*. Like the human person, in contradistinction to the so-called “self” claiming ownership over itself, meanings are consummated not by a stance of detached, critical “cognition” (*Erkenntnis*) but by one of deeply involved “recognition” (*Anerkennung*). All interpretive fields, and theology above all, will do well to keep that distinction in view.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> *Truth and Method*, 275; in his structurally cognate critique of nineteenth-century “encyclopaedism,” Alasdair MacIntyre argues that “the encyclopaedists’ narrative reduces the past to a mere prologue to the rational present.” *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (South Bend, IN: U of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 79.

<sup>3</sup> *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984), 3-5; 12; as early as 1903, Maurice Blondel identifies the same underlying fallacy of a historical method that “tends to accept as reality ‘historical’ phenomena ... as a substitute for reality itself. ... Historical facts will be given the role of reality itself; and an ontology ... will be extracted from a methodology” (*History and Dogma*, 240). Recently, Peter Gordon has remarked on the slippage between an actual “understanding of an idea” and its methodological confinement within a supposedly determinative “context [which] like a discrete and holistic sphere ... englobes the idea in question and sharply delimits its capacity for movement” (“Contextualism and Criticism,” 39).

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, (*Truth and Method*, trans. Peter Marshall and Donald Weinsheimer (New York: Continuum, 2004), 196; Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1991), 3 (“Critical Fragments,” no. 25); on the conceptual problems of historicism, see Pfau, “Reading beyond Redemption,” in *Lessons of Romanticism*, ed. Robert Gleckner and Thomas Pfau (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998), 1-37 and *Minding the Modern* (South Bend, IN: U of Notre Dame Press, 2013), esp. 35-52.

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<sup>5</sup> *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademische Studiums*, in Schelling, *Werke* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1981), I/5, 227, 234.

<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 275; 277. Similarly, Frei remarks how, “with the rise of historical criticism ... the clue to meaning now is no longer the text itself but its reconstruction from its context, intentional or cultural, or else its aid in reconstructing that context, which in circular fashion then serves to explain the text itself” (*Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 160).

<sup>7</sup> “Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas,” in *Rethinking Modern Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Darron M. McMahon (New York: Oxford University Press; 2013), pp. 32-55; quote from p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> *Knowing and Being*, ed. Marjorie Greene (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1969), 130-31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, 16c, trans. R. Hackforth in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Bollingen, 1961)

<sup>14</sup> Josef Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, trans. E. Christian Kopff (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010), 28; see also Congar, who notes that “the economy begins by a *divine* transmission or tradition; it is continued in and by the men chosen and sent out by God for that purpose.” *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (San Francisco: St. Ignatius Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Tracts for the Times* (no. 73), ed. James Tolhurst (South Bend, IN: U of Notre Dame Press, 213), 188-89.

<sup>16</sup> *Intellectual Appetite* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 58; as Pieper notes, “the concept of *depositum*” has a supra-personal dignity to it: “What has been handed down to us we possess as a kind of loan” (*Tradition*, 21).

<sup>17</sup> *East Coker* (1940), lines 175f.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, lines 81-88.

<sup>19</sup> “Contextualism and Criticism,” 33; henceforth cited parenthetically.

<sup>20</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 88. – “It is no trivial matter that all claims to knowledge are the claims of some particular person, developed out of the claims of other particular persons. Knowledge is possessed only in and through participation in a history of dialectical encounters” (*ibid.*, 202).

<sup>21</sup> *Republic*, VII (533c)

<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283; though there is no evidence that Gadamer ever read Newman, the convergence of their position is truly remarkable here: “In tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, and is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one. For this reason, only innovation and planning appear to be the result of reason. But this is an illusion ...” (*ibid.*, 282).

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306-7; see also Gadamer’s 1965 supplement on “Hermeneutics and Historicism” (*ibid.*, 507-45). See also Carr, *Newman & Gadamer* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), esp. 89-131.

<sup>24</sup> *Truth and Method*, 307.