

TAKING TRUTH FOR GRANTED:
A REFLECTION ON THE
SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITION IN
JOSEF PIEPER

D. C. SCHINDLER

“What is passed on in tradition is not just some
truth, but the ground of all truth.”



When Josef Pieper explores a philosophical theme, his typical practice is to begin by laying out what has already been said, and has generally found acceptance, on the matter. There is a certain irony in the fact that, when he sets himself to reflect specifically on the theme of *tradition*, he finds that virtually nothing has been handed down on this subject in the realm of philosophy.¹

1. Pieper discussed the concept of tradition often in his work. Setting aside an early essay (“Die Grundsätze für die Gestaltung der Sammlung christlichen Traditionsgutes” [1933], published in *Werke, Ergänzungsband, I, Frühe soziologische Schriften* [Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2004]), Pieper first offered some thoughts on the matter from a philosophical perspective in the essay “The Philosophical Act” (originally written in 1947), which appears in his best-known book *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998) (see pages 117–20). In 1957, he delivered a lecture directly on

Quite unusually, there is no entry on “tradition” in the great German philosophical dictionaries, and the classic dictionaries in theological and classical literature provide entries of such narrow scope as to offer very little to the philosophical mind. Thus, when he takes up this particular theme in his 1970 book, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, Pieper discovers he has to start more or less from scratch.²

It is ironic, but there is perhaps something fitting in the absence of an explicit philosophical theory or account of tradition. A tradition is something we inherit *uncritically*, without a demand for justification. We feel no need to certify the precise origin of tradition, and, indeed, details about the time and place a tradition was instituted tend to diminish its status as tradition, especially if the origin turns out to be recent and accessible in some way other than its transmission through others. The initiation of a tradition is most properly hidden in the mists of time. Rather than critically assessing it, we are meant to take a tradition *for granted*; a kind of spontaneous and unreflective acceptance seems to belong to its essence. In this respect, we might say of tradition something analogous to what Nietzsche says of all genuinely good things: “Honest things, like honest men, do not carry their reasons in their hand. . . . It is indecent to show all five fingers. What must first be proved is worth little.”³ To have to make an explicit case for it would be a kind of admission that it no longer exists as a tradition.⁴ If this is true, the absence of an entry on

this theme, which was then published along with the critical responses to it in 1958 as “Über den Begriff der Tradition” (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1958). Shorter essays on tradition appeared later, most importantly the 1960 essay, published in English as “Tradition in the Changing World,” in the book *Tradition as Challenge* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2015), 1–19. The most sustained treatment, which will be the focus of our discussion here, was developed from the 1957 lecture. It was published in 1970 as *Überlieferung: Begriff und Anspruch* (in English: *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, trans. E. Christian Kopff [Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008]) (hereafter cited as *Tradition*). On all of this, see the translator’s helpful introduction, *Tradition*, xvii–xxxi. All otherwise unattributed citations in this essay will be to this work.

2. *Tradition*, 6–7.

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), 476.

4. An anecdote in this regard: My wife and I once attended an academic event that was “emceed” by two faculty members, somewhat in the way television

“tradition” in the philosophical dictionary could very well be a sign of its living reality, whereas the fact that Pieper felt the need to reflect on it in the latter part of the twentieth century, and make arguments on its behalf, could be the symptom of a coming crisis.

This possibility is sobering in the current cultural climate, in which one hears the word “tradition” with increasing frequency, and in somewhat peculiar contexts. The regular use of the word is particularly surprising, given that the form of the culture in which we live is hardly a traditional one. Indeed, one of the more adequate ways to characterize modernity is as the first age in history to understand itself as *not* receiving its basic view of the world and its governing values from ages past, but beginning itself anew.⁵ It may be that the apparent freedom gained by such a breaking of the bond to the past is the flip side of a loss of something essential to human existence, and this loss is one of the reasons we are so frequently encouraged to recover our “family traditions” (or, if they are irretrievably lost, to create new ones), to bring back our native languages, or at least some of the basic words, which the people of our culture were pressured to forget during the past century. But there is another irony in all of this. Pieper ends his book on tradition by citing a contemporary figure who worries about the possibility that the moment may arrive in the future when tradition is simply forgotten, and,

hosts accompany the Macy’s Day parade. In response to what the university no doubt rightly perceived to be a general cultural ignorance, the two faculty members narrated, in a conversational manner, every detail of the event as it transpired, explaining the symbolic meaning and recounting theories about its origin. However informative such an accompaniment may have been, the participants and spectators could not fail to have been struck by its inappropriateness. There was a decided “lack of transcendence” in the event, a transcendence that is usually evoked by the solemnity of the pagentry. It is not possible to *participate* in an event that is so staged; one can only appreciate it in detachment, like an episode of something or other on the History Channel.

5. As Robert Spaemann has observed, while other historical periods are defined by a particular content that is definable in principle, modernity is unique in having a principally formal and empty character: “It defines itself essentially in opposition to all the history that preceded it. It is so to speak an open project that can never be completed, so that to say that it has ended and has been replaced by a new period would be to say that it has failed” (“The End of Modernity?,” in *Philosophical Essays on God, Nature, and the Human Person: A Robert Spaemann Reader* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 211).

with it, the only genuine form of human solidarity, since it is only tradition that can unify people.⁶ This moment seems not only to have come, but also to have gone: Tradition has been forgotten, but “traditions” have taken its place, and these are understood above all as things that make us unique, practices and values that distinguish us from others. The very fact that we can talk about the importance of celebrating our traditions without recognizing the fundamental challenge that tradition poses to the basic cultural form that defines modernity, setting the horizon, and so the most basic terms, within which any such celebration may take place, tells us that the word “tradition” has changed its meaning. It now refers, not to the core of existence (which, as we will see in the discussion below, is how Pieper understands it), but only to what we might call the external “trappings” of a culture—literally, the cut and color of the clothes one wears, or the particular seasonings one adds to one’s food. Hence the disconcerting irony that we are only just beginning to fathom: the first radically anti-traditional culture in history, liberalism, presents itself as the champion of tradition(s), insofar as it provides a protective framework that liberates the (private) spaces in which these differences, these unique practices that may belong to one group but not to another, may be cultivated in peace. One cannot help but suspect that the modern age calls up new cultural energies to be devoted to the promotion of such practices (appeals to family tradition, for example, are often at the base of ad campaigns) because they distract us from the loss of tradition that cannot but be imposed on us by the basic cultural form of liberalism.

Now, it may be the case that a certain absence of critical reflection is natural to tradition, but in an age in which a sense for tradition has all but gone missing, it becomes necessary to provide a defense, at the level of first principles, however untraditional such an endeavor might be. In this regard, we can be grateful to Josef Pieper, not only for having attempted to give

6. See his mention of Viacheslav Ivanov in *Tradition*, 54 and 67 (see also Pieper, “Tradition in the Changing World,” 19). For an account of how the fragmenting of tradition that occurred in the Protestant Reformation has resulted in the disorder of a radical cultural pluralism, see Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

a general account of what tradition is, but for penetrating to its essence and arguing for its fundamental importance in properly human existence. One of the striking aspects of Pieper's account is that, far from accepting the "uncritical" character of tradition as foreign to the philosophical spirit—as the modern mind tends to do (Adorno states bluntly, for example, that "Tradition stands in opposition to rationality"⁷)—he argues that philosophy cannot be uprooted from tradition without losing its inner life. In recalling philosophy's responsibility to and dependence on tradition, Pieper opened himself to the criticism of subordinating thought to what is ultimately irrational. A philosophical defense of tradition would appear, from this perspective, to be self-undermining. To defend it thus would seem to make inevitable a kind of "traditionalism" that can avoid cultural relativism only by being despotic. Pieper responds to such criticism in his book by insisting on the fundamental difference between philosophical reflection and the reception of tradition, but argues that the two subsist in a "contrapuntal" relationship (see 66): even in its irreducible difference, philosophy needs tradition; the relative opposition creates a harmony more beautiful than the melodies of each alone. But we wish to propose, here, that his account offers resources for a more fundamental statement regarding the relationship between tradition and truth. In what follows, we will first present a general outline of Pieper's understanding, and then, on the basis of this understanding, we will carry out a further reflection on the place of tradition within the task of thinking.

1.

As is well known, the English word "tradition" comes from the Latin "*traditio*," which is an abstract noun formed from the past participle (*traditum*) of the verb "*tradere*," "to surrender," "to hand over," "to hand down." According to its etymology, the verb comes from "*trans*" ("across") and "*dare*" ("to give"), implying the sense of giving, as it were, across a certain distance (c.f. the

7. Adorno, *Theses on Tradition*, cited in Pieper, *Tradition*, 24. To be sure, as Kopff points out (xix–xx), Adorno does not mean simply to disparage tradition here in favor of modernity; he is a well-known critic, after all, of the instrumental form of rationality that is privileged by the Enlightenment.

corresponding Greek verb, *παράδομαι*, which conveys the same sense). According to Pieper, we can best get at the essence of tradition if we consider it as a particular kind of “giving,” which is an activity transpiring between two parties. Let us first look at the *traditio* itself before we attend to the elements that constitute it, each of which receives an illuminating analysis in Pieper’s study.

What distinguishes *traditio* from other kinds of giving (*dare*) is the “trans” aspect, which, Pieper explains, designates in this case the crossing of the distance that separates two generations. We tend to picture a tradition most simply as something that parents pass on to their children, but it is not the particular relationship between the individuals as such that is decisive. The individuals who give and receive a tradition stand, according to Pieper, as representatives of their generation:

The person who receives a *traditum* by listening receives it as a member or representative of the next generation. Even if by chance he were to be older in years than the transmitter, he is still the disciple [in German, *Jünger*] and heir to whom the tradition will be entrusted in the future. That is why Paul calls those who accept his message his “sons” (1 Corinthians 4:14–15). (11)

Now, to say that *traditio* is a giving that crosses the distance that separates two generations is most immediately to highlight its “trans-temporal” character. A tradition is not something meant to belong to one age to the exclusion of others, but is meant to be *shared* by them. While the temporal dimension of *traditio* is crucial, however, it is not the only significant dimension here. When we speak of a “generation,” we mean something more than a quantity of people at a particular time (and place). The word also has a qualitative aspect: we give names to particular generations (the “Greatest Generation,” the “Baby Boomers,” the “Millennials,” and so forth) and attempt to distill the character that distinguishes this generation from others. A generation represents a distinctive way of seeing things and inhabiting the world, a distinct set of values and attitudes, and is typically interpreted as having “grown out” of the previous one, standing in some sense over against the generation that preceded it. In this respect, if *traditio* represents a bridging of the distance between two generations, it is the introduction of something that *relativ-*

izes that which distinguishes the generations from each other. It does not allow the difference between generations to be absolute.

This initial reflection already serves to bring out what will be the decisive feature of what is passed on in tradition: if it bridges the distance between two generations, tradition cannot belong in an exclusive way to either one of the generations in its particularity; it can *belong* to both of them, which is to say it can be actually handed down from one generation to the next, only if it transcends each. In other words, what is passed down specifically as tradition has to transcend any given historical period; it has to possess an essentially time-transcending character.⁸ This is one of the reasons that the one who receives a tradition receives it specifically as a representative of his generation: Insofar as the tradition transcends the particularity of space and time, it is not something he can take into his own personal possession as something that concerns himself alone. It is instead something in which he participates, something he is “brought into.”

Now, Pieper highlights three elements in the core of tradition: there is the transmitter, the recipient, and the thing itself that is passed on, i.e., the “*traditum*.” Let us consider the distinctive character of each, beginning with the last. Pieper explains, first of all, that he is going to focus his discussion, not on the customs or practices we typically identify with tradition, but specifically on the handing down of a “teaching,” a certain understanding of the world (9–10). We will come back to the relation between tradition as an idea and as a practice below, but the first thing worth pointing out here is that, even when the *traditum* is a doctrine, there is more to tradition than simply the communication of an idea. It may initially seem, given the “trans-temporal” character of tradition just highlighted, that the activity of *traditio*

8. This is why Pieper’s notion of tradition requires him immediately to face the question whether he takes the particularity of *history* seriously enough (the first chapter of his study is called “Is Tradition Anti-Historical?”). His 1957 lecture, in fact, “Tradition in Changing Times,” was intended in part to counterbalance the timelessness of tradition against the constant movement of history. It is interesting that Alasdair MacIntyre’s emphasis on tradition, by contrast, forces him to deal with the charge that his concept of reasoning is *too* historical (see Christopher Lutz’s thorough account of and response to this debate in *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004]). At issue in the difference here is a different understanding of the essence of tradition, as we will see below.

is simply the passing on of a timeless truth. But Pieper illuminates a decisive difference between the passing on of tradition and the teaching of a truth in two respects. On the one hand, while it is possible to imagine someone *teaching* his own discoveries or contributions to a field of study, this cannot be the case with tradition: what one hands down in this particular sense can only be something one has oneself *received* from the generation before, and one hands it down *precisely as such* (14). A passage from Augustine that Pieper refers to repeatedly sums this up succinctly: *quod a patribus acceperunt, hoc filiis tradiderunt*.⁹ Second, “It is an essential part of the concept of tradition that no experience and no deductive reasoning can assimilate and surpass what is handed down” (19). It is not enough that the tradition be handed down as received from another; this quality must belong to its very essence, which is to say that there can be no other access to it outside of the mediation through others. One can teach addition and subtraction to a child, but when he learns it, it is something he sees plainly for himself. He has, as it were, direct access to this truth; it is completely accidental that mathematics happens to be mediated to him through his parents. By contrast, mediation cannot be eliminated from tradition without it ceasing to have the character of tradition (if it *ever* actually had it in this case).

This point sets into relief another aspect of tradition, which Pieper does not explicitly dwell on, but which clearly informs his account. Though what is handed down by tradition transcends time in one respect, it is nevertheless bound to time in another respect. Receiving a tradition from others means receiving it from those who *come before*. We might say that tradition represents a transcendence that is both vertical and horizontal: tradition transcends the moment in which we live vertically in the sense that its content is in one respect “timeless,” but at the same time it transcends the present moment horizontally in the sense that it has its source in some earlier time in history. Clearly, there is a certain paradox in the convergence of the timeless and the time-bound; it implies a sort of entry into time of what lies beyond time. Pieper uses the word “revelation” to describe the origin of tradition (30), and quotes Plato in this respect: “A gift

9. Augustine, *Contra Julianum* 2.10.34 (PL 44, 698) [“What they received from their fathers they handed down to their sons”].

from the gods was brought down by a certain (unknown) Prometheus in bright gleam of fire and the ancients, better than we and dwelling closer to the gods, handed down [παρέδοσαν] this saying to us.”¹⁰ The word indicates an event in history—even if it is difficult or perhaps even impossible in principle to “pinpoint” the moment, it is nevertheless a communication *to* history—but it is essentially the communication of something more than historical. As we saw above, tradition cannot originate in a human individual; instead, Pieper proposes, it has its origin in God. There is something like a “divine revelation” at the origin of every tradition. This no doubt controversial point will turn out to be the decisive one in Pieper’s account, and we will return to it below.

We have been speaking, thus far, principally about that which is handed down in the activity of *traditio*; what we have laid out allows us to describe the other basic elements of tradition, namely, the recipient and the transmitter, the one who hands the *triditum* down. Of these two, it is the recipient that has primacy, since, as we indicated above, *traditio* occurs only where the giver passes on something he himself has received. Regarding the recipient, Pieper makes two observations. The first thing Pieper highlights is the fact that *traditio*, as a personal event, implies a dependence of the recipient on the giver: “This is reception in the strictest meaning of the term, hearing something and really taking it seriously. I accept what someone else offers me and presents to me. I allow him to give it to me. This means that I do not take it for myself. I do not procure it for myself out of my own ability” (17). This radical receptivity is natural given the characteristic of the *traditio* we saw above, namely, that it concerns something that one cannot simply verify for oneself. But this aspect stands in a certain tension with the second observation Pieper makes: “On the other hand, I do not accept the *triditum* ‘because it is traditional,’ but because I am convinced that it is true and valid” (17). To see why this point does not contradict the one just made will require a reflection on the *kind* of truth expressed in tradition, which is distinct from that of, say, a mathematical formula or a scientific “fact.” We will attend to this in section two below. Here, we ought to see that the af-

10. Plato, *Philebus* 16c, cited in Pieper, *Tradition*, 27.

firmation of the *truth* passed on entails a kind of reception *with assent*, beyond simple understanding. On this score, Pieper helpfully contrasts the recipient of a tradition from a historian, who perhaps has a thorough knowledge of the *tradita*, but does not receive them with an inward assent; Pieper suggests that it may even be precisely the kind of knowledge he has that precludes such a “taking to be true” (16).

The giver of tradition presents the same two aspects as the recipient; he too gives the *traditum*, not as something arising from himself, but in which he himself is a participant: He “takes what he is sharing not from himself, but ‘from some other place’” (13). At the same time, he does not pass it on as something simply *separate* from him, like a cold, objective “fact.” Pieper speaks of passing on the tradition as something “really alive” (15), though he does not elaborate what this means exactly. A hint as to its meaning nevertheless comes later on in the discussion, when in a different context he makes a decisively important observation that bears directly on the question:

One can simply not expect people as personal beings to be obliged to say without the possibility of critical verification, “this is the way it is and no other way,” unless what has to be believed concerns the center of the world and the core of their own existence. It is precisely this which gives to the claim its full weight. What the “wisdom of the ancients” talks about, however, are in fact precisely subjects that concern the core and center. (33)

If tradition concerns the core of existence, it cannot but concern me personally, so to speak. In other words, I cannot be indifferent towards it, but have to give myself over to it in order to grasp it at all. I take hold of it only by letting it take hold of me. In this respect, I cannot embrace tradition *except* as something “really alive.” But this living quality implies that it does not come to a rest with me; my own taking hold of it implies an internal dynamic of handing it on further in love. The *traditum*, Pieper says, is by its very nature a *tradendum*, that which demands, of itself, to be passed on. I receive it only as giving myself to it, and in passing it on I also give myself along with it. This is what is meant by calling *traditio* something passed on by a “personal, voluntary

act.”¹¹ Without a doubt, there is no better image of this passing on of tradition in love than Charles Péguy’s woodsman, who ponders his children and the many things he hopes to hand down to them as he pours himself into his difficult work:

With his tools certainly and his ancestry and his blood, his
children will inherit.
What is above everything.
God’s blessing, which is on his house and on his ancestors.
The grace of God, which is worth more than anything.
He can be sure of this.
Which is on the poor man and on the working man.
And on him who raises his children well.
He can be sure of this.
Because God promised it.
And because he is supremely faithful in his promises.¹²

Drawing on another of his poems, we might say of tradition what Péguy says of the soul: “You don’t save your soul in the way you would save a treasure; you save it in the way that you lose a treasure, by spending it.”¹³ A tradition is something that can be preserved only through what *Gaudium et spes* has referred to as “a sincere gift of self” (24).

It is becoming evident that we can properly understand tradition only if we look with but beyond its form, at its content. To get at the essential content of tradition in Pieper’s understanding, it is helpful to return to discuss the point left open above, namely, that tradition always has its origin in divine revelation. This affirmation strikes us as implausible, no doubt, to the extent that we tend to identify tradition with such things as manner of dress and preparation of food. But to reduce the meaning of tradition in this way, we have already pointed out, is to cash it out, so to speak, in modern currency. According to Pieper, the paradigm of tradition, which is to say the form of tradition that

11. This also illuminates the profound connection between *tradition* as a vision of the world, and the “*traditio*”—the surrender—that Christ enacts on the Cross, a connection that Pieper seems to imply is accidental (see 76n8).

12. Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 12–22, at 15.

13. Charles Péguy, *Le mystère de la charité de Jeanne d’Arc*, in *Oeuvres Poétique Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 392.

most fully expresses its essence and so presents a model, is *sacred* tradition (see 23–35).

It is important to recognize, however, that Pieper means by this expression more than simply the practice of the Christian faith, though that is obviously the first meaning. In two successive chapters of his book, he extends this meaning. First, he explains that any customs, beliefs, norms, and practices are “traditions” to the extent that they are passed on from one generation to the next, “if not necessarily as authoritative, yet without explicitly questioning” (37). It is helpful, here, to introduce the term “analogy,” though Pieper does not make use of it himself. Pieper’s principal point is to draw a distinction: On the one hand, there are those practices that have no essential necessity, and so can be neglected whenever conditions require. These “traditional practices” can change over time (his surprising example is the deliberate introduction of what we take to be the quintessential German expression “Aufwiedersehen” in 1914–1915 to replace the previously customary “Adieu,” borrowed from the French [38]). On the other hand, there is the explicitly sacred tradition, like the celebration of Easter, which has an absolute quality, and which no circumstances—even being desperately at war—would permit a culture deliberately to fail to celebrate. If we recognize the importance of tradition in human existence, we will nevertheless tend to give the benefit of the doubt even to the nonessential practices, and to admit change in their regard only gradually.¹⁴

The notion of analogy is helpful here because it illuminates a relation between the sacred and so-called secular traditions: In a healthy culture, the daily practices, manners, and customs are relative expressions of the sacred tradition, the core meaning of existence, diversely extended into the social order, which is to say into an order that is “other” than the directly sacred.¹⁵ There is, in principle, an infinity of possibilities at this level of existence, and, because this sphere is not directly sacred,

14. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 97, a. 2.

15. This does not imply a “wall of separation” between the sacred and the secular, but rather a “relative autonomy” of the secular that arrives *precisely* by virtue of the priority of the sacred as revealed in Christianity. On this, see the chapter on culture in Rémi Brague’s forthcoming *Curing Mad Truths* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press).

any given practices will exhibit a certain contingency in the way Pieper describes. But recognizing an analogy reveals that these cultural phenomena, these various customs, beliefs, and norms, constitute a *way of life*, and not just a collection of individual peculiarities. They are elements of an organic whole, lying at varying distances from a center. Taken as a whole, they represent an interpretation of the sacred tradition in the particular time and place of a given people, or, to switch metaphors, the incarnation of a tradition in a particular flesh, which is not imposed from above but extends into a sphere beyond it while drawing on the native quality of that sphere.¹⁶ We are proposing, here, an analogous extension of the notion of “inculturation,” which is typically used in a theological context to describe a culture’s ultimately unique way of practicing the faith; here, we mean to see that even the nonreligious practices of a culture are an expression of sacred tradition, broadly conceived. We could call it a second-order expression of sacred tradition. One of the implications of this is that different sorts of customs will have different degrees of necessity and contingency depending on how “close” they are to the *central* meaning of tradition.

The second way Pieper extends the meaning of “sacred tradition” beyond the directly theological is by appealing to the clearly provocative notion of an “original revelation,” which is distinct from the special revelation in Christ. He means by this phrase something more than the usual notion of “general revelation” that is often contrasted to “special revelation,” namely, God’s revelation of himself in creation, a revelation accessible to natural reason and so present in principle in any culture, no matter when and where it exists. In line with his argument above, Pieper speaks of this specifically as an “original revelation” (30), meaning that it was, in a manner analogous to “special revelation,” inaugurated in history through God’s initiative, a communication from God to the world. Exactly when and where this “original” revelation took place is, of course, necessarily obscure, and the notion of analogy allows one even to suspend any judg-

16. In the Incarnation, the Son of God takes on, not just flesh in general, or even flesh simply created for him from above by the Father, but specifically flesh given to him by his mother, and thus exhibiting features of her particularity. Mary, moreover, raised Jesus in the tradition of the Jewish people.

ment regarding whether there would need to be some discrete historical event at the origin. Somewhat in the same spirit, John Henry Newman has observed that

There never was a time when God had not spoken to man, and told him to a certain extent his duty. . . . Accordingly, we are expressly told in the New Testament, that at no time he left himself without a witness in the world . . . so that Revelation, properly speaking, is an universal, not a local gift. . . . All men have had more or less the guidance of Tradition.¹⁷

However things may stand as to the manner of revelation in its more universal sense, Pieper points to the role that *mythology*, received stories about the gods and the origin of the world and man, has played in conveying tradition in premodern cultures.¹⁸ The principal point is that the stories are received, and that they operate, so to speak, in the mode of an authority.¹⁹ In this sense, and by virtue of their content, they are indeed a *sacred* tradition, even if they are not immediately Christian. Perhaps we can refer to them as sacred in a “natural” sense. In any event, Pieper is quick to insist that even this “original” revelation arises from the Logos, who is incarnate in Christ—in other words, we are not dealing with a kind of “generic” religion, of which Christianity would simply be a particular instance.²⁰ It is not possible in the

17. John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, vol. 1, *The Works of Cardinal Newman* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), 80.

18. This is a notion one finds, too, in Schelling, but it does not appear to be the case that Pieper is familiar with Schelling’s positive philosophy. In any event, he does not make any reference to it. Schelling presents mythology as a form of revelation, and posits a supra-individual authorship, the origin of which would be as mysterious as the origin of language, and indeed it seems as if the two origins may have some connection with one another. The supra-individual aspect may be the analogy with divine revelation; there is no particular human source. See F. W. J. Schelling’s *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Myth* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

19. Chapter 3 is called “Tradition and Authority,” and begins with the observation that medieval thinkers took “authority” to be “the same for tradition” (23).

20. Pieper notably critiques the sort of “Gnostic” interpretation one finds, for example, in Leopold Ziegler (see 52). To found the point he makes in the tradition, Pieper cites an illuminating text from Augustine’s *Retractiones*: “The

present context to enter into the profound and delicate question of Christianity and what is called “religious pluralism”; but, recognizing the complexity of this question, especially today, we may nevertheless here hold onto the importance of what Pieper calls “original” revelation, which is in a certain respect presupposed by Christian revelation, as preparing for that revelation in a manner essentially different from, though of course analogous to, the Old Testament.

Interestingly—and in a certain continuity with the Fathers of the Church—Pieper points to Plato as an eminent “witness” to the “original revelation,” not in the sense of his having “been there,” but in his acknowledging the importance of what has been said “by the ancients” regarding matters at the limits, so to speak, of philosophical reflection.²¹ The fundamental importance of mythology in Plato has often been recognized;²² Pieper refers to the great Plato scholar Paul Friedländer, who interprets Plato as having gathered back together the disparate fragments of an original “great myth.”²³ We might add to this that he integrated them, and, more than that, received them as having significant and intelligible content, rather than just repeating them or reduc-

very thing which is now called the ‘Christian religion’ existed among the ancients. Indeed it has never been absent since the beginning of the human race, until Christ appeared in the flesh. That was when the true religion, which already existed, began to be called the ‘Christian religion’” (*Retractiones*, I.12).

21. We might compare this to Balthasar, who points to Virgil as in some sense summing up pagan religion in preparation for Christianity: see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, vol. 5, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 630; c.f., *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Ancient World*, vol. 4, *The Glory of the Lord*, 232–79. Each clearly seeks to highlight something distinct: for Pieper, it is a *vision* of the world suffused by the good, while for Balthasar, the primary point seems to be *mission* in obedience to the gods.

22. Among the many scholarly discussions, see Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); J. F. Mattéi, “The Theatre of Myth in Plato,” in *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles Griswold Jr. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1988), 66–83; Ludwig Edelstein, “The Function of the Myth in Plato’s Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10, no. 4 (1949): 463–81. Pieper himself has a book on the subject: *The Platonic Myths*, trans. Dan Farrelly (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011).

23. Paul Friedländer, *Platon I* (Berlin, 1954), 184 [*Plato: An Introduction* (New York, 1958), 173], cited in 53.

ing them simply to otherwise senseless norms for behavior.²⁴ It is significant that Plato typically refused to absolutize the “details” of any of the stories he recounts—they were not, for him, most basically empirical or historical in the positivistic sense—but instead pointed to the meaning they communicate, i.e., to an insight that we ought to draw from them.²⁵ That insight invariably concerns, in one way or another, the ultimate origin or end of things, the *archē* or the eschaton, the transcendent “sphere” that provides the horizon for our existence in time. It always refers, receptively, to a truth that lies at the furthest limits of philosophical reflection.

It is right here that we encounter the boldest and most provocative proposal that Pieper makes in his book, or at least what cannot but strike the contemporary reader as such. Up to this point, as is natural in philosophy, we have been discussing the meaning of tradition in more or less formal terms, though of course the notion of an “original revelation” already turns in a more concrete direction. Pieper makes this turn thematic, and insists that tradition has a particular content (33). Even more than that, he claims that there is, in the end, a single tradition that belongs to humanity as such, beyond any (liberal notions of the) diversity of traditions, plural (see 54). These two ultimately inseparable claims distinguish Pieper’s vision sharply from the other, no doubt better known, defender of tradition in contemporary philosophy, Alasdair MacIntyre. While MacIntyre affirms that we can never get outside the particularity of a tradition to judge it on the basis of some “extra-traditional” criteria,²⁶

24. Plato illustrates this point, for example, in the opening book of the *Republic*. Socrates questions Cephalus about the nature of justice that Cephalus had insisted was necessary to practice, but Cephalus is unable to answer. Before returning to practice his religious rites, he “hands down” (*παράδιδωμι*) his argument to Polemarchus, his son, who now has to deal with the challenge of providing a rational account (*Republic*, 331d).

25. This is not meant to imply that the myth is simply an extrinsic vehicle communicating an abstract, universal meaning.

26. See Kopff’s discussion, xxii–xxiii. This does *not* necessarily imply relativism, though there have been some who criticize MacIntyre on that score. MacIntyre does indeed provide criteria for judging the superiority of one tradition to another, though it is important to note that his criteria remain strictly *formal*: see MacIntyre’s *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990),

Pieper might agree,²⁷ but would add that, as we saw above, tradition itself transcends historical particularity. This point becomes clearer once we recognize a content that belongs essentially to tradition, beyond the merely formal aspects of its mode of transmission. There is thus a *norm* by which traditions—in the plural—can be measured, a standard that can be regarded as “extra-traditional” only if we forget the “vertical transcendence” that belongs essentially to tradition (in this case, we ought to say “belongs essentially to *the* tradition”), as Pieper has argued.²⁸ Now, Pieper does not go into much detail regarding the essential content of the tradition; an attempt to specify it in an exhaustive sense would arguably betray its proper form. Instead, in his 1960 essay “Tradition in the Changing World,” Pieper points to some of the principles that one discovers in Plato’s work: “if we ask Plato what, in his opinion, is the quintessence of the ‘wisdom of the ancients,’ this is the answer we receive: that the world proceeded from the ungrudging goodness of God; that God holds in his hands the beginning, the middle, and the end of all things; that the soul of man survives death; that it is worse to do injustice than to suffer it; that, after death, judgment awaits us, along with punishment and reward, and so on.”²⁹ Note that, though these

181. It might be argued that Pieper and MacIntyre are talking about two different things, not that they take up contrary positions. Though there is certainly some truth to this, we nevertheless need to recognize that Pieper is here *adding* something of decisive significance to MacIntyre’s well-known account.

27. Pieper does present the philosophical act as transcending historical conditions, but this would mean it transcends one’s tradition only if one identifies tradition with particularity. In other words, while MacIntyre would say the philosophical act is bound in some sense to tradition and therefore to the particular historical conditions in which it is performed, Pieper would say that it is bound to tradition and that is at least one of the reasons it transcends particular historical conditions.

28. The standard objection that this presupposes a modern-rationalistic universal concept or abstract essence fails insofar as it allows only a modern-rationalistic understanding of universality. There are, however, *concrete* understandings of the universal in the ancient and medieval world (see the comments in this regard in Spaemann, “A Philosophical Autobiography,” 12). For a profound meditation on a nonabstract sense of the universal, see William Desmond, *The Intimate Universal: The Hidden Porosity among Religion, Art, Philosophy, and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

29. Pieper, “Tradition in the Changing World,” 14–15. One might take issue with some of the specific teachings mentioned: Plato clearly offers philo-

principles clearly bear on conduct, and the way human beings ought to order their existence, this is not a list of moral norms. In this respect, these principles are different from what we find, for example, in C. S. Lewis's "Tao," which represents what Lewis takes to be a basic moral code found, it seems, in all cultures and representing part of the essential human patrimony.³⁰ Pieper is aiming, more basically, we might say, at the theoretical foundation of Lewis's "Tao," in order to distill what they have in common as therefore "universal." The list he draws from Plato concerns truth, a way of understanding, which would be the pre-supposed principles of moral norms. As we suggested a moment ago, the list can be simplified even further: it is a recognition, not just of goodness, but of absolute goodness, as the origin of all things. As such, it is that to which all things bear a relation, and that to which all things return. Even more succinctly, God, as goodness, is the principle and end. Things therefore have come to be out of perfect generosity, by which they will ultimately be judged. This *exitus-reditus* "schema" is *the* tradition. More specifically, we ought to say that the content of the original revelation appears to be, not simply the formal structure of a schema, but also what is conveyed in and through this schema, namely, a goodness that *concerns* (and is in a certain sense *concerned with*) the world, a goodness that pronounces judgment and thereby *saves*.³¹

sophical arguments for some of these points (like the preferability of suffering injustice [*Gorgias*, 469bff.] and the immortality of the soul [*Phaedrus*, 245c–e]), but the eschatological *condition* of the soul and the goodness of the origin and end of all things seems to lie beyond such proof. For his part, Newman presents the following as belonging to the "universal revelation" handed down in tradition: "the doctrines of the power and presence of an invisible God, of His moral law and governance, of the obligation of duty, and the certainty of a just judgment, and of reward and punishment, as eventually dispensed to individuals" (Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, 80). There is evidently a significant overlap here.

30. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1974), 18ff.

31. "In this connection, Plato used the word 'save.' The mythical story of the Judgment of the Dead and reward or punishment in the afterlife was in marvelous fashion 'saved.' He then astonishingly adds that it can save us too, if we believe it" (47). Pieper is referring to the "myth of Er," recounted at the end of the *Republic* in 621c. There is no space in the present context, but it would be quite worthwhile to reflect on the subtle difference between what Pieper is calling here tradition, and what the Church has recognized as the truths of "natural reason" accessible in principle to reason alone (*Dei Filius*).

Regarding the essentially obscure origins of ancient tradition, we may use the words Plato places in the mouth of Socrates: I will not insist on the particular details of any one account, but I will say with confidence that this story is true.

2.

But can we know whether it is true? Is it even proper to call tradition true if it is unverifiable of its very nature? At this point, we may reflect in a more general way on some of the implications of Pieper's account. Inside of a traditional culture, the question of the truth of tradition does not seem to arise, not because it is forbidden by the powers-that-be, as the modern liberal mind might tend to think, but simply because such a question would appear strange or unnatural. On the other hand, in a culture uprooted from "sacred tradition," in the sense Pieper has given the term, the question cannot be avoided. The problem, however, is that the posing of the question in the modern context tends to *im*-pose modern assumptions concerning the nature of truth and the criteria for its assessment, which makes the problem insoluble (and this is quite different from showing tradition to be untrue or even simply nonrational). Pointing out in response that there is a contradiction in the uncritical absolutizing of critical reason tends only to deepen the despair. It makes a difference, a genuinely fundamental difference, whether one raises the question concerning truth from inside tradition or from an absolute point outside.

One might object that this difference simply goes to show that, in the end, it is all arbitrary, since it makes truth finally depend on something other than reason, on nothing more than what one happens to take as one's starting point. But to raise such an objection is already to assume that one is approaching the problem as an abstract reasoner. It is unsurprising that people often find the question hopeless, but tragic that they simply resolve

We might speak of a distinction here between form and content. Reason, considered abstractly, is able to grasp the *form* (first principle), while the tradition, which goes *beyond* abstract reason in the manner we have been discussing, conveys content (the first principle is *good*), and, indeed, reveals that this content *involves* man in his historical existence in some sense.

therefore to accept a certain arbitrariness about their fundamental identity as a result: I am an American Catholic living in the twenty-first century, but I could just as easily have been born a Buddhist in China 500 years ago. (There is in fact no ground whatsoever for that possibility; to think that there is is simply to concede the absoluteness of the current milieu, modern liberalism, which takes for granted an entirely unreal conception of the self.³²)

Some other approach to the problem of justifying the truth of tradition is needed. It would no doubt be possible to make some headway in showing the truth of tradition, as Pieper has presented it, by making a survey of various cultures, somewhat as Lewis does in his presentation of the universal moral code, the “Tao.” But, even if the present context allowed for such an exploration, it remains the case that studies of this sort could not finally resolve the problem insofar as the claim Pieper makes about tradition is not an empirical one in the first place, but a normative one. By saying that tradition is not just a form but also a content, Pieper opens up the possibility that certain ideas can be passed on from one age to the next without being genuinely traditional. What we propose to do here is not to try to *prove* the truth of tradition; instead, we will simply point to some things that may serve to illuminate why what Pieper says is inwardly compelling.

In a nominalistic and technological age, the point may be difficult to understand, but “rational” is not a univocal standard in the assessment of method or manner. A *rational* method is one in which the path (*hodos*) leads in truth to the object to which it is directed; in other words, a method has to be adequate to its object, which is to say that it is the *nature* of the object that determines the *nature* of the method. The object comes first.³³ In his discussion of the good in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously observes that one cannot demand the same necessity in the matter of ethics that is natural in mathematics.³⁴ With

32. For an excellent characterization of the liberal self along these lines, see the opening pages of John Milbank’s essay, “The Gift of Ruling: Secularization and Political Authority,” *New Blackfriars* 85, no. 996 (2004): 212–38.

33. Logically, if not also chronologically.

34. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.3.

respect to tradition, we have seen that it is essential to tradition that its content lies beyond immediate apprehension or deductive reasoning. In this sense, tradition is not accessible to critical reason by its very nature. This does not mean that it fails when measured by the standard of critical reason, but simply that it cannot be so measured. To insist on critical reasoning, in this case, would be irrational. Indeed, it would show that one's understanding of rationality is itself arbitrary, since it amounts to a method that imposes conditions a priori, before considering any reasons that might bear on the method, and so without taking heed of reason's concrete object. In other words, it is a mindless use of reason. The first point we can make about the truth of tradition, thus, is that it is not a truth that can be reasonably subjected to critical reason. Again, this does not mean that it is *against* critical reason (as, for example, Adorno suggests: "Tradition is the opposite of reason"), but only that the truth proper to it is prior to the distinction between critical rationality and its opposite.

Now, this is a fairly straightforward point, but it is important to understand that there is more at stake here than a merely technical issue. The different methods, or, more adequately put, the different conceptions of what a method *is*, give expression to something more basic. The "rationalistic" method, which would determine tradition to be arbitrary because one's acceptance of it does not come as the conclusion of a deductive process but precedes any such work of reasoning, is already "anti-traditional" from the outset. It takes for granted that the mind operates as a wholly autonomous power of reasoning, from an absolute perspective, which is to say not as always-already embedded within a context *from* which it receives its most basically determining horizon. This position is not itself arrived at as the conclusion of a reasoning process; indeed, it *cannot* be, because this would make it relative to the more basically given context as that *from* which the reasoning begins. And this is just what the position excludes. Critical reason's suspicion of tradition as arbitrary is *itself* arbitrary, and so its refusal of arbitrariness condemns itself to the very arbitrariness it refuses. The refusal of the givenness of the context from within which it thinks, or in other words its anti-traditional stance, is a *self*-refusal, or to put the matter succinctly: this is a self-contradiction.

It is right at this point that we see the power of Pieper's proposal. One might conclude from the foregoing line of reasoning that even critical reasoning cannot help but be a kind of tradition; as MacIntyre has famously shown in a different, but profoundly related context, liberalism, too, is a tradition, in spite of its self-understanding.³⁵ But Pieper's notion allows us to reach something more than the essentially negative conclusion that *some* kind of tradition is inevitable, so we do best by at least admitting that fact, which then puts us in the position of comparing traditions fairly. As we saw earlier, Pieper shows that there is ultimately just one tradition, and that this tradition has a determinate content, which can be reduced more or less to the recognition of absolute goodness as the origin and end of all things. From this perspective, we can say not only that liberalism and absolutized critical reason, which is its epistemological counterpart, are also and inescapably "traditional" in their own way (and so not completely liberal or the product of critical reasoning). By virtue of the norm that Pieper provides, we can also say, more profoundly, that they are essentially *bad* traditions; they *fail* at being traditional in a decisive way. They are not traditions that touch the center of the world and the core of existence, in spite of the fact that they are passed on uncritically. We therefore have to qualify the claim a MacIntyrean thinker might make, namely, that these forms of thought are "no less" traditional than the traditions they intend to reject, a claim that reduces tradition to its formal features. As a matter of fact, liberalism and critical reason *are* less traditional, and it is for this very reason that they contradict themselves.

There is an extraordinary implication of all this, which completely turns the tables on the critical reasoning that belongs to liberalism. We note the word "given" that appeared several times in the discussion above; it is inevitable in any discussion of reason, since one cannot begin reasoning except from within a context that precedes that activity and thus establishes its horizon from the outset. But according to Pieper's notion of tradition, *givenness is the very content of tradition!* In other words, absolute generosity at the origin of all things is not just one possible

35. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

context for thinking among many, any one of which might be equally “given”; instead, it is the only “given” that is precisely confirmed *by* its being given. In this respect, to “posit” the good as the first principle is not in fact to *posit* anything at all, but simply to acknowledge *as* given what *is* given, or in other words to take *as* absolute what *is* absolute. It is interesting to note, in this context, that Plato refers to approaching the good specifically as one’s “proceeding to the unhypothetical first principle of everything” (μέχρι τοῦ ἀνυποθέτου ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ παντὸς ἀρχὴν ἰών, [*Republic*, 611b]): it is “unhypothetical” because it is not something that reason hypothesizes on the basis of some more fundamental context—and thus in some sense “arbitrarily”—but is recognized *as* the *archē*, as the *first* principle. In this sense, not only is starting from tradition—the tradition, the *given* tradition—not arbitrary with respect to other possible given contexts, but the absolutizing of tradition is an absolutizing of the very structure that belongs to reason. *The total embrace of the claim of genuine tradition is therefore the only way to avoid arbitrariness.* Far from obfuscating or relativizing the role of reason, tradition liberates reason to be its most integral self.

But tradition does not mean only the establishment of a context from within which to carry out argumentation; indeed, it does not mean this principally. We tend to associate the word “tradition” with certain practices, or more adequately, as we suggested above, with a “way of life” rather than first of all with an idea or concept, and it is natural to do so. To be sure, as we noted at the outset, having acknowledged the kinds of practices we associate most immediately with tradition, Pieper specifies that, in his own discussion, “special attention will be directed to the tradition of *truth*, where the *traditum* (or *tradendum*) is a teaching, a statement about reality, an interpretation of reality, a proverb” (9–10). He goes on to make the crucial observation that theory and practice ought not to be separated from each other in a dualistic fashion: “we have to acknowledge that a custom, a legal maxim and a holiday can contain a doctrine, explicitly or implicitly” (10). Let us strengthen this observation by saying that not only *can* such practices contain some understanding of reality, some claim about the nature of things, but that they inevitably *will* contain some doctrine at a certain level. And let us note, too, that the converse is also true as a general principle: a claim about

the nature of things will inevitably imply, at a certain level, a particular way of acting. It seems clear that Pieper would accept both of these statements. The subtitle of his book, after all, is "Concept and Claim" (*Begriff und Anspruch*), which implies, as we have seen, a worldview that can be understood in the proper sense only by being inhabited: the concept demands a response. In this regard, a tradition is not simply something that we recall (*anamnesis*), but at the same time something we re-enact, as it were. "The Hebrew word for appropriating what has been handed down," Pieper observes, "means the same as 'to repeat'" (21). The handing on of tradition implies, we might say, a synthesis of the Greek recollection and the Jewish repetition: "Do this in memory of me . . ."

The unity of thought and action, however, manifests an even more profound self-confirmation when we think of tradition in the concrete terms Pieper has presented. In the beginning steps of his attempt to define tradition, to lay out what it is, Pieper says that "in every case we are dealing with something that can be received and handed down in a personal voluntary act" (10). As we have seen, he goes on to expound this act as a comprehensive giving and receiving, which is distinct from mere teaching and learning both because its content is not simply "information" that can be conveyed in this manner, and also because the communication is a kind of sharing that requires a personal involvement. On the one hand, there is a giving into which one pours oneself, and on the other side there is a receiving through which one entrusts oneself to another. All of this concerns, thus far, what we would call the formal elements of tradition. As for the material aspect, Pieper proposes, as we have seen, that the tradition has a particular content, namely, absolute goodness as the origin and end of all things. What is striking here, though Pieper himself does not seem to take note of it, is another astonishing convergence of form and content. It is fitting, *perfectly fitting*, that the truth that generosity is the most basic, and most ultimate, truth of all should be communicated in and through generosity, in and through free (personal and voluntary) acts of giving and receiving, uniting people through the ages and across generations by means of a truth that transcends time, remaining constant as time passes. The living of this truth is thus a demonstration of its content, and the intelligibility of the content

makes itself manifest precisely in the giving and receiving. Here is a demonstration that is more than just a syllogistic inference. Though they remain distinct, of course, the theoretical and practical dimensions of this most basic truth can never be separated from each other, and this inseparability shows itself both in the content and in the form.

It is therefore proper to speak in the case of tradition of an intrinsic intelligibility, an intelligibility that provides its own evidence—i.e., is “*self-evident*”—and so is compelling essentially *of itself*. It is not compelling, therefore, in an extrinsic sense, in the form, that is, of coercion; nor is it compelling in the manner of deductive reasoning, which, we might say, “forces” us to accept the conclusion once we admit the premises. Instead, it can be received, as we have seen repeatedly, *only* through an act of freedom, though at the same time, as we have been arguing, this freedom is anything but arbitrary: it is, instead, an entry into a comprehensive necessity, which governs both the receiving and the passing on. There is nothing more important than receiving the truth that gives sense to the whole of existence, and this *traditum* is by its very nature a *tradendum*: what we have been freely given, we must freely pass on. Our passing it on, our being generous in the very form of our existence, is the only genuine expression of our having properly received it.

By reflecting on the way tradition happens, we come to the realization of the essence of tradition, and the meaning of the manner gets deepened beyond expectation. What flashes forth here is the splendor of truth. More precisely, it is the light in which all truths show themselves as true. In other words, what is passed on in tradition is not just some truth, but the ground of all truth *tout court*. As Pieper put it, the *tradendum* is the center of the world and the core of existence. If truth does indeed have a ground, it is not surprising that this should be communicated in a mode that is fundamentally different from (even as it includes) teaching, which is the mode proper to the conveying of one truth or another. In the end, both the form and content of tradition is love.

Toward the end of his 1960 essay on tradition, Pieper affirms that “the ultimate, and, when it comes down to it, the sole sufficient reason” to preserve a tradition as true is because it has its origin in a “‘Divine’ utterance—however this may have

been heard.”³⁶ While this is of course the final word to be said on the matter, it is important to see that this is not the *only* word to be said. One might otherwise have the impression that the only thing there is that finally serves to verify a tradition is an essentially unverifiable fact, which we accept on a trust that cannot ultimately be anything but blind. Here we would have only an extrinsic criterion, which means our acceptance of tradition would be nothing but an assent of the will that is purely spontaneous, since there is no given reason to which it responds. This is trust in a purely fideistic form. Such an interpretation would send us back to the notion of “tradition as arbitrary” that we have been criticizing. To the contrary, we have seen that the proper notion of tradition offers more than the possibility of an extrinsic criterion for its verification. There is *also* an intrinsic criterion, namely, its inherent goodness. This criterion does not supplant the transcendent criterion, namely, that tradition has its origin in a divine word, i.e., in God’s self-communication, because the intrinsic criterion depends on this, or even more adequately put, it gives proper expression to this truth. But for that very reason, it shows that the transcendent criterion cannot be *isolated* as a criterion without its being thereby distorted. A generosity without generosity is an empty word, a show of truth without the reality. The trust required in the transmission of truth, in relation to this intrinsic criterion with a transcendent ground, can *never* be simply blind; a wholly blind trust would be a trust in something *other* than the communication of goodness. When Pieper criticizes the justification he once witnessed during a visit to India, in which a father responded to his son’s question of why the family kept a certain practice with nothing more than the vague assertion that this is what has always been done, it is not because Pieper thought some argument ought to have been made.³⁷ Instead, he insisted that one has to give a *living witness* to the truth of tradition (15). Such a witness, we might say, is *part* of the argument, one of its deepest forms. What, after all, *is* a living witness? One offers a living witness when one enacts the practices of a tradition while recollecting its meaning, which is to say

36. Pieper, “Tradition in the Changing World,” 18.

37. As should be clear from the foregoing, this is not to imply that argument is simply *pointless*, but just that the essential matter is displaying the *ground*.

its ground. If beauty is, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has suggested, the “appearance of the ground,”³⁸ we can say that a living witness exhibits a certain beauty in his existence, taken as a whole. The beauty, the compellingness of the intrinsic truth, lies in the goodness that, as the ground of all things, gets refracted in each particular gesture.

In this regard, Pieper’s account of tradition should also make us wary of going to the other extreme, namely, of saying that it ultimately makes no difference whether something is traditional or not; the ultimate question is simply whether it is *true*.³⁹ One sometimes hears the justification of an education founded on classic texts—a Great Books program, for instance—in terms like the following: We ought to read the classic texts, not because they are old, but because they represent some of the best responses given to perennial human questions, the quality of which is attested to by the fact that the books have withstood the test of time. (Taken to an extreme, this justification amounts to the circular argument that we read these books because we read these books.) As Pieper has suggested, if we understand tradition in the concrete sense, which means as a timeless truth communicated in time, and add the point drawn out in our reflection on his account, namely, that this is not just “a” truth, but the founding truth insofar as it concerns the goodness that is the ultimate origin and end of things, then it follows that a reverence for the ancients is not arbitrary or irrational. It does not in principle compromise a devotion to the truth as such. Instead, being closer to the origin in this respect is, in a certain sense, a proximity to the source of truth (though of course this cannot be reduced simply to the formal aspect). As Pieper puts it, “The essential element in this concept is closeness to the origin, the beginning, the early, the dawn, the start” (25). The origin is not something one invents, but something one receives, and thus *being handed down* is its proper form. To put the matter somewhat

38. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Truth of the World*, vol. 1, *Theo-Logic* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 221–25.

39. Pieper refers to Pascal in this regard, who says, “No matter what weight we assign to antiquity, truth must always be the prime consideration, however recently it may have been discovered” (6). While this is essentially true, we have seen that the claim requires some qualification.

provocatively, we might say that the more *genuinely* traditional a notion is, the truer it is. Truth and tradition reveal themselves to be correlative concepts.

Josef Pieper is himself an exemplary transmitter of tradition, first in the love he invariably displays in his work for the “wisdom of the ancients,” but also in the theoretical account he has given of tradition, an account that is philosophical without being in the least rationalistic. He explains tradition without “demythologizing” it. In line with what emerged in our reflections, we might say that his explanation lies not only in the specific claims he makes but also in the mode of being that comes to expression in and through his writing, the “spirit” of his thought. If one were to choose a word to characterize Pieper’s thinking, a good candidate would be “joy,” or perhaps even more precisely, “celebration.” It is a spirit that corresponds beautifully to the reception, through the tradition, of the good, a reception that is always at the same time a further communication. His love for the tradition gives his thinking a childlike energy, and one suspects that the ineradicable “naiveté” that this stance necessarily implies is one of the reasons he has often been dismissed as a “popular philosopher,” and has rarely been taken seriously inside the academy. But a whole army of “professional academics” will do little to help us, as a culture, to recollect the “love at the heart of things.”⁴⁰ Indeed, with their all-too-heavy boots, they are more likely to stamp it out once and for all. If this love is, as we have suggested, the *ground* of truth upon which genuine thinking takes its stand, then the academy itself depends on the living tradition that Pieper conveys and calls us to keep alive.^{*41} □

D. C. SCHINDLER is associate professor of metaphysics and anthropology at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America.

40. Stephan Oster has an essay on the philosophy of Ferdinand Ulrich (who is himself an admirer of Josef Pieper), which is entitled “Thinking Love at the Heart of Things: The Metaphysics of Being as Love in the Thought of Ferdinand Ulrich,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 660–700. This is a phrase that Pieper would have affirmed with enthusiasm.

* A version of this essay was originally written to be included as a chapter in a forthcoming Festschrift honoring the work of Fr. Joseph Fessio, edited by Nicholas J. Healy Jr. and Matthew Levering.