TRADITION AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

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Over the last twenty years there has been an attack, from various quarters, on what might be called the Cartesian project: the attempt to provide an indubitable, self-justifying, foundation for knowledge. This has gone hand in hand with a critique of the universalistic pretensions of 'pure reason', a central part of the Enlightenment project. Indeed, the one is a corollary of the other.

This anti-foundationalist and anti-universalistic critique has been developed within very different perspectives: for example, Wittgenstein's later philosophy with its central idea of 'forms of life' as the contextual determinant of meaning; Saussurean linguistics and the various forms of semiological theory (Barthes et al.) which see language as the primary model for thought; Foucault's concept of the thought and power structures, which he calls 'epistemes', determine what is to count as 'truth' in any area of discourse; Kuhn's thesis that scientific knowledge is governed by 'paradigms' sanctioned by the scientific community in various epochs, and that its development is not evolutionary and cumulative but 'revolutionary'; Rorty's radical conventionalism and pragmatism; Derrida's deconstruction project (perhaps the most dramatic and far-reaching form of anti-foundationalism) and his critique of the 'totalising' pretensions of metaphysics; the sociology of science movement (if indeed it can be called a 'movement') — Latour, Woolgar, Knoor-Cetina, Bloor, Mulkay, Collins et al. — with its general view that scientific knowledge is socio-culturally 'constructed'; one might also mention the anti-foundationalist movement (Stanley Fish et al.) in contemporary literary theory, or again the anti-positivist 'interpretivist' tendency (Ronald Dworkin et al.) in contemporary jurisprudence.

I do not think that it is helpful to attempt to see these various tendencies as part of a general coherent 'movement'. However, there are affinities between them. Let me, to show this, take two or three examples at random. In an essay entitled 'Philosophers and Human Understanding' Hilary Putnam argues that without public norms shared by a group and constituting a 'form of life', language and even thought itself would be impossible.

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Similarly within science "the judgment that special relativity and quantum electro-dynamics are the most successful physical theories we have is one which is made by authorities whom the society has appointed and whose authority is recognised by a host of practices and ceremonies, and in that sense institutionalised". Again, with regard to the foundations of ethics, Bernard Williams, criticising Kant's foundationalist and universalistic view of morality, notes that

"Hegel admirably criticised the 'abstract' Kantian morality and contrasted it with the notion of Sittlichkeit, a concretely determined ethical existence that was expressed in the local folkways, a form of life that made particular sense to the people living in it. The conception inevitably raises the question of how local the view of those folkways can properly remain, and whether they cannot be criticised, ranked, or transcended . . . But the Hegelian problem is the right problem at least to this extent: it asks how a concretely experienced form of life can be extended, rather than considering how a universal program is to be applied".2

Again, Clifford Geertz argues that the 'local knowledge' which we recognise in so-called 'primitive' societies as being culturally grounded, can be extended to the belief systems of the anthropological observers themselves. This makes any kind of transcultural or universalistic knowledge problematic, though Geertz resists the idea that this leads to any kind of pernicious relativism.3 Finally, in the preface to his recent book Doing What Comes Naturally, the US literary theorist, Stanley Fish, says that the title is intended to refer

"to the unreflective actions that follow from being embedded in a context of practice. This kind of action — and in my argument there is no other — is anything but natural in the sense of proceeding independently of historical and social foundations; but once those foundations are in place (and they always are), what you think to do will not be calculated in relation to a higher law or an overarching theory but will issue from you as naturally as breathing. In the words of John Milton, 'from a sincere heart' — that is, a heart

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3 Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology (New York 1983).
embedded in a structure of conviction — 'unimpos'd expressions' will come 'unbidden into the outward gesture''.

The idea that the quest for any kind of Cartesian foundation for knowledge is an illusion, and the recognition of 'local knowledge' of various kinds, have of course their own problems. However, I believe that we can get some illumination here from the notion of tradition (suitably refined and enlarged). The notion of tradition has always been an integral part of religious thought and also, of course, of political thought, but it has had a relatively minor role in Western philosophical thought, at least until recently.

To begin in a simple and obvious way, it is worthwhile looking at the role of tradition in Christian theology. I do not intend to engage in a detailed and technical discussion of the Christian idea of tradition: all I wish to do is to show its role in relation to scripture, namely that the scriptural canon was (and in a sense, is continually being) established by tradition, and further that the meaning of scripture is interpreted within the context of tradition. In other words, scripture is in a very real sense 'constructed' within the lived experience of the Christian community and its general shape and form continually refined and determined within the same context. Scripture does not, and cannot, establish its own credentials or its own canonicity, and it does not bear its meaning upon its face. If fundamentalism is defined as the claim that scripture does display its meaning self-evidently and indubitable, without the need for any kind of mediating interpretation and without the need for any kind of contextualisation, then the notion of tradition is profoundly anti-fundamentalist. Scripture is not, and cannot be, a kind of Cartesian 'foundation', something which is self-evident and self-guaranteeing and absolutely indubitable, unmediated by interpretation. But neither can any interpretive body — for example, the teaching authority or magisterium in Catholic theology — claim the same Cartesian prerogatives. For seventeenth century Catholic apologists the need for tradition meant that 'sola scriptura' was an impossibility: that meant in turn that the interpretive and teaching authority of the Church was needed, and that lead to the Catholic Church, or

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5 Two exceptions are Michael Polanyi and Alasdair MacIntyre. See the latter's After Virtue (Notre Dame, Indiana 1981), ch.15, 'The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition'.
a powerful tendency within the Church, claiming that the teaching authority of the pope was, under certain conditions, 'infallible' and not subject to any kind of further interpretation or to any kind of contextualisation. Paradoxically, more was claimed for the teaching authority of the Church than was claimed for scripture, the word of God, itself. In other words, after escaping scriptural fundamentalism, this tendency within the Catholic church issued in a kind of institutional fundamentalism. This unfortunate and deviant tendency culminated in an attempt to define papal infallibility in a decontextualised way at the First Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council, however, showed that the infallibility of the pope could not be divorced from the infallibility of the whole Church and that this latter involved tradition and the lived experience of the Church as a whole, pope, bishops, clergy, laity. As a statement of the Dutch bishops in 1960 put it: the Church is essentially a community, and the growth of doctrine and of the life of faith within the Church is a work of the whole community. Various ideas, influences, attitudes form within the Christian community and

"by a continual process of confrontation and purification, in which all the faithful play their part — sacramental practices, popular devotions, ecclesiastical movements, theological research, the intellectual talents of such and such a people, different outlooks between the laity and the clergy — all these factors contribute to the life of faith. In this gradual fermentation, foreign elements are gradually eliminated and the theological formulation finds an adequate expression of what was always in the Church implicitly. We are led then to recognise a collective conception formed by the whole community of faith, and this conception is infallible, not only in principle but also in fact. 'The faith of the Universal Church . . . cannot be deceived', says St Thomas, formulating the opinion of the whole tradition of faith".

The Cartesian spirit, then, and the fundamentalist spirit (both scriptural and institutional) converge: both seek a foundation which will be self-evident and self-guaranteeing without the need for any kind of mediation and without reference to the context of lived experience. Again, both rely upon the threat of scepticism and relativism to cajole us into a acquiescence. Either the self-

6 I have discussed these issues in detail in the essay 'Aspects of Infallibility' in Church, State and Conscience (Brisbane 1970).
7 Cited in Church, State and Conscience, p.95.
evident and self-justifying cogito or scepticism: either a self-evident and self-guaranteeing scripture or teaching and interpretive authority, or religious anarchism and relativism.

In parenthesis, one finds the same fundamentalist and foundationalist strategy in Hobbes' political theory where the self-guaranteeing 'sovereign' is seen as the one sure foundation on which the political 'Commonwealth' rests. By definition, Hobbes argues, the sovereign cannot be a party to the social contract that binds the members of society. Hobbes sees the paradoxical consequences of this since the sovereign who is set up to enforce the social contract cannot himself be a party to the contract. We escape one kind of absolute power through the social contract, but then we end up with absolute power in the person of the sovereign! Hobbes relies upon the threat of political and social anarchy to persuade us that his doctrine of sovereignty has to be accepted. Either accept the sovereign or be faced with political anarchy.

I have so far used the notion of tradition in a rather wide sense to mean the human context, 'a concretely experienced form of life', within which various forms of thought arise and within which they are endowed with 'canonicity' and their meaning refined and interpreted. In this sense, tradition is dynamic and creative and future-oriented, and not static or conservative or backwards-looking. But here we must confront the spectre of relativism. As we saw before, foundationalism presents us with an either/or. Either a self-evident and self-justifying, presuppositionless, foundation of knowledge, a foundation which would ensure its trans-cultural universality, or some kind of Hegelian Sittlichkeit which lands us in some form of epistemological relativism. As Stanley Fish puts it:

"Anti-foundationalism teaches that questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity, and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extracontextual, ahistorical, nonsituational reality, or rule, or law, or value; rather, anti-foundationalism asserts, all of these matters are intelligible and debatable only within the precincts of the contexts or situations or paradigms or communities that give them their local and changeable shape . . . The resistance . . . of foundationalism usually takes the form of a counterattack in which the supposedly disastrous consequences of anti-foundationalism are paraded as a reason for rejecting it. These consequences are usually
said to extend to the loss of everything necessary to rational enquiry and successful communication”.

It is, I think helpful to approach this problem in an oblique way by looking at its ethical version. That ethical version comes up in a particularly interesting way in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* and I would like to focus upon Aristotle’s position. After many warnings that we must not expect ethics to have any kind of strictly necessary and universal basis, so that any attempt to provide — à la Kant — a metaphysical ground for ethics is expressly repudiated, Aristotle first presents us with a picture of a person with certain central moral and intellectual 'excellences' or virtues. These are the excellences of character which we recognise that any person should have since they show human beings at their best and most human and most ‘fine and noble’. Aristotle does not claim that these excellences are derivable from a consideration of 'human nature' (although he flirts with the Platonic idea that we can discover the 'function' (ergon) of human beings and that what is good for humans is derivable from this; again, he also refers to 'invariant' (and presumably universal) ethical prescriptions over and above more local and variable prescriptions. They are simply the excellences recognised by the moral tradition of a society over a long time of refinement and experience.

Second, Aristotle implies that the only ethical criterion we have is the *phronimos* — the person of practical wisdom equipped with the central excellences of character and mind and experienced in deliberating and deciding what the practice and expression of courage, temperance, liberality, justice etc. involve in particular circumstances here and now. For Kant, of course, this is viciously circular since to know that the *phronimos* is an ethical model for us we must already be in possession of ethical criteria by reference to which we judge him or her to be a worthy ethical model. If God, or even the Holy One, Jesus Christ, cannot be an ethical criterion (as Kant indeed says they cannot) then neither can Aristotle's *phronimos*. Aristotle, however, insists that this is the only guide we have. We have to make an act of basic trust and accept him or her as a model.

It is clear that Aristotle sees the only foundation for ethics not in the universe of rational agents but in the local moral community and its tradition, but it is also clear that Aristotle does not accept that this lands his position in relativism.

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In a remarkable study of Aristotle's ethics Martha Nussbaum shows how important what I have called tradition is to Aristotle's conception of the moral life:

"... as Aristotle stresses in Politics II, an anthropocentric ethics will in one sense need to rely on its standing rules more and not less firmly than a Platonic conception. For if there is no divine law or eternal foregrounded episteme backing ethical judgment — if, as he alleges, human justice is a historically grounded thing that exists only in the human world and if, in consequence, 'the law has no power towards obedience but that of habit', frequent changes in law may conduce to a climate of moral rootlessness. This is not a relativistic claim — for Aristotle can believe compatibly with this, as he plainly does, that there is a single best human way of life. He simply warns us that at no point, in working towards better laws, will we replace the merely human with something harder and more authoritative than the human, something with an extra-human 'power towards obedience'. And if this is so, knowing that humans heed merely human authority best in conditions of stability or slow change, we should not quickly alter our rules, even to improve them."\(^9\)

Tradition is here being used in the conservative sense, but, as Nussbaum shows, it also has a deeper sense:

"... Aristotelian practical wisdom is not a type of rootless situational perception that rejects all guidance from ongoing commitments and values. The person of practical wisdom is a person of good character, that is to say, a person who has internalised through early training certain ethical values and a certain conception of the good human life as the more or less harmonious pursuit of these ... he will derive from this internalised conception of value ongoing guidelines for action, pointers as to what to look for in a particular situation. If there were no such guidelines and no sense of being bound to a character, if the 'eye of the soul' saw each situation as simply new and non-repeatable, the perceptions of practical wisdom would begin to look arbitrary and empty. Aristotle insists that a person's character and value commitments are what that person is in and of himself; personal continuity requires a high

degree, at least, of continuity in the general nature of these commitments".

Nussbaum goes on to say that this personal moral 'tradition', as we may call it, is situated within a larger moral tradition and she makes the point that it "is not immune to revision even at the highest level; and this revision may come from the perceptions embodied in new experience".10

In his book After Virtue, Alastair MacIntyre has some interesting points to make which chime in with the views of Nussbaum's Aristotle. Tradition, he suggests, is a web of 'stories' which define social roles and moral and intellectual excellences and open up possibilities of what J.S. Mill calls 'experiments in living'. As he puts it:

"I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters — roles into which we have been drafted — and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or misleam both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things. Vico was right and so was Joyce. And so too of course is that moral tradition from heroic society to its medieval heirs according to which the telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues".11

10 Ibid., p.306.
11 After Virtue, p.201.
MacIntyre goes on to suggest that the problem of personal identity is solvable only by reference to a kind of personal history or tradition which makes possible 'the unity of a character': "The self inhabits a character whose unity is given as the unity of a character". 12 Again, he emphasises that tradition can embody conflict.

"We are apt", he says, "to be misled . . . by the ideological uses to which the concept of a tradition has been put by conservative political theorists. Characteristically such theorists have followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. Both contrasts obfuscate. For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic. Moreover when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose. So when an institution — a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital — is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will partly, but in a centrally important way, be constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is. Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead". 13

MacIntyre concludes by saying: "A living tradition . . . is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition". 14

It is obvious that the concept of tradition which emerges from this discussion is an enlarged and enriched one. It is also one which makes the concept of tradition central to any knowledge system. What Aristotle says about ethical knowledge, namely that it is historically and humanly grounded and that, as Nussbaum says, it is vain to hope that we will "replace the merely human with something harder and more authoritative than the

13 Ibid., p.206.
14 Ibid., p.207.
human, something with an extra-human 'power towards obedience'"— is also true, pari passu, of knowledge as a whole (although Aristotle himself clearly thought that in the realm of theoretical reason, as distinct from practical reason, it was possible to get something harder and more authoritative than the human). Again, just as one can acknowledge tradition as a non-foundationalist and non-universalistic basis for ethical thought without falling into ethical relativism, so also one can use the concept of tradition in other areas of knowledge without necessarily falling into epistemological scepticism or relativism.

We can, perhaps, get a clearer view of these issues by looking at two familiar phenomena; first, language and second, the law. A language is clearly a human and historical and cultural construct and it is useless (pace Heidegger's playful attempt to claim that German was the metaphysical language!) to attempt to impose some kind of foundational necessity and universality upon a natural language. But that does not mean that linguistic systems are wholly contingent and wholly relativistic so that they are incommensurable and no translation is possible between them. In other words, the recognition that English and Basque are different linguistic systems within two very different socio-cultural contexts does not mean that we cannot say that a sentence in English 'means the same as' a sentence in Basque. Although there are limits to translation, it is always possible: indeed, translatability is part and parcel of what we mean by language. We realise that translation does not imply that there is some kind of supra-linguistic Archimedean point or God-like vantage point which enables us to see that a linguistic sign in English means the same as linguistic signs in Basque. There is only language (in all its human and cultural contingency) and any translation has to be done within the language. There is no 'language of the Gods'! We realise from this that any particular language is not a 'prison house' since, as I have said, translation between linguistic systems or traditions is always possible. A further point: any language — any linguistic tradition — is open-ended and 'generative', i.e. it undergoes ceaseless modification and change (sometimes quite radical, as shown by the development of creole languages) and it allows the possibility of new and unpredictable meanings being generated within it. (There are, of course, continual attempts to foundationalise language by trying to formalise it and to purify 'ordinary language' of its supposed confusion and ambiguity and 'corruptions'. But the formalist's dream of inventing a perfect language which would bear its meaning clearly and unambiguously upon its face, i.e. where
there was a perfect coincidence between signifier and signified, is simply another form of what I am referred to as fundamentalism.

To sum up: language is clearly non-foundationist in the Cartesian sense since it is culturally constructed and cannot claim any kind of necessity or universality. (We do not determine the meaning of any linguistic sign by consulting the universe of rational agents.) At the same time we get along quite happily with it and do not fall into semiological anarchism or relativism. There are difficulties, of course, but we nevertheless cope with the confusion and ambiguity of language and with the difficulties of language.

The law also offers a useful analogy since a legal system is a tradition which gives meaning to a set of practices by defining the legal 'canon' and specifying rules of interpretation. Like language, a legal tradition is culturally constructed and open-ended and 'generative' and dynamic. Again, like language it is subject continually to foundationalising attempts (one thinks, for example, of the attempts by legal conservatives in the US to make the Constitution the basic foundation of the law, or the attempts to base the law directly upon a moral consensus about a set of 'core values'). The analogy with legal systems also brings out to what a degree power and 'politics' play a role in the elaboration of a tradition. Foucault has reminded us that power and knowledge are two sides of the same coin in the establishment of a socio-cultural paradigm or of the complex structures he calls 'epistemes'. At any one time there are competing paradigms and epistemes and that one is successful and others not is the result of 'political' negotiation.

Ronald Dworkin, in a recent work entitled *Law's Empire* speaks of legal reasoning as "an exercise in constructive interpretation". Our law, he says,

"consists in the best justification of our legal practices as a whole; . . . it consists in the narrative story that makes of these practices the best they can be. The distinctive structures and constraints of legal argument emerge, on this view, only when we identify and distinguish the diverse and often competitive dimensions of political value, the different strands woven together in the complex judgement that one interpretation makes law's story better on the whole, all things considered, than any other can".
Dworkin strongly defends his view against the sceptical argument that there is no way of deciding which interpretation is the better.

"I have argued", he says, "for many years against the positivist's claim that there cannot be 'right' answers to controversial legal questions, but only 'different' answers: I have insisted that in most hard cases there are right answers to be hunted by reason and imagination. Some critics have thought I meant that in these cases one answer could be proved right to the satisfaction of everyone, even though I insisted from the start that this is not what I meant, that the question whether we can have a reason to think an answer right is different from the question whether it can be demonstrated to be right".15

Dworkin goes on to say that the sceptical challenge, (there are no right answers to legal questions), has a powerful theoretical hold on lawyers, although in practice they proceed in the interpretive and 'traditional' way he describes. Thus they demand

"not a case they can accept or oppose but a thundering knock-down metaphysical demonstration no one can resist who has the wit to understand. And when we see that no argument of that power is in prospect, they grumble that jurisprudence is subjective only. Then, finally, they return to their knitting — making, accepting, resisting, rejecting arguments in the normal way, consulting, revising, deploying convictions pertinent to deciding which of competing accounts of legal practice provides the best interpretation of that practice."16

In a robust series of exchange with Dworkin, Stanley Fish claims that in his search for 'the best' interpretation of the law, Dworkin shows himself to be a closet foundationalist. (Fish's responses to Dworkin, embodied in three articles, are entitled respectively 'Wrong', 'Wrong Again' and 'Still Wrong After All These Years'!) According to Fish, Dworkin claims to be rejecting positivism or legal fundamentalism and to accept the necessity of what we have been calling legal 'tradition'. But afrighted by the spectre of relativism

16 Ibid., pp.85-6.
which raises the fear that all interpretations of the law are on the same level so that there is no way of saying which is 'the best', he then tries to find a foundation in legal tradition. If only we look hard enough we will find that the structure of the tradition is such that one interpretation is privileged and fits that structure 'better' than others. According to Fish, 'interpretive communities' develop conventions about which interpretations are good and bad and there is no kind of appeal to a higher court. You will only see this as relativism if you subscribe to the foundationalist's either/or: either foundationalism or scepticism. As Fish says: "... this follows only if anti-foundationalism is an argument for unbridled subjectivity, for the absence of constraints on the individual; whereas, in fact, it is an argument for the situated subject, for the individual who is always constrained by the local or community standards and criteria of which his judgment is an extension".

As said before, the standard objection made by foundationalists and fundamentalists against tradition is precisely that it leads to scepticism and subjectivism. For them, the only alternatives are Cartesian foundationalism on the one hand and scepticism on the other. From this point of view, scepticism is disappointed foundationalism. But once we get free of this either/or we can see more clearly that there is a space for a concept of tradition which escapes scepticism and relativism. Wittgenstein's advice: 'Don't think but look!' is especially apposite here. Look to see how tradition works in religion, in morality, in language, in the law, in literature, etc.

I have remarked several times that the absolutising or foundationalist tendency is always at work and that tradition can easily be made into a 'foundation', i.e. an absolute point of reference in relation to which morality or religion or political life or literature can be, to use Derrida's word, 'totalised', i.e. delimited or defined as a whole. Tradition must always be sensitive to this and must be suspicious of any tendency to make it into a foundation in the Burkean sense. In his recent magisterial work on Derrida, Kevin Hart argues that Derrida's intention is to prevent this

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17 See the essays in Fish, *op.cit.*, 'Working on the Chain Gang: Interpretation in Law and Literature'; 'Wrong Again'; 'Still Wrong after All These Years'.
absolutising and totalising, or foundationalist, tendency in philosophy by a process akin to that of negative theology vis-à-vis religious faith. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob — i.e., the God of lived religious faith — is not an absolutising and totalising point of reference — the ultimate foundation, the ground of being — as is the God of the philosophers. Deconstruction brings about the death of the metaphysical God of the philosophers, but it does not touch the God of lived faith, the God that is encountered in the life of faith. In a sense, one could say that we need a similar deconstructive program within tradition.20

We began with a simplistic notion of tradition but now that we have seen how the concept of tradition may be extended and refined by analysing how it operates in the various spheres of meaning we have been considering, we can also recognise how rich a concept it is. Tradition is not static or conservative but dynamic and creative; tradition is, like language, open-textured and generative; it can embody conflict within its continuity; tradition embodies both knowledge and power and has, inevitably, a 'political' aspect; tradition can be self-critical and self-reforming; indeed it must have a built-in self-critical, 'deconstructive' function if it is to escape being surreptitiously turned into a Cartesian 'foundation', or if it is to escape the kind of scepticism that derives from disappointed foundationalism.

Let me conclude by signalling a number of objections that might be made about this revised and expanded concept of tradition.

First, it might be said that the concept of tradition has now become so inflated and compendious that it is very difficult to see what is not part of it since it includes socio-cultural structures and contexts, myths, paradigms, social and legal and literary conventions or 'grammars', the historical experiences of communities and the social and other practices they have evolved, interpretive practices, even conflicts within the tradition about what is involved in that tradition or even (as between foundationalists and anti-foundationalists) over the very concept of tradition itself. We must not, heeding Stanly Fish's warnings, seek for a higher-order principle which will enable us to discern infallibly what is essential to a tradition and what is not,

20 Hart notes that "we should not be too quick to designate the philosophical concept of God and thereby uncritically align ourselves with Pascal. For (the) 'vocabulary of presence'... is not wholly distinct from that of Biblical theology". (p.32).
but we need at least to be able to recognise the broad shape of the tradition and that means that we can recognise, however vaguely, what does not belong to it.

A connected question is whether we can speak of a debased or corrupt or deviant tradition or strand within a tradition. Derrida, we may remember, argues that the Western philosophical tradition has been systematically distorted by 'logocentrism' or foundationalism. But how is he able to make this claim unless he allows a critical function to human reason which transcends its local context? How can we, from within the Western philosophical tradition, stand in critical judgment on that tradition? The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School can do this, but that is because they implicitly adopt a foundationalist and universalist concept of reason. If, however, we reject such a concept of reason, how can we give any meaning to the critical function of reason? And if we cannot find a place for critical reason must we say that everything in a tradition is to be accepted just as it is (very much as Wittgenstein said about 'ordinary language' that everything was in place just as it is). And again, if we say that, do we not simply sanctify the status quo and close off any possibilities of change? As many critics have pointed out, Kuhn, one protagonist of local knowledge, finds it difficult to explain why scientific paradigms, and the scientific traditions that sustain them, change.

Once again, there is an illicit foundationalist way of posing these questions, but to pose these questions is not necessarily to opt for foundationalism. One is asking rather whether there is any possibility of a tradition generating from within itself a reflective and critical perspective so as to prevent it falling into what MacIntyre calls 'burkeanism'? In the past, Western anthropologists have spoken of 'traditionalist' societies as being based upon unreflective and uncritical tradition and custom, and they have argued that it was because there was no place for the play of critical reason within such societies that they did not undergo radical change but were essentially conservative. In actual fact, as we know, many so-called traditionalist societies, like the Australian Aboriginal hunter-gatherer communities, had remarkable powers of assimilation and underwent a good deal of change and were not the static and conservative and unreflective societies they were supposed to be. However, even if the concept of traditionalism has frequently been misused, we can pose our question in these terms: can we recognise the centrality of tradition while rejecting 'traditionalism'?
One further remark: speaking from within a tradition and operating according to its practices is different from speaking about the concept of tradition in a reflective way as Derrida and Fish and the other anti-foundationality do in their books. How then can we speak about anti-foundationalist ideas of tradition without adopting a foundationalist and 'totalising' point of view in our meta-discourse? Wittgenstein faced the same problem in the Tractatus: how can we speak about language without going beyond the limits of meaning? Is there a way of doing philosophy and reflecting about tradition by 'assembling reminders' as Wittgenstein says, or by an analogue of 'negative theology' as Derrida suggests, or by 'saving the phainomena' as Nussbaum's Aristotle says, which will not involve some kind of foundationalism.

I mentioned before Bernard Williams' remark that Hegel was right, as against Kant, to give Sittlichkeit a central place in ethics, namely "a concretely determined ethical existence that was expressed in the local folkways, a form of life that made a particular sense to the people, living in it. The conception, Williams continues, "inevitably raises the question of how local the view of those folkways can properly remain, and whether they cannot be criticised, ranked or transcended . . . But the Hegelian problem is the right problem at least to this extent: it asks how a concretely experienced form of life can be extended, rather than considering how a universal program is to be applied".21 In my view, one could say very much the same about the concept of tradition in general. The right way to proceed is not to retreat to some form of Cartesian foundationalism or fundamentalism but to explore how the concept of tradition can be extended to meet the objections I have just raised.

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