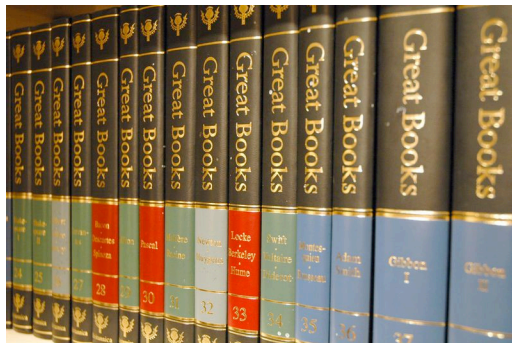


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THE IDEA OF TRADITION IN *GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD*

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Tradition is not one of the Great Ideas in the *Syntopicon*. It is, however, included in the Inventory of Terms, where we find it noted as a subject of discussion in topics belonging to half a dozen of those ideas, and at least implied in topics related to eight or nine more. This does not mean that the word itself always appears in the passage referred to. The discussion is sometimes carried on in the name of “custom,” “convention,” “habit,” or “example.” Nor are such related terms without their differences of meaning. They have, nevertheless, a common connotation, which is the preservation of the past that the idea of tradition necessarily involves, and they may fairly be said to indicate a common concept, as to the definition of which there is no serious dispute in *Great Books of the Western World*, but only some disagreement over the question whether that preservation is a good or a bad thing, considered in all its aspects.

One such aspect appears in the idea that the Past claims some authority in the Present, where it may or may not be regarded with deference. This is taken up in the texts under History 2, which deal with the role of history in education and the guidance of human

conduct; it is considered also, with respect to the intellectual tradition, in passages noted at Progress 6*c*; it figures again, more generally, in writings listed at Time 8*b*, which deal with historical epochs, the ages of man, and the relative character of modernity.

A second aspect of the past as something that extends into the present appears in the form of particular customs or creeds that are handed down in the expectation of obedience or belief. This is discussed in the texts at Custom and Convention 8, dealing with custom in relation to order and progress; it appears also in writings listed under Custom and Convention 2, which have to do with the transmission of customs, and in Law 8, where passages dealing with the historical development of law are noted.

Still a third aspect of the subject, the most interesting one for a reader of the great books, seems to reveal a community of discourse in the accumulation of human knowledge. We find this considered in the chapter on Truth at topic 6, which lists writings that have to do with the progress of human learning; it is of some concern also in the texts at Philosophy 7, which deal with the history of philosophy and the lives of philosophers in relation to their thought; it is a notion basic to the discussion in the texts noted under Memory and Imagination 4*b*, which have to do with what is remembered, through instinct, legend, and tradition, in the life of the group or race.

The idea of a surviving past appears also in writings mentioned in the chapter on Art at topic 12, which are devoted to the history and progress of the arts, and by texts at Poetry 2 and 3, which are concerned with the origins of poetry in myth and legend and the influence on the poet of the poetic tradition. And the passages listed variously at Education 9, Family 7*b*, and Language 3*c* all point to the further fact that some, perhaps all, human arts and institutions are to some extent conservative of the past.

We can divide these many texts, which range beyond the concern of this year's symposium, into two groups. In one group, "tradition" or one of its related terms is used or intended generally and reflects a preoccupation with human development or human character. Such is the case in certain discussions of custom that occur, for example, in the Essays of Montaigne. The same preoccupation appears in William James's account of habit in the *Principles of Psychology*. We see it also in Freud when he speaks of the role of the superego in the unconscious. What is said about "tradition" on these occasions extends to all human orders—everything that men

do, or make, or think—and is applicable perennially, without respect to time or place. Thus Robert M. Hutchins in volume 1 of *Great Books of the Western World* speaks of the tradition of the West as a Great Conversation, recognized by “the common voice of mankind,”¹ which has endured from epoch to epoch. The *Syntopicon* itself is, of course, a monument to this conception, without which it could never have been made.

In the second group of texts, “tradition” or one of its related terms is used with respect to a particular human order or preoccupation, such as art, philosophy, or government, and is often limited to a particular time and place. Hence the application is frequently one in which a custom or tradition is noted as having come or gone, grown stronger or weaker, perhaps even disappeared. In the *Iliad*, Nestor laments the vanished days of his youth when, he says, men were equally accomplished in counsel and the arts of war. Dante speaks of a change that has come about in art, where “Cimabue thought to hold the field in painting, and now Giotto has the cry”² he mentions also a “sweet new style” that has emerged in the poetry of his age.³ Of course there is more than mention in *Don Quixote* about the passing of knight errantry. There is more than mention, too, in Plato’s *Dialogues* of Athenian education, with its literary bent and rote learning, of which the *Dialogues* may be read as a critique, and for which Plato in his Academy substituted the mathematics and speculative inquiry that laid the basis of Western thought. As great a change was later brought about by Saint Augustine in Roman education, of which it may be said that he found it pagan and left it Christian, through the example and influence of his writings. And comparable changes were accomplished still later by Copernicus—first, perhaps, among those whose work has altered the traditional understanding of things—by William Harvey, who revolutionized Galenic medicine, and by Lavoisier, who laid the foundations of modern chemistry.

The role of tradition in a particular human order is judged to be bad by some of these authors, by others is thought to be good. Among the first, those whose concern is with science tend to be most cogent and most critical. In this order, the weight of tradition is usually protested on the ground that it inhibits or prevents the progress of learning. Bacon, for instance—noting “the overmuch credit” that is given to the authority of the ancients, “making them

¹ *GBWW*, Vol. 1, p. xi.

² *GBWW*, Vol. 21, p. 69d.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

dictators, that their words should stand, and not consuls to give advice”—says, “the damage is infinite that the sciences have received thereby, as the principal cause that hath kept them low at a stay without growth or advancement.”⁴ In another passage, speaking of “idols [that] beset the human mind,” he mentions the “many elements and axioms of sciences which have become inveterate by tradition,” and which he includes among what he calls the “idols of the theatre,” because they, like “all the systems of philosophy hitherto received or imagined, [are] so many plays brought out and performed, creating fictitious and theatrical worlds.”⁵ And still later he complains that not experience but “mere reports of experience, traditions as it were of dreams,” are the basis of the still-medieval science that he sees, which must be “built anew” if the mind of man is to be purged of “credulity and accident, and the puerile notions it originally contracted.”⁶

Hobbes is even more severe, condemning deference to the past not only in science but in nearly everything else. “There is nothing so absurd that the old philosophers (as Cicero saith, who was one of them) have not some of them maintained,” he writes. “And I believe that scarce anything can be more absurdly said in natural philosophy than what now is called Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*; nor more repugnant to government than much of what he saith in his *Politics*; nor more ignorantly than a great part of his *Ethics*.”⁷ Pascal, in his “Preface” to the *Treatise on the Vacuum*—an important text, about which there will be occasion to say more later on—is unwilling to condemn ancient authority in the same broad way, but he too notes the bad effect it has had in what we would now call physics, where, accepting the ancient dictum that nature abhors a vacuum, men had not until his time troubled to find out Whether it was, in nature, actually so.⁸ Galileo’s account of his experiment with falling bodies in effect makes the same point, but it is not accompanied by any general remarks about the pernicious effects of traditional ways of thought.⁹ We find such remarks, however, in La-voisier, who in establishing that water is a compound and not a

⁴ *GBWW*, Vol. 30, p. 14c-d.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 110.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁷ *GBWW*, Vol. 23, pp. 268-69.

⁸ *GBWW*, Vol. 33, p. 358.

⁹ *GBWW*, Vol. 28, pp. 157 if.

simple substance observes:

It is very extraordinary that this fact should have hitherto been overlooked by natural philosophers and chemists: indeed, it strongly proves that, in chemistry as in moral philosophy, it is extremely difficult to overcome prejudices imbibed in early education and to search for truth in any other road than the one we have been accustomed to follow.¹⁰

And to this may be added the passage, of more extended application, that occurs in the second chapter of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, where Gibbon notes the intellectual stagnation that had overtaken the Empire in the age of the Antonines, when, he says,

the authority of Plato and Aristotle, of Zeno and Epicurus, still reigned in the schools; and their systems, transmitted with blind deference from one generation of disciples to another, precluded every generous attempt to exercise the powers, or enlarge the limits, of the human mind.¹¹

As the focus of texts that are critical of tradition is chiefly on science, though it is not confined to that (Gibbon goes on to observe that in the same period of the Empire “the beauties of the [ancient] poets and orators, instead of kindling a fire like their own, inspired only cold and servile imitations: or if any ventured to deviate from those models, they deviated at the same time from good sense and propriety”¹²), so the focus of texts that approve the role of tradition tends to be on politics, morals, and religion, though authors can be found who judge that the weight of the past is a bad thing even in those orders. (“Prudence,” said Jefferson, “... will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes,”¹³ but the authors of *The Federalist* ask, “Is it not the glory of the people of America, that, whilst they have paid a decent regard to the opinions of former times and other nations, they have not suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names, to overrule the suggestions of their own good sense, the knowledge of their own situation, and the lessons of their own

¹⁰ *GBWW*, Vol. 45, p. 33.

¹¹ *GBWW*, Vol. 40, pp. 23-24.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³ *GBWW*, Vol. 43, p. 1.

experience?”¹⁴) As the ground for objecting to the role of tradition in science is chiefly that it prevents or inhibits progress, so the ground for supporting it in politics, morals, and religion is that it prevents or limits change. Montesquieu, for example, says that a democracy ought to have “a permanent body . . . to serve as a rule and pattern of manners; a senate, to which years, virtue, gravity, and eminent services procure admittance,” which will “steadily adhere to the ancient institutions, and mind that the people and the magistrates never swerve from them.”¹⁵ And as the texts that oppose the role of tradition in science and certain other orders do so from the conviction, expressed or implied, that the past is inferior to the present, so the defenders of tradition do so from a conviction that at least in some orders the reverse is true. Again, it is Montesquieu who says,

*The preservation of the ancient customs is a very considerable point in respect to manners. Since a corrupt people seldom perform any memorable actions, seldom establish societies, build cities, or enact laws; on the contrary, since most institutions are derived from people whose manners are plain and simple, to keep up the ancient customs is the way to preserve the original purity of morals.*¹⁶

A regard for “ancient institutions” is as much needed when “by some revolution the state has happened to assume a new form” as in other circumstances, Montesquieu adds. For “even those who have been the instruments of the revolution were desirous it should be relished, which is difficult to compass without good Laws.”¹⁷

Authors who disapprove of tradition because of its effect on the progress of some human order such as science usually do so in the name of reason, which they oppose to it. This still allows tradition some room. Gibbon, observing how the Romans continued to worship the Greek gods as long as the Empire prospered, without any real belief that there was a connection between their fortunes and their faith, justifies such practice on the excuse—ironically intended, as to be sure it is—that “where reason cannot instruct, custom may be permitted to guide.” Montaigne, however, finds reason

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁵ *GBWW*, Vol. 38, p. 22a.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

in custom, insisting that there is “no so absurd or ridiculous fancy can enter into human imagination, that does not meet with some example of public practice, and that, consequently, our reason does not ground and back up.”¹⁸ What we regard as reasonable in this world is merely what we are accustomed to, he argues,

and the common fancies that we find in repute everywhere about us, and infused into our minds with the seed of our fathers, appear to be the most universal and genuine: from whence it comes to pass, that whatever is off the hinges of custom, is believed to be also off the hinges of reason; how unreasonably for the most part, God knows.

Even “the laws of conscience, which we pretend to be derived from nature, proceed from custom,” Montaigne says, so that “everyone, having an inward veneration for the opinions and manners approved and received amongst his own people, cannot, without very great reluctance, depart from them, nor apply himself to them without applause.”¹⁹ Such a doctrine, which denies that one custom is more reasonable than another, denies equally, of course, that reason can refute them. It is not therefore a surprise to find Montaigne saying, with respect to the political order, that men ought never to attempt to change their form of government so as to conform to some idea of what the best government is. Whatever plan is then conceived will be inferior in Montaigne’s view to the wisdom embodied by time and trial in the government that exists, however bad that government is from an ideal point of view. “Not according to opinion,” he insists, “but in truth and reality, the best and most excellent government for every nation is that under which it is maintained: its form and essential convenience depend upon custom.” If we are displeased with our condition, yet we shall seek to alter it at our peril, for “nothing presses so hard upon a state as innovation: change only gives form to injustice and tyranny.”²⁰

Pascal disagrees with part of this. “Montaigne is wrong,” he says, in offering such a rationale for custom. “Custom should be followed only because it is custom, and not because it is reasonable or just.”²¹ As we have seen, that for Pascal does not mean in science,

¹⁸ *GBWW*, Vol. 25, p. 44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

²¹ *GBWW*, Vol. 33, p. 230.

where reason must rule and where men cannot accept any authority that is prejudicial to it. Customary beliefs, the authority of books, ancient teachings—these things belong in Pascal’s view rather to history, to languages, and above all to religion, or more precisely to theology. For he says,

*it is in theology that authority has its chief weight because there it is inseparable from truth, which we know only through it; so that to give absolute certainty to things which reason can grasp, it is sufficient to point them out in Holy Scripture (as, to show the uncertainty of the most probable things, we need only point out that they are not included there); because the principles of theology are above nature and reason, and the mind of man, too feeble to reach them by its own efforts, can arrive at this highest knowledge only if carried there by an all-powerful and supernatural force.*²²

Because the tenor of these remarks is so very different from that with which Gibbon justifies the religion of Rome in the age of the Antonines, we may overlook the fact that they say the same thing. Of course Gibbon means that in matters that lie beyond the scope of reason, since no belief can be either true or false, any belief will do, or none; whereas for Pascal there is an order of things that includes a transcendent truth that reason cannot reach, that only faith can find. For both men, however, it is not in the order of reason and nature, but only in what lies beyond or above it, that what they call variously custom, tradition, opinion, or authority, in these and other texts, has its proper place.

The texts we have considered in which “tradition” or one of its related terms is said to be either a good or a bad thing in a particular human order are for the most part qualified, at least by implication, as expressions of the goodness or badness of “tradition” in general. Authors who approve or disapprove of custom or traditional authority in one order may accept or reject it in another, or in all others. Pascal, as we have seen, regards such authority as wrong in science but not in religion. Montaigne, who will not allow that any established government—that is, one sanctioned by custom—should be overthrown, even where the strongest reasons appear to exist for doing so, is eloquent on the folly of those who in dress or manners, “blinded and imposed upon by the authority of present usage,” condemn any fashion but the current one, forgetting how

²² Ibid., p. 355.

often such things change.²³ And Bacon, who protests the authority of ancient learning in the experimental sciences, by no means rejects the means by which such learning survives. Indeed, he writes, “knowledge, whether it descend from divine inspiration, or spring from human sense, would soon perish and vanish to oblivion, if it were not preserved in books, traditions, conferences, and places appointed, as universities, colleges, and schools.”²⁴

There are, to be sure, a number of texts in which such qualifications do not appear, which take what may be called a comprehensive view of the subject. In some of them the role of “tradition” is regarded as beneficial in human character and circumstances generally, or in respect of some human order that is fundamental to such character and circumstances. These texts indicate that tradition, or custom, or whatever seems to convey the past into the present with authority, is an indispensable ingredient of human life considered as a whole, and therefore cannot or should not be denied.

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²³ *GBWW*, Vol. 25, p. 143.

²⁴ *GBWW*, Vol. 30, p. 29.