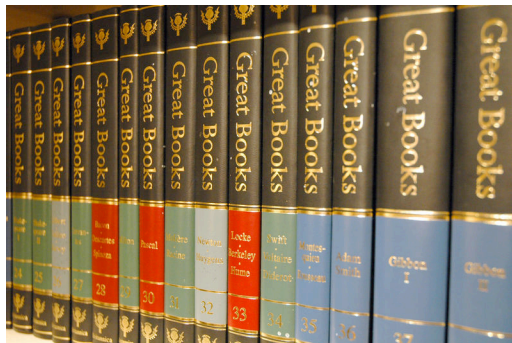


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THE IDEA OF TRADITION IN *GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD*

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One of these texts is in the *Laws* of Plato, who speaks in terms of custom and habit as well as of tradition itself. Elsewhere in that long dialogue, Plato asserts the importance of “unwritten customs, and what are termed the laws of our ancestors,” which he calls “the bonds of the whole state”;¹ he insists also upon the importance of religious traditions, “the least part of [which] ought not to be disturbed by the legislator”;² he argues, as in *The Republic*, that no changes should ever be allowed in music and the forms of dance when they are expressive, as they ought always to be, of virtue;³ and so forth. But in one particular passage he goes farther and maintains that

any change whatever except from evil is the most dangerous of

¹ *GBWW*, Vol. 7, p. 716.

² *Ibid.*, p. 692.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 654.

all things; this is true in the case of the seasons and of the winds, in the management of our bodies and the habits of our minds—true of all things except, as I said before, of the bad. He who looks at the constitution of individuals accustomed to eat any sort of meat, or drink any drink, or to do any work which they can get, may see that they are first disordered by them, but afterwards, as time goes on, their bodies grow adapted to them, and they learn to know and like variety, and have good health and enjoyment of life; and if ever afterwards they are confined again to a superior diet, at first they are troubled with disorders, and with difficulty become habituated to their new food. A similar principle we may imagine to hold good about the minds of men and the natures of their souls. For when they have been brought up in certain laws, which by some Divine Providence have remained unchanged during long ages, so that no one has any memory or tradition of their being otherwise than they are, then everyone is afraid and ashamed to change that which is established.

Therefore, Plato says, “the legislator must somehow find a way of implanting this reverence for antiquity,” lest there be “frequent changes in the praise and censure of manners,” which constitute “the greatest of evils.”⁴

A second text in which “tradition” or one of its related terms is held to be good in a general sense is the famous passage in *The Principles of Psychology* where William James discourses on the subject of habit, which he calls “the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent.” The force of habit is such that no man can escape its effects, James asserts. And “on the whole,” he adds, “it is best” that we should not escape. “It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again.”⁵

Still a third text of the sort we are discussing is that in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* where Freud speaks of the superego as formed by the child’s parents and thus as constituting “the vehicle of tradition and all the age-long values which have been handed down ... from generation to generation.” In conveying this tradition, Freud adds, the superego is “the representative of all moral restrictions, the advocate of the impulse towards perfection, in short ... as much as we have been able to apprehend psychologi-

⁴ Ibid., p. 718.

⁵ *GBWW*, Vol. 53, p. 79.

cally of what people call the ‘higher’ things in human life.”⁶ Similar statements appear later in the *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, where Freud again makes the point that the superego reflects the influence of the parents on the child’s mind, and “includes not merely the personalities of the parents themselves, but also the racial, national, and family traditions handed on through them.”⁷ The same work contains a further interesting passage in which Freud adds:

In spite of their fundamental difference, the id and the superego have one thing in common: they both represent the influences of the past (the id the influence of heredity, the superego essentially the influence of what is taken over from other people), whereas the ego is principally determined by the individual’s own experience, that is to say by accidental and current events.⁸

There are also texts, however, quite as comprehensive as any of these, that take the opposite view, disputing the necessity and the worth of tradition in human affairs with the same lack of qualification. They regard tradition as inhibiting or as being otherwise detrimental to the progress of knowledge, the formation of human character, or the arrangement of human circumstances, and they argue or appeal for a reduction of its influence if they do not absolutely defy it.

One such text consists of the chapter called “Of Darkness from Vain Philosophy and Fabulous Traditions” in Part IV of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, from which a portion has already been quoted. In this chapter, Hobbes reviews with massive scorn a variety of errors or illusions that have survived by tradition through books and other means from ancient or medieval times. The defect of these errors or illusions—among which Hobbes lists the teachings of Aristotle, the commentaries of the Jews, and the dogmas of the Roman Church—is that they are based, or at least our acceptance of them is based, not on what Hobbes calls “reasoning,” by which he means proceeding from “the manner of the generation of anything, to the properties; or from the properties, to some possible way of generation of the same,” so as to be able to produce, “as far as mat-

⁶ *GBWW*, Vol. 54, p. 834b-c.

⁷ *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1949), p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*

ter and human force permit, such effects as human life requireth,”⁹ but on suppositions and distinctions that were faulty to begin with and have been handed down in books that neither understood the errors nor corrected them. All of which Hobbes rejects as tending to keep men in intellectual and spiritual darkness, ignorant alike of reason and the gospel, unfitted for the duties of a human Commonwealth and unready for the Kingdom of God to come.

To this may be added the statements in the *Discourse on Method* that tell how Descartes came to rely on his own intellectual resources rather than those of other men—statements purely personal in their intention, and significantly so, yet symptomatic of a cast of thought that has become widespread. For, Descartes says, after his experience of schools had convinced him that nothing was certainly known by the philosophers, and that the sciences grounded on their writings could therefore not be trusted, he resolved to seek no other knowledge than that which could be found in himself, on the assumption that

as regards all the opinions which up to this time I had embraced, I ... could not do better than endeavour once for all to sweep them completely away, so that they might later on be replaced, either by others which were better, or by the same, when I had made them conform to the uniformity of a rational scheme. And I firmly believed that by this means I should succeed in directing my life much better than if I had only built on old foundations, and relied on principles of which I allowed myself in youth to be persuaded without having inquired into their truth.¹⁰

On top of this must be added the remarks of John Stuart Mill—as strong an antitraditionalist in his way as Hobbes, though his tone is very different—who addresses himself to the subject in the essay *On Liberty*. There, in the chapter called “Of Individuality, as one of the Elements of Well-being,” Mill asserts that

Where, not the person’s own character, but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress.¹¹

⁹ *GBWW*, Vol. 23, p. 267.

¹⁰ *GBWW*, Vol. 31, p. 45b-c.

¹¹ *GBWW*, Vol. 43, pp. 293-94.

The defect that Mill sees in the human society of his time is just its tendency to insist upon such sources of conduct and, as a result, to discourage individual and social development. “The despotism of custom,” he writes, “is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress or improvement.”¹² Mill accepts certain limits to this spirit. “Nobody denies,” he says,

that people should be so taught and trained in youth as to know and benefit by the ascertained results of human experience. But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way.¹³

If this does not happen, Mill argues, there cannot be any human development, for “the individuality is the same thing with development, and . . . it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings.”¹⁴

It will be noted that in the passages we have considered from Plato, William James, and Freud, the value of tradition (or custom, or habit, as the case may be) is thought to lie mostly in its stabilizing influence, the restraint it provides in the cultural life of the race. For each of these authors, this is only the means to an end. James indicates how that is so in the relatively restricted terms that the idea of “habit” implies, as assuring social stability and making possible individual achievement. The function of the superego, Freud argues, is something greater, binding together not merely the social but what we may think of more comprehensively as the human order, and not only in respect of an individual lifetime, to which, of course, any habit is confined, but of the whole of human experience, which the superego makes available to, and brings to bear upon, the individual psyche. And Plato’s frame of reference is larger still, being political and philosophical rather than historical or moral: the well-ordered State requires a “reverence for antiquity” as a body requires health—must, if it loses this reverence, become enfeebled and disordered, as a body without health be-

¹² Ibid., p. 300.

¹³ Ibid., p. 294.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 297.

comes weakened or diseased—to the end that the laws and public institutions may survive and prosper and the citizens may live wise and virtuous lives.

The texts from Hobbes, Descartes, and J. S. Mill, which are as strongly against tradition as these passages are for it, likewise regard it not as an end in itself but as something intermediate in human affairs. But where Plato, Freud, and William James think tradition is enabling—is, indeed, the indispensable condition of a wise, good, and truly human life—for Hobbes, Descartes, and Mill it serves precisely the opposite function, is rather inhibiting if not absolutely preventive of that kind of life. Or, if some qualification is in order before we reach such a conclusion in the case of Hobbes and Descartes, the focus of whose concern may be said to be intellectual rather than moral—with what we know rather than with what we do (whatever difference that makes)—yet at least in the case of Mill there can be no doubt that we have a disagreement, with respect to Plato, James, and Freud, that is both direct and profound. And this disagreement is at least implied in many of the other texts we have reviewed, so that it seems necessary to accept that, while the issue is not always exactly joined, when it is, the judgments of the authors of *Great Books of the Western World* on the subject are seriously conflicting.

There are, however, a number of texts in the set that endeavor to reconcile or transcend this disagreement, or that seem to provide grounds on which we may reconcile or transcend it ourselves—texts that indicate the fullest perception of the conflict that has been noted. This means, among other things, that they recognize the deadening effects that tradition can have in human affairs or on human understanding (for their focus is as much on knowledge as it is on action), and that they undertake to defend it only insofar as they can regard it as a vital force.

Such a text is Pascal's Preface to the *Treatise on the Vacuum*, of which some account has already been given. In this remarkable discussion that, brief as it is, seems to say nearly everything that can be said about tradition, Pascal distinguishes between the kind of knowledge that animals have and the kind that is peculiar to man. He observes that the knowledge animals have through instinct is complete but limited: nature teaches them whatever they need to know in order to accomplish their natural purpose, but no more; and as their knowledge does not need to be increased, so it cannot be preserved, being created afresh in each new member of the species. "It is different with man," Pascal says, "made only for infinity."

He is ignorant in his life's first age, but he never ceases to learn as he goes forward, for he has the advantage not only of his own experience but also of his predecessors', because he always keeps in his memory the knowledge he has once acquired, and that of the ancients is always at hand in the books they have left.

In terms we have been using, this is to say that as man learns by reason rather than instinct, so the source of his knowledge is not nature but experience, both his own and that of his ancestors. The latter cannot limit us, Pascal insists, unless we make the mistake of treating it with reverence, as if, once the opinions of the ancients had been expressed, there were "no more truths to know." When we do this, in effect we treat such opinions as if they *were* instincts, and thus can learn nothing from them. The right way for man to regard the matter, Pascal argues, is to realize that "since he keeps his knowledge, he can also easily increase it," and that the men of any given time are, as one may say, in the same condition as the ancients would be if they had been able to continue their studies. For "the same thing happens in the succession of men as in the different ages of an individual," Pascal goes on, "so that the whole series of men during the course of so many centuries should be considered as one self-same man, always in existence and continually learning."¹⁵

A second text that seems to reconcile or transcend the conflict we have noted is from *The Critique of Judgment*, where Kant considers how an aesthetic judgment—that is, a judgment of taste, having to do with the excellence or beauty of a thing—can be arrived at. Such a judgment has no objective basis, yet lays claim to the agreement of everyone; can be verified only in the sense, and to the extent, that it agrees with the judgment of others, yet lays claim to autonomy, denying that other judgments are its source. "The fact that we recommend the works of the ancients as models," Kant says, "and rightly, too, and call their authors *classical*, as constituting a sort of nobility among writers that leads the way and thereby gives laws to the people, seems to indicate *a posteriori* sources of taste and to contradict the autonomy of taste in each individual."

But we might just as well say that the ancient mathematicians, who, to this day, are looked upon as the almost indispensable models of perfect thoroughness and elegance in synthetic methods, prove that reason also is on our part only imitative,

¹⁵ *GBWW*, Vol. 33, p. 357.

and that it is incompetent with the deepest intuition to produce of itself rigorous proofs by means of the construction of concepts.¹⁶

Kant allows that when we come to judge of anything, without considering what others have said before us, we are likely to blunder. It is not, however, “that predecessors make those who follow in their steps mere imitators, but by their methods they set others upon the track of seeking in themselves for the principles, and so of adopting their own, often better, course.” They serve as examples rather than as rules, and the difference is that in judgments based on reason, such examples only reinforce the authority of concepts, whereas in aesthetic judgments, which are not based on concepts but are only expressions of taste, examples are our only guide, indicating “what has in the course of culture maintained itself longest in esteem.” We follow such examples as precedents, Kant says, and this, so far as the influence of a particular author extends, “means no more than going to the same sources for a creative work as those to which he went for his creations, and learning from one’s predecessor no more than the mode of availing oneself of such sources.”¹⁷


To these observations of Kant’s we may add the text—the last we have room to consider—provided by T. S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which appears not in *Great Books of the Western World* but in *Gateway to the Great Books*, volume 5. For this essay, too, seems to reconcile or transcend the conflict we have observed. That is, it seems to rescue the idea of tradition from its deadening implications—not, as Pascal does, by asserting the continuity of humankind, and not as Kant does by invoking the notion of example or precedent, but with its perception that there is a particular order of human experience to which tradition belongs, and which may be said to comprise just that portion of the historical order that is always present and alive.

The context in which this perception of Eliot’s occurs is that of art, in particular of poetry, as Pascal’s context is scientific and Kant’s is philosophical. But it is an idea with wider applications than Eliot gives it. It recognizes that there is a difference between the purely historical order and the order—the ideal order, as Eliot suggests it is—that is formed by “the existing monuments.” This order is both temporal and timeless; it occurs within the historical order, but the parts of it, the achievements that comprise it, have a simultaneous

¹⁶ *GBWW*, Vol. 42, pp. 513d-14a.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 514.

existence. As such they constitute a tradition, Eliot says, that cannot be inherited, but can be obtained, if we chose, by great labor. If we are willing to put forth this labor, he adds, we acquire a historical sense that makes us conscious that as whatever work we undertake is affected by the tradition of which we have become aware, and in which our work takes its place, so the tradition is affected by that work, if ever so slightly—affected in the relationship that is thus established between the part and the whole, in the new intelligibility that each thereby acquires, and in the new value they take on in being measured by each other. For none of the works of man has its meaning alone, but each is significant in relation to the rest.

What we discern in these observations of Eliot's, as in Kant's remarks and those of Pascal, is an endeavor to distinguish between what may be called traditionalism, which forces the present, for good or ill, to adapt itself to the past, and a different sort of influence that places the present in a context that allows for—that requires—development. It is this latter meaning of tradition, implicit in many other texts besides those we have discussed, that a careful reading of *Great Books of the Western World* seems to bring out, as being the wisdom of the subject when it is squarely contemplated. That this should be so is consistent with the kind of tradition that the books themselves are thought to embody, of which Eliot in particular, though he has in mind a somewhat different order, gives such a good account. It is as if we had discovered in them the principle of their own vitality, which they had not often or lengthily troubled to explain, but which, when necessary, they could articulate and make manifest. “For books,” as Milton says, “are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of the living intellect that bred them.” In respect to the idea of tradition, as with so many other subjects, the *Great Books* seem able to show with special force how this is so. 

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