
Dialogue on Tradition

Tradition, Habit, and Social Interaction: A Response to Mark Bevir

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Tradition constitutes the inescapable background to human life. Historians construct particular traditions out of the general flux of tradition by tracing the temporal and conceptual connections that flow out of the particular object or objects that they want to explain.

Thus Mark Bevir characterizes the putative subject of his highly interesting essay “On Tradition.”¹ I say “putative” because Bevir is not primarily concerned with tradition as such. His central focus is on tradition as an explanatory device, as a way of examining “the social context within which individuals reason and act” (29). Traditions are useful, according to Bevir, to the extent that historians are able to construct and reconstruct them to “illustrate the process by which individuals inherited beliefs and practices from their communities” (49).

I wish to take issue with Bevir’s treatment of tradition precisely because it is so utilitarian. It reduces a social reality to an amorphous material with no meaning or purpose of its own; to mere clay properly molded to suit the needs of intellectuals seeking to examine objects that interest them. Unchallenged, Bevir’s reading of tradition would further reduce the already narrow focus of most academics on the relationship between individuals and abstract, ideological categories, whether the epistemes and paradigms Bevir explicitly discusses or the race, class, gender, and other constructs so prevalent in current intellectual discourse. And

¹ Mark Bevir, “On Tradition,” *Humanitas* XIII, no. 2 (2000), 28-53, 50; references to this article hereinafter cited in the text.

this narrow field of inquiry excludes the primary focus of most actual *lives*: the constitutive, corporate groups of family, church, and local association, and the modes of conduct their members take as their own.

Bevir is no simplistic atomist. He takes issue with the assertion that individuals are “able to transcend totally the influence of tradition” (29). Likewise he rejects the simple determinism of structuralists who see beliefs as “the products of the internal relations of self-sufficient languages or paradigms” (31). This rejection of anti-social extremes would seem to put Bevir in sympathy with the early sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, who urged scholars to recognize “the actual field of interpersonal interaction as the primary source of social organization.”² But Bevir is not concerned with interpersonal interaction. He is concerned with the prototypically individualist question “how do I develop my beliefs in relation to the beliefs other people already hold?” (31). With the focus so narrowly set on the individual Bevir cannot see tradition as anything more than a background against which individuals construct their own realities.

Bevir’s argument entails three assertions regarding tradition with which I will take issue here; first that the content of any given tradition is primarily intellectual; second that traditions are manipulable in the short term through individual application of reason; and third that traditions are constituted by individuals acting *qua* individuals. In response to these assertions I will argue that traditions are important subjects of study in their own right because they are concrete, social realities. Traditions are constituted primarily by habits—both intellectual and practical—that go qualitatively beyond the status of any background understanding. They are framed and effect behavior over time and thus require sustained assault from many sources before giving way to significant change. They combine social groups and practices, adding to them purpose and inner logic that cohere over time. They shape human character and conduct. By minimizing their reality we minimize our own social nature and reduce ourselves to contentless, choice-making monads with no purpose.

*Traditions
concrete social
realities.*

² See J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith, *American Sociology and Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 157-58.

The Content of Tradition

In rejecting atomism's empiricist basis, Bevir argues that "because we cannot have pure experiences, we must necessarily construe our personal experiences in terms of a prior bundle of theories" (30). "Theories"—reasoned propositions concerning the connections among objects and events—may influence the way we perceive and act on our experiences. But how often and under what circumstances do we consciously formulate them?

It is helpful, here, to look at the work of Michael Oakeshott. Bevir rejects Oakeshott's conception of tradition as "a concrete manner of behaviour," deeming it an attempt to "evaluate particular beliefs and actions against an allegedly privileged set of beliefs or an allegedly authentic set of experiences and actions" (44). But Oakeshott saw that anything we might coherently refer to as a tradition must rest on tacit understandings and habits that most people most of the time accept without subjecting them to rational analysis. Traditions are accepted forms of conduct to which practitioners seek to conform, as a matter of habit, even in seeking to enrich them. Yet Bevir's almost exclusive focus on intellectual beliefs as the stuff of social reality leads him to characterize the process of inculcation into a tradition in a manner that all but leaves out the role of habituation. In describing how traditions are passed on he uses the example of an infant who "learns to pick out objects as a result of being shown them and told their names, but what he or she can be shown and taught to name depends on the objects of which his or her teachers have experiences and so on the theories with which these teachers already make sense of the world. A tradition provides the theories that construct the objects the infant initially finds in the world" (36).

*A matter of
habitual
conduct.*

Bevir's assertion that theories construct the objects of experience rather than vice versa pervades his essay. Yet soup remains soup, and the mother who redefines soup to include mud will not succeed in nourishing her child. The name or idea we choose must match, in practice, the concrete reality with which we and our fellows engage, or the result will be incoherence, embodied in a bad meal or worse. There may be "theories" of soup—of what types of ingredients will produce what kinds of tastes. But the ingredients and the traditions of combining them in particular ways come first. Or, rather, each develops over time on the basis of concrete

experience with ingredients and their tastes rather than through abstract thought. Reality precedes theory.

The cook who must plan out every discrete part-act in the preparation of a meal will never achieve excellence because virtuosity is the spontaneous flow of deeply ingrained knowledge and experience. And such experience is gained through practice, through acting within the tradition of cooking in a particular manner, not from reading an abstraction-based list of instructions. One may cook in more than one way, even combining various forms of cooking. But the process of analogy this entails will not be successful if one has not interiorized the habits enabling one to prepare foods well. Not even the philosopher acts purely at the level of ideas. He applies the tools and methods of his tradition (such as paradigms and modes of textual analysis) as a matter of habit or unexamined conduct. Were this not the case, the process of philosophizing would never commence beyond questions of first principles.

Unlike Bevir, Oakeshott saw modes of conduct as wholes—as coherent ways of acting in given circumstances. Oakeshott pointed out that connections are not merely abstract theories to be drawn out through analysis of discrete, inherently unrelated objects, but natural flows among acts and people. And such flows are more the product of habit than of analysis—of a combination of inherent properties and custom than of theory. As Oakeshott observed, “all actual conduct, all specific activity springs up within an already existing idiom of activity. And by an ‘idiom of activity’ I mean a knowledge of how to behave appropriately in the circumstances.” Knowledge concerning appropriateness entails more than recognizing the existence of a background understanding and more than constructing abstract theories. It entails acting according to pre-existing standards of excellence and perceiving oneself as a constituent part of one’s tradition. This means, for Oakeshott, that acting reasonably means working to maintain the continuity and coherence of the activity in which one is engaged—to make a better soup, for example, yet something that others will still recognize as soup.³ And that recognition is based in a tradition of cooking and eating, of practical experience with the concrete reality of food and the flow of thought and action that produce nourishing, pleasant-tasting dishes.

Acting within one’s tradition provides knowledge of appropriateness.

³ See especially Oakeshott’s essay “Rational Conduct” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995).

The Limits of Manipulation

Edward Shils noted that society is replete with traditions, and cannot exist without them.⁴ But their sheer variety does not transform traditions into mere background, an “initial influence on people” (37) constructing their own realities. Whether as parochial as a particular mode of cooking or as expansive as Christian Humanism, traditions have purpose, inner logic and necessity embodied in habits of thought and action. And these habits are taught, not primarily through didactic relationships, but through the social interactions involved in the conduct of life.

*Traditions
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closed nor
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Traditions are concrete realities, not collections of ideas more or less coherently put together. They are enduring modes of conduct based in habitual relations among people and between practitioners and their objects. Because they are constituted largely by habit, traditions are not easily manipulated or changed, particularly by individuals. Thus it is a distortion to say, as Bevir does, that “traditions, structures, and paradigms cannot be self-contained systems because they depend on the beliefs and actions of individuals, and they do not decide the nature of these beliefs and actions” (33). No tradition can be fully closed, if for no other reason than that its practitioners must face constantly changing circumstances. But traditions do not depend directly on the actions and beliefs of individuals.

Once in a great while a cataclysmic event or powerful individual may have a significant effect on a given tradition. Such was the case with the French Revolution’s destruction of the Old Regime. Ideologues claiming to act for the people and for deistic Reason tore down existing structures, slaughtered much of the aristocracy (and many others), seized control over Church lands and personnel and set in motion a century of war and revolution. But, even if we were able to ascribe the events of the French Revolution to one or a few individuals, those events were made possible by trends in pre-existing traditions stretching back centuries. As Tocqueville showed, it was the administrative centralization carried out by a series of French monarchs that sapped the vitality from local associations and their traditions, breaking the bonds of mutual dependence and the common goal of a more beautiful France that made for social cooperation among people from varying regions, circumstances and professions. Neither Robespierre nor Napoleon destroyed traditional relations. Ideology, animosity,

⁴ Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

and mob violence filled the vacuum left after Gallican absolutism had all but destroyed the social groups that once constituted France.⁵

To recognize the importance of constitutive groups even in times of cataclysm is not to deny the facts of individual free will and of the malleability of traditions. But it indicates the reality of practical limits on both. Contrast this with Bevir's argument that "the concept of a tradition . . . suggests that a social inheritance comes to each individual who, through his or her agency, then can modify and transform this inheritance even as he or she passes it on to yet others" (35). Again, tradition is a tool, in Bevir's analysis, for examining "the processes by which beliefs and practices change, and, more especially, the role played by particular individuals in these processes" (29). This didactic understanding of tradition leaves out the fact that it is by nature social and concrete, constituted within group practices rather than schematic theories that can be manipulated as they are passed on. Bevir's chosen metaphor, of "teachers initiating pupils" into "shared understandings" (39) is off the mark. It implies a binary relationship in which plastic material is passed from one agent to another, undergoing willful manipulation and fundamental change in the process. It would be closer to reality to speak of a master and his apprentice, who is immersed in the practice of a given trade; who observes and is shown, in hands-on fashion, how to use given tools to achieve results that match pre-existing examples and fulfill the promise of pre-existing models of excellence.

Individuals do not radically alter traditions, least of all through redefinition on the basis of abstract principles. Traditions undergo modifications in the course of events—in facing changed circumstances—or when constitutive groups over time come to accept that aspects of their tradition conflict with other, higher order traditions. This is true even when the aspects at issue are closely intertwined with specific beliefs. Such was the case, for example, with slavery. In Britain and America the abolitionist movement was based on an appeal from the bad acts perpetrated under the slave system to basic practices of established Christian and republican tradition. The argument repeated time after time in the literature is that the abuses were unchristian, systematic, and rooted in the tyrannical nature of the slave system. It was corrupting to

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kaham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

one's character to have unchecked control over another person, whether one was a king or a slaveholder; the result inevitably would be abuse. Thus the system must be ended. To map out such consequences requires the use of reason, but the analogies involved would be impossible without the habits of thought and practice gained through membership in specific traditions. And the change in concrete practice that came with the abolition of slavery was the result of sustained argument and conflict among groups constituting varying, at times competing, traditions over the appropriateness of slavery in terms of both localized and generalized traditions.

Social Identification

*Individual's
absorption in
society
provides gain
in identity.*

The key element missing in Bevir's account of tradition is social interaction. In studying "the relationship of the individual to his social inheritance" (29) Bevir overlooks the fact that the individual does not stand outside this inheritance and decide what to do with it. He resides *within* his inheritance, or rather within the variety of traditions that constitute it. Western individualists have great trouble accepting the existence of what John C. Turner refers to as a "category shift" from individual to social identity. But, whether in family, profession, or other social group, individual members who are fully engaged become "*subjectively* the exemplars or representatives of society or some part of it, the living, self-aware embodiments of the historical, cultural and politico-ideological forces and movements which formed them. Indeed, psychologically speaking, they do not 'represent,' they 'are;' they become self-conscious society." Individuals take on the interests, the perspectives, and the habits of thought and mind of the groups in which they are engaged, including at its most inclusive the society to which they belong. As Turner argues, this shift in social identity "is not a loss or submergence of the self in the group . . . nor any kind of regression to a more primitive or unconscious form of identity In many respects [it] may be seen as a *gain* in identity, since it represents a mechanism whereby individuals may act in terms of the social similarities and differences produced by the historical development of human society and culture."⁶

Socially identified individuals (that is, to a significant degree, all of us) do not "disappear" when they act as group members.

⁶ John C. Turner, *Rediscovering the Social Group* (New York: Blackwell, 1987), 206, 51.

They become part of a “team.” Even in America, even among such strong individualists as American athletes, team members cooperate in working toward a common goal, looking at each event from the team’s perspective, learning from experience how to act, what to expect from one’s teammates, and even how one’s mates will respond to surprising turns of events.

Each team has its own tradition, into which each member is initiated; thus the difficulty of getting even good players to perform well as a team without practicing together over time. Yet each team also acts within a broader tradition of its sport, and still broader traditions of sportsmanship, national pride, and so on which may be activated under certain circumstances (e.g. playing in the Olympics, particularly against a team from a rival nation). We do not simply construct and rearrange these relationships—not even in corporate America can teams be reconstituted at will without paying a severe penalty in performance.⁷

Freedom and judgment are not stifled by these facts of social life; they are made possible by the variety of traditions of which each of us is a member. We gain the ability to “judge” our family’s conduct toward its members and toward others, for example, from our membership in traditions such as our religion or nationality. We cannot simply think up, out of thin air, rational criteria against which to judge our traditions. One who is made uncomfortable by a particular practice must look to the variety of his traditions to find the inconsistency at the root of the discomfort and, perhaps, find the more inclusive, more compelling practice to which the practice causing discomfort should conform.

Freedom and judgment made possible by membership in variety of traditions.

Abstraction and Tradition

None of this is to say that the intellect does not play a significant role in tradition. The high intellectual faculty of analogy is key to traditional practice and judgment. Moreover, I would disagree with Oakeshott’s conclusion that abstract rationality, arising from the Enlightenment, does not itself constitute a tradition. The habits of abstract thought and reductionist conduct that solidified during the Enlightenment decreed that traditions were unimportant or harmful to the degree that they put constraints on the individual’s ability to examine, criticize, and categorize all aspects

⁷ Intersubjective cooperation is discussed in greater depth in Grace Goodell’s forthcoming work on the Culture of Contingency and constitutive groups within the “four little dragons” of Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

of life and place them into categories rooted in theoretical constructs. But, as a habituated group with its own inner logic and purpose (the promotion and application of abstract logic to all of experience), Enlightenment intellectuals constitute a tradition. It is, however, a tradition that is hostile to all other traditions and, in the end, undermines itself because no reality, not even abstraction itself, can meet the decontextualized criteria it would apply.

People still act within traditions because it is natural to do so.

By setting up the form of conduct they most prize (abstract reason) as the sole criterion against which to judge all of human conduct, Enlightenment intellectuals have succeeded in weakening all forms of tradition and social interaction in the west. But the fact that so simple and self-flattering an idea as abstract rationality has not swept all before it is proof of its existential falsehood. People still act within traditions because it is natural to do so. And they still insist on defending their traditions on the basis of contextual analogy and other intellectual tools slighted by most rationalists. Rationalism itself is now under attack. Bevir himself seeks to distance his position from that of simple empiricism. More troubling, proponents of extreme forms of feminism and multiculturalism seek to undermine reason itself through appeals to romantic forms of biological determinism.⁸

Reason, properly understood, demands that we set aside the atomistic assumptions of abstract rationalism in favor of an understanding of social interaction rooted in historical practice. Through careful study of tradition we can learn more about the causes of particular events and more about the nature of those universals which actually influence human conduct across traditional lines. Cross-cultural analysis rooted in an understanding of actual, customary human conduct can give rise to an understanding of commonalities that remain real—rooted in the actual conduct of actual people.⁹ But only by taking traditions seriously as social realities constituted by groups and their habitual practices can we hope to understand the actual roots of human conduct.

⁸ See for example Julia Kristeva, *A Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

⁹ See for example C. S. Lewis's appendix to *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). It should be obvious that nothing I have said minimizes the necessity of transcendent standards to guide human conduct. But those standards, provided through both reason and revelation, build upon the more concrete experiences of social relations. The natural human need for religious faith and guidance exemplified throughout human culture should point any open-minded scholar to the need for further theological study.