

The Normativity of Tradition*

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[forthcoming in Scheffler, Equality and Tradition (Oxford, 2010)]

1. Tradition plays an important role in many people's lives. Many people, and perhaps most people, participate in traditions of one kind or another. By this I mean that they take the fact that an act is called for by some tradition as giving them reason to perform that act. For convenience, I will say that they see themselves as having "reasons of tradition" or simply "traditional reasons" for acting in certain ways.

The force of traditional reasons is not immediately apparent. These reasons may appear to be subject to a reductive dilemma. On the one hand, it may seem that to act in a certain way for traditional reasons is simply to act in that way because people have acted that way in the past. But the mere fact that people have acted some way in the past is not by itself a reason to act that way in the future. If it were, then every act that has ever been performed would give us reason to perform a relevantly similar act. This seems absurd. On the other

* This paper was presented as a keynote address at the 3rd Annual Conference of the Northwestern Society for Ethical Theory and Political Philosophy in April, 2009. Earlier versions were presented to a philosophy department colloquium at Brown, to my Fall, 2008 graduate seminar at NYU, and to a meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Reading Group in Ethics (MARGE). I am grateful to all of these audiences for helpful discussion. I owe special thanks to William FitzPatrick, who served as commentator on the paper at Northwestern, and to Jerry Cohen, who provided valuable written comments on an earlier draft.

hand, most traditions endorse or embody or exemplify certain values, principles, or ideals. So perhaps to act for traditional reasons is just to act for reasons that derive from those values, principles, or ideals. But if traditional reasons are just reasons deriving from certain values, principles, or ideals, then the reference to tradition seems otiose. The force of the reasons, on this assumption, does not derive from the fact that they are part of a tradition. It is not the existence of the tradition, but rather the normative significance of the values or principles, that gives rise to the reasons. So someone who has never participated in the tradition may have just the same reasons for responding in just the same way to the relevant values or principles as someone who is a participant of long standing.

In the past I have argued that something like this reductive dilemma actually holds in the case of culture.¹ On the one hand, to act on “cultural reasons” might be to act in a certain way simply because other people have acted that way. So understood, “cultural reasons” have no normative force; they are not reasons at all. On the other hand, to act on “cultural reasons” might be to act in response to certain values or principles, values or principles which are, as a matter of fact, widely accepted within a cultural group. But then the reference to culture seems otiose. The normative force of the reasons derives from the relevant values or principles, and not from the fact of their acceptance by the cultural group. The upshot is that “cultural reasons” do not represent an

¹ See “Immigration and the Significance of Culture,” Chapter Ten in this volume. The next two paragraphs summarize arguments developed at greater length in that paper.

independent class of reasons over and above the reasons deriving from the values and principles that people recognize.

From a deliberative perspective, this conclusion can be accepted without significant loss, for 'culture' is primarily a descriptive or ethnographic category, not a normative or deliberative one. In other words, to describe something as a cultural norm or cultural value is simply to indicate that it is a norm or value that is widely shared within a certain social group. Except in special cases, people who actually accept the values and norms in question, and who feel their force, do not think of them as "cultural norms," nor do they see the authority of the norms as deriving from their status within the culture. Similarly, "cultural reasons" rarely feature as such in individual deliberation.

The case of tradition seems different. People do, I believe, act on reasons whose force they themselves ascribe to the authority of some tradition. In this sense, 'tradition' appears to be a normative notion. So the reductive dilemma with respect to tradition has significant skeptical implications. This is reason enough to pursue the investigation further. But questions about the normative force of tradition are of interest for at least two additional reasons.

First, these questions are relevant to issues of political morality. The diversity of traditions is characteristic of a modern, pluralistic society, and the question of how a political society should organize itself so as to accommodate this form of diversity is a pressing one. Liberal societies have a long history of attaching special significance to normative diversity, particularly diversity with

respect to people's differing moral and religious outlooks and conceptions of the good life. This suggests that questions about how best to respond to the diversity of traditions may depend on the normative force of traditional reasons. There is of course, a parallel issue about the proper response to the diversity of cultures, and in that instance I have argued that the reductive dilemma undercuts the case for special "cultural rights" or for "multiculturalism," at least on some interpretations of those contested and highly charged terms. The case that is undercut depends, in effect, on an equivocation between the ideas embodied in the two horns of the dilemma. On the one hand, the fact that cultures comprise actual group practices is used to establish that cultural diversity is something over and above the diversity of individual moral, religious, and philosophical convictions. This paves the way for the claim that a special regime of rights may be required to accommodate this form of diversity. Yet, on the other hand, the examples of cultural considerations that are cited are almost always considerations that are perceived, within the relevant cultural groups themselves, as deriving their normative authority from moral, religious, or philosophical values or principles, and not from the group's acceptance of those values or principles. The upshot is that cultural diversity is not, in the end, a species of *normative* diversity that is independent of moral, religious and philosophical diversity. The question whether the same is true of diversity with respect to tradition is of obvious political relevance.

The second reason is this. Questions about the normative force of tradition bear on the more general topic of the role in human life, and the importance for human flourishing, of our attitudes toward the past and the future. Many people care intensely, though in ways that are rarely made explicit or articulate, about certain things that happened in the past and certain things that may happen in the future. Of course, they care about their own pasts and their own futures. But their time-related concerns are not limited to concerns about other temporal periods of their own lives. They also care about things that happened before they were born, and things that will or might happen after their deaths.

It is a commonplace, of course, that many people wish to feel a part of something larger than themselves, and contemporary philosophers have relied on this commonplace in their investigations of the moral and political significance of membership in a community or a nation. But I am interested in the specifically temporal dimension of people's attitudes, which seems to me to have received insufficient attention. Our attitudes toward the past and the future are complex, puzzling, and poorly understood. It may or may not be the case that they involve something that is best described as a desire to be part of something larger than ourselves. Part of the interest of an investigation of the normative force of tradition lies in the light it may shed on these attitudes.

Two points of clarification are in order. First, in one broad and standard sense of the term, a tradition is a set of beliefs, customs, teachings, values,

practices, and procedures that is transmitted from generation to generation. However, a tradition need not incorporate items of all of the kinds just mentioned. For example, we speak of intellectual traditions, and these are traditions that comprise ideas and beliefs but may not include practices or norms of action and may not have any direct implications for how people should behave. In this essay, though, I am interested in those traditions that are seen by people as providing them with reasons for action, and so I will limit myself to traditions that include norms of practice and behavior. This still includes traditions of many different kinds, including, for example, national traditions, religious traditions, literary or artistic traditions, and the traditions associated with particular institutions, organizations, communities, and professions.

Second, there is a looser sense of the term in which a tradition need not extend over multiple generations. A family or a group of friends may establish a “tradition”, for example, of celebrating special occasions by going to a certain restaurant, without any thought that subsequent generations will do the same thing. Even a single individual may be described as having established certain traditions, in this extended sense of the term. For example, a person may have a “tradition” of taking a walk by the river on Saturday afternoons. These uses of the term are suggestive, and I have no desire to police ordinary usage, but my primary interest is in the more standard cases in which traditions are understood to involve multiple people and to extend over generations. Except where I explicitly indicate otherwise, those are the kinds of traditions I will have in mind

in this discussion. I will refer to personal “traditions” like those just mentioned as “personal routines.”

2. Why might the fact that some act is called for by a tradition to which one subscribes seem like a consideration in favor of performing that act? A short but unhelpful answer would be to say: because one subscribes to the tradition. As I have already said, to subscribe to or participate in a tradition just is to see the fact that it calls for certain actions as reasons for performing those actions. But this invites the question: why “subscribe” to a tradition? What is it about traditions that leads people to treat them as reason-giving? There is, I believe, no single answer to this question. Instead, one of my aims in this essay is to show that there are many different factors that may contribute to the perceived normative authority of a tradition.

To begin with, one important feature of traditions is that they serve to establish and entrench certain social conventions. Indeed, virtually any well-established convention may be said to constitute a tradition in an extended sense of the term. The fact that red traffic lights are normally used to indicate that vehicles should stop might be expressed by saying that red lights are traditionally used as stop signs. But some conventions belong to wider traditions of thought and practice that include many other elements. Like all conventions, the conventions that belong to wider traditions serve to co-ordinate behavior and, in so doing, to facilitate social interaction and make it easier to achieve

various individual and collective goods. So, for example, a religious tradition may establish a sabbatarian practice which designates one day each week as a day of rest. If it is desirable for each person to observe a weekly day of rest, and if there are advantages to having an entire community observe the same day of rest, then a convention that establishes a particular day as the day of rest has obvious advantages. In treating the fact that that day is the traditional day of rest as a reason not to work that day oneself, one acknowledges these advantages and defers to the normative force of the convention.

Second, if it is an essential feature of conventions that they play a useful co-coordinating role, then there may be room for a distinction between conventions and what might be termed “collective habits.” Suppose that the people in a given community always go to the beach on a certain holiday. On balance, most of them find this a pleasant thing to do. Yet the fact that they all do it on the same holiday is not itself a useful piece of social co-ordination, for it results in heavy traffic and overcrowded beaches, and does not make beachgoing more pleasant than it would be if different people went on different days. So we might describe the practice of going to the beach on this holiday not as a convention but rather as a collective habit. Although collective habits can have their disadvantages, such as heavy traffic and overcrowded beaches, they also have advantages. Like all habits, they enable us to settle without excessive and repetitive deliberation on courses of action that have, on balance, proved successful in the past. We gain deliberative efficiency by relying relatively

unreflectively on successful past practice as a defeasible guide to future conduct. If we distinguish collective habits from social conventions in this way, then it seems clear that traditions will often embody collective habits as well as social conventions. If one goes to the beach because it is the traditional thing to do on this holiday, one reaps the benefits of the deliberative efficiencies of these habits.

A third, closely related factor that may speak on behalf of adherence to a tradition is the fact that a tradition of reasonably long standing may be regarded as a repository of experience and of the kind of wisdom that comes from experience. Traditional practices take shape in light of an accumulation of historical experience, judgment, and perspective that outstrips what any single individual can reasonably aspire to achieve in the course of a lifetime, and someone who adheres to the tradition may gain the advantages of that accumulated experience and judgment.

Fourth, there may be reasons for adhering to a tradition which derive from the fact that it embodies certain values, ideals, and principles. The reductive dilemma suggests otherwise. It maintains that any reasons of this kind will derive from the values, ideals, and principles themselves, and that the tradition is not a source of reasons over and above these value-, ideal-, or principle-based reasons. But this may be too hasty. For one thing, values, ideals, and principles are not self-interpreting. In addition to endorsing or embodying a set of values, a tradition will typically incorporate a well-developed body of advice and instruction about how to interpret those values and how best to apply

them to the concrete circumstances of daily life. Actually, there are two closely related phenomena that need to be distinguished here. First, there is the fact that abstract values and principles require interpretation if they are to provide any concrete guidance about how to live. Most traditions do not limit themselves to endorsing some set of values and principles, but also provide useful guidance about their implementation and application. Second, many values, principles, and norms are “imperfect” in the Kantian sense; that is, they articulate norms of living with which we are supposed to comply, but these norms leave the timing and manner of our compliance up to us. The discretionary character of these norms, which might seem to make them less burdensome for individuals, actually makes them more so, at least in one respect. The very indeterminacy of the norms places special burdens on the will and the deliberative capacities of the individual, for there is no particular occasion on which one is required to fulfill the obligations they establish. This turns the decision about when to fulfill them into a significant deliberative task.² Phenomenologically, moreover, it also creates the impression that their fulfillment is always supererogatory, for on each occasion, discharging such an obligation goes beyond what one is, then and there, required to do. This in turn makes it easier to convince oneself, on each

² This is related to a point that Thomas Nagel makes in criticizing Robert Nozick’s libertarianism: it “is acceptable to compel people to contribute to the support of the indigent by automatic taxation, but unreasonable to insist that in the absence of such a system they ought to contribute voluntarily. The latter is an excessively demanding position because it requires voluntary decisions that are quite difficult to make” (“Libertarianism Without Foundations,” Yale Law Journal 85[175]: 136-49, at p. 145).

particular occasion, that one need not discharge the obligation *then*. One function of traditions is to establish customs and conventions regarding the time and manner in which we fulfill these imperfect duties and ideals, thus reducing the indeterminacy of the norms and the burdensomely discretionary character of the demands that they make of individuals. For example, many traditions establish conventions concerning the timing and proper amount of charitable giving, and thus make the demands on individuals more determinate and clear-cut. This point illustrates, incidentally, the way in which the various advantages of subscribing to a tradition may operate in tandem. In this case, the tradition establishes a convention whose function is to make it easier for people to implement some principle or live up to some ideal. And such conventions themselves normally reflect a long history of experience in trying to develop effective ways of encouraging compliance with the relevant principles and ideals.

Fifth, in addition to embodying or endorsing certain values and principles, traditions may themselves be seen as valuable, in something like the way that libraries or cathedrals or museums are seen as valuable. They may be regarded as valuable repositories of human knowledge, experience, creativity, and achievement. As I have argued elsewhere,³ we can distinguish between recognizing something as valuable and valuing it oneself; we recognize the value of many things that we ourselves do not value. For example, I may regard bird watching as a valuable activity without valuing it myself. Valuing includes but

³ "Valuing," Chapter One in this volume.

goes beyond the recognition of value. Like me, those who value bird watching will see it as a valuable activity, but unlike me they will also see themselves as having reason to engage in the activity. In the case under consideration, similarly, one may recognize the value of a tradition without valuing it oneself, and people who are in this position will not normally see the fact that some act is called for by the tradition as a reason for performing that act. But the situation is different for people who do value the tradition. For them, the fact that the tradition calls for some act to be performed may well be seen as a reason for performing it. Indeed, this may be part of what valuing the tradition consists in.

Sixth, even if the mere fact that people have acted in a certain way in the past does not by itself provide one with a reason to act that way now, the fact that particular people to whom one feels closely tied acted in a certain way in the past -- and attached special value to that way of acting -- may give one reasons of loyalty to act that way now. Subscribing to a tradition and acting in accordance with that tradition may be ways of expressing one's loyalty to others who adhered to the tradition and to whom such adherence was important. Loyalty is itself a value that many traditions endorse, of course, and in so doing these traditions are, in effect, self-reinforcing: that is, they confirm for their adherents the importance of acting in accordance with the kinds of reasons that lead many people to adhere to them in the first place. If a tradition itself endorses loyalty as a virtue or value, then one effect of this is that people may have reasons of loyalty for acting in accordance with reasons of loyalty.

Seventh, the fact that traditions normally embody certain values, principles, and ideals means that traditions normally *stand for* something. They are not simply intergenerational chains of replicated behavior. Accordingly, when a tradition has played a formative role in a person's development, the person may come to feel that what the tradition stands for is also what he or she stands for. The values of the tradition have been internalized in such a way that they have come to occupy a central place in the person's self-conception. The person may or may not regard these values as binding or mandatory for everyone, but she feels that she would be unrecognizable to herself without them. For someone who is in this position, acting as called for by the tradition is not only a matter of responding to the intrinsic normative force of the values. It is also a matter of being true to oneself. In this sense, acting on traditional reasons may be experienced as a requirement of personal integrity.

To this point, I have identified seven different kinds of consideration that may speak in favor of adherence to a tradition: we may label them *convention, habit, wisdom, guidance, value, loyalty, and integrity*. In acting on reasons of tradition, people may be seen as tacitly acknowledging the force of some or all of these kinds of consideration. This by itself is sufficient to show that the reductive dilemma fails as a diagnosis of traditional reasons. It is not true that, in acting on traditional reasons, one must either be acting in a certain way simply because other people have acted that way in the past or else responding to a principle-

based reason that applies with just as much force to people who do not adhere to the tradition. Traditional reasons are neither normatively empty nor otiose.

3 The seven types of consideration I have mentioned so far do not exhaust the normative force of traditional reasons. To make further progress, we need to consider the general question I mentioned earlier, namely, the role of tradition in relation to broader human attitudes toward the past and the future. One place to begin is with what I call personal routines. As I have noted, these may sometimes be spoken of as “traditions” in an extended sense of that term, but for the sake of clarity I will generally avoid using this terminology. Whatever we choose to call them, these routines help to illuminate the normative significance of traditions in the standard sense, because they provide clues about the attitudes toward time that help to account for that significance.

So consider, to begin with, the pleasures of repetition and familiarity. Someone who goes to the same café and orders the same coffee and pastry every morning may take pleasure in the regularity of this routine over and above the pleasure derived from the coffee and pastry themselves. There may also be an extra pleasure involved if the café proprietor or waiter knows without asking, when the person walks in each day, what the person wants: that he will have “the usual.” Many people have routines of one kind or another that have this character. In saying this, of course, I do not mean to deny that many routines are not pleasurable at all, but are instead boring, tedious, or even soul-deadening.

The point is not that our familiar personal routines are always pleasurable, only that they sometimes are. To the extent that these routines *are* pleasurable, it is worth asking why this is the case. What is the source and character of these distinctive pleasures, the pleasures of routine and familiarity? These are questions that do not seem to me to be often enough discussed, perhaps because we are accustomed to thinking of novelty, adventure, and excitement, rather than familiarity and repetitiveness, as sources of pleasure and fulfillment, and we are too quick to associate routine with boredom and tedium. The pleasures of “the usual” are easily overlooked.

Let me venture three tentative suggestions about what accounts for these pleasures. The first two have to do with what might be called the problem of temporal mobility. It is a striking fact about human life that we have almost no control over our movement through time. The one exception is that we can influence the time of our deaths, either by killing ourselves or, less dramatically, by taking steps that will predictably raise or lower the odds of our survival. But as long as we are alive, we move through time at a uniform rate in a single direction, and we have no alternative. This contrasts sharply with the degree of control we exercise over our mobility in space. Unless we are severely incapacitated, the ability to move our own bodies from one place to another, at a rate and in a direction of our choosing, is a fundamental feature of our lives, and we rely on it so ubiquitously that we tend to take it for granted. Yet its importance to us can hardly be overstated.

Although we also take our inability to control our mobility in time for granted, it is nevertheless experienced as a constraint. The twin urges to revisit the past and to see into the future can be almost unbearably powerful. Since they cannot be satisfied, we must make do for the most part with memory in the one case and anticipatory imagination in the other. But these mental capacities are highly imperfect surrogates for genuine temporal mobility. In a modest way, personal routines help to compensate for the lack of such mobility. If I visit the same café and order the same coffee and pastry every morning, then during any given visit my experience is, in relevant respects, the same as it has been in the past and as it will be in the future – or so it seems to me. This means that I experience what might be thought of as a kind of quasi-mobility in time, for the invariant character of the daily routine effaces the temporal specificity of any particular café visit. I am having coffee here today, but it is as if I were having it yesterday – or tomorrow. Of course, when it comes to living in the past or in the future, “as if” is not good enough, but then again it is better than nothing, although the phenomenon can also be taken too far. If our life is altogether dominated by routine, then the years may seem to “blend into” or become indistinguishable from one another. In these circumstances, all of our experiences may seem to lack temporal specificity, and we may find it difficult to say whether any given experience took place three years ago or five years ago or ten years ago. When this is not just a symptom of failing memory, it may instead be a symptom of our life’s impoverishment. An excess of routine may give us

quasi-mobility at the expense of a narrow and unrewarding existence. Yet without any personal routines at all a life may come to seem fractured and disjointed. One reason why such routines can be rewarding is precisely that they efface the temporal specificity of particular experiences and, in so doing, enable us to feel, as we engage in the routine activity, that we are making contact with other stages of our lives.

A second function of personal routines is as follows. One consequence of our lack of temporal control is that we cannot establish for ourselves a “home” in time, in the way that we can establish a home in space. A home (in space) is not merely a place that we happen to occupy. It is also a place to which we normally have both a claim to return and the capacity to return. It is a place where we feel that we belong, and where others treat us as belonging. By establishing a home, we ward off feelings of being lost or adrift in the world. The very idea of a home is, in effect, a response to the vastness and impersonality of the universe and the precariousness and insignificance of our own place in it. A home is a tiny piece of the world to which we lay claim, and which we experience as our own. It is, in a sense, our world. This is one reason why homelessness is such a terrible condition, even if one does not lack for shelter from the elements. Those who have no home have no place in the world.

But we are all homeless in time. That is, we cannot carve out a piece of time that becomes our own and to which we can return at will. The constraints on our temporal mobility make this impossible. Yet the vastness and

impersonality of time are every bit as chilling and awe-inspiring as the vastness and impersonality of space, and the need for a refuge – for something that serves the function of a place in time – is, for many people, almost as strong as the need for a place in space. Since we cannot establish homes in time the way we can establish homes in space, we must address this need in other ways. This is a second function of personal routines. By ordering the same coffee and pastry at the same café each morning, I domesticate a slice of time. In other words, I dedicate that slice of time each day to a specific purpose of my choosing, and in so doing I lay claim to it. It becomes “my time,” as people sometimes say. And since a routine is by its nature temporally extended, “my time” extends beyond a single day. The routine establishes a kind of temporal corridor, which passes through the succession of days, and which “belongs” to me. So although we cannot establish a home in time by strict analogy to a home in space, we can establish something that serves some of the same function. Obviously, we cannot return to any particular point in time the way we can return to a particular location in space. But when we dedicate the same hour each day to a particular activity of our choosing, the recurrence of the designated hour substitutes for the ability to return to a particular temporal location. And the comfort and familiarity of the routine is not unlike the comfort and familiarity of a home. In this sense, the routine domesticates a piece of time in the way that a home domesticates a piece of space. In both cases, the effect is to make ourselves feel *at home* in the world. We ward off the vastness and chilliness of time, in the

one case, just as we ward off the vastness and chilliness of space, in the other. So the second function of personal routines is to domesticate time: to help us establish something that fulfills the function of a temporal “home.”

Now the example of a personal routine that I have been using is in one way misleading. If I go to the same café every morning, then my routine involves repetition both with regard to time and with regard to space. It is not an example of an exclusively temporal regularity. Many personal routines have this kind of mixed character. They involve a repetitive activity that it is always undertaken at the same time *and* in the same place. Indeed, one of the most familiar and ordinary sorts of personal routines, though not always one of the most rewarding, involves leaving and returning to one’s (spatial) home at a certain time each day. Yet a personal routine need not have this mixed character. One’s routine may be to take a walk at a certain time each day, following a different route each time. Or perhaps one devotes an hour each evening to reading fiction or listening to music, wherever one happens to find oneself. But even when a routine does involve regularity with regard both to time and to place, my point has been that the temporal regularity serves some distinctive purposes.

I have so far mentioned two of these purposes. There is also a third purpose, which has to do with the reality of the self. The philosophical problem of personal identity concerns the conditions under which a person who exists at one time is the same person as a person who exists at another time. There is a

related question that arises from the perspective of the individual agent. What gives me confidence at any given moment that I am a temporally persisting being, that I have a reality that extends beyond the present moment? As I am interpreting it, this is not exactly a philosophical question. That is, it is not a request for a statement of the conditions for the persistence of the self over time. It is rather a psychological question, a question about the sources of my confidence (whether justified or unjustified) that I am a persisting creature. After all, the past is gone and the future has not arrived yet. I have direct awareness of my existence at the present moment. But what makes me so sure that some person who existed in the past was *me*, or that there is a particular future person whose existence would be *my* existence? In raising this question, I do not mean to suggest that people are normally troubled by it, still less that they are plagued by skepticism about their own persistence. On the contrary, we normally take our persistence for granted, and the question I am raising has to do with the factors that enable us to do this.

Certainly the fact that I have (what present themselves as) memories of the past is of great importance, as is the fact that I have intentions, expectations and other future-directed attitudes. Also important is the fact that the subjective quality of my consciousness is continuous from moment to moment; there is something that it feels like to be me and this feeling is not normally subject to sharp discontinuities (although more needs to be said about sleep and other forms of unconsciousness). Another factor that contributes to my confidence in

my own persistence is my sense of myself as an organism. I am a physical creature with a body that manifestly has a history, and I experience changes in that body as changes in me. All of these factors help to establish and to stabilize my sense of myself as a persisting creature.

It would be a mistake, however, to focus exclusively on our own attitudes as sources of our confidence in our persistence. For all its importance, memory is notoriously unreliable and in any case we remember only a small fraction of our lives and experiences. The other factors that I have mentioned are similarly imperfect as devices for instilling confidence in ourselves as temporally extended beings. Rather than focusing exclusively on our own attitudes and faculties, we need also to consider the role of stability in the world around us in giving us a sense of ourselves as persisting creatures. If we were confronted at each moment with an utterly different environment, with no fixed points or continuities from one minute to the next, then it is doubtful that we could achieve a stable sense of ourselves as temporally extended beings. Our confidence in our persistence is inseparable from our confidence in the persistence of the world in which we live. In addition to the generic persistence of the world around us, moreover, it is also important that there should be particular other people who themselves persist and who recognize us as persisting creatures. One of the things that reinforces my sense of myself as a persisting creature, in other words, is the fact that there are other people who treat me as such a creature. In short, my confidence in my

persistence is dependent on my confidence in the persistence of the world around me and on the confidence of others in my persistence.

Personal routines contribute in another way to our confidence in our own stability over time. I have so far mentioned two types of stabilizing factor. First, there are “internal” factors, which include various of our own mental and physical states, such as memories, intentions, feelings of being embodied, and so on. Second, there are “external” factors like the persistence of the world around us and of other people who regard us as persistent. Personal routines amount to a third type of factor, which occupies an intermediate position between the other two. By engaging in personal routines, we *enact* our persistence over time.

Through the repetitive performance of acts that express our distinctive values and desires, we mark the world with continuities that are expressive of ourselves. In so doing, we confirm our sense of ourselves as persistent creatures, manufacturing, as it were, evidence to support our confidence in our persistence. The result is a kind of self-fulfilling, performative validation of our sense of our own reality as temporally extended beings. And to the extent that others recognize or enter into our routines, as for example when the barista knows what our “usual” is, we receive the added reassurance of knowing that the evidence we have “manufactured” or performed has been independently confirmed. The barista’s response gives pleasure in part because it testifies to our success in making manifest, through willful repetitive doing, our own reality as temporally extended creatures.

4. I have identified three functions of personal routines in helping to solve problems posed by time. Such routines help to compensate for our lack of control over our mobility in time, they provide a way of domesticating portions of time, and they provide assurance of our own reality as temporally extended creatures. Let me now return to the question of tradition and its normative significance. I said earlier that, in order fully to appreciate the normative force of traditional reasons, we needed to investigate the role of tradition in relation to broader human attitudes toward the past and the future. Our discussion of personal routines was the first step in that investigation, and we are now in a position to notice that traditions fulfill the same functions as do personal routines, although there are some differences in the way they do so.

Consider, first, the problem of mobility in time. I said that a personal routine compensates for our lack of control over our temporal mobility by establishing a regularity that effaces the temporal specificity of any particular instance of that regularity. In so doing, such a routine compensates for our lack of control over our mobility in time by enabling us to feel that each instance is “timeless.” Although any given instance does of course have a particular temporal location, the fact that it is, in relevant respects, indistinguishable from all the other instances means that its temporal location is inessential – it takes place in the present, but it might as well be taking place in the past or the future. Now traditions fulfill this same function, but with an important added

dimension. In regularly acting in accordance with a traditional practice, an individual in effect assimilates that practice as a personal routine, and so reaps the advantages just mentioned. But insofar as the tradition extends beyond the lifespan of the individual, the quasi-mobility in time that it affords outstrips anything that the individual could achieve with an ordinary personal routine. In acting in accordance with the traditional practice, the individual acts not only as she has acted in the past and as she will act in the future, but also as others acted before she was born and will act after she is dead. In so acting, then, there is a way in which she is able to project herself backward and forward in time, to transcend not only the specificity of the moment but also the boundaries of her own life. She acts in accordance with the traditional practice today, but her act is in relevant respects indistinguishable from the way others have acted since before she was born and will act after she is gone. In that sense, participating in the practice enables her to travel back to a time before she lived and forward to a time when she will live no more.

Consider next the desire to domesticate time, to create something that plays a role in relation to time that is analogous to the role that a home plays in relation to space. I said earlier that a personal routine affords one way of doing this. By devoting a certain period of time each day (or each week, or...) to a specific type of activity of one's choosing, one establishes that recurring time slot as a kind of refuge to which one can "return" more or less at will, and in so doing achieve a sense of comfort and familiarity. It is no accident, I think, that great

traditions are often greatly preoccupied with the establishment of temporal rhythms and routines, with the organization and segmentation of time, and with marking time's passage. They establish calendars, holidays and festivals, seasonal practices and ceremonies, daily or weekly or monthly or yearly rites and rituals, and regular commemorations of historical events. As already noted, a person who regularly acts in accordance with traditional practices assimilates these routines as his own, and in so doing such a person comes to inhabit what amounts to a pre-established temporal structure. As a way of domesticating time, this offers certain advantages when compared with the development of purely personal routines. Traditions are public, collective enterprises, so the temporal structures they make available have a social dimension that many people find comforting and enriching, much as many people prefer living with others to living alone. In addition, traditions usually have at their disposal substantial resources of wisdom and experience, and to the extent that they are supported by and embodied in institutions they often have substantial material resources as well. This means that the temporal routines they have established are likely to be both more elaborate and better grounded in the lessons of the past than are the purely personal routines developed de novo by individual agents. Moreover, insofar as traditions extend beyond the normal human life-span, they offer individuals temporal structures that are themselves more enduring and so temporally more expansive than any routine those individuals could construct for themselves.

Consider, finally, the way that personal routines help to confirm our reality as temporally extended beings, through a kind of repetitive doing that enacts our persistence over time and marks the world with continuities that are expressive of ourselves. I pointed out that, when other people recognize or enter into our routines, they testify to the objectivity of these performative demonstrations of our persistence, and in so doing they confirm the reality we have sought to enact: that is, they confirm our own reality as temporally extended creatures. But traditions are by their nature collective enterprises, which are sustained not only by the allegiance of many adherents over long periods of time, but also by the adherents' mutual recognition of one another as collaborators in a shared enterprise. This recognition is normally expressed in and reinforced by the adherents' joint participation in various public, collective routines: in public rites, rituals, ceremonies, celebrations, and observances. In effect, then, this makes the mutual recognition by each adherent of the others' performative demonstrations of their persistence a structural feature of the tradition itself. So one function of traditions is to provide a stable means by which their adherents can confirm their own reality as temporally extended creatures. The continuing presence of others who participate in the same routines as we do, and who recognize us as fellow participants, provides us with regular confirmation of the reality that our participation seeks to enact.

The upshot of these reflections is that, in addition to the various considerations enumerated earlier, association with a tradition offers some

distinctive advantages as a way of addressing the three problems related to time that we have been discussing: our lack of control over our mobility in time, our need to domesticate time, and our desire to assure our own reality as temporally extended creatures. To be sure, some people feel these problems more acutely than others, and some who feel them acutely will nevertheless find other ways to address them than through association with a tradition, perhaps because they regard the traditions that are accessible to them as uncongenial for one reason or another. Association with a tradition is certainly not the only way of addressing these time-related problems. Personal routines continue to have some advantages that are not superseded by the advantages of association with a tradition. In particular, personal routines are by their nature more individualized – more closely tailored to the desires and interests of the individuals whose routines they are – than any ongoing tradition can possibly be. Association with an ongoing tradition requires individuals to accommodate themselves to practices and arrangements that were developed by other people. And these practices and arrangements may have features that are experienced, especially by persons of a more voluntaristic and individualistic temperament, as alien or external constraints. For such individuals, reliance on personal routines may therefore be more appealing than association with any tradition. Of course, participation in traditional practices is not incompatible with the development of purely personal routines, and many people incorporate both into their lives.

5. I referred at the beginning of my discussion to the commonplace that many people wish to feel a part of something larger than themselves. This commonplace is often cited in discussions of the moral significance of membership in a community or nation, and it is also cited in explaining the appeal of association with a tradition. But although there is surely something right about the commonplace, its meaning is less clear than it may seem. Taken literally, after all, the desire to be part of something larger than oneself is automatically satisfied by anyone capable of experiencing it. Each of us is a member of the species homo sapiens, for example, each of us is an earthling, and each of us is part of the universe. If these truisms do not slake the desire to be part of something larger than ourselves, perhaps it is because we don't want to be part of something quite *that* large. But, it will be said, the size of the group or entity isn't the main thing. The main thing is that we want to *feel identified* with something larger than ourselves, and this feeling involves more than simply recognizing that we belong to some larger group or can be subsumed within some larger category.

I do not doubt that this is true, but it raises at least two sorts of question. First, there is the question of what it is, exactly, to "feel identified with" a group or collective enterprise? If one can recognize that one does in fact belong to a group and yet not feel "identified with" that group, then what more is involved in the feeling of identification? The second question is why exactly we wish to feel identified with groups or entities or enterprises of some kinds but not of

others? We may wish to feel identified with something larger than ourselves but, it seems, not just any larger thing will do. This should lead us to ask about the characteristics that make certain types of groups and enterprises good candidates for identification, and about the human impulses that are addressed by identification with groups and enterprises possessing those characteristics. In seeking to understand the attractions of association with a tradition, for example, we cannot rest content with the commonplace that people wish to identify with something larger than themselves, for that desire underdetermines the specific choice of a tradition as something with which to identify. We should instead ask why traditions in particular are the sorts of things with which people wish to feel identified. What makes it possible and attractive to identify with a tradition, and what do these feelings of identification involve? These, in effect, are the questions I have been discussing.

Still, the commonplace that people wish to be a part of something larger than themselves is suggestive. One of its functions is to call attention to the limits of our egoism. We want to care about, and to value, things other than ourselves and our own flourishing. We think of people who do not care about anything other than themselves as leading impoverished lives. Indeed, it is widely remarked, and sometimes regarded as a paradox, that people who care about things other than themselves are more likely to flourish than people who care solely about their own flourishing. Be that as it may, the logic of valuing implies that, if we do value things other than ourselves, then things other than

ourselves come to matter to us, and if they are the kinds of things whose survival can be in question, then their survival normally comes to matter to us as well. As I have argued elsewhere, there is something approaching a conceptual connection between valuing something and seeing reasons to preserve or sustain it.⁴ So insofar as we wish to care about, and to value, things other than ourselves, the position in which we wish to put ourselves is one in which there are things other than ourselves whose survival matters to us. It is a further question whether we want to care about things other than ourselves *in order to* care about the survival of things other than ourselves. But the fact remains that most of us do care about, and value, the survival and flourishing of things other than ourselves. And one consequence of this is that we are not indifferent to what happens after our own deaths. What we value, in valuing the survival and flourishing of things other than ourselves, does not depend on our own survival. So if we value the survival and flourishing of things other than ourselves, then it matters to us that those things should survive and flourish even if we are dead. Does this mean that our own death matters less to us? It certainly means that it is not the only thing that matters to us; if we die, but the things we care about and value survive, then, we may feel, all is not lost. The phrase “all is not lost” suggests that we take the survival of what we value to confer on us a kind of immortality, or at any rate, extended longevity. But perhaps this is too strong;

⁴ “Immigration and the Significance of Culture,” pp. 000-00.

perhaps the survival of what we value merely diminishes the significance of our own mortality.

So we want to care about, and to value, things other than ourselves, and in caring about, and valuing, such things, we are led naturally to care about what happens after our deaths: to care about the survival and flourishing of the things that we value. These are time-related concerns in addition to the ones discussed previously, and it is clear that they cannot be addressed by purely personal routines, which, by definition, end with our deaths if not sooner. By contrast, it is evident that traditions have a special role to play here. For traditions are repositories of value, and are themselves objects of value, and the whole point of a tradition is to perpetuate the survival of what people value: to hand these values down from generation to generation. Traditions are human practices whose organizing purpose is to preserve what is valued beyond the lifespan of any single individual or generation. They are collaborative, multi-generational enterprises devised by human beings precisely to satisfy the deep human impulse to preserve what is valued. In subscribing to a tradition that embodies values one embraces, or whose own value one embraces, one seeks to ensure the survival over time of what one values. And in seeking to ensure the survival over time of what one values, one diminishes the perceived significance of one's own death.

Of course, participation in a tradition has a backward-looking as well as a forward-looking dimension. If, in the forward-looking dimension, one seeks to

ensure the survival of what one values, then, in the backward-looking dimension, one sees oneself as inheriting values that have been preserved by others. One is heir to, and custodian of, values that have been handed down by those who went before. These values themselves enrich one's life, and one's status as heir and custodian gives one's life an additional significance or importance that it would not otherwise have had. One is now part of a custodial chain, a chain of people stretching through time who have undertaken to preserve and extend these values. In addition to imbuing one's own life with a distinctive kind of value, this gives one a value-based relation to the past: a past that might otherwise seem to stand in relation to one's own life as nothing but an eternal void. Just as the forward-looking dimension of participation in a tradition undercuts the sense of the future after one's death as representing nothing more than an eternity of nonexistence, so too the backward-looking dimension undercuts this same sense in relation to the time before one's birth. By giving one a role to play as part of a custodial chain of value, the backward-looking dimension of tradition personalizes one's relation to the past and enhances the perceived significance of one's existence. We might say that, in its forward-looking dimension, participation in a tradition diminishes the perceived significance of one's death, while in the backward-looking dimension it enhances the perceived significance of one's life.

These reflections help give content to the idea that participation in a tradition enables people to feel part of something that is larger than themselves.

They help to explain what exactly might be meant by saying this. They also help to explain why the desire to feel part of something larger than oneself, understood in this way, should be a powerful one for many people.

6. At the beginning of this paper, I said that I wanted to investigate the force of traditional reasons, with an eye toward evaluating the reductive dilemma and the form of skepticism about the normative significance of tradition that it appears to support. I also suggested that such an investigation might help to illuminate questions about people's attitudes toward the past and the future and the role of those attitudes in human life. I have now identified a total of twelve different considerations that may speak in favor of adherence to a tradition. These include the seven considerations that I earlier labeled *convention*, *habit*, *wisdom*, *guidance*, *value*, *loyalty*, and *integrity*. They also include five time-related considerations. Participation in a tradition may help to compensate for our lack of control over our mobility in time, it may enable us to domesticate time, it may assure us of our own reality as temporally extended creatures and, by incorporating us into a custodial chain designed to preserve things (other than ourselves) that we value, it may help to enhance the perceived significance of our lives and diminish the perceived significance of our deaths. All of this goes to show, I believe, that the reductive dilemma fails in the case of tradition, and that we should reject the form of skepticism about tradition that is embodied in that dilemma. Acting on traditional reasons is not a matter of doing something

simply because people have done the same thing in the past. But neither is it a matter of acting on reasons that derive solely from certain abstract values, principles, or ideals. As we have seen, many of the considerations that speak in favor of adherence to a tradition essentially depend on the existence of the tradition as a collaborative enterprise involving many people over multiple generations. The actual existence of the tradition gives the participants reasons that they would not otherwise have, and which non-participants may not share. Tradition is indeed a normative notion.

Several points of clarification are in order. First, my enumeration of this list of twelve distinct considerations should not be taken to suggest that the factors I have listed are entirely independent of one another. To the contrary, I have pointed out in the course of my discussion a number of ways in which these factors may interact with or reinforce one another. I present them as a list of separate considerations for analytic purposes only.

Second, nothing in what I have said is meant to imply that all human beings have the impulses that make participation in a tradition seem compelling, still less that every person either does or should participate in one tradition or other. I believe that participation in a tradition is a very common way of addressing some profound and widespread human concerns, but I make no claims of universality either on behalf of those concerns or on behalf of participation in a tradition.

Third, the list I have presented is not meant to be exhaustive. There may be other considerations, in addition to those I have mentioned, that speak in favor of participation in a tradition as well.

Fourth, I do not mean to suggest that all of the considerations I have mentioned apply with equal force to all traditions or to all of the participants in those traditions. Individuals vary in their susceptibility to some of the considerations I have discussed, and traditions vary in their strength, resources, and capacity to fulfill the diverse functions I have enumerated. Nor is the robustness of any individual tradition likely to be invariant over time.

Fifth, although I have emphasized some of the conservative dimensions of traditions, that is, their role in preserving values and establishing rituals and routines that endure over generations, it would be a mistake to think of any tradition as completely fixed and invariant. On the contrary, all traditions change over time and new generations always find ways to modify a traditional legacy in light of changing circumstances and outlooks. Fixity in one area of practice and belief may go hand-in-hand with significant change in other areas. In general, every tradition must strike a balance between continuity and change. If a tradition is too rigid and resistant to change, then it may lose its capacity to speak to the needs, interests, and convictions of new generations, and to help them engage with the novel circumstances and predicaments that they will inevitably face. If, on the other hand, the tradition is too quick to change, or too willing to dispense with older forms of practice, then it risks forfeiting the

features that make participation in a tradition seem attractive in the first place. It is a truism that the traditions that are most likely to endure are those that develop successful techniques for balancing continuity and change.

Sixth, although I have spoken at times of the “benefits” or “advantages” that traditions make available to their participants, I do not mean to suggest that these advantages should be understood in narrowly self-interested terms.

Among the advantages I have mentioned, for example, is the fact that traditions normally embody and perpetuate a range of values and principles, and provide guidance about how to interpret these values and principles and apply them to the concrete circumstances of daily life. To be sure, I have also emphasized that valuing things other than ourselves can help us in various ways to flourish, so the fact that traditions are repositories of value may itself enable them to provide their adherents with eudaimonistic benefits. Still, this does not imply either that the values and principles that a tradition embodies are themselves reducible to values or principles of self-interest, or that the adherents who subscribe to those values and principles are moved by the eudaimonistic advantages they afford.

Seventh, in enumerating the various considerations that may speak in favor of adherence to a tradition, I have not meant to suggest that the participants in a tradition normally have all of these considerations in view when they treat the tradition as a source of reasons for action. As I have said, to subscribe to a tradition just is, in part, to treat the fact that the tradition calls for a certain act as being, other things equal, a reason in favor of performing that act. I

have been trying to identify some of the features of traditions that help to explain why people are disposed to treat them as having this kind of practical authority. But in enumerating such features, I do not mean to imply that the individuals who respond to traditional reasons have these features immediately in view or even that they could articulate the features in question if asked. Individual adherents may in fact be able to say little by way of offering reasons for their own actions beyond saying that what they did was what was called for by the tradition. Still, as participants in the tradition they see it as a source of normative authority – that is, of reasons to act in certain ways – and the question I have been discussing is why this should be so.

Eighth, in addressing this question, I have tried to explain why the fact that some act is called for by a tradition to which one subscribes may count as a consideration in favor of doing it. This leaves many other questions unanswered. For example, it does not tell us whether traditional reasons can ever be binding or obligatory. Nor does it tell us what exactly a person's relation to a tradition must be in order for the tradition to be reason-giving for that person. These are important questions, and they deserve careful investigation. But similar questions arise about values in general, and the mere fact that such questions arise does not undermine the normativity either of value or of tradition.

Ninth, although I have discussed some of the advantages that participation in a tradition makes available to individual adherents, we should

not overlook the potential social and political advantages of widespread adherence to a tradition. The successful entrenchment within a society of a tradition that supports humane values may help the society to realize those values, may make it easier for the society to secure various public goods, and may contribute to the political stability of the society.

Finally, I do not mean to idealize or romanticize traditions. Traditions are not all equally admirable, and even the best traditions have their disadvantages. At worst, the (perceived) values that a tradition perpetuates may be misguided or noxious, and the influence it exerts in human affairs may be destructive, oppressive, or in other ways deplorable. A tradition may reinforce social hierarchy, serve the interests of élites at the expense of others, stifle freedom and creativity, place obstacles in the way of social mobility, and make ideals of equality more difficult to achieve. Even a generally benign tradition may at times tend to inhibit desirable forms of change. I have enumerated a large number of considerations that speak in favor of adherence to a tradition, but this should not be taken as a blanket endorsement of all traditions or as a statement of unqualified enthusiasm about all aspects of participation in a tradition. The importance of tradition should not blind us to the deficiencies of particular traditions or to the characteristic disadvantages of participation in any tradition.

On the other hand, the various considerations I have mentioned demonstrate that it would be a mistake to take an unduly dismissive attitude toward tradition as such or to view participation in a tradition as amounting to

nothing more than a form of blind conservatism. Most of us do in fact participate in traditions of various kinds, and tradition plays a profound, complex, and wide-ranging role in human life. I have tried to shed light on some aspects of that role, and in so doing to demonstrate the importance of taking tradition seriously.

7. Before concluding, let me comment briefly on the implications of my argument for the questions of political morality that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The failure of the reductive dilemma implies that, unlike “cultural reasons,” traditional reasons are normative reasons that are not reducible without loss to other kinds of normative reasons. Although values and principles are important aspects of most cultures, the reasons they generate derive from those values and principles themselves, and not from the fact of their acceptance within a culture. By contrast, I have argued that traditional reasons depend for much of their normative force on the actual existence of the traditions within which they arise.⁵ It follows, I believe, that a liberal society that is

⁵ At this point a defender of cultural reasons might propose that they are best understood simply as traditional reasons in my sense, so that my arguments for the normativity of tradition, rather than undermining the normativity of culture, actually reinstate it. If, as this proposal asserts, cultural reasons are stipulated to be nothing over and above traditional reasons, then of course I waive my reservations about the normativity of culture. But culture is normally understood to include all forms of group thought and practice, including both normative materials – such as values, ideals, principles and, indeed, traditions – and non-normative materials. My argument has been that, when culture is understood in this way, then the mere fact that something is part of a culture is

concerned to accommodate normative diversity needs to pay special attention to diversity with respect to tradition. Contemporary liberal philosophers tend to characterize normative diversity as diversity with respect to people's "conceptions of the good" or "comprehensive moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines." Insofar as these terms of art are intended as umbrella terms covering all forms of normative diversity, they may be taken by stipulation to include reasons deriving from participation in a tradition. Yet the non-technical meaning of these phrases makes them less than ideally suited to capture the normative force of traditional reasons, for they suggest forms of normative diversity that consist primarily in differences of individual conviction. By contrast, we have seen that the normative force of traditional reasons essentially depends on the fact that traditions are collaborative enterprises involving many people over multiple generations. And the diversity of traditions is a multifaceted phenomenon, comprising differences of practice, ritual, historical memory, and collective aspiration no less than differences of doctrine or individual conviction. In short, one consequence of acknowledging the multiplicity of traditions as a species of normative diversity is to remind us that normative diversity is neither a purely individualistic nor a purely doxastic phenomenon. This is, I believe, the grain of truth in the appeal to "cultural reasons". It may not have any very

not – and is not normally seen as – a reason for doing it. If our concern is to accommodate normative diversity, then we should focus on the distinctively normative dimensions of human cultures – such as the values, ideals, and traditions that they endorse or embody – and avoid any suggestion that merely being part of a culture in itself confers some kind of normative standing.

immediate or very dramatic consequences for liberal theory. I do not believe, for example, that it supports the establishment of a special regime of rights, on the cultural rights model, to accommodate the diversity of traditions. Still, it is an important point to bear in mind when thinking about the forms of accommodation and mutual understanding that a liberal society will want to encourage.