The Concept of a Tradition

Alasdair MacIntyre

Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the major critics of liberalism in the current debate. He holds that a person is fully human only within a coherent tradition, since it is through a tradition that an individual gains self-understanding and it is through social practices that he or she is able to live a meaningful life. Morality is a function of this self-understanding and these social practices. By MacIntyre's account, modern liberal society is a collection of rudderless, often desperate people clutching at fragments of lost traditions with which to interpret their lives. The moral life of individuals and of society is in disarray. In this selection MacIntyre describes the life of a person as a narrative set in a particular cultural group and scripted by the stories and myths of a tradition. Through a tradition I cast myself as a character in the life of my community and adopt a life plan. I am not only the subject, or main character, of my own narrative, I am also a character in the narratives of other people. Morality originates in the accountability each of us has vis-à-vis others in these narratives. The good life consists of attaining the goods that are internal to the social practices in which I am a character, and the virtues are dispositions that both sustain these practices and my ability to act within them. Finally, MacIntyre explains that the good life can never be achieved by a person alone, but only as an integrated member of a community. This view of the moral life contrasts sharply with liberal morality and politics. The individualism, acquisitiveness, and adversarial relations found in liberal societies, MacIntyre argues, undermine the traditions through which people develop the social virtues necessary to their own well-being and the proper functioning of their community.

A central thesis then begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutters in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any

society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things. Vico was right and so was Joyce. And so too of course is that moral tradition from heroic society to its medieval heirs according to which the telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues.

I would now like to make a... suggestion about another concept, that of personal identity. Derek Parfit and others have recently drawn our attention to the contrast between the criteria of strict identity, which is an all-or-nothing matter (either the Tichborne claimant is the last Tichborne heir; either all the properties of the last heir belong to the claimant or the claimant is not the heir—Leibniz's Law applies) and the psychological continuities of personality which are a matter of more or less. (Am I the same man at fifty as I was at forty in respect of memory, intellectual powers, critical responses? More or less.) But what is crucial to human beings as characters in enacted narratives is that, possessing only the resources of psychological continuity, we have to be able to respond to the imputation of strict identity. I am forever whatever I have been at any time for others—and I may at any time be called upon to answer for it—no matter how changed I may be now. There is no way of founding my identity—or lack of it—on the psychological continuity or discontinuity of the self. The self inhabits a character whose unity is given as the unity of a character. Once again there is a crucial disagreement with empiricists or analytical philosophers on the one hand and with existentialists on the other.

Empiricists, such as Locke or Hume, tried to give an account of personal identity solely in terms of psychological states or events. Analytical philosophers, in so many ways their heirs as well as their critics, have wrestled with the connection between those states and events and strict identity understood in terms of Leibniz's Law. Both have failed to see that a background has been omitted, the lack of which makes the problems insoluble. That background is provided by the concept of a story and of that kind of unity of character which a story requires. Just as a history is not a sequence of actions, but the concept of an action is that of a moment in an actual or possible history abstracted for some purpose from that history, so the characters in a history are not a collection of persons, but the concept of a person is that of a character abstracted from a history.

What the narrative concept of selfhood requires is thus twofold. On the one hand, I am what I may justifiably be taken by others to be in the course of living out a story that runs from my birth to my death; I am the subject of a history that is my own and no one else's, that has its own peculiar meaning. When someone complains—as do some of those who attempt or commit suicide—that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement towards a climax or a telos. Hence the point of doing any one thing rather than another at crucial junctures in their lives seems to such a person to have been lost.

To be the subject of a narrative that runs from one's birth to one's death is, I remarked earlier, to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life. It is, that is, to be open to being asked to give a certain kind of account of what one did or what happened to one or what one witnessed at any earlier point in one's life the time at which the question is posed. Of course someone may have forgotten or suffered brain damage or simply not attended sufficiently at the relevant times to be able to give the relevant account. But to say of someone under some one description ("The prisoner of the Chateau d'If") that he is the same person as someone characterised quite differently ("The Count of Monte Cristo") is precisely to say that it makes sense to ask him to give an intelligible narrative account enabling us to understand how he could at different times and different places be one and the same person and yet be so differently characterised. Thus personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of a narrative requires. Without such unity there would not be subjects of whom stories could be told.
The other aspect of narrative selfhood is correlative: I am not only accountable, I am one who can always ask others for an account, who can put others to the question. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives. Moreover this asking for and giving of accounts itself plays an important part in constituting narratives. Asking you what you did and why, saying what I did and why, pondering the differences between your account of what I did and my account of what I did, and vice versa, these are essential constituents of all but the very simplest and barest of narratives. Thus without the accountability of the self those trains of events that constitute all but the simplest and barest of narratives could not occur; and without that some accountability narratives would lack that continuity required to make both them and the actions that constitute them intelligible.

It is important to notice that I am not arguing that the concepts of narrative or of intelligibility or of accountability are more fundamental than that of personal identity. The concepts of narrative, intelligibility and accountability presuppose the applicability of the concept of personal identity, just as it presupposes their applicability and just as indeed each of these three presupposes the applicability of the two others. The relationship is one of mutual presupposition. It does follow of course that all attempts to elucidate the notion of personal identity independently of and in isolation from the notions of narrative, intelligibility and accountability are bound to fail. As all such attempts have.

It is now possible to return to the question from which the enquiry into the nature of human action and identity started: In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask "What is the good for me?" is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask "What is the good for man?" is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. But now it is important to emphasise that it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. A quest for what?

Two key features of the medieval conception of a quest need to be recalled. The first is that without some at least partly determinate conception of the final telos there could not be any beginning to a quest. Some conception of the good for man is required. Whence is such a conception to be drawn? Precisely from those questions which led us to attempt to transcend that limited conception of the virtues which is available in and through practices. It is in looking for a conception of the good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of the good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of the good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life, that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good. But secondly it is clear the medieval conception of a quest is not at all that of a search for something already adequately characterised, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil. It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finitely to be understood. A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge.

The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues re-
quired to sustain the kind of households and
the kind of political communities in which
men and women can seek for the good
and the virtues necessary for philo-
sophical enquiry about the character of the
good. We have then arrived at a provisional
conclusion about the good life for man: the
good life for man is the life spent in seeking
for the good life for man, and the virtues
necessary for the seeking are those which will
enable us to understand what more and what
else the good life for man is. We have also
completed the second stage in our account of
the virtues, by situating them in relation to the
good life for man and not only in relation to
practices. But our enquiry requires a third
stage.

For I am never able to seek for the good or
exercise the virtues only qua individual. This is
partly because what it is to live the good life
concretely varies from circumstance to circum-
stance even when it is one and the same con-
ception of the good life and one and the same
set of virtues which are being embodied in a
human life. What the good life is for a fifth-
century Athenian general will not be the same
as what it was for a medieval nun or a seven-
teenth-century farmer. But it is not just that
different individuals live in different social cir-
cumstances; it is also that we all approach our
own circumstances as bearers of a particular
social identity. I am someone’s son or daugh-
ter, someone else’s cousin or uncle; I am a
citizen of this or that city, a member of this or
that guild or profession; I belong to this clan,
that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for
me has to be the good for one who inhabits
these roles. As such, I inherit from the past of
my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a
variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expec-
tations and obligations. These constitute
the given of my life, my moral starting point.
This is in part what gives my life its own moral
particularity.

This thought is likely to appear alien and
even surprising from the standpoint of mod-
ern individualism. From the standpoint of indi-
vidualism I am what I myself choose to be. I
can always, if I wish to, put in question what
are taken to be the merely contingent social
features of my existence. I may biologically be
my father’s son; but I cannot be held responsi-
able for what he did unless I choose implicitly
or explicitly to assume such responsibility. I
may legally be a citizen of a certain country;
but I cannot be held responsible for what my
country does or has done unless I choose im-
plcitly or explicitly to assume such responsi-
bility. Such individualism is expressed by those
modern Americans who deny any responsi-
bility for the effects of slavery upon black Amer-
icans, saying “I never owned any slaves.” It is
more subtly the standpoint of those other
modern Americans who accept a nicely calcu-
lated responsibility for such effects measured
precisely by the benefits they themselves as
individuals have indirectly received from slav-
ery. In both cases “being an American” is not
in itself taken to be part of the moral identity
of the individual. And of course there is noth-
ing peculiar to modern Americans in this atti-
dude: the Englishman who says, “I never did
any wrong to Ireland; why bring up that old
history as though it had something to do with
me?” or the young German who believes that
being born after 1945 means that what Nazis
did to Jews has no moral relevance to his
relationship to his Jewish contemporaries, ex-
hibit the same attitude, that according to
which the self is detachable from its social and
historical roles and statuses. And the self so
detached is of course a self very much at home
in either Sartre’s or Goffman’s perspective, a
self that can have no history. The contrast with
the narrative view of the self is clear. For the
story of my life is always embedded in the
story of those communities from which I de-
rive my identity. I am born with a past; and to
try to cut myself off from that past, in the
individualist mode, is to deform my present
relationships. The possession of an historical
identity and the possession of a social identity
coincide. Notice that rebellion against my
identity is always one possible mode of ex-
pressing it.

Notice also that the fact that the self has to
find its moral identity in and through its
membership in communities such as those of
the family, the neighbourhood, the city and
the tribe does not entail that the self has to
accept the moral limitations of the particularity
of those forms of community. Without those
moral particularities to begin from there
would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in
moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists. Yet particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated. The notion of escaping from it into a realm of entirely universal maxims which belong to man as such, whether in its eighteenth-century Kantian form or in the presentation of some modern analytical moral philosophies, is an illusion and an illusion with painful consequences. When men and women identify what are in fact their partial and particular causes too easily and too completely with the cause of some universal principle, they usually behave worse than they would otherwise do.

What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognise it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition. It was important when I characterised the concept of a practice to notice that practices always have histories and that at any given moment what a practice is depends on a mode of understanding it which has been transmitted often through many generations. And thus, insofar as the virtues sustain the relationships required for practices, they have to sustain relationships to the past—and to the future—as well as in the present. But the traditions through which particular practices are transmitted and reshaped never exist in isolation for larger social traditions. What constitutes such traditions?

We are apt to be misled here by the ideological uses to which the concept of a tradition has been put by conservative political theorists. Characteristically such theorists have followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. Both contrasts obfuscate. For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic. Moreover when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose.

So when an institution—a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital—is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is. Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead.

The individualism of modernity could of course find no use for the notion of tradition within its own conceptual scheme except as an adversary notion; it therefore all too willingly abandoned it to the Burkeans, who, faithful to Burke’s own allegiance, tried to combine adherence in politics to a conception of tradition which would vindicate the oligarchical revolution of property of 1688 and adherence in economics to the doctrine and institutions of the free market. The theoretical incoherence of this mismatch did not deprive it of ideological usefulness. But the outcome has been that modern conservatives are for the most part engaged in conserving only older rather than later versions of liberal individualism. Their own core doctrine is as liberal and as individualist as that of self-avowed liberals.

A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life. Once again the narrative phenomenon of embedding is crucial: the history of a practice in our time is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer history of the tradition through which the practice in its present form was conveyed to us; the history of each of our own lives is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer histories of a number of traditions. I have to say “generally and characteristically” rather than “always,” for traditions decay, disintegrate and
disappear. What then sustains and strengthens traditions? What weakens and destroys them?

The answer in key part is: the exercise of the relevant virtues. The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary to the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual may seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context. Lack of justice, lack of truthfulness, lack of courage, lack of the relevant intellectual virtues—these corrupt traditions, just as they do those institutions and practices which derive their life from the traditions of which they are the contemporary embodiments. To recognize this is of course also to recognize the existence of an additional virtue, one whose importance is perhaps most obvious when it is least present, the virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one. This virtue is not to be confused with any form of conservative antiquarianism; I am not praising those who choose the conventional conservative role of tardator temporis actus. It is rather the case that an adequate sense of tradition manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present. Living traditions, just because they continue a not-yet-completed narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past.

Whose Traditions? Which Understandings?

Susan Moller Okin

In Justice, Gender, and the Family, which contains this selection, Susan Okin charges that political philosophy has assumed that a citizen is a male head of a household. Freedom, justice, and equality have been sought for these citizens, but the special circumstances of women have been ignored. Women perform the labor that supports a household and raise the children. They receive no wages, must curtail their careers, and often bear the risks and burdens of single parenthood alone. On the other hand, women occupy only a small portion of the electorate offices, so they are impotent to secure their interests as free and equal citizens. Liberalism has failed to recognize the unequal distribution of family burdens and to acknowledge that women have a unique function in society. In this selection Okin examines the communalist theories of Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Walzer to see if "traditions" and "spheres" can help modern American women gain status, security, and rewards for constructing and maintaining families.

She begins with the tradition of the Thomist Middle Ages that MacIntyre has praised as the best example of a well-functioning tradition. Not surprisingly, she finds that this tradition was forged by and for men and cannot be expanded to accommodate women. For the typical American woman who is employed while she raises her children, there is no possibility of engaging in a conversation with any of the historical traditions that have MacIntyre's approval. Okin then turns to Walzer's Spheres of Justice. But his reliance on shared understandings within a sphere to arbitrate moral questions leaves women prey to entrenched social practices, which rarely favor them. Walzer endorses caste systems and feudal societies. His criteria would also endorse gender hierarchy because it is formed by a single set of internal meanings based on male dominance.