

# Performing Culture and Breaking Rules

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## Abstract

How is it possible to perform more than is required? And yet, isn't that precisely what is required, in order for an interlocking society of human beings to function, develop and evolve? If human beings only did what we were told to do, we would live in complete monotony and enslavement. If human beings did only what we were permitted to do, nothing interesting would ever happen. Although performance has often been limited to the study of isolated artistic forms of expressions (music, visual arts, etc.), it is equally possible to analyze culture, on the whole, as a behaviour-encoding system of rules and regulations, wherein the individual actor's performative appropriation and reinterpretation of these said (cultural, political, artistic) rules makes possible the culture's very survival, against all odds and obstacles, over long periods of time, as a "tradition" upheld by a community of rule-followers / rule-breakers. Rules, in a very real sense, are meant to be broken. Rule-breaking, by the same token, is, as it were, legislated within the very law code itself, as its own guarantee of immortality. After all, what law could function for any period of time without undergoing reinterpretation? This is good news both for culture and for the avant garde (the creative individual or collective), because even the strictest of rules creates its own conditions of transgression, and vice versa. The performance of culture through the creative freedom of the transgressive individual – i.e. any individual qua his or her individuality – is the sine qua non for a democratic society of peers. Creativity depends upon structure, and structure depends upon that which breaks its shackles of normativity, by rebirthing structure transgressively. The whole point of interpreters is to make things alright for the reappearance of the "father" (the law code) again. This is what Islamic reformism does. Ironically, then, anarchy is the only guarantee of the rule of law.

## 1. CULTURE, TRADITION AND THE «FREE BONDAGE» OF MANKIND

When I'll be speaking about culture, I mean any socially mediated praxis which carries meaning and significance to people under its spell. In other words, culture is to the living present as tradition is to history: both terms refer to conditions of livelihood, a temporally extended living reality for people as individuals and as socially motivated agents. A tradition is a way of doing things, and the result of doing things is culture.

When people denigrate cultural affiliations as parochial, when people demand universal conditions of justice or law, they oftentimes see themselves as carrying on a project of liberation. These enlightenment warriors want total liberation of the spirit from the enslavement of tradition. They demand to break the shackles of habit, culture and tradition, and open the doorway to a new world of cosmopolitan utopia. These people are progressivists, humanists, democrats, enlightenment rationalists etc...

On the other side, conservatives and neo-communitarians demand a return to or a protection of living history, and see the human being as eternally bound to actualizing its potentialities in a given social, historical and local tradition. Traditionalists and conservatives (or, as the case may be, utopian communalists) see the human being as a socially mediated flowering of spiritual and historical self-realization. They see the human being as an aimless wanderer in the dark night of history, destined to fail and falter without the guiding light of tradition which bestows upon the human spirit the powers and potencies of self-actualization as living members of an organic unity of a tradition with its internal logic of unfolding history. The tradition, whatever it may be, fosters a real sense of rootedness and belonging that binds a human being to a shared experience of lived historical tradition — be it nation, community, religion or shared praxis in the work place or the family — and simultaneously frees up the same human being into the active roles of engagement made possible only through this tradition. Every tradition is unique, with its own tastes, smells, colours and realities. An Italian peasant of the late middle ages, dressed in peculiar garment and engaged in peculiar social games, is far removed from the facts of life of a Berlin cabaret dancer of the 1920's, and neither of these two «ways of doing things» is commensurable with the contemporary experiences of a suburban skater community in the outskirts of Los Angeles, California. Or, in another example, a Christian Saint lives the life of a Christian Saint and not the life of Beckettian fragmentary ego shattered in the face of bureaucracy, despite the universalizing tendencies of *both* Christian and Beckettian conceptions of what it means to be human. There are, of course, Beckettian Saints and, one might surmise, rather «saintly» Beckettians, but the singularity of a way of life can never be reduced to a weak analogy where a dominant term is used to explain the weaker. In other words, every reality is self-justifying (and justifiably so), every habit self-engendering (and self-evidently so) and every tradition *complete in and of itself* (set up within its own reality). We should not look for ways of X-izing Y, or Y-izing X (for example, Christianizing Beckett or vice versa).

I hold the (empirical) *ipseity* and *singularity* of each and every thing, event and Dasein: no one thing is the same as any other, and no two cultures speak the same language, even when they do.

Traditions are unique not because they differ in *facts*, but because they differ *holistically*.

Every tradition, every culture, provides ways of finding meaning in this world. In other words, culture is, yes, bondage and obedience, but such that also paradoxically liberates the human being into practices of self-actualization (as member of a community), such practices without which the human being is a vast clamouring nothingness. This perennially Romantic sentiment has been best reflected in the writings of such philosophers of history as Vico, Collingwood, Spengler, Toynbee, Herder and, in our own time, Isaiah Berlin, Alasdair MacIntyre, John Ralston Saul and Charles Taylor, whose cyclical views of tradition, communities and history have served as a healthy counterbalance to the dominant discourse of unilaterally progressivist modernizing utopianism that traces its development through St. Augustine, Voltaire, Rousseau, Locke, Kant, Auguste Comte, Proudhon, Saint-Simon, Hegel and Marx, through the modern sociology of Durkheim and Weber, all the way to the contemporary neo-Kantian and neo-Lockean purely formalistic political science, from John Rawls (1971) on the left to Robert Nozick (1975) on the right. The question is not, which tradition is right — Kantianism or communitarianism — but rather, how can we celebrate the beauty inherent in each perspective, and find a balance between (empty, formalistic) legal universalism and (rich, mystifying) aesthetic particularism? Currently, I am concerned with revitalizing Herder and Vico rather than defending Kant and Rawls, because it is clear where the dominant paradigm of the day lies, and where the established dogmas are most transfixed under the present condition. Who reads Vico anymore? *O tempora, o mores!*

It would be wise, though, to read Vico and Herder, today more than ever, together with Nietzsche and MacIntyre, as champions of a kind of gorgeous historicism that liberates tradition from the bondages of the present.

By this paradoxical statement, I mean that only by understanding history, and becoming part of it, can we liberate ourselves from the bondages of a life inherently bereft of meaning, and *become absolutely free* by means of a transcendental engagement with(in) a tradition as a Jacob's Ladder to heaven.

We need to liberate the human mind from the naive illusion that the present is unconditioned.

We need to *situate* ourselves in a tradition, to *become* history, to *make* history, to *act it out* — in order to escape from it. There is only this: either be the conscious master or the unwitting dupe of history.

We need to recognize the shape and design of each unit of experience as an irreplaceable part, as Dewey, James and Peirce already pointed out, of a totalizing kind of way of doing things: a *habit*. Tradition is habit. The empirical truth of the singularity of experience means that each community, as a shared illusion of sorts, has maintained and perpetuated a particular stylistic commitment to a shared phenomenological-semiotic space-time reality made available only to members of that community, as Herder and Vico have pointed out. Every community or tradition, to the extent it has any lasting merit, embodies a new way of approaching human life by the means of shared signs and other cultural artefacts. The role of the historian is to delve into the mind space of a culture by means of a thoroughgoing self-transformative, almost visionary experience, trying to situate oneself as firmly as possible within the reality of the culture that one wants to understand; as Isaiah Berlin, echoing Herder, said, the scholar needs to understand «that one must not judge one culture by the criteria of another; that different

civilizations are different growths, pursue different goals, embody different ways of living, are dominated by different attitudes to life; so that to understand them one must perform an imaginative act of ‘empathy’ [*Einfühlung*] into their essence, understand them ‘from within’ as far as possible, and see the world through their eyes» (Berlin: 210). What Herder called «*Einfühlung*» Vico called «*fantasia*» (*ibid*: xix): the mental exercise of imaginative recreation with the intention of penetrating other cultures from within. Both Vico and Herder share with Nietzsche and Foucault «the cardinal truth that all valid explanation is necessarily and essentially genetic» (*ibid*: 34). A Deweyan analysis of the shapes and meanings of experience would be the appropriate parallel, and a Peircean combinatory analysis of «*habit*» and «*tradition*» would illuminate the contours of an interpretative tradition (such as Christian exegesis or neo-Romantic poetry) better than a simple historiological analysis of cultures and languages. But whatever the method used, the context remains the same: never to give up the singularity of the experience in favour of some retroactively justified or ideologically coloured story about how things *ought* to have been as opposed to how things actually were, or seemed, in all their richness, through the prism and prison of the world view and culture we want to understand, deeply.

Communities, when freely entered into (and sometimes even when coercively placed upon your head), make the individual free to express him — or herself in ways unavailable to other communities and other traditions. A neo-expressionist is not a cubist is not a neo-minimalist. In politics, a social democratic paradise is not a libertarian paradise. They both have their own charm and their own «mystical aura» of utopian vision. We need to *choose* our *own* traditions. Traditions are tools towards the liberation of humanity — the *only* tools that humanity can aspire to. Ways of doing things liberate: this is what Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen have emphasized in their «capability approach» to political agency; the power to act, through «positive freedoms» (as Isaiah Berlin called them) or «substantive freedoms» (as Amartya Sen called them) to achieve particular results in the real world. Cultures, I claim, following Aristotle and MacIntyre, provide precisely such «capabilities» (or «virtues») by the means of which humanity can inspire to goodness.

Of course communities are also shackles. But only toxically moribund (or just stupid and old) and schismatically universalizing traditions deny the validity of cultures and traditions other than themselves. The more enlightened defenders of cultural integrity are relativists and pluralists, like Isaiah Berlin or the aforementioned Johann Gottfried von Herder, who see the richness of different traditions as the justified richness of the flora and fauna of human biosphere, as different expressions of the truly vast and infinite potential of human spirit. In other words, they see the uniqueness of every living thing as the fragile flowering of a singularity of experience that cannot be duplicated by law or logic. It is said that every living history and every living tradition is a universe onto itself, with its own «life world» of action, thought, habit and praxis. That’s why tradition is not something to escape from; it is something to *engage* and *transform*: «history is an enacted dramatic narrative in which the characters are also the authors» (MacIntyre 1981: 200).

For Nietzsche, the question was: which tradition, which morality, suits our heroic aspirations best? Another variation of this theme is Alasdair MacIntyre’s answer to the older, Aristotelean-Platonic question: Wherein lies the good life of man? MacIntyre’s answer: in the

virtuous community of peers. Both of these approaches to community life raise the possibility of human freedom as engagement to tradition. Such a perspective says that true human freedom can only be experienced as the contented feeling of «having-made-a-choice», by way of subjective affirmation, and living these choices through to the end, to the bittersweet end, by flowing and moving through changing experiences like a fish swimming upstream, enjoying every minute of it, sticking to one's principles and defending one's friends with all the madness of the protagonist of Camus's «Stranger» and all the self-intoxicating ecstatic fervour of a dancing Dervish.

Indeed — it is argued — the true slavery of human beings lies in the feelings of uprootedness and aimlessness, a condition where nothing great, beautiful, true or real can ever come about (according to anti-universalists) because nothing is neither required nor made possible when everything is permitted and nothing is categorically excluded at any given time. Such «tolerant multiculturalism» (so wonderfully analyzed by Slavoj Žižek) can lead to the total enslavement of the human being to a languid choicelessness and to an absolute, sickly prudence: avoiding the fear and disappointment of having made the wrong choice by refusing to make choices altogether, or only making weak choices. Such pragmatism that pushes one towards tolerant centrism has its charms, but the underside can be a failure of the individual to make great commitments to truth, value, beauty or any other kind of life project that pushes meaning into the world.

Value nihilism, in the worst case, can enslave a human being to the sort of apathy that is well known to sociologists, culture critics and social workers. The answer to the challenges of post-modernism and multiculturalism, I think, is a reaffirmation of tradition from the perspective of absolute freedom. The trick is to make movement between traditions easy and painless, and indeed a *skill* taught in schools, similar to what is done in multicultural religious education today, giving children access to every belief system known to mankind, from the «official» to the most foreign: even (and *especially*) the ones that the school and the teacher disagree with. What we have left, after the absolutist claims or traditions are dispensed with and after the cosmopolitan teachings of Kant are duly digested, is a form of «cosmopolitan polytraditionalism» that recognizes the value of every tradition without succumbing to the *universalism* of either one of them.

Such a neo-traditionalism permits the pure movement towards absolute freedom by the means of any and every tradition that we have access to, as mere tools to be used, and dispensed with, at will... We need to see cultures as labyrinths of truth, as specific forms of making something out of nothing, i.e. creating meaning into this world by an act of unjustifiable but almost heavenly *fiat*. By combining Herder and Kant (or Nietzsche and Aristotle), the enslaving effect of tradition can be thwarted by denying the validity of universalistic truth claims made by any one tradition, and instead affirming the totalizing power of human mind to move frictionlessly between experiences, traditions, cultures and allegiances. Such a power is multicultural in the best possible sense: not weak and feeble like modern politically correct multiculturalism, but rather susceptible to the logic of self-creation that every cultural identification supports and indeed makes possible. In recognizing the plurality of values inherent in the plurality of cultures (including cultures that only have one or two members, like private fantasies and boys' clubs), we open the Pandora's box of infinite marvels that is called the depth of the human subconscious,

and delve into the mysteries of parallel universes (because every culture is a world onto its own). We need to affirm the absolute value pluralism and the singularity of experience made possible by cultural diversity. Afterwards, we need to have some fun with it, like a cat with a mouse, playing around with reality itself.

The Nietzschean in us tells us to embrace a single vision and defend it «red in tooth and claw». but the Rortyan in us must also recognize the irony and contingency of any such value commitments. We need to engage traditions, but also to be ready to abandon them at the first instance, and even to mercilessly cross old battle lines, combine and confuse various traditions in unexpected ways and to do sacrilege to every sacred cow on our way. In other words, we need a *Machiavellian* pluralism: sincere but wickedly clever to boot. To sum up, every culture has its merits, yes, but there is nothing holy about it. Every culture, like every politics and every type of jazz, has its charm and every crime its own law and justification. I think that cultures are completely dumb creatures, and it is pointless to have them unless we can use and abuse them, brutally but in a fun way, like sex dolls, without mercy. After all, *they* have no soul, even if they *give* people one (or million). Cultures are not meant to be obeyed, but rather to be commanded and shaped at will.

## 2. PERFORMING CULTURE, OBEYING RULES

So, a culture is defined by the rules that make up the games that people engage in as part of a living tradition. To be a culture member, one needs to follow rules. Indeed, to the extent one follows rules (of habit, meaning, action, work, etc...) one is a more or less exemplary member of a community. To the extent a slave of an aristocrat forgoes his own democratic-universalist aspirations to achieve full citizenry, in order to serve wholeheartedly his master, to that same extent he is seen as a «good slave» within the society of slave-owners. To the extent a Christian priest performs flawlessly the rites of the Eucharist, his parish will sleep easily that night. To the extent a bassist in a rock band performs his role in the timing of harmonies and tapping of melodies, to that extent he shall not fear the boot from the fickle but fair band leader. To the extent that a guest at a gala dinner dresses up to the code, even exceeding the norm, so do his chances of making friends and influencing people — or even finding a partner in love — improve in exact correlation. To the extent a biochemist relies on the theories of Crick and Watson, and not, say, on the Kabbalistic theories of Pico Della Mirandola, in explaining the reproductive potencies of the cell tissue he is cultivating, the infinitely greater his chances of getting published in *Nature* and in finding public funding for his research.

Overall, the question of rule following is the question of fitting a pattern of meaningful expectations within the parameters of established traditional bounds of cultural performativity.

With this in mind, tradition appears as a supraindividual imperative binding individual will to its ends. Performance of culture, in this limited sense, is only the conformism of will to external constraints. But this picture is not enough. It is simultaneously possible to understand culture as the attempted liberation of the human spirit from the bondage of matter, as the first stage of the complete liberation of human mind from the repetition compulsion of natural

cycles of birth, life and death. Culture, as we know, arises from the settlement of nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes to proto-agricultural and proto-urban cohabitations, which later develop further into the city states of the ancient world and the «cultures» proper that we know today. In this sense, any culture, be it Iranian theocracy or Spanish constitutional monarchy, provides, at the *very least*, the essential service of liberating human beings into the quality of higher-order patterning that we call «state-ness» from the state of no-state that Hobbes, misleadingly enough, called the state of nature.

Any culture is a kind of higher order reality principle building a bridge to heaven. Jacob's ladder was a metaphor for the ascent of the spirit, but it could also be applied to describe the ascent of pattern out of chaos, as the self-disciplining drive that makes people say: «I have had enough of being bound to a way of being *that is not my own*, so let me do *this* and enslave *myself* to *my own* culture and tradition so that no-one can dictate the outlines of my prison for myself except myself! ...»

So, culture is the self-liberating self-enslavement of mankind. The state of culture stands to the state of nature as the human mind stands to the human body: the essential extra that transforms and governs the latter by means of a transcendental superposition of hierarchies, lifting one's consciousness from the lower realms to the higher, *liberating* thus the lower to the demands and purposes of the latter, in an act of free submission to a higher cause. This is an idea we need to reinvent: the idea of slavery as the first step of freedom (culture as the true liberation *of nature*)... or indeed, slavery as the *end* state of freedom (our compulsion to choose as the ultimate prison for mankind). After all, what do people mean by freedom? They mean the ability to choose something, to say something, to do something. And what is this something? It is something specific, something crazy, something that could have been otherwise. In other words, freedom is the freedom to choose/do/say/think/plan/want/desire/etc... *one thing rather than another*, i.e. one prison rather than another, to say «A but not B», or «B but not A», or any combination thereof. So, the demand for freedom is really the demand for a prison, for a way of doing things, for the final horizon and limits of one's life. The Dasein closes in on its own horizon of truth.

The idea of «identity» is born, as the guiding light of *my life*. For Nietzsche, *any* mode of self-assertion is an expression of the *Will* and *vitality* that goes into sustaining and maintaining the constitutive lie and violence that grounds the tradition by a continuous act of self-renewal and self-creation out of nothing. In Aristotelean/MacIntyrean terms, the freedom to belong to a tradition is the freedom to choose a virtuous life and stick by it, even if it means acting on principle against common sense and empirical evidence. And who am I to deny this right to people? Certainly it is a universal human imperative. After all, perhaps that is all we can do on this earth: choose one prison (prism) rather than another.

This is culture: it is slavery, imprisonment, stupidity, horror, evil itself... And, consequently, freedom itself, liberation itself... Culture, like human life itself, is a way of living *not* some *other* way, but *this very way*.

A tradition is the «free imprisonment» of mankind into patterns. Self-bondage; self-liberation.

### 3. PERFORMING CULTURE... AND BREAKING RULES (EVEN WHILE BEING TRAPPED IN OUR PRISM/PRISON)

As we have seen, culture is a way of doing things, and this way of doing things (*any* way of doing things) constitutes a prison for the mind that also doubles as a free domain of action.

In such a perspective, what hope is there?

I claim that there's double hope: 1) freedom within tradition, and 2) freedom without tradition.

The second answer, the second hope, is offered by existentialist and mystical traditions.

The first hope is offered by the enlightened historical communitarian tradition of Vico and Herder.

It is *this* communitarian hope, combined with the truth of cosmopolitanism, that I embrace here, more than the existentialist answer — although, to be truthful, there is nothing in either existentialism or mysticism that I expressly disavow. No; the problem with existentialism is *not* that it is a doctrine of freedom; the problem with existentialism is that it's *not free enough*: that it hasn't given us the tools for embracing world views convincingly, only the means whereby we can destroy, deconstruct or transcend them. This is why my understanding of freedom is always «freedom within bounds» and not «freedom without tradition».

Let me be clear, here: I am not saying that freedom-without-compulsion, as such, is an illusion. I am saying something more radical than that — I'm saying that freedom is the way for bondage to appear in the world. How? To make a choice (A *or* B) is to deny reality its empirical richness (it's quality of A *and* B). And yet to make a choice is to live, to become a human being. But if denying (the complete multifaceted nature of) reality is constitutive of making a choice, and if making a choice is constitutive of freedom, and, finally, if being free is constitutive of being human, then (transitively speaking) *denying reality is constitutive of being human*. We must, it seems, *qua* being human, make a commitment, freely, to a project of self-realization, and this project of self-making is a way of narrowing down reality to a specific pathway. To be free is to be selfish, subjective, perspectively challenged and crazily infatuated with a lie called «way of being» or «method» (see also Feyerabend's 1975 book, «Against Method») that overtakes one's life as a modality that rolls over us with overbearing conviction because it holds us in its grip — whether because it conforms to empirical facts as we see them, or to our prevalent ideological outlines, or because it neatly disagrees with what our father and mother hold dear and thus constitutes a means of liberation for us.

But both without and within traditions, things are constantly changing. Time, as Heraclitus and Nietzsche agreed, is the master of even the most self-assured of fixed identities. Not only is every sign usage always differing from every other, but even *within* a particular culture and tradition, signs and events are always being reinterpreted so as to be in constant flux of self-transcendence of their own history. But the point is not that every identity dissipates in the winds of time. The point is that *tradition itself is change*. Tradition is a kind of algebra for producing novelty and change. Tradition is a complex metamorphosis of reality, slowly unfolding in time. What is changing it? People, events, outside forces, but mostly the logic of the tradition itself: the logic that dictates how its future is left open-ended and how its narrative might continue, branch out, discontinue or take in new directions. Its narrative arc is underdetermined and open

to newness. In MacIntyre's phrase, «[u]npredictability and teleology therefore coexist as part of our lives [...] is always both the case that there are constraints on how the story [of a tradition and of our lives] can continue *and* that within those constraints there are indefinitely many ways that it can continue» (1981: 200).

In other words, a tradition, in the end, is like a prison whose outlines have not been drawn before the final act. This is where my «Machiavellian pluralism» comes into play: we must embrace traditions as the raw material for potential, conceivable futures, as the ground for radical change. Of course, traditions are nothing but *ways* of doing things, and limited ways at that. But to pick one is *not* to commit the pathetic fallacy of parochialism, at least if (and only if) the choice of so doing is, first of all, free, and second of all, made within the transcendental horizon of value pluralism and enlightened cosmopolitanism. To embrace a tradition *self-reflexively* means to have accepted the limitations (and liberations) of the tradition as the necessary enclosure and molding of the horizon of truth. Habermasian and Apelian policy of tolerance regarding conflicting communicative horizons should always be exercised to keep open gates of mutual transfer of world-constitutive semiotic insights (i.e. deep level communication between different traditions), and to facilitate inter-movement and peaceful coexistence at the borders of such (easily conflicting) traditions. Furthermore, the long-term goal should be an increased flow of information between cultures. This can apply to nation states, scientific disciplines, political ideological traditions as well as aesthetic and social life paradigms. Everywhere the key is to maintain a perspective of *transcendental openness* to radical novelty; to work within a tradition in order to subvert the tradition. In the end, our goal should be to subvert *all* traditions in the name of some as-of-yet unnamable utopian vision of world in harmony and peace.

So, to work within a tradition, within a culture, is not *necessarily* a crime against good faith and good conscience, if it is done kindly and tolerantly with some particular (achievable) goal in mind (that couldn't be achieved *without* the help of the tradition), and also without compulsion, without resentment and without any foreboding regrets of not being free to do as one pleases. After making a commitment, things *could* be otherwise, but they *would* be otherwise only if that culture (or way of doing things) were abandoned, i.e. only if truth were again re-evaluated and reality overturned. In Alain Badiou's words, the «Event» of the revolution would overtake the «Being» of the old, established culture [see Alain Badiou (2005)]. But my point is that the «Event» is already taking place within the logic of the tradition itself. Tradition *is* the Event.

There are, in my mind, no better traditions and worse traditions, just like there are no better or worse animal species. Every species is a way of doing things. There are no better or worse cultures just like there are no better or worse letters of the alphabet. The framing of the question itself is absurd. The only objective measure of greatness of any tradition is the laxity of the conditions of entry and exit that it permits to its members; and, perhaps, the amount of violence and indoctrination that it utilizes against its children. But that is a complex matter that shall not be got into here. For our purposes, we shall verify the validity of every way of living as, potentially, the true and only way of living.

There are numerous traditions. They constitute history. Culture is the confluence of traditions plus the performative acts made in the present condition. We have to perform culture in

the present, because history is dead, and we are alive. So we cannot be only the sum total of different traditions. We also make traditions. We make traditions by accepting them, but also transforming them through a continuous process of reinterpreted semioethical *praxis*. This movement, essentially, becomes the exercise of the Machiavellian pluralistic principle, *anything goes*; anything goes, that is, as long as it serves the ends of a particular line of argument or the teleological goal of a particular virtue we seek to perfect. So, we must play within the system in order to transform or subvert the system, i.e. in order to improve the system. This is what terrorists do, and also what serious academics do — not to mention the Picassos and Matisses of this world.

Why is there an interrelationship between changing the system and improving it? Because movement as such, time as such, history as such, consciousness as such, demands the continual shift of the meaning of the fundamentals of any tradition. The so-called «central meaning» of Christianity, for example, has been continuously shifting ever since Jesus uttered his first words of prophetic wisdom. St. Paul was a liar and a crook and consequently someone who understood the greatness of Jesus as the greatness of a tradition that can always be added to and improved upon. This is why St. Paul was a great and *authentic* Christian, a true disciple of Christ. St. Paul saved Christianity from Christ's parochial obscurantism. In another example, we know that the concept of «mass» in science and physics has been continuously shifting throughout the centuries and millennia, from Aristotle to Einstein and Peter Higgs. A third example would be the changing representation of male nudity across the spectrum from Greco-Roman sculptures to the homoerotic pop art of Tom of Finland in the 20th Century; never at rest, always nude — and always new (in the wake of the old).

Every tradition, then, is always changing. This is why traditions are the source of great freedom and liberation for the human being! To be an *outstanding* member of any tradition is truly, paradoxically, to be *outside* of it, to stand mockingly above it and to transcend the limitations of this tradition in a way that, in truth, approximates Machiavellian irony. To be a great sculptor (as opposed to a mediocre one) is to understand the rules that make it «happen» but also to shift the central thesis in that argument and to liberate the hand and the chisel from the dogmatic constraints of the past in an act of spiritual freedom that forces consensus reality into hiding out of sheer shock and awe. Such acts of *self-assured mocking mastery* (of form and tradition) constitute the organizing principles of *great* art, i.e. revolutionary art, i.e. *traditional* (canonical) art, and also of a *great* performance of tradition. Culture loves its skilful rule-breakers. A Goethe or a Shakespeare understood the logic and limitations of their native languages better than almost anyone, but their mastery of their language gave them the sufficient skill set to renew and change the very *modus operandi* of the language itself, and to change their contemporary culture, literary form and society in the process. An Einstein, Picasso, Wagner or Goethe is a perfect example of a *traditionalist revolutionary*. By understanding and skilfully breaking the rules of that tradition that nurtured them they *became* that tradition.

Tradition itself carries the inscriptions of all its revolutions (that it has seen and instigated) as its open secret — on its sleeve, as it were, proudly enough. Saying: «I am tradition, I am change». I am Goethe.

To sum up, the rules of the game are meant to be broken, respecting the old *via* the new. Historical consciousness is the key to achieving revolutionary potential.

Why not see traditions as great opportunities? The *momentum* of history, with a bit of ingenuity and historical consciousness, can be on your side, behind you, supporting your every move, urging you on even as you proceed to destroy its dogmas through an act of semiotic reinterpretation. Anybody who has studied *aikido* knows the concept of using the momentum of the enemy to your advantage; this is how history should be tackled: gently, bringing her to her knees, until she comes *to you* begging for mercy.

#### 4. LAST WORDS... FOR A NEW WORLD

Since we can never say the last word, about anything, let us at least say a few things about where we are *now*.

My paper has combined Kant and Herder into a cosmopolitan communitarianism.

I have advocated the combination of principles of enlightenment tolerance and value pluralism with a renewed acceptance of traditions as the *sources of freedom* available to human beings. This implies that no tradition has any special claim to truth (i.e. no tradition can claim to be universalizable in a violent way to the exclusion of other traditions), but also that every tradition has its specific claims that have to be judged by its own standards, not by the standards of anybody else (who claims privileged access to truth). The second principle is that people should have perfect ability to move between traditions, cultures, identities and belief systems without being punished for it (and in fact such transcendental, transhorizontal movement should be encouraged). The third principle, which ties together the first and the second, is that every culture needs to be judged only from the basis of value pluralism, but *strictly indeed* from this basis. Basically, this means that those traditions (and only those traditions) that threaten the ecospheric balance of a pluralistic world — which supports a multitude of cultures, traditions and habits — constitute a danger to *any* culture, and to the very idea of a pluralistic communitarian utopia, and need to be defended against (as universalizing viruses that seek the total destruction of the «biodiversity» of cultures).

Whether this means that every culture must ultimately be destroyed in order to save cultural pluralism, well, we shall have to wait and see...

After all, isn't every (local) tradition potentially (global) domination? Yes; in a way this is true. Every culture says: «I am that I am! I have the right to be, here and there and potentially everywhere!» This means that, in the end, to achieve novelty, we shall need to move beyond cultures as such, and to deny the truth of all (past) tradition, culture, history, truth, reality, significance and meaning, in order to start afresh. Traditions, for us, should be mere tools. We need to live anew.

After all, the past is the past. There is no need to go back to it. Time moves forward. There is only one «now» — and it is now. To move forward, we need to engage a tradition, understand it from within (Herder's «*Einfühlung*» and Vico's «*fantasia*») and follow its rules to the end, and then (only at the last minute, with all the conviction of a fanatic believer gone mad) to break them, creatively, performatively, truly and ingeniously, thus perfecting the chain that tradition has made. In other words, we need to *know* something old in order to *say, create or do* anything new. We need to master the past in order to free ourselves from its elusive

grasp. Only *then*, after we learn the past thoroughly, after we situate ourselves in a tradition of our choosing, and after we become its rule-breaking rule-makers, can we really become a good Christian or a good scientist or a good Gothic writer or a good stripper, or anything else that remotely resembles freedom.

So, to belong to a tradition as a way of being is a thing we can all agree upon is a worthy and unavoidable consequence of being human. Our lives are essentially organized mythologically, narratively. This is what Alasdair MacIntyre meant, in support for his communitarianism, when he said that «Vico was right and so was Joyce» (1981: 201). The narrative of our lives is an open-ended journey through cyclical time: riverrun, past Eve and Adam's... Yet, to belong to *which* tradition, under *what* conditions, for *what* purpose, with *what* conditions of entry and exit, for *what* period of time — these are questions that everybody has to define for his — or herself, within the confines of a tradition, a past, a history and the living present.

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