

## TRADITION AS BODY

### Abstract

The dominant modern picture of human rationality has devalued both tradition and the body. Various postmodernisms ultimately fail to take seriously enough the implications of the enablement of all human reason and meaning by tradition and the body, either by following modernity on their incidental nature of, by privileging one tradition as absolute, and/or by overemphasizing the role of linguistic constructivism. However, one substrand of moderate postmodernism—which I label “radical embodiment”—has recognized that all human language and meaning arise from our embodiment, not just instrumentally but substantively. The bodily roots of tradition, which I argue for elsewhere, will largely be assumed for this article. Rather this article—building upon Polanyi’s idea that what we tacitly rely upon becomes incorporated into our bodies—argues that traditions function as a body through which we meaningfully engage the world. Thus, the prereflective givenness of tradition parallels the prereflective givenness of the human body. Our traditions, like our bodies, constitute our life and identity—what we live in and through—and function as that on which we tacitly rely in order to meaningfully orient ourselves, in order to reflect, know, value. As such, tradition sets limits to our critical penetration, as much of our knowledge is unspecifiable. The piece also addresses the issue of how analytically dissecting particular components of a tradition can alienate one from more holistic meanings. That all tradition is thoroughly contestable—open to explicitation and needing justification (in the tradition of the Enlightenment)—remains strong in the academy, as various examples will testify. The paper examines when critical reflection becomes appropriate, both in terms of rules of thumb as well as with more particular instances, especially 1) those traditions that are anti-body or anti-tradition and 2) when those with power influence a tradition to privilege a particular group at the expense of other groups.

## Introduction

“Without tradition our lives would be as shaky as . . . as a fiddler on the roof.” So intones Tevye in a (bodily) metaphor from *Fiddler on the Roof* (Bock, 1964). As the play suggests, the role of tradition came under increasing threat in the modern period. Indeed, the dominant modern picture of human rationality, and by extension of human life, has been deracinate and discarnate—without roots in tradition or in the human body. I will claim that tradition and the body are—and should be acknowledged as—thoroughly interconnected. And I will attempt to reclaim the cruciality of tradition, like the body, for human rationality and life.

Modern epistemological assumptions discounted, indeed dismissed, the role and value of tradition. As William Poteat has argued, Renaissance paintings, where all appears crystal clear in foreground and background, reveal a “controlling picture” of modernity: the reasoning subject can reach a place of absolute privilege beyond enabling structures such as the human body, language, and tradition (1985:59).<sup>1</sup> Crucial aspects of the Protestant Reformation evidence the influence of this picture. Apart from its actual relationship to tradition, the rhetoric of the Reformation entailed bypassing centuries of corrupt tradition to recover a supposedly pure origin. Likewise tradition was dethroned from an authoritative role in interpreting Scripture, in favor of individual reason and conscience under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (again in rhetoric if not always in reality). Observations on the negative attitude of the Enlightenment toward tradition are commonplace. Two thinkers, in addition to Poteat, who make such observations and who will serve as interlocutors for this article are sociologist Edward Shils and especially epistemologist Michael

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<sup>1</sup> Given Radical Orthodoxy’s claim (Milbank et al., 1999) and earlier Tillich’s (1959:16, 19), that late medieval nominalism formed the juncture where Western theology and philosophy went tragically astray, I will share a word on nominalism’s relationships to modernity. With Tillich (1959:16f) I judge that Aquinas did posit an autonomy (and even an aspect of superiority) of reason vis-a-vis faith. This was not yet modernity’s absolutizing of reason. But this elevation of reason drew a Scotistic-Occamist reaction which paralleled at the same time both deconstructive and postliberal reactions to modernity: skepticism regarding reason’s ability to establish any truth about God *and* the reassertion of tradition in the form of church authority guaranteeing absolute divine truth.

Polanyi. Alasdair MacIntyre goes so far as to claim that *the* essential project of Enlightenment liberalism has been to remove all vestiges of traditional communal authority (1988:228). I acknowledge the essentializing and hyperbole of that claim. And I grant countervailing tendencies in the Enlightenment, a very complex phenomenon indeed.<sup>2</sup> But given the space constraints of this project, I will claim the following as a scholarly consensus in the humanities and social sciences: on the whole the Enlightenment did indeed enthrone the ideal of a universal reason not dependent upon particular traditions. Descartes, signaling the philosophical beginnings of modernity, assumed a radical skepticism of all tradition and convention in the search for absolute certainty based on reason. This was a *critical reason*, in the senses that 1) claims based on tradition or convention demanded critical evaluation and 2) any truth claim required explicit justification or proof.

Such Enlightenment rationality exhibited initial confidence in establishing a universal religion and morality. However, given the standard of absolute proof, this project was doomed to failure. The assumptions of modernity—that knowledge required explicit justification from neutral premises—ineluctably led to the polarized opposites of absolutism and relativism, flip sides of the same epistemological coin. In the wake of Humean skepticism, Kant attempted to negotiate the limits of human reason, yet still relying on critical doubt to find the supposedly indubitable, to “gain for ourselves a possession which never again can be contested” (B 805-806, quoted in Polanyi, 1958:270). Hegel and others promoted the idea of history as progressive unfolding of ever more rational realities. But absolutism could not stand up to critical reason. The relativistic failure of universal reason left only historically conditioned particularisms, constructed by communities and individuals, with no means for adjudication. Here critical reason concluded that religious, ethical, and other value claims were unjustifiable. Standing in or preferring one

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<sup>2</sup> Certainly Enlightenment thinkers manifested great interest in historical, social, and political contexts—though still the dominant mode was to emphasize discontinuity over continuity with the past. Regarding another angle on the Enlightenment’s complexity, Karsten Harries (2003) and Susan E. Schreiner (2003) have shown that anxiety about the deceptiveness of putative privileged perspectives pervaded the late Renaissance and the early Enlightenment. Yet the very breadth and depth of this anxiety and doubt reflects the pervasive pull of the ideal of absolute knowledge.

tradition to another was wholly arbitrary. This attitude helped set the stage for modern rootlessness.

If the anti-tradition “tradition” of modernity is clear, the anti-body dimension is no less real, if more complex.<sup>3</sup> Modern epistemology, either implicitly or explicitly, attempted to locate a place of absolute privilege and certainty on one side or the other of Cartesian mind-body dualism. Rationalists obviously had little use for the body. Yet even empiricists such as Locke and Hume offered strangely disembodied understandings of perception, focusing on immediate mental contents. Many of their contemporary realist, empiricist successors champion a reductionist physicalist version of the body, where the body is merely an object, an object with little or no connection to anyone’s lived or experiential body. Even idealist, individualistic Romantics glorying in the prereflective and emotive often split these from any rational bodily connection with the actual natural and social world.

While one can point to particular pernicious effects of modernity’s anti-tradition and anti-body assumptions,<sup>4</sup> these symptoms point to a deeper malaise: these assumptions call into doubt—radical doubt—the fundamental meaningfulness of life. Indeed, if we alienate ourselves from our traditions and our bodies, what remains but the most abstract forms of meaning? Furthermore this doubt is invincible given modernity’s absolutistic/relativistic epistemological assumptions. Paul Tillich famously observes that the dominant existential anxiety of the modern era was meaninglessness (1952:60-62, 113ff). If as I believe we have been entering a postmodern age, the premiere existential issue remains that of meaning(lessness), at least for affluent Westerners. Compounding the atmosphere of uprootedness bequeathed by modernity’s denials of tradition and the body are various interrelated twentieth- and twenty-first-century developments:

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<sup>3</sup> For a corroborating perspective, see Midgley, 1997:54ff.

<sup>4</sup> Such effects include the tendency in medical science to regard patients solely as physiological machines, striving in the workplace for absolute technological efficiency regardless of bodily consequences, environmental degradation, the positing of a universal absolute beyond all tradition which has been a factor in much (though certainly not all) modern mass death, as with fascism, communism, and some religious violence.

increased mobility, exponential technological change, the knowledge explosion, and sea changes in social roles and status.

### Problematic Postmodern Alternatives

Modernity's controlling picture has left us with a deep-seated dualism, rooted in mind/body and subject/object dichotomies—which, again, push us to either relativism or absolutism. “Postmodernism,” despite its varied and contested nature, usually intends to break significantly with the worst features of modernity. But how well does postmodern thought fare on this score? I will argue that most postmodernisms fail to overcome dualism and/or the absolutism/relativism trap, precisely because they have failed to give tradition (along with the body) their proper due.

On one side, assorted radical postmodernists and other constructivists have tended to devalue not only tradition, but the body itself, as mere, arbitrary constructs in principle always subject to deconstruction or reconstitution, thus giving support to relativism. In so doing they at best exhibit ambivalence about the body, despite not infrequent invocations of it. Modernity imagined the transparency and incidental nature of our language and bodies, as in the case of our perceptions claiming that we can get beyond the mediation entailed in “secondary” qualities and discern “primary” qualities. Likewise, radical postmodernism clings to the incidental nature of our traditions, language, and bodies. (A key difference lies in modernity's hope that one may reach the truth beyond incidental mediators, while post-structuralism posits only incidental signs with no beyond—except for the unrepresentable, for the unreachable.) Whatever the mix of the influence of our subjective determinations and the relativistic determinations of environment and society, of traditions, upon persons—as they inscribe themselves upon our bodies, radical postmodernisms tend to an immanentism, where we humans are stuck in our constructions, representations, language, perceptions. As Mark C. Taylor recognizes Derrida and other

deconstructionists “insist that systems and structures inevitably totalize” (2009a:112). For deconstruction, “significant change is, therefore, impossible and the most we can hope for is persistent resistance to unending repression” (Taylor, 2009a:112). Despite radical postmodernism’s uplifting of intertextuality/contextuality and of alterity, such immanentist tendencies lead to an irony: we (and our bodies) never reach the other. In combination with the alleged arbitrariness of our constructions, this leaves us in subjectivism and/or cultural relativism. Unreachable *differance* or otherness becomes abstract, transcendent, disembodied.

Consulting Mark C. Taylor’s deconstructive phase can help unpack those dynamics. He affirms in Nietzschean “Dionysian” fashion the whole of life and all its constitutive parts, thus seemingly endorsing all constructions (at least as long as they do not suppress other constructions) (e.g., 1984:167). On the other hand, this deconstructionist approach suggests two notions, not unrelated, which appear to challenge total immanentism regarding constructions. Derrida denied outright that we are stuck in our constructions, given his overarching goal of valorizing otherness (Derrida, 1984:123, 198:136-137, 146-147; see also Creech, Kamuf, and Todd, 1985). Ambivalence, however, pervades this goal, as we can never reach the unrepresentable—*differance*—which remains beyond our constructions. Our bodies and language (and traditions) then cannot finally mediate difference—through them we can only recognize the existence of an unbridgeable gap. An ironic corollary follows: despite the intertextuality that assumes our constructions always interconnect with those of others, out of respect for the principle of “otherness” we can never truly reach the other (Taylor, 1984:30-31; 1987; 1993:89-91). Secondly, deconstructionists—including Taylor in that phase—urge us (somehow) to resist any *dominant* constructions, including influential traditions, again valorizing the marginal and the trace, the “not,” the imperceptible always escaping our grasp (1993). Therefore, even stopping

short of the ironic detachment—and implied disembodiment—that often accompanies radical postmodernism, we have only the criteria-less criterion of the unrepresentable or “not” that ever eludes us.

Recently David Newheiser offers a more positive appraisal of tradition, especially religious tradition, for the premiere deconstructionist, Jacques Derrida, than I present. Building upon Derrida’s notion of the “messianic ideal” (see especially 1994), Newheiser argues that religion is “an indispensable resource for political reflection” (2017:42). Though conceding that Derrida “rarely comments on secularism directly,” he claims support for the inevitable presence of religion within the secular based on Derrida’s philosophy that every structure contains much disruptive otherness, resulting in “porous impurity” (2017:51). Newheiser quotes the following from Derrida: “That we *are* heirs does not mean that we *have* or we *receive* this or that, some inheritance that enriches us one day with this or that, but that the *being* of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not” (2017:51-52; 1994:68). In this quotation, which Newheiser indicates plays on “the unconscious” (2017:51), there is much cognate with my understanding of tradition. Nevertheless, I would instead say that much of tradition upon which we rely is better understood as subconscious, prereflective, or tacit, rather than unconscious. The key question is whether Derrida offers us criteria to choose how to interpret or apply tradition, be it the messianic ideal or another tradition. Newheiser answers “yes,” based on the messianic ideal coming from the particular traditions of Judaism and Christianity (2017:54-55) and on Derrida’s claim that we “have some idea of democracy” (2017:55; 2005:18). However, Newheiser includes a quotation from Derrida that “the democratic promise” has “this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, . . . of an alterity which cannot be anticipated” (2017:53; 1994:81). It seems to me that with the messianic ideal we are left with another version of *differance*, the

unpresentable, the “not,” called to unremitting self-critique, without criteria to judge whether any interpretation of the tradition is the best or even adequate relative to present circumstances. Additionally, Derrida’s position of disruptive and even contradictory otherness within any tradition, calls into question whether we ought to trustingly rely upon any tradition, though we apparently cannot avoid depending on some traditions.

This leaves no means to decide among contested, “living, forced, momentous” options, to use William James’ language (1896), no means to choose whether to resist or accept a given construction or interpretation in our actual contexts—except perhaps to try to resist the most totalizing and oppressive interpretation, as the post-deconstructionist Taylor suggests. As radical postmodernism resists any closure in favor of eternal deferral, the desire to feel at home in the world, for things to hang together, becomes an unhealthy illusion we best abandon.

On the opposite side, postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy attempt to purchase at-home-ness in the world by investing (a) tradition with an ultimately absolute objectivity. Postliberalism regards Christianity as a particular form of life and practice deriving from a canon and its interpretation, with its own internal logic and coherence. Doctrine, according to the Wittgensteinian influenced George Lindbeck, performs a regulative function for Christian language games and the Christian form of life.

The overarching concern of Lindbeck and other postliberals, as well as of Radical Orthodoxy, is to define Christian identity over against the larger culture. One danger of such a project is to over-determine identity, to fail to acknowledge sufficiently the plurality within Christianity. It would be quite unfair to characterize the postliberals as blithely unaware of the contested and changing nature of Christianity historically, relative to formation of the canon, interpretation of Scripture, and communal practice. (For example, Lindbeck cites the significant

adaptations that resulted from the encounter of pacifistic early Christianity with militaristic Germanic culture [1984:33-34], and he generalizes that a religious tradition *may* need to change in changing historical contexts [emphasis mine; 1984:39].) Yet despite the ability to recognize a certain plurality on the level of historical facticity, I judge that the following overarching picture unites the postliberals: the essential, defining features and logical structure of Christianity resided in the earliest canonical Scriptures as interpreted by the first Christian community (Protestant postliberals) or earliest ecclesiastical practice (Catholic postliberals). This essence is readily decidable, at least for the discerning with eyes to see and ears to hear. And despite variations, adaptations, explicitations, unfaithfulness, or outright heresy, this essence itself has remained intact, unchanging, at least for the Protestants. Lindbeck clearly affirms a “self-identical story” of Christ and a constancy of basic Christian grammar or rules (1984:83-84). In speaking of a Christian essence for postliberals, I am not suggesting an abstract, philosophical essence. Many Protestant postliberals contend that the (essential?) form of the Christian message is narrative. Yet this narrative consists of unchanging essential features, the “self-identical story.” The Catholics are more open to development and maturation of the original essence (Fiorenza, 1996). Of course postliberals disagree as to the nature of this essence. (In particular, Yoder and Hauerwas believe that the mainstream Constantinian church, in refusing pacifism, abandoned an essential feature of Christianity.)

Like radical postmodernism, postliberalism regards tradition as a cultural-linguistic construct—but without even invoking the body. In its embrace of cultural-linguistic constructivism, postliberalism comes to the precipice of relativism: Lindbeck, the premiere postliberal theoretician, relies upon postmodern logic in expounding Christianity as one constructed cultural-linguistic system among others. Lindbeck senses the unenforceability of

claims to Christianity's unique absoluteness on postmodern logic; so he relies on eschatological verification of Christianity's unique and final truth (that is, we will know in the afterlife) (1984:56ff). Therefore, while Christianity may appear to be humanly constructed on the same ontological plane as all other traditions, for the postliberal it is not: only Christianity comes divinely constructed, possessing an absolute givenness. A revelation from the Wholly Other overcomes the finitude and partiality entailed in our embodiment as "Adam—earth beings"—and supersedes our normal epistemological limitations or (Barthian) impotency in divine matters. While this revelation comes hidden within fallible human construction and divine fullness remains concealed, still an absolute connection from the divine side guarantees to this construction a unique correspondence to reality. Radical Orthodoxy finds more nuance with its Patristic affirmation that the whole world reveals God, but with the same upshot: only revelation in Jesus Christ provides absolute truth.

Standing in the middle, moderate postmodernisms, such as hermeneuticists, neo-romantic expressivists, and moderate neo-pragmatists/historicists, offer the best hope for avoiding the extremes of absolutism and relativism. Moderate postmodernisms refuse the Cartesian assumption of a fundamental subject-object, idealist-realist split. In all our acts of knowing, doing, and valuing, subjectivity and objectivity stand in inescapable correlation: A (significant yet partial) givenness constrains human epistemological and axiological structures and the world we encounter, but (partial) constructedness on both the individual and social levels also applies. Thus the living subject ever deals in givenness and creative judgment in correlative "both-and" fashion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Moderate postmodernism, as much as and perhaps more consistently than poststructuralism (given its mode of ironic detachment) or postliberalism (given its objectivist tendencies with

Tradition in particular involves a givenness from the past in correlation with present judgment, interpretation, and partial construction, as in Gadamer's fusion of horizons (1989). Of course, this correlative process of givenness from the past meeting present construal has formed the traditions we inherit. Sociologist Barry Schwarz expounds upon "collective memory," a phrase popularized by, though preceding, Maurice Halbwachs (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy, 2011:26). Schwarz critiques those who exaggerate either side of this dialectic of past givenness and present construal. Those he labels "constructionists" emphasize collective memory's revisions and discontinuities," regarding tradition "as more precarious than it actually is" (2000: 303). I would substitute the term "presentists" here, reserving "social constructionism" or "constructivism" to refer to those who ply the mind side of dualism by ignoring the constraints and enablements of the human body in the formation of culture—given that such constructionism can accord considerable weight to the past in the formation of culture. On the opposite side, those Schwarz labels "essentialists" stress "the continuities of collective memory" and "underestimate the extent to which" tradition "adapts to society's changing needs and tendencies" (2000:303).

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respect to revelation), emphasizes that knowledge is an activity, a practice, which involves our desire, participation, interpretation, commitment. Examples include Ricoeur's figuration (1984-1988), Gadamer's mimesis as performance (1989:113-118), Bernstein's (1983) and the just-mentioned thinkers' appropriation of Aristotle's *phronesis*, Cavell (1976) and Charles Taylor's (1989) knowledge as expression, including Taylolean "strong evaluation" and Cavellian conviction "to mean what we say," Polanyi's personal knowledge (e.g., 1958:157-162) and intellectual passions (1958:133-196), and Merleau-Ponty's active perception (1962:28ff). For these moderate postmodern thinkers the act of knowing always involves judgment. Judgment is not limited to aesthetics, as in Kant, but applies to scientific, ethical, religious knowing, etc. As Bernstein has observed, Gadamer's *Truth and Method* argues that finally no method exists for determining truth (Bernstein, 1983:115); one must instead rely upon judgment. For Polanyi human knowing relies upon a tacit dimension in principle unamenable to total specifiability (1958:55-65, 95-100; 1966:3-25; 1969:138-157), which I will develop later in this article. For Wittgenstein rules run out: every act includes a moment where one must judge how to apply the rules of a language game or form of life (1958: nos. 28, 84-86, 186, 198; p. 227). (This usually more or less prereflective judgment is sometimes distinguished from a reflective "interpretation" [no. 201].) And Merleau-Ponty describes judgment as "the hidden art of the imagination" in all human knowledge and consciousness (1962:xvii, see also, 32ff). For these thinkers then there is no decidability by rules, yet a non-arbitrary decidability obtains.

Schwarz thus articulates a “both—and” understanding of tradition, where the past frames and helps shape present social reality by providing orientation for our lives at the same time as tradition “reflects reality by interpreting the past in terms of images appropriate and relevant to the present” (2000:301-302). Schwarz includes among essentialists, Edward Shils, with whom he was an associate early in his career. While I will argue later in this article that Shils in some ways is insufficiently critical of inheritances from the past, nevertheless, still Schwarz’s criticism strikes me as unfair. For Shils observes that “the strength or efficacy of the link [with the past] can vary considerably, just as can the state of integration of a society at any point in time” (2000:328). Shils also recognizes that “actions have to be taken in conditions which are nearly always partly unprecedented . . . . Practically all actions entail some deviation from or some independence of tradition” (2011:329-330). Similarly, Polanyi, a protégé of Shils and like him a great respecter of tradition, pens,

in . . . all . . . human activities, it falls finally to him who tells their story, to endorse or revise all previous assessments of their outcome—while simultaneously responding to contemporary issues unthought of before. Traditions are transmitted to us from the past, but they are our own interpretations of the past, at which we have arrived in the context of our own immediate problems (1958:160).

Traditions themselves then always involve interpretations beyond mere facts or experiences, while our appropriations involve further interpretations in turn transmitted into the future. This correlation of givenness with present construal means then that tradition is never absolutely continuous or discontinuous. It means that even when traditions are greatly altered or rejected, they still play a major constitutive role. Paul Connerton notes that even revolutionary change relies centrally upon social memory of the tradition it attempts to displace (1989:13).

While its premises avoid most of the either-or's of radical postmodernism and postliberalism, still many of the exemplars of moderate postmodernism—join the above movements in their emphasis on the linguistic dimensions of tradition, to the neglect of the natural and the bodily dimensions of traditions.<sup>6</sup> Thus they miss the crucial role of the body in the world, of embodiment, as the bridge between subjectivity and objectivity, or better, the very correlation of subjectivity and objectivity. Thus they neglect how we successfully make contact with objects, with our natural/social world, with reality. Thus they overlook the pervasive, foundational role of the body in language and culture. Kimerer LaMothe rightly observes how, not only those movements, but scholars of religion generally, assume the primacy of the linguistic over the bodily (2008:573-580, 590-591). Donovan Schaefer laments the notion of the body under the influence of the “linguistic turn”: “A body determined by language—a deanimalized body—is a blank slate without preexisting affective dispositions” (2015:37). I do not claim that all the above groups of thinkers deny non-linguistic aspects of human experience; however, they do subsume the natural to the cultural-linguistic. Linguistic-cultural construction so dominates, that experiences of nature and body become linguistic through and through. Causal influence travels one way. Here Enlightenment culture-nature binarism still rules, albeit through hierarchical reductionism rather than through separation. Judith Butler declares that language is “the very

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<sup>6</sup> William Dean indicts not only his fellow neo-pragmatists/historicists, but also deconstructionists and postliberal narrative theologians for regarding meaning as “literally and entirely constituted by the language of narrative conversation, or chains of signs,” thus “neglect(ing) the natural world as it is experienced in cognitive, noncognitive, sensory, and affective ways” (1992:749-750). Dean attempts to correct such neglect through his proposal of the “convention,” defined as a social construct that takes on an objective historical reality (1992:751). The convention involves both cultural and natural experience (1992:750-751). However, both the normal connotations of a “convention” and Dean’s definition of it as social construct seem to favor the cultural over the natural, even as does “history” as primary category. In the absence of the development of an ontology or epistemology of the body or nature, Dean alerts us to a problem with the new historicism but fails to overcome it.

condition under which materiality may be said to appear” (1993:31). On the contrary, materiality or physicality is the very condition under which language may be said to appear. The cultural-linguistic may perhaps so pervasively affect our lives that no “pure” bodily experience of the world “untainted” by language and culture exists. Overlooked however is the profound, prior, foundational, inalienable effect of the body upon language and culture, most influentially in the realm of prereflective givenness. While culture indeed constructs our bodies in various ways, more fundamentally, the human body constructs and shapes culture and its traditions.<sup>7</sup>

### The Body in Tradition

Building upon my just-above remarks and contrary to the assumptions of most scholars of religion, a consensus exists among scholars of embodied and enactive cognition that all human meaning—all language and culture—constitutively or substantively relies on human embodiment and its diverse aspects. I have written about this elsewhere, drawing especially upon philosopher Mark Johnson and linguist George Lakoff, philosopher of cognitive science Evan Thompson, and neuroscientists Antonio Damasio and Gerald Edelman (Johnson, 1987, 2007; Lakoff, 1987; Johnson and Lakoff, 1999; Thompson, 2007; Damasio, 1994, 1999, 2003; Edelman, 1989, 1992, 2004). For the purposes of this article, I assume the accuracy of that consensus. Thus traditions radically and tacitly rely upon the body in order “to mean at all,” to use LaMothe’s words (2008:590). This reliance entails some commonalities or similarities of our human spatial orientation, motility, perception, and affect that ever abide as acritical ordainers/constrainers of all our potentialities for meaning. With regard to human language, Poteat succinctly and forcefully expresses its bodily basis: “language—our first formal system—has the sinews of our bodies

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<sup>7</sup> LaMothe herself, relying upon Nietzsche, may lean too much in a constructivist direction, emphasizing self-creation (2008:575) and world creation (2008:575, 591) through bodily movement and the different ways we train our bodies to engage the world, but not addressing how our bodies also constrain the ways we can train them and constrain our possibilities for engaging t

which had them first; the grammar, syntax, meaning, semantic and metaphorical intentionality of our language are preformed in that of our prelingual mindbodily being in the world which is their condition” (1985:9). Growing evidence of non-linguistic dimensions of meaning, knowledge, and symbolism directly contribute to the claim that all human meaning is radically embodied, as well as implying bodily bases for linguistic meaning. Such non-linguistic dimensions themselves play a role in the forming and passing down of tradition. This should come as no surprise to scholars of religion, given the importance for religion of ritual, music, and art, of visual and kinesthetic symbolism. Consonant with Polanyi’s intuition that we learn many of the tacit elements of tradition from observing practitioners, Paul Connerton has argued that bodily ritual (focusing on commemorative rituals as prime example), bodily techniques, and bodily properties in their own right constitute traditions as much as does linguistic inscription (1989:41-71). Thus one’s language and traditions do not operate separately from one’s embodiment in the world but function as aspects of that embodiment.

#### Tradition as Body and the Tacit Dimension

Having considered the embodied nature of tradition, I now argue for tradition as body. The metaphorical phrase, “the body of a tradition,” is well-known. Indeed, as such a conventional and familiar a metaphor, it long ago lost its metaphorical power in ordinary usage. I suspect though that the original inventor(s) of the phrase intuited some vital truth about the nature of tradition. In any case, I want to make this metaphor fresh again by arguing that the prereflective givenness of tradition parallels the prereflective givenness of the human body. Our traditions, like our bodies, constitute our life and identity—what we live in and through, what we are—and function as that on which we tacitly rely in order to meaningfully orient ourselves and in order to reflect, to know, to value. As just indicated, traditions exist always as embodied and function as

an integral part of our embodiment. Now the appropriation of tradition—including its givenness—can be relatively self-conscious, reflective, and critical, as when one selects certain classic texts for interpretation or defends a discrete facet of a tradition. Or its appropriation can be more subconscious, prereflective, and acritical—and more pervasive, as in a tradition’s consensual authorization of a canonical religious text or in the background one brings to the interpretation of any text or idea. Here tradition is not what we think about but what we think and act with. Thinkers and their terminology that recognizes this crucial dimension of tradition include Gadamer’s “prejudices” or prejudgments (1989), Ricoeur’s “prefigurations” (1984-1988), and Wittgenstein’s “customs” (1958:no. 337) or “forms of life” (1058:no. 241, p. 226). Shils and Polanyi, the latter of whom I will invoke frequently below, both note the crucial role of tradition as a subsidiary that we use to attend to matters at hand (Moodey, 2013:6). I will refer to this aspect of tradition as its prereflective or tacit givenness.

Note that givenness here does not function as object of our knowledge—though we do have subsidiary or tacit awareness involving some content, but as part of the subjectivity of our experiential body—or tradition as body—that enables our meaningful contact with the world. The very possibility of critical thinking presumes the existence of tradition(s) upon which we pre-critically and radically rely. Polanyi has written, “when we make a thing function as the proximal term of tacit knowing [that which we are “attending from”], we incorporate it in our body—or extend our body to include it—so that we come to dwell in it” (1966:58; see also, x). We can profitably apply Polanyi’s remark to tradition: We dwell in traditions, extending our bodies through them, incorporating them within our bodies; tradition then functions as a body through which we engage the world.

I would emphasize that from the perspective of radical embodiment the prereflectivity and

tacitness of much of tradition applies both to the material—ritual, architecture, moral behavior, and institutional practices to which Paul Connerton attests—and to the conceptual. While much of the linguistic, conceptual dimension of many traditions has received some explicitation, for any tradition some of it has not. Moreover, from a Polanyian perspective, every use of even a single word or concept involves a tacit coefficient as the speaker relates it to the particular context, including tacit knowledge of its application in many other contexts. Therefore, especially considering the complexity of religion (as well as that of many cultural, social, and political traditions), when a thinker in a tradition articulates any religious belief, only a small portion—the tip of the iceberg—of the full meaning of said belief finds explicit expression. Of course, some of that meaning can find expression in other or further articulations. Yet a significant tacit operation always pertains when religious beliefs or doctrines stated explicitly in one context find application in new contexts—which in turn anticipate future contexts. My sense is that, even in the realm of the linguistic, more of the meaning of any tradition remains unspecified and tacit than becomes explicit. In any case, as various elements of any tradition—again including the linguistic let alone all the non-linguistic—enter into wider applications and meanings in a contemporary context, the tacit dimension must always figure heavily. As Polanyi has put it, all knowledge is either tacit or explicit, and explicit knowledge relies on, is rooted in, tacit knowledge for understanding and application; “a *wholly* explicit knowledge is unthinkable” (1969:144; see also, 1966:61).

Furthermore, not only practical limitations pertain to making explicit all of a tradition. The unspecifiability of key aspects of a tradition (as well as of knowledge more generally) is central to Polanyi’s epistemology. An art or craft serves as an exemplar of the unspecifiability involved in a tradition, where an apprentice learns skills from imitating a master who is unable to specify the requisite skills even to oneself. Here, where so much depends on transmission from one person to

another, a tradition easily becomes lost. Polanyi highlights the “pathetic” nature of “endless efforts—equipped with microscopy and chemistry, with mathematics and electronics—to reproduce a single violin of the kind the half-literate Stradivarius turned out as a matter of routine” (1958:53). However, more literate traditions also involve unspecifiable skills, also involve a dimension of “art” as well as of “science.” After all, thinking, speaking, and writing in any language constitute an embodied skill—or many such skills. Polanyi notes how “*the articulate contents of science*,” which would include various facts, theories, premises, and methodological rules, “are successfully taught all over the world in hundreds of new universities,” but “*the unspecifiable art of scientific research* has not yet penetrated to many of these” (emphases Polanyi’s). He claims that (in 1958) various impoverished areas of Europe where the scientific method originated had proven much more fruitful in scientific research than many other areas with greater financial resources (1958:53). Polanyi also cites the British tradition of “public liberties,” which included maxims of political doctrine. He judges that these explicit doctrines spread to France, “while the unspecifiable art of exercising public liberty” did not, with disastrous results for the French Revolution (1958:54). The abilities and disabilities of artificial intelligence speak to this issue. While computers now surpass human experts in every game, where specifiable rules allow them to encompass far more scenarios than can the human mind (or mindbody to use Potat’s coinage), artificial intelligence proves incapable of programming and learning that capture all the relevant contexts for human communication.<sup>8</sup> In principle, therefore, some of any tradition we inherit remains unspecifiable, though we can capture some of it with maxims, rules,

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<sup>8</sup> Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger cites the recent example of the chatbox “Tay, designed to generate friendly conversation in the language patterns of a 19-year-old girl [sic]. But the machine proved unable to define the imperatives of ‘friendly’ and ‘reasonable’ language installed by its instructors and instead became racist, sexist, and otherwise inflammatory” (2018:13). While the program may have been poorly designed, the example nevertheless points to difficulties for artificial intelligence in the art of human communication.

doctrines, etc. Plus, in applying a tradition to a new situation, no exact rules exist on how to do so, so the art of judgment with some accompanying unspecifiability pertains to both ends of the process of transmission of tradition.

A general limitation associated with making explicit what is tacit or prereflective is that the meaning of a previously implicit or subsidiary part compared to its meaning as the focal object of one's awareness is never one of exact equivalency. Polanyi has pointed out a potential danger associated with this limitation: "an unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters. Scrutinize closely the [normally tacit] particulars of a comprehensive entity and their meaning is effaced, our conception of the entity is destroyed" (1966:18). When we look at particulars, rather than from or through them, we may become alienated from their integrated meaning. Everyday examples include repeating a word while concentrating on its individual phonemes, a pianist looking at finger movements, or focusing on small details of a face (Polanyi 1966:18, see also 1958: 56, 1969:146). To apply this phenomenon to tradition, analytically dissecting particular components of a tradition risks alienating one from its wider integrated meaning. The economy of grace or "the gift" might provide one such example. Radical postmodernists might conclude that any expectations of the recipient by the giver must vitiate the graciousness of a gift. Yet in lived experience I believe the following occurs: someone gives a gift in *hopes* of some kind of appreciation or reciprocity, but without any condition that the gift should be returned if this does not eventuate. Some religious traditions of course believe that this occurs with regard to the divine's relation to human beings. Moreover, much human giving involves some mix of self-concern and concern for others. While the Protestant Reformers' doctrine of total depravity taught that any self-interest vitiated a loving deed, embodied religious traditions are not bound to such absolutistic, all or nothing thinking. Fundamentalism offers an example

from a different worldview: The authority of a scriptural passage becomes so tied to the historicity of a single detail that the deeper religious meaning of interpretive traditions becomes lost.

Just above I offer examples of how focusing on particulars can efface holistic meanings of a tradition by contradicting them. However, the integrity or coherence of holistic meanings of the body of a tradition does not assume that important concepts—and their underlying primary metaphors—need always be propositionally consistent.<sup>9</sup> All the same they may complement and cohere at a more tacit, prereflective level of embodiment. In agreement with various theorists of myth, Ernst Cassirer and Polanyi comment on how myth typically involves antimonies incompatible when considered separately, yet point to an import which encompasses their joint meaning, a sympathetic coherence, involving a “unity of feeling,” in Cassirer’s language (Cassirer, 1944: 81ff; Polanyi and Prosch, 1975:152ff). Such polarities may include the one and the many (unity/multiplicity), creation/destruction, primordial goodness/evil, and order/chaos. Most broadly, a sense of a wider or overall purpose or meaning to life and the universe maintained by many religions appears impossible to discern if one focuses on particular elements of the universe in isolation. Personal commitment to a tradition upon which one relies with a “universal intent” to discover and create meaning lies at the heart of Polanyi’s epistemology and ontology. (Pardoning the exclusive language) Polanyi warns of the ultimate result of detached, disembodied, and reductionistic analysis of particulars:

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the diversity within a tradition involves contestation. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that traditions themselves contain arguments—traditions are hardly unaware of questions, tensions, and multiple perspectives (2007:221-222). Contestation within a tradition in itself does not deny coherence sufficient for relying upon that tradition; rather it represents a striving for greater coherence and integration.

Then law is no more than what the court will decide, art no more than an emollient of nerves, morality but a convention, tradition but an inertia, God but a psychological necessity. Then man dominates a world in which he himself does not exist. For with his obligations he has lost his voice and his hope, and been left meaningless to himself (1958:380).

### Tradition and Critical Reflection for Postcritical Thought

The implications of my model have hopefully become clear: Tradition—as a body through which we meaningfully engage the world, as a body with which we act, as a body upon which we tacitly and radically rely—is not at every point contestable, negotiable, amenable to explication. As constitutive of our encounter with reality, tradition like our bodies is not transparent nor fully penetrable. As I have argued, limits exist on exposing the tacit givenness of the flesh of tradition. Yet my sense is that most scholars of religion fail to recognize such limitations. Rather, the prevailing picture assumes we can critically expose all of the assumptions of the traditions we examine, or least should attempt to do so. As expounded above, postliberalism maintains that an unchanging grammar of the Christian tradition, establishing its essence, has been made explicit. Here no room exists for Polanyi’s unspecifiability in appropriating and applying that tradition in new circumstances.

Deconstructionism and poststructuralism move in two different directions when it comes to exposing tradition. Derrida characterizes immanence in our representations and constructions of reality as a plunging “into the horizontality of a pure surface” (1978:298). The body itself becomes a blank text on which language inscribes itself. Not coincidentally, pictures and metaphors of surface and of texts inscribed on a surface pervade radical postmodernism’s understanding of meaning, with a concomitant eschewal of metaphors of depth. Murray Jardine observes that deconstruction relies upon a visual, literate “picture” of language

rather than an aural, oral model (1996). Literary texts consist of two dimensions while bodies and embodied life inhabit three. Written texts are subject to unending, sometimes incompatible, interpretation over time. Here tradition and contemporary thought and interpretation all lie on the same plane. Here no room exists for the tacit dimension and the deep metaphors of traditions. So in principle every aspect of a tradition can be subject to a critical gaze that scans this horizontal surface of our constructions.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, in the later Derrida and in some other radical postmodernists, we see an acknowledgment of the significance of the unconscious. While one's unconscious will include traditions, these thinkers maintain the fragmented and inwardly torn nature of the self and by implication of whatever traditions it harbors. Yet one should uncover as much as possible from these traditions, with wariness of them, especially of dominant ones. Thus, from whatever direction the radical postmodernist comes—or as bi-directional—one cannot rely on a coherent tradition, while one is called to expose as much of tradition as possible. One can also say the same about many social constructivist, liberationist, feminist, post-colonial, and critical race theorists influenced by deconstruction and post-structuralism.

Many liberal Christian theologians have joined radical postmodernism in alleging the thoroughly contestable nature of all tradition. Some years have passed since the session of the 1996 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, entitled “The Nature of Tradition and the Theological Task”; still my sense is that the sentiments expressed there still hold sway with many.

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<sup>10</sup> Radical postmodernism's picture in effect crunches interpretations into an abstract instant on a flat, “utopian”—“no place”—space. Difference constitutes the unreachable third dimension. Interestingly, this tendency to abstraction comes out as Derrida (echoing Sartre and consonant with Levinas) writes of our equal ethical obligation—an absolute duty—to each of various others. Yes, of course we must decide, but here any decision appears arbitrary. By contrast the givenness of the concrete depth of particular situations at a place in time more readily elicits valid judgments of better and worse: as we must always stand somewhere, this givenness calls us to take a principled stand as traditioned bodies. While written texts can bear multifarious interpretations over time, a spoken word is more readily adequately understood in its context.

Francis S. Fiorenza characterized identity within a tradition as a present contemporary constructive task rather than a historical inheritance (1996). (I would insist that it is both.) Kathryn Tanner rejected the legitimacy of any appeal to the authority of tradition, claiming that theology must establish continuity and “prove everything” (1996) (of course, from the perspective I have been developing, there will always be some discontinuity, which does not automatically rule out some authoritativeness upon which one relies). Delwin Brown and Sheila Greeve Davaney acknowledge that traditions are not just conceptual, but material, embedded in communities. Nevertheless they argue that truth can be judged only by “contemporary canons of discourse,” not by the embedded authority of a tradition; traditions are negotiable throughout, they conclude (1996).

Brown in particular has written at length about tradition in his book, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction*. Here Brown regards humans’ relationship to tradition primarily as one of self-consciously “reconstructing . . . the house of history which they have inherited” (1994:118). He does refer to ritual and feelings (1994:92ff, 145ff) and in a response to journal articles addressing his book explicitly identifies “a principle of materiality” (1997:169-170). In this latter piece he commendably mentions the body’s “reach into the cognitive life” and notes that the interaction of feeling, thought, and practice “far exceeds the force of language and conscious reflection” (1997:170). However, he specifically writes only about bodily enactments of thoughts and feelings in ritual and in social institutions. What Brown does not significantly develop is a bodily or prereflective givenness that radically forms and informs traditions, a theory that recognizes the depth of the constituting function of traditions. Frankly, we do not have all the rooms of the house of history fully accessible to us for our projects of reconstruction.

The outlooks considered above reflect a strongly reflective model of tradition that ignores or downplays inherited and possibly authoritative prereflective givenness. As such, it is terribly redolent of Enlightenment standards of critical reason: the explicitation and justification of everything. Underneath lies the Cartesian call to doubt any and every meaning unless one achieves explicit justification. Despite post-Enlightenment chastening, the Enlightenment picture of absolute lucidity and accompanying standards still exerts powerful influence as asymptotic ideal. Postliberalism believes it has reached explicit justification, albeit on a serpentine path. While radical postmodernism with its undecidability denies that we can clearly establish anything, this Enlightenment picture and standard fuel its “hermeneutics of suspicion” and its doubting of all interpretations, especially dominant ones. As Poteat notes, this picture assumes that tradition and critical thought lie on the same logical plane:

All the elements of their relationships . . . are taken to be logically homogeneous, suggesting that tradition and criticism have the same logical standing and, more important, that they have the same kind of weight; that tradition exerts its force in the way that an explicitly reflected premise does when construed in light of the above rationalistic model, whereas the force of all the unreflected premises, metaphors, analogies, images, pictures which determine the range and limits—and power—of critical thought is hardly felt at all (1990:146).

Polanyi subtitled his book *Personal Knowledge with Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. While being postcritical recognizes that we rely acritically on much in any action, including to think critically, this does not mean that Polanyi and the perspective I am developing assign no role to critical reflection. So when does critical thinking have an appropriate and valuable function to perform? Perhaps some have noticed an irony: While I advocate the misguidedness and impossibility of making explicit every tradition, my very project stems from making explicit a

tradition that I judge to be very harmful, namely, the anti-tradition and anti-body tradition of modernity. Critical reflection within a postcritical stance recognizes the critical paradigm of systematic doubt, its genesis, and its dire consequences. Despite the irony, I can claim coherence in that I criticize an anti-tradition tradition, a tradition that assumes it can escape the influence of all tradition, as well as of our embodiment. For the truth is that postmodern thinkers, just as the Enlightenment thinkers before them, always stand in some tradition or traditions upon which they acritically rely as they question some aspect of a tradition. We finite human beings cannot abscond from our bodies or from traditions that extend our embodiment.

My employment of critical thought just above suggests a rule of thumb for invoking critical thinking: since applying tradition constitutes a skill, one should use critical reflection when problems arise in one's practice. This rule of thumb bears some similarity to the negative pragmatism of William Ernest Hocking, who attempted to forge a rapprochement between his idealism and pragmatism. In short, Hocking's standard states that a theory that works may be true or false, but "that which does not work is not true" (1912:xiii). W. S. Sahakian and M. L. Sahakian find this criterion of negative pragmatism to be the only epistemological standard they cannot defeat (1966:9). Still, not everyone in a tradition may agree on whether an aspect of the tradition has problems, fails to work. When people judged as competent in the skill of applying a tradition claim a problem exists, that is, when some aspect is actively contested, critical reflection comes into play. Undoubtedly, liberal theologians such as those I cited above would want to avoid the appeal to authority as a trump-card discussion ender, and so do I. In this case, discussants have already raised elements of tradition to a reflective level and critical reason becomes requisite. However, I disagree that any reference to an acritical dimension of trust in a traditional authority necessarily represents an illegitimate move in every controversy.

The much ballyhooed digital humanities raise questions about explicitation and

interpretation. Recently Stanley Fish points out the dangers inherent in the digital humanities—indeed seeing them as the death knell of the humanities if they come to dominate: to make the humanities—to reduce them to—a science where we no longer have to deal with the messy business of interpretation. Fish views their attraction as offering the false hope of bringing “humanities activities in line with the more culturally privileged activities of science and mathematics” (2018:B13) Of course, computers and the digital humanities can make explicit the frequency of word usage and associations in quantities of which the human mind/body proves incapable. However, we deceive ourselves if we assume they eliminate the need for interpretation (and its reliance on our tacit powers) or make the best interpretation obvious. And because of that tendency to deception, they make more likely a poor interpretation. A case in point I believe involves Edward Slingerland and others’ recent study of three Chinese terms for “body” and *xin* (“heart” or “heart-mind”) in ancient Chinese texts (Slingerland et al., 2017:985-1016). Using collocation of terms, hierarchical clustering, and topic modeling, they conclude that ancient Chinese texts support a *xin*-body dualism (2017:994-1010) rather than *xin* being “first among equally physical organs in a materialistic, monistic universe” (2017:1009). I would first note that they seem to assume as the only alternative to dualism, a reductive physicalism. I doubt that they have established a clear-cut simple contrast of *xin* and body. Statistically, the t-scores shown in the article for other purportedly contrastive pairs range from 82.75 (“lord”-“minister”) to 54.62 (“inside”-“outside”), while that for *xin*-body is approximately 29. Substantively, I propose a different interpretation. While *xin* does have meanings of a physical organ in terms of location in the center of the body, its wider meaning involves the bodily sense of being alive and of a holistic sentience—perceptive awareness—of the body as a whole. Dawei Pan, challenging Slingerland and company, cites several texts relevant to my point. A quote from one text describes “the ears,

eyes, nose, mouth, hands, and feet”—“minor parts of the body”—as “slaves to the *xin*,” “a major part of the body” (2017:1022). Pan translates another text that characterizes the *xin* as “the grand master of the five viscera and the six bowels” (2017:1024). In paraphrasing yet another text, he designates the *xin* as that “into which the *qi* [vital force] enters and dwells” (2017:1025).

Interestingly, Damasio hypothesizes background feelings of one’s body, which include some sense of one’s viscera, “provide a core for the neural representation of self” (1994:235ff; see also 1999:110, 285-287) and bestow “the feeling of life itself, the sense of being” [alive] (1994:150). I do agree with Slingerland et al. that *xin* is not an organ just like any other bodily organ (2017:1001, 1006, 1009). But rather than regarding it as immaterial mind, I interpret it as pointing to embodied consciousness and to the whole self, which includes one’s character, dispositions, habits, values, and desires. Relative to a putative contrast, I regard the *xin*-body relationship as more complementary than contrastive. “Body” then would refer to the embodied person more objectively from others’ perspectives, while *xin* would more subjectively refer to the lived or phenomenal body, to use Merleau-Ponty’s language. This accords with Pan’s view of “physicality and mentality as two sides of the same coin” (2017:1026).

When particular problems arise in the practice of a tradition then, hopefully practitioners of that tradition can address them through adequate explicitation and reflection. However, in principle, some aspects of tradition may be so deeply tacit and embedded as to defy adequate explicitation. These aspects would be assumed in any explicit affirmations or refutations—and would, I claim, include the basic meaningfulness of our bodily orientation of ourselves to our world.

I now want to focus on a particular type of problem that arises in many traditions, including religious ones. Certainly some religious and quasi-religious traditions stand guilty of

privileging the powerful and oppressing others. Even as anti-traditionalists always rely upon some tradition(s), so from the perspective of radical embodiment those supporting an anti-body tradition always tacitly and substantively rely on human embodiment in order for their claims to have any meaning in the first place, even if those claims are false. Commonly the powerful have utilized the strategy of identifying those of lower status, such as women and people of color, as more “bodily,” associating the latter with nature and more “physical” or “grosser” aspects of embodiment, while identifying themselves with cultural creativity and “finer” or more refined aspects of embodiment—or of alleged discarnate immateriality, including ratiocination. Projecting onto a less privileged group facets and functions of the human body related to substances that evoke disgust ratchets up this dualism (Nussbaum, 2004; Bloom, 2004:175-178). The caste system of Hinduism employed such projection. The Nazis infamously invoked that tactic to dehumanize Jews and homosexual persons.

The reason why many scholars contest traditions and the traditional, why many scholars employ a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” involves ethical concerns relating to abuses of power, not just a generalized Cartesian epistemology of doubt. This includes not just deconstructionist and poststructuralist types, but also feminist, liberationist, post-colonial, and critical race scholars. Long before Foucault, Tillich noted that moral systems always contain both genuine wisdom inherited from the past and provisions to protect the privileges of the powerful (1959:139). Those oppressed have often sensed this problem, whether prereflectively or reflectively, while some of the privileged have sometimes sensed it as well. When the large majority of a society come to sense the problem, as with slavery, the unfairness of inequality becomes obvious to most. All the major world religious tradition have resources to recognize this tendency of the powerful to shape and apply tradition in a way that privileges their group at the expense of others. For all these

traditions acknowledge a human tendency towards selfishness, whether understood more in terms of sin in Western traditions or more in terms of ignorance in Asian traditions. At this point in world history, we have become sufficiently aware of how human selfishness often has resulted in inequity and discrimination not based upon the capabilities of the targeted group. Writing about “prejudice” not in the negative sense of unjust discrimination, Gadamer observes, “the prejudices and fore-meanings in the mind of the interpreter are not at his free disposal. He is not able to separate in advance the productive prejudices that make understanding possible from the prejudices that hinder understanding and lead to misunderstandings” (1989:263). But knowing the tendency to prejudice that unfairly privileges the powerful and disadvantages others, we can practice bringing into the foreground and examine those aspects of our religious, cultural, social, political, and economic traditions that treat groups of people differently to judge whether they do so in an unwarranted and unfair manner.

So where do I part company with the above-mentioned groups with whom I share an ethical concern about privileging the powerful at the expense of others? As alluded to earlier, I agree with Schaefer—as he shares the concerns of Eve Sedgwick, Adam Frank, Stacy Alaimo, and Susan Hekmann—“that theory has become reflexively antibiological, relying exclusively on the register of language as the only possible zone for critical work” (Schafer, 2015:50). This ignoring or denying of the constitutive nature of the body, as well as a general anti-tradition attitude, collapses any place where one might reliably stand to challenge any use of power. This brings us to the next problem, the tendency to reduce all traditions to political, social, or economic power to the exclusion of other cultural and religious meanings—more “existential” meanings—not thoroughly or inextricably related to those types of power. Sociologist Schwarz critiques the model of collective memory as always in the service of dominant power structures for being

“atemporal” in erasing the power of the past with its fullness of cultural meaning in favor of current political conditions (as well as discounting memories that challenge the powerful) (2000:299-300). While not granting religious traditions the degree of stability and coherence that I do, I applaud Schaefer’s perspicuity in spotting the assumption—often stemming from the above “linguistic fallacy”—that one should try

to map power according to a grid of aligned propositional statements. Sedgwick calls this *paranoid reading* [emphasis Schaefer’s]: “whatever account it may give of its own motivation, paranoia is characterized by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure” [2003:138]. Allowing accident into our assessment of the relationships between bodies and systems of power makes it easier to propose that sometimes power may not be out to get you, that the things bodies do with religion may be about healing, joy, and nurturing” (2015 176).

What Tillich avers about ethical systems should be affirmed about at least most religious traditions: they do provide us some measure of wisdom.

### Our Contemporary Situation

Given that my article argues for the indispensable and generally positive nature of tradition—at minimum that human society and culture would not exist without it, it is incumbent upon me to address somewhat the issue of stability versus innovation in general and for our contemporary situation. After all, I began this article by describing tradition as a temporal process of inheritance *and* contemporary interpretation. Edward Shils among sociologists is probably the greatest defender of tradition against the modern “construction of a doctrine which treated traditions as the detritus of the forward movements of a society” (1981:330). We have seen that he recognizes that the application of a tradition almost always involves some modification of that

tradition. And he declares that “not all traditions are benign; not all of them merit survival.” Nevertheless, he asserts “that the fact that certain beliefs, institutions, and practices” have “persisted for an extended period” “indicates that they served those who lived in accordance with them” (1981:328). Though Shils at one point acknowledges the danger posed by those who want to monopolize power for their group (1981:327), he fails to qualify the above assertion with a caveat that sometimes a tradition may serve, may work for, one group, while failing to do so for others. Still, I grant Shils’ point that generally major traditions deserve some presumptive respect. Shils goes on to argue that caution should be exercised with respect to major changes to or departures from a tradition, seeing some inherent value in relative stability versus significant instability. He does not hold that major change or departure is never warranted, for significant benefits may accrue. However, “the renunciation of tradition should be considered as a cost of a new departure; the retention of traditions should be considered as a benefit of a new departure.” His position supports “moderation in policy” (1981:329). He regards fascism and communism as exemplars of the danger of radical change.

Similarly, Michael Polanyi sees moderate change as key to the survival and growth of liberal democracy. Earlier I shared Polanyi’s analysis of the excesses of the French Revolution. He regards fascism and communism in their respective ways as radical renouncers of tradition that end up as “fanatical cult[s] of power.” The moral passions behind communism became “scientific affirmations,” unmoored from their “original moral context,” combined with explicit denial of the existence of morality, and immune to most limitations (1958:231). In Nazism the acids of doubt dissolved traditional moral obligations, to be replaced by the duty of the superior individual and nation to fulfill their will and power. Polanyi comments how fascism stirred the moral passions of the German Youth Movement (1958:232). In a similar analysis, Tillich, who

lived for a while under Nazi rule before escaping to America, explains the attraction of fascism to European youth: alienated by “the emptiness of adjustment to the demands of the industrial society” and “the emptiness” of “playing with cultural goods”—now status symbols cut off from their traditional meanings, they longed for “something *absolutely serious*” (albeit demonic) (emphasis Tillich’s; 1959:152).

Given his aversion to revolutionary change, Polanyi addresses the problem of unjust power distribution and accompanying privilege as follows:

Unjust privileges prevailing in a free society can be reduced only by carefully graded stages; those who would demolish them overnight would erect greater injustices in their place. An absolute moral renewal of society can be attempted only by an absolute power which must inevitably destroy the moral life of man (1958:245).

How should we respond to Polanyi in an age very different from his own? Economic inequality, increasing for around forty years, has become quite pronounced. Progress in the rights of female, African-American, Hispanic, homosexual, and transgender persons has occurred, though inequities remain and backlash has become stronger recently. While I would recommend less caution than Polanyi might in addressing economic inequality, I largely agree with him. To mimic our current President, many people are saying that this President wishes for dictatorial power and a significant proportion of Americans would be willing to grant it in hopes that he might dramatically improve their lives (even as his policies work against the interests of working and middle-class folks).

More generally—not only for the cases of fascism and communism, Polanyi delineates the concept of “moral inversion,” whereby morality as morality is denied by objectivist Enlightenment reasoning, while it may be readmitted as objective science, which can serve as an

unstable counter to nihilism. (Or at some points, the moral inverter may inconsistently think and write in actual moral terms.) Polanyi sees this as common in modern sociology and psychology (1958:232-234). Recently psychologist Paul Bloom authored *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (2016). In utilitarian fashion, he argues that empathy leads people to direct their charitable efforts in narrow ways and should be ignored in favor of a detached compassion and reason that direct such efforts in more effective ways. Yet I find no basis for any compassion unless we grant some moral authority to the pro-social affects and inclinations of our bodies and to the religious and moral traditions that encourage them. Granted the helpful nature of suggestions to better direct our moral efforts, but I think the goal should be to better cultivate our empathy. Though obviously not the whole story, the major world religions have cultivated traditions of enlarging the circle of those to whom we have an obligation to show compassion.

The Enlightenment and its traditions have of course presented significant challenges to religious traditions. Modern natural science has contradicted literal interpretations of various scriptural passages and of various traditional doctrines, beliefs, and practices. Modern historical scriptural criticism, informed by the natural sciences in the art of objectively evaluating evidence, has—along with growing skepticism of miracles now understood as violations of established natural laws—disputed the historicity of many events related in scripture. While decrying the anti-tradition ideology of the Enlightenment, both Polanyi and Shils endorse other accomplishments and inheritances of the Enlightenment. Shils affirms that “the Enlightenment was a very great accomplishment and it has become part of our tradition” (1981:330). Polanyi of course criticizes the common portrayal of scientific methodology and progress, a model that has infected epistemic methodologies more widely: the scientist follows an impersonal process of gathering and analyzing evidence and data, then forming a plausible hypothesis, and finally

testing the hypothesis with experiment, controlling conditions as much as possible, and doubting everything until proven (1958:15-17, 270-271). Under this model, discoveries should happen in gradual increments from simply following logical rules (1958:123-131, 150-151). On the contrary, from his own practice as a physical chemist and reflection upon that practice and upon the history of science, Polanyi concludes that intellectual passions drive the scientist, who trusts some scientific theories as well as not fully specifiable scientific methods, in hopefully advancing scientific knowledge with her or his research (1958:133-196). Usually this advancement does not lead to fundamental change in an established theory. When that does happen, though, a logical gap exists that requires a heuristic leap (1958:123, 150-151, 159, 177, 189-190). That is, one cannot in logical, specifiable steps move from the old to the new theory. Though writing somewhat later than Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn became much better known for this insight, for which he coined the phrase “paradigm shift.” In promulgating a new theory, the scientist believes that it will result in indeterminate future manifestations. Polanyi applied the phrase “universal intent” to the scientist’s (and others’) quest for truth (1958:64-65, 300-301). Of course, some new theories (as well as less groundbreaking research results) are ultimately disconfirmed, while others bear fruit and are confirmed by overwhelming evidence. Because of the sharing of basic values within the scientific community and the history of science, Polanyi endorses a critical realism associated with a dramatic advancement in our scientific knowledge (Kuhn is not always as clear that scientific paradigm shifts have advanced our knowledge). It is worth noting here that theories overwhelmingly confirmed are not so much proven false as supplemented. For example, Newton’s laws of motion are quite accurate for all ordinary human movement and purposes, which happen at speeds far too slow for noticeable relativistic effects. Thus, for Polanyi the knowledge of the scientist, driven by intellectual passions and universal intent, with the fiduciary

element of reliance upon one's body and some traditions, is always "personal knowledge." And knowledge in most other areas of human culture is, all the more so, personal.

Which brings us back to religious traditions. Polanyi himself believed that the scientific and historical knowledge that challenged some aspects of religious traditions, by purging unnecessary or counterproductive elements, should lead to a deeper and truer religious faith for those who best interpret their tradition (1958:282-283, 286). But what about interpretations that reject consensus on scientific and historical knowledge? Though such interpreters would claim to save tradition from undue challenges, I would characterize their responses to changing conditions as immoderate ones, which to a large extent cut themselves off from any interpretive tradition. With respect to Protestant Christianity, Liam Jerrold Fraser recently argues that Methodist and free church Protestants, unfettered by the Reformed confessions, took the Reformation idea of individual interpretation of scripture much further than the original reformers (2018:69-83). This happened despite John Wesley's own reliance on Patristic theologians and ecumenical creeds (Fraser, 2018:72). With the Fundamentalist movement, interpretations hardened into a dogmatic literalism against scientific and historical findings. This reactionary extremism ignored previous interpretive traditions. Until the Protestant Reformation, a tradition of four senses of scripture—only one of which was "literal"—prevailed. According to various interpreters, some scriptural passages lacked any literal sense. And the literal meaning did not have to constitute a blow-by-blow account of events. Augustine, the most influential early Western theologian, in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* interprets God's initial creative act to happen simultaneously and the whole of creation to happen gradually over a period of time as God plants "seeds" (1982:Book V). Similarly Origen, the most influential early Eastern theologian, expounds that many details of the creation stories must be interpreted figuratively to

avoid absurdities (1966:288). Even with respect to historical traditions that hold to literal six days, fundamentalist interpretation represents a radical inversion: the insistence on the falsity of the scientific consensus becomes primary and the religious or theological meaning—the world as the good creation of a beneficent divine source in this case—becomes at best secondary. Similarly, the historicity of miracles—now understood as violations of natural law—becomes primary and the religious meaning the story conveyed or of which it served as “sign”, to use the language of John’s gospel, becomes secondary at best. Likewise, the historicity of a detail disproven as factual becomes more important than any religious meaning. Granted that previous interpretive traditions naively assumed the realism of much of scripture now challenged by modern science and historiography. Yet in precariously tying the authority of scripture to its historicity and scientific credibility at every point, fundamentalist interpretation undermines and distorts tradition by weakening its authority and obscuring its deeper religious meanings.

While the application of the label “fundamentalist” to Islamic radicalism is debatable, radical forms of Islam, informed by Wahhabism and/or Salafism on the Sunni side and Ayatollah Khomeini’s theology on the Shi’ite side, do feature immoderate interpretations of the Qur’an and hadith largely cut off from interpretive traditions. Clifford Geertz in *Islam Observed* (1968) compares two forms or styles of classical Islam, the Indonesian Balinese and the Moroccan. The Balinese style, informed by Hinduism and Buddhism, was very flexible, while the Moroccan style was strict. Nevertheless, Geertz classifies the latter like the former as “mystical,” because of the importance of charismatic powers for the marabout—the political and religious leader—and saints around whom cults had formed. Both styles faced radical “scripturalist” challenges. One can see similar developments with respect to other classical forms of Islam: insistence on literalism in texts challenged by modern science and strict application of proscriptive and prescriptive texts

with an attitude of intolerance to non-Muslims as well as to those claiming a Muslim identity but with a differing viewpoint from the radical group. Of course, these extreme interpretations involve a reaction (or overreaction) to the impact of Western culture, with the irony that the scripturalist focus owes a debt to Protestant colonialism.

Both fundamentalist Christianity and radical Islam purport to return to a time of origins free from later corruptions. As Shils discerns, “a tradition once it has receded from regular usage cannot be deliberately restored. The conditions and the motives to say nothing of the memories of those of later times who would restore it are unsuited for the task. What will appear will be a fanatical distortion of the receded tradition” (1981:329).

Clearly then the Enlightenment and its legacy have brought huge changes in scientific and historical knowledge that demand a response, some of which must enlist critical reflection on the part of religious practitioners. Mark C. Taylor writes helpfully about the destabilizing effect of the growing interaction and competition among religious and other traditions in modern and postmodern times (2007:23-28). In such a situation, which we can label scientifically as “far from equilibrium” or “a moment of self-organized criticality” (the latter, 2009a:118), reside both special danger and special opportunity. The opportunity is to forge “new” or “revised” traditions of greater complexity (which term to favor depends on context). I have argued just above that a danger consists of reactionary movements purporting to preserve tradition, but which fail to do so and, from a scholarly perspective, fail to seriously engage contemporary knowledge, thus refusing complexity and its inclusivity in favor of simplicity and exclusivity. In positing an interplay of the structuring and figuring of complex meaningful wholes with the de-structuring and disfiguring of the same, Taylor confesses a preference for the destabilizing side (2007:345; *Columbia News*, 2008; see also 2009a:117-118). Radical embodiment, however, grants a certain priority to the side

of the stability of complex wholes, in the first instance the integral stability of the complex biological organisms which are our bodies.<sup>11</sup> Of course, traditions can transform into new complex wholes in a way an individual organism cannot. For when an organism gets very far from equilibrium, it dies. However, Taylor, in his exposition of “imagination”/autopoiesis/self-organization as ultimate category refuses the notion that self-organization within the universe operates according to certain structures or principles, thus downplaying stability (2007:20, 120-129, 322-323, 345-346). For Taylor then it is self-organization “all the way down,” a doctrine of self-organization from nothing, if you will (2007:116ff, 126, 345). “Logos,” whatever structures or principles pertain to self-organization, is itself self-organized (2007:346), as are the natural laws of the universe which evolve (2007:322-323). Indeed, Taylor misunderstands physicist Lee Smolin, who theorizes the formation of new universes from black holes, the basic laws of which are up for grabs at their origins (2009). However, Smolin does not believe that the fundamental laws of our universe (determined in the early moments of the Big Bang and possibly to some extent during the ensuing first million years when the universe was opaque to light and thus unknowable to us) undergo subsequent change (1997:77-79). Contrary to Taylor, the coherence of

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the deconstructionist Taylor penned that the body itself “betrays” (1993:239ff). While rejecting modern notions of the absoluteness of origin and primordality as a matter of general principle, Taylor then tellingly found great import in the fact that the fetus’ immune system must learn not to attack the body’s own cells. Taylor interpreted this as a primordial division of the body against itself (1993:246). The contemporary Taylor associates the de-structuring, undifferentiating element with the experience of the sublime, which he equates with the experience of unlimited possibility (2007:119-124). While we do not possess the divine as structured particularity, still in Taylor’s scheme we may end up with a “having of the divine” more in keeping with the modern than the postmodern spirit. For radical embodiment by contrast, we and our world in no sense have direct dealings with that aspect of divinity that serves as the reservoir of all possibility, of that which is prior to embodiment. All the activity and creativity of emergent complex realities happen within structures.

Taylor’s controversial call to abolish academic departments also manifests his preference for the side of destabilization (2009b). While totally agreeing with Taylor on the narrowness and over-specialization in academia that prevents the recognition of complex wholes, I believe the solution lies in maintaining departments, as reformed parts which can help us see interconnected wholes.

reality, consisting of a balance of determinacy and indeterminacy in possibilities for our enactment, would seem to me to require some features that remain stable through the flow of time (I have written about this at more length elsewhere).

I do agree with Taylor that the Enlightenment and its wake have created for religious traditions a situation far from equilibrium offering special opportunity. And I would not wish away the disruptive Enlightenment, for it has brought many benefits to humankind, especially in terms of scientific and technological knowledge. (I do wonder if it lay within human possibility to have had an Enlightenment without its anti-body and anti-tradition ideology.) However, I would part company with Taylor in giving more weight to the pole of structuring and stability than does he. Even in forming new religions or radically altering existing ones, I would insist that even such radical change does rely radically upon some traditions. And I would hope that those forming new religions or re-forming the major world religions would respect the religious traditions upon which they rely in a manner that retains the traditions' deepest wisdom even as they adapt to our contemporary reality. I also hope that we scholars of religion might in postcritical fashion recognize the impossibility and foolishness of the goal of making explicit everything about our embodiment and the body of tradition, in favor of honing our skills in the art of knowing when to employ critical reason.

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