

“Performing culture and breaking rules”

- Otto Lehto

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 pluralistic 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 successful interpreters – the prodigal "sons and daughters," the radical revolutionaries - is to make things alright for the reappearance of the order of the "father" (the law code). This is what, for example, Islamic reformism does, in re-interpreting Shari'a skillfully. Ironically, then, anarchy is the only guarantee of the rule of law.

1. Introduction: Performance theories in political and moral philosophy

The particular question I explore here is this: Can culture be simultaneously liberating *and* constricting? It seems that culture is precisely such a double-edged sword. Nor can there be any human flourishing without the “enslavement” of culture, habit and tradition; its rules are meant to be mastered, broken and re-imagined, through the skillful, virtuous performance of cultural roles. Not only does culture *allow*, but it even seems to *require* a certain level of rule-breaking in order to function properly, in order to survive as a historical entity. In short, without people to break the rules skillfully, there cannot be any law, or culture, or tradition, to last for a very long time.

Before moving to Vico, Herder, and MacIntyre, who are the main subject of my analysis, let us briefly explain the need for a performance theory of political philosophy.

What are the proper dimensions and ends of political theory? How does political theory relate to, for example, metaphysics and psychology? I will argue that the underlying thread from Aristotle to Kant, and from Kant to Rawls, is a systematic exposition of the properly *performative* dimension of man as part of the practical use of reason. Political theory is a study of that part of man which concerns the performance of his inherent capacities for self-perfection in the social arena. Political theory can be seen as simply one aspect of the theory of “actualizing the potential” in man. Political philosophy, then, is the proper extension of psychology and anthropology, i.e. “humanism” - the study and science of man. Humanism is the science of human performance. Psychology, for example, concerns itself with the *performance of the self as “I”*, while politics concerns itself with the *performance of the self as “we”*. In both cases, the proper goal is the perfection of man (in the first case as *private*, in the second case as *social being*).

Much of this history of perfectibility is the study of universals that unite all human beings. This has led many people to believe in a single utopian vision. Plato already saw that human beings are innately capable of reason, and that the Idea of the Good, which they all share, means that they are intrinsically capable of self-perfectibility. Aristotle expanded this notion, in a more elaborate direction, and saw that human beings have capacities and propensities which can be either developed or neglected. His theory of the virtues is an example of an early performance theory of political action. Aristotle's ethics and politics concern themselves with the perfection of our capacities. He asked the question still relevant for us today—How can excellence and the idea of the good be attained?—and he provided the means, however culture-bound, of getting there.

It can be shown that Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and others modern thinkers also offer a kind of performance theory of political engagement. Only with the rise of modern political theory, after Hobbes and Kant, do we get a new consciousness of self-reflexivity

that aims toward emancipation of the individual from the shackles of tradition. They emphasize the universal aspirations of political theory, and they, like Plato and Aristotle, but in a different way, believe in the self-perfectibility of man through the cultivation of social virtues.

But the Enlightenment rationalists, for the most part, tended to ignore local traditions in favour of universal, all-encompassing Enlightenment aspirations.

Thus, in my analysis, we concern ourselves, in the present essay, with communitarians, from Herder to MacIntyre, and their quest for self-perfectibility.

They provide us with the means to complement Enlightenment universalism with a healthy dose of relativism, skepticism and pluralism. This “sidestep” into cultural relativism, with its many problematic tendencies, still allows us to continue to interpret the proper role of political philosophy as the perfection of virtues and the development of human flourishing.

2. Culture, tradition and the “free bondage” of mankind

I take the following statement to be true: culture is a means of liberating people (into performance). It is also true that culture is a means of imprisoning people (into performance). These two truths are the focus of our analysis.

By “culture”, I mean any socially mediated praxis which carries meaning and significance to people under its sway. In other words, *culture* is to the living present as *tradition* is to history: both terms refer to conditions of daily life, a temporally extended, living reality for people as individuals and as socially motivated agents. The actors of history are the performers of culture. (Henceforth I use the two terms “culture” and “tradition” interchangeably.)

When people denigrate cultural affiliations as parochial, when people demand universal conditions of justice or law, they often see themselves as carrying on a project of liberation. These enlightenment warriors want total liberation of the spirit from the enslavement of

tradition. They set out to break the shackles of habit, culture, and tradition, and to open the doorway to a new world of cosmopolitan utopia. These people are progressives, humanists, democrats, Enlightenment rationalists.

On the other side, conservatives and neo-communitarians demand a return to or protection of living history, and see the human being as eternally bound to actualizing his/her potentialities within 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 potentials 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 workplace or the family; simultaneously, it frees the same person *into* the active roles of engagement made possible only through this tradition.

Every tradition is unique, with its own tastes, smells, colors and realities. An Italian peasant of the late Middle Ages, dressed in peculiar garb and engaged in peculiar social games, is far removed from the facts of life of a Berlin cabaret dancer of the 1920s; and neither of these two “ways of doing things” is commensurable with the contemporary experiences of a suburban skater community on 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 a 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 the 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, that is, 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 believe in 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, yes, culture is bondage and obedience, but such that it also paradoxically liberates the human being into practices of self-actualization as member of a community; without such practices, the human being is a vast and clamoring 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 the 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 Weber, all the way to contemporary neo-Kantian/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 (I believe *both* are)—but rather: How can we celebrate the beauty inherent in each perspective, and find a balance between empty, formalistic, legal universalism and rich, relativistic, aesthetic particularism? My main interest here is in revitalizing Herder and Vico rather than defending Kant and Rawls, because it is clear that the dominant paradigm in political philosophy today is in, roughly speaking, the “Kantian school.”

Who reads Vico anymore? *O tempora, o mores!* It would be wise, though, to read both 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 shackles 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 bondage 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—all in order to escape it. There is only this choice: either be the conscious master of history or its unwitting dupe.

We need to recognize the shape and design of each unit of experience as an irreplaceable part of a totalizing kind of way of doing things, as Dewey, James, and Peirce have already pointed out; a way that is a *habit*. Tradition is habit. The empirical truth of the singularity of experience means, as Herder and Vico have pointed out, 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. Every community or tradition, to the extent that it has any lasting merit, embodies a new way of approaching human life by means of shared signs and other cultural artifacts. The historian's role is to delve into the mental space of a culture by means of a thorough, self-transformative, almost visionary experience, by 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 1976: 210). What Herder called *Einfühlung*, Vico called *fantasia* (ibid: xix): the mental exercise of imaginative recreation with the intention to penetrate other cultures, as it were, 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, or a Peircean semiotic 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 historiographical analysis of cultures and languages. But whatever the method used, the context remains the same: never give up the singularity of the experience in favor of some retroactively justified or ideologically colored 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.

Communities, when freely entered into (and sometimes even when forced upon you), 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 Pop Artist. In politics, a social-democratic paradise is not a libertarian paradise. Different traditions have their own charm and their own “mystical aura” of utopian vision. We need to choose our own traditions. Traditions are tools for 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 “capabilities approach” to political agency: the power to act, through “positive freedoms” (as Berlin called them) or “substantive freedoms” (Sen) to achieve particular results in the real world. Cultures, I claim, following Aristotle and MacIntyre, provide precisely such “capabilities” (or “virtues”), by means of which humanity can aspire to goodness.

Of course, communities are also shackles. But only toxic (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 to be as justified as the richness of the “flora and fauna” of the human biosphere, as different expressions of the truly vast and infinite potential of the 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, every living tradition, is a universe unto itself, with its own “life world” of action, thought, habit, and praxis. That is 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, best suits our heroic aspirations? Another variation of this theme is Alasdair MacIntyre's answer to the older, Aristotelian-Platonic question, Wherein lies the good life of man? MacIntyre's answer: in the virtuous community of his peers. Both of these approaches to community life raise the possibility of human freedom as engagement with 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 fervor of a whirling Dervish.

Indeed, it is argued, the real slavery of human beings lies in feelings of uprootedness and aimlessness, a condition in which nothing great, beautiful, true, or real can ever come about (according to anti-universalists), because nothing is required or made possible when everything is permitted and nothing is categorically excluded at any given time. Such “tolerant multiculturalism” (so wonderfully analyzed by Slavoj Žižek in many of his books) can lead to the human being's total enslavement to a languid choicelessness and to an absolute, sickly prudence, evidenced by avoidance of the fear and disappointment of having made the wrong choice by refusing to make

choices altogether, or only making weak choices. A pragmatism that pushes one toward 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 injects 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, cultural critics, and social workers. The answer to the challenges of post-modernism and multiculturalism is, I think, a reaffirmation of tradition from the perspective of absolute freedom. The trick is to make the movement between traditions easy and painless, and indeed a skill taught in schools, similar to what is done in multicultural religious education today, so as to give children access to every known belief system, 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 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 any of them.

Such a neo-traditionalism permits a pure movement towards absolute freedom by 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., as creating meaning in 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 a denial of the validity of universalist truth claims made by any one tradition, and instead embracing the power of the human mind to move without friction 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 the depth of human creativity; and also delve into the mysteries of parallel universes, since every culture is a world unto itself. We need to affirm the absolute value-pluralism and singularity of experience made possible by cultural diversity. Afterward, we need to have fun with it, like a cat with a mouse, and play around with reality itself.

Our inner Nietzsche tells us to embrace a single vision and defend it “red in tooth and claw”, but the Rorty in us must also recognize the irony and contingency of any such value commitment. We need to engage with traditions, but also be ready to abandon them at a moment's notice, and even to mercilessly cross old battle lines, to combine and confuse various traditions in unexpected ways, and to do sacrilege to every sacred cow in our way. In other words, we need a Machiavellian pluralism: sincere but wickedly clever to boot. In brief, every culture has its merits, yes, but there is nothing holy about them. Every culture, like every politics and every type of jazz, has its charm; and every crime its own law and justification (a perspective from which it makes sense). 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. Cultures are not meant to be obeyed, but rather to be commanded and shaped at will.

3. Performing culture, obeying Rules

“Culture” is defined by the rules that make up the games that people engage in as part of a living tradition. To be a member of a culture, one needs to follow rules. Indeed, to the extent that one follows the rules (of habit, meaning, action, work, etc.), one is a more or less exemplary member of a community. Let's take a few examples.

To the extent to which a slave of an aristocrat, in a society of slave-owners, 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.” To the extent that a Christian priest performs flawlessly the rites of the Eucharist, his parish will sleep easily that night. To the extent that 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 getting the boot from the band-leader. To the extent that a guest at a gala dinner dresses up to code, or even exceeds the norm, his chances of making friends and influencing people—or even finding a partner in love—improve. To the extent that 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 potentials of the cell tissue he is cultivating, the greater are his chances of getting published in *Nature*, and securing 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 performance practices. With this in mind, tradition appears as a supra-individual imperative that binds the individual will to its ends. The performance of culture, in this limited sense, is only the conforming of one’s will to external constraints. But this picture is incomplete. 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 the human mind from the repetition-compulsion of natural cycles of birth, life, and death. Culture, in the ordinary sense - to the best of our knowledge - arose from the settlement of nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes into agricultural and urban settlements, which later developed further into the city-states of the ancient world and the “civilizations” 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 from the state of no-state, which Hobbes, misleadingly enough, called the state of nature. Any culture is a kind of higher-order reality principle, building a bridge to heaven (or at least to a better

human society). Jacob's ladder might be a metaphor for the ascent of the spirit; but it may also be applied to describe the ascent of pattern out of chaos as the self-disciplining drive that makes people define the limits of reality for themselves. It is as if the early people, the founders of traditions, had suddenly proclaimed: "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 to 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, lifting one's consciousness from the lower realms to the higher ones, thus liberating the lower to the demands and purposes of the higher ends, in an act of free submission to a higher cause.

This is an idea we need to reinvent: slavery as the first step to freedom, or indeed, our "having-to-make-a-choice" - a "fall" into culture - as the ultimate, but beneficial 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 limited, 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) one prison rather than another. Freedom is to choose between A and B, even if it makes no sense. Freedom is the freedom to say "no" to open alternatives (for this, tragically, is what any "choice" entails). Hence 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 idea of "identity" - cultural, religious, national, generational - becomes the guiding light of *my* life. For Nietzsche, any mode of self-assertion is an expression of the Will, of the vitality that goes into sustaining and maintaining the constitutive "faith" that grounds the tradition out of nothing. In Aristotelian/ MacIntyrean terms, the freedom to belong to a tradition is the freedom to choose a virtuous life and stick to it, even if it means standing and acting purely "on principle," against common sense and empirical evidence. Who am I to deny this right to people, even if it

means believing in fanciful things? Certainly it is a universal human imperative. Perhaps that is all we can do on this earth: choose one prison (or prism) rather than another.

This is culture: slavery, imprisonment, stupidity, horror, evil itself; and, consequently, freedom itself, liberation itself. Culture, like individual human life, is a way of living *not some other way*, but *this very way*. Cultures are the “voluntary imprisonment” of mankind into scattered, mutually exclusive, habit-forming, tradition-creating patterns.

Traditions are mankind's self-bondage as self-liberation.

4. Performing culture, breaking rules (... even while 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. The prison cell, while restricting reality, opens up a field of possibilities. It goes both ways: limitations create freedom, and freedom creates limits. Not only does the setting of limits create new opportunities, the opening of this very real freedom is a way for bondage to appear in the world. How? To make a choice (A *or* B) is to deny reality its empirical richness (its quality of A *and* B). And yet to make a choice is to live, to become a human being. If the denial of the complete, multifaceted nature of reality (with its open matrix of possibilities) 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) *denial of reality (and its open matrix of possibilities) 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-perfection 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 Feyerabend 1975), which overtakes one's life as a modality that rolls over us with overbearing conviction because it holds us in its grip—because it

conforms to empirical facts as we see them, or to our prevalent ideological outlines, or perhaps because it neatly disagrees with what our father and mother believed in, and thus constitutes a means of psychological 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 the constant flux of self-transcendence of their own history. 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, stop, or take new directions. Its narrative arc is undetermined and open to newness. In MacIntyre's words, "[u]npredictability and teleology therefore coexist as part of our lives ... [It is] always the case both 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. Its contours are not entirely finished. This is where "Machiavellian pluralism" comes into play: we must embrace traditions as the raw material for potential, conceivable futures, as the ground for radical change. They are like the Lego blocks of political change. They offer ways of building structures for human flourishing. 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, freely made, and second of all, made within the transcendental horizon of value pluralism and enlightened

cosmopolitanism. To embrace a tradition from an Enlightenment perspective is to self-consciously accept the limitations of the tradition as the necessary enclosure of its horizon of truth.

The Habermasian and Apelian policy of hermeneutic tolerance regarding conflicting communicative horizons should always be exercised to keep open the gates for communication between traditions, and to facilitate movement between, and peaceful coexistence at, the borders of such (otherwise easily conflicting) traditions. 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 to 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 long term, our goal should be to subvert and revolutionize all traditions in the name of a utopian vision of Enlightened poly-traditionalism.

Despite my faith in multiculturalism, I want to emphasize, that 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 a particular and achievable goal in mind, which could not be achieved without the help of the tradition; and if it is done without compulsion, without resentment, and without any regrets about not being, any longer, “free” to do as one pleases. After a commitment is made, things *may* be otherwise, but they *can* be otherwise only if that culture, or way of doing things, is abandoned, i.e., only if truth should again be re-evaluated and reality overturned. In Alain Badiou's (2005) terms, the “Event” of the revolution needs to overtake the “Being” of the established culture. My point, however, is that the “Event” is *already* taking place *within* the logic of the tradition itself. It is not merely dead structure. Tradition *is* the Event.

Perhaps relativism is right. There are no better and worse traditions, just as there are no better or worse animal species. Every species is a way of doing things. There are no better or worse cultures just as 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, I claim, 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—a complex matter we shall not go into here. With these exceptions, I wish to believe in the validity of every tradition as, potentially, the true and only way of being. Every culture is a fruitful doctrine for organizing human flourishing.

There are numerous traditions. They constitute history. Culture is the confluence of the performative acts made by members of those traditions, *both* in the past *and* in the present. We have to perform culture in the present, because history is dead, and we are alive. So we cannot only be the “sum total” of the past actions and performance practices of different traditions. We also *make* traditions. We make traditions by accepting them, but also by transforming them through a continuous process of re-interpretative, semiotic praxis. This process, essentially, becomes the exercise of the Machiavellian pluralistic principle of “anything goes” (what Feyerabend has been criticized as advocating); anything goes, that is, anything goes so long as it serves the ends of a particular line of argument or the teleological goal of a particular virtue that we happen to seek to perfect. As individuals, we must play within the system in order to transform or subvert the system - and in order to improve it. This kind of anarchism is what terrorists do, and also what serious academics do, not to mention the Picassos and Matisses of this world.

The only way to radically improve the system is to subvert it from within.

Why is there an interrelationship between changing the system and improving it?

Because time and history as such, and consciousness as such, demand a continual shift of the meaning of the fundamentals of any tradition. People change. Needs change. Expectations change. Thus also traditions change. 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, a self-avowed hypocrite and murderer, who never met Jesus, was able to take Jesus's words and to *improve* upon them. Paul really invented Christianity and the cult of Christ. This is why Paul was a great and authentic Christian. For it was he who saved Christianity from the parochial obscurantism

of Judaism. 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 Higgs.

Every tradition 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 its limitations. 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, to liberate hand and chisel from the dogmatic constraints of the past in an act of spiritual freedom. Such acts of self-assured, mocking mastery of form and tradition constitute the organizing principles of great (revolutionary) art, i.e., of traditional (canonical) art, and also of a great performance of tradition. Culture *loves* its skilful rule-breakers. Culture *erects statues*, literally and figuratively, to its skilful rule-breakers. For example, Goethe and Shakespeare understood the logic and limitations of their native languages better than almost anyone (the bondage of their traditions and cultures), and their mastery of the language gave them sufficient skills to renew and change the very *modus operandi* of the language itself. By this, they managed to change their contemporary culture, literary form, and society in the process. An Einstein, Picasso, Wagner, or Goethe is a perfect example of a tradition-mastered revolutionary. By understanding and skilfully breaking the rules of the tradition that nurtured them, they *became* that tradition. (So much so that, today, it would impossible to imagine their respective cultures *without* them!)

Tradition itself carries the inscriptions of all its revolutions, those which it has seen and instigated, as its open secret on its sleeve, as it were, proudly saying, “I am tradition, I am change. I am Goethe.” But at the moment the culture erects statues to Goethe, and fixes idioms to German language to celebrate his legacy, the original anarchism of Goethe (the rule-breaking that made possible the rule-following) is forgotten. The rules of the game are *meant* to be broken, to

create new *via* the old tradition. Historical consciousness – the consciousness of the skillful rule-breakers situated within a living tradition - is the key to achieving revolutionary potential.

Why not, indeed, interpret 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. If indeed “history is an enacted dramatic narrative in which the characters are also the authors” (MacIntyre 1981: 200), we need to *become* those characters-in-the-narrative, and perform culture by breaking its rules creatively and skillfully - and thus become, in our own modest way, authors of history.

5. Final thoughts and suggestions

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 a combination of principles of Enlightenment tolerance and value-pluralism with a renewed acceptance of traditions as the best source 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 and has to be judged by its own standards, not by the standards of anybody else, who might claim privileged access to truth. Cultures are ways of *erecting* standards (like statues of Goethe) and their outcomes differ. Indeed, with a variety of cultures and standards, human beings have many opportunities for human flourishing. We need a “free market” of cultures and traditions.

The second principle is that people should have the perfect ability and freedom to move between traditions, cultures, identities, and belief systems without being punished for it; in fact, such transcendental, trans-horizontal movement should be encouraged. The third principle,

which ties together the first two, is that every culture needs to be judged only on the basis of value-pluralism, but strictly indeed on this basis. This means, fundamentally, that those 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; these 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, we shall have to wait and see.

After all, isn't every local tradition a potentially global domination? 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, ultimately, 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, taking what's best in the traditions and creating new ones, slowly.

The past is the past. There is no need to go back to it. 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—then 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 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 a good anything else that remotely represents freedom.

So, to belong to a tradition, as a way of being, is something which we can all agree upon as being a worthy and unavoidable consequence of being human. Our lives are essentially organized mythologically, narratively. This is what Alasdair MacIntyre means, in support of his

communitarianism, when he says, “Vico was right and so was Joyce” (1981: 201). The narrative of our lives is an open-ended journey through cyclical time: “river-run, past Adam and Eve’s,” says Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. As individuals, we are performers of traditional roles/rules.

But, *which* tradition to belong to, under *what* conditions, for *what* purpose, with *what* conditions of entry and exit, for *what* period of time—these are questions that everyone must define for his- or herself, within the confines of a tradition, a past, a history, and a living present.

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