

SEEKING AFTER TRADITIONS: ANALYTICAL FORAYS

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The social world does not divide at its joints into perspicuous we's with whom we can empathise, however much we differ with them, and enigmatical they's with whom we cannot, however much we defend to the death their right to differ from us.

Clifford Geertz, 'The Uses of Diversity'

The mandate of this paper is fairly explicit and clear: to comment upon and foreground the academic (read, social scientific) analyses of traditions. In giving effect to it, however, I have had to modify its focus – giving it an altogether analytical twist – while also striving to avoid an excessive historical self-consciousness about the problem – of the order, say, which asks of a representation, any modality, whether it is 'Indian', whether it is not actually 'Western' or 'Hindu', and, unto this frame, whether it is not always or already 'Brahminical' or 'Sanskritic'. There are many reasons for this avoidance, not least my ignorance, a sense of incredulity about matters formulated as either traditional or modern; but also to fend away a line of criticism that would interpret any (or all) concern about traditionality and traditionalisation as both archaic and abstruse or as lending themselves to a variety of nativist exceptionalism.

An even more decisive impetus marking out the contours of my engagement is the contemporaneity configuring the question of tradition; but as I seek to formulate it this contemporaneity would have to be placed within a normative analytical grid. What I want to talk about in this contribution, therefore, is not strictly speaking the character of tradition. One might imagine at least that one is talking about processes of transmission – to be sure, one is here trading off the etymological sense of tradition, from the Latin *tradere*, to give over, the act therefore of handing down or transmitting something from generation to generation – when one is talking about the character of tradition; but I do not want to talk about transmission per se. Rather, my concern is with how we – social scientists, the secular liberal intelligentsia, by and large – stand relative to

transmission, to that which is handed down, be it doctrine, practice or belief. I want to think about what we think we know, what there is to know, and how one goes about seeking after traditions. These near-programmatic outlines should not be lost sight of in responding to my arguments herein. What is more, I think, they could lend some further perspective to the whole talk today about either retrieving traditions or reinstituting them.

I. CONSTRUALS OF FORM AND CONTENT

The imperative of providing a necessary corrective to the standard picture of Indian traditions (where metaphysics, theology and spirituality dominate, and ethics, politics and sociology are relegated to the background) cannot be gainsaid. But the perspective from which most such attempts at correction are undertaken, it appears to me, embody a concern less with the deliberations in the Indian thought about man, society and polity than with the intuitions and basic concepts that guide the design of the traditions itself. Thus, for instance, Daya Krishna, prefacing his attempt to foreground the socio-political matrix of traditional Indian thought, observes:

The question is not whether the understanding of a concept or a set of concepts is 'correct' in the light of what has been said in a particular text or a series of texts on the subject, but whether one is creatively *using* and *developing* it to understand one's own experience as did so many of the great thinkers in the past (Krishna 1996: ix).

The problem with such a schematization is that its terminology indicates a certain lack of clarity about what is in need of justification – the past, the present, Indian traditions, the thought about man, society and polity? And besides, one can even add that the metaphors 'using' and 'developing' have their own history of expediency.

An alternative strategy in seeking after traditions is what might be termed *reconstructive appropriation* – an effort, that is, to reconstruct and analyze a substratum of ideas and concepts latent in the political culture of a society and its normative footholds. I have tried to give effect to this procedure in a piece written some years ago (see Hegde 1998). The scene and the object of this recuperation was an effort to come to terms with the imperative/prescriptive dimension of traditions; that is to say, traditions as something binding and commanding, offering themselves with a sense of obligation, and whose determining ground can and ought to be adduced alongside a certain normativity.¹ I had maintained that the existence of this normativity – roughly equivalent to the questions, internal to normative political and moral philosophy, about 'What is justice?' or 'Why be moral?' or, even more squarely within traditions of virtue ethics, the

preoccupation with codes of conduct considered to be exemplary or desirable – is the mark of a concern within the tradition to articulate a space of power in accordance with a criterion of legal regulation and/or moral subjectivation. The force of this marking is what gives the tradition its currency, that is to say, informs its strategies of individuation and control and ensures its articulability in different historical and discursive circumstances. For the most part therefore, in attesting to the conceptuality surrounding traditions, we have to be wary of a necessary limit to contextualist determinations. Recall Marx's adage to the effect that texts have a remarkable capacity to circulate without their contexts. I will return to this point about contextuality later, albeit in the backdrop of a philosophically mediated appraisal.

At any rate, it remains moot to ask, not only what kinds of passage into the present traditions conceived as alternative form of life and ideas can facilitate (*vide* their contemporaneity) but also what ethical and political standards – independent of what one is used to, say, in modern culture – are implied in it. Yet there are bound to be difficulties here. It has been suggested that the Indian situation is best approached as 'a juncture of traditions':

When considering ... Europe and India, the two traditions can, of course, be considered comparatively; (but) the contemporary Indian case has to be examined as a *juncture* of the two traditions also (Saberwal 1990: 1).

And what is more: "apropos the earlier ... traditions, one notices on the Indian side that there is a *multiplicity* of traditions" (*ibid.*) – so that it may be maintained for the Indian case that not only is there not one tradition from which to mediate claims, there is no one tradition to mediate.

It is to what that formulation, namely, 'a juncture of traditions' can yield that I wish to turn the readers' attention. The late A. K. Ramanujan, in a delightful and tantalizing essay, formulates this well:

I think cultures (may be said to) have overall tendencies (for whatever complex reasons) – tendencies to *idealise*, think in terms of, either the context-free or the context-sensitive kind of rules. Actual behaviour may be more complex, though the rules they think with are a crucial factor in guiding their behaviour. In cultures like India's, the context-sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation (Ramanujan 1989: 47).

Interestingly, he notes, in an admission brimming with insight drawn from a long history of tradition:

Yet societies have underbellies. In predominantly 'context-free' societies, the counter-movements tend to be towards the context-sensitive. In 'traditional' cultures like India, where context-sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context (1989: 54).

What this translates into is a condition of contingency underwriting most institutional and cultural forms as well as overseeing their realization in forms of life. The question is: what is one to make of this condition? Let me set up a passage through Saberwal and Ramanujan again, names that I take as emblematic rather than final or figural.

To be sure, both are concerned to traverse different contexts, institute different totalities. Ramanujan, clearly, is groping towards a *description* of the two kinds of emphases underlying cultures, namely, the context-sensitive and the context-free, maintaining that—

(n)either the unique, nor the universal, the two, often contradictory, concerns of Western philosophy art and polity, are the central concerns of the Indian arts and sciences – except in the counter-cultures and modern attempts, which quickly get enlisted and remolded ... by the prevailing context-sensitive patterns (Ramanujan 1989: 55).

Alternatively, Saberwal may be seen to be fixing on the question of appraisal – that in *appraising* any tradition, what is at issue is “the quality of the society’s institutions” and that in contrast to the West,

the grain of Indian society has run in the direction not of unified, impersonal codes but of multiple, segmental ones; so that our tradition has not displayed notable capabilities either for devising unified codes or for promulgating reorganized ones in any considerable social depth (Saberwal 1985: 208-9; see also his 1995 *passim*).

One can discern an argument here about the nature of traditions in India, not just about their remarkable polysemy, but also (as in Saberwal, more so) their historicity, the possibilities they contain as well as their historic costs. Yet it seems that they both tend towards a *universalistic* orientation, though reflecting in this mode critically. Consequently, we may have to contend with an implication emanating from these proposals: that even as they alert is to the contingency suffusing Indian cultural and institutional forms, the regulative idea concerning these proposals, to the extent that we can formulate it as ‘universalism’ (that is, the rendering of traditions from the standpoint of their universalizability), seems to mark a break with this very contingency.² Thus, for Saberwal, it is not enough to accept mediation from within a tradition; one would also have to consider the possibility that the standards of a tradition could have something fundamentally wrong about them.³ Or, again, Ramanujan: that cultures “despite all the complexity and oscillation” have a “definite bias” (1989: 57), and that this bias may yet have to be approached in rendering a tradition’s contents as representative of ways of life and thought.

The problem here is as much a logical one – of an unauthorized slippage between two levels of discourse, the prescriptive and the descriptive – as one of a straining within and against ‘significant language’

(to use a phrase from Wittgenstein) that any reflection on traditions *must* accept.⁴ We need to take this problem seriously, if we are to avoid dissolving the contingency that one is describing. It is not our contention of course that the universal horizon ought to be unthought or jettisoned (indeed the very critique of universalism gains its force, so to say, from universalism); for the universalism-particularism divide, in terms of its competing imperatives, can also be an argument between different forms of the universal perspective.⁵ Rather, that there is a whole problem of the 'should' – the straining within and against 'significant language' – in a word, the imperative/prescriptive dimension of traditions, that must be grasped (and which, I might reiterate, most arguments for or about contingency smooth over).⁶

The foregoing considerations enable us to approach, and even reformulate, aspects of the imperative/prescriptive dimension of traditions, some allusions to which can be had from the 'contexts' specified, but perhaps most concisely in Veena Das (again, a name being taken here as emblematic rather than figural). Working through an extant interpretation of the sociology of India, she calls attention to an aspect of the 'Brahmanic construction of tradition':

Texts (including the *Dharmashastras* which lay out rules of conduct) do not prescribe behaviour in the sense of laying out areas of obligation as much as describing codes of conduct considered to be exemplary or desirable. This is why the actual governance of conduct came under customary law, and even the king was not entitled to alter the customary law of the people (Das 1995: 37).

She further observes, in a stunning footnote attached to these claims: "(I)t does seem to me that by characterizing this as a purely Brahmanic conception, one loses the opportunity of treating it as an important conceptual resource" (1995: 37–8, n.9).

I shall here take these suggestions through, to see what they might yield in respect of our theme. Das' allusions relate to a matrix that one might construct as 'textual', and yet do not lend themselves to such an exclusive determination. Thus, even as she is prepared to admit a distinction between "local circumstances for which customary rules were valid and authoritative knowledge which was only contained in texts" as crucial to the 'Brahmanic construction of tradition', she seems quite unwilling to come to terms with this 'disjunction' in the way that some scholars (she mentions M. N. Srinivas) have, "by positing a sharp difference between 'book-view' and 'world-view' in Indian society, [and] reserving the latter as the legitimate domain of inquiry for the anthropologist" (Das 1995: 38). While this can make for the point noted by Das, it also slants the investigation of the imperative/prescriptive dimension of traditions in a

certain direction: towards a focus on stipulation, rather than regulation. In other words, Das' construal, although adverting to a vocabulary of prescription, even of imperativeness, seems to imply a concept of tradition as necessarily 'stipulative' – as establishing an ontology of acts, specifying what kinds of acts can be.⁷ What this cannot accommodate, at least not entirely, is a concept of tradition as 'regulation', indeed that another quite different sense in which the imperative/prescriptive dimension of traditions may be outlined – as constraining action in an already existing context of constraint and, therefore, as adverting to an economy of power.

One might, following Ramanujan, read this 'regulation' alongside a matrix of 'context-sensitivity' and/or 'particularism', that while "the main tradition of Judeo-Christian ethics is based on a ... premise of universalisation", "Manu will not understand such a premise" – that "to be moral, for Manu, is to particularize – to ask who did what, to whom and when" (Ramanujan 1989: 46). What this avoids however is a focus upon the economy of power that we have taken the concept of tradition as 'regulation' as betokening⁸. One may of course reappropriate that claim in Das, take the situation that it alludes to (namely, of the actual governance of conduct coming under customary law, and even the king not being entitled to alter this law) as implying precisely this economy.

II. THE QUESTION OF APPRAISAL

It is important to be quite clear what is at issue here. There are, it seems to me, grave difficulties facing the idea of difference, of radically distinct traditions, concepts and/or discursive agendas. For instance, where do *we* or *us* (or *our*) stop and *they* or *others* (or *them*) begin? Certainly geography and time may help implicate separateness, even exclusivity, and therefore difference, but this does not, of itself, establish the difference as difference. What has to be shown, and this is important, is that there are points of separation or exclusivity beyond these spatio-temporal ones that constitute incommensurable differences. A line of reasoning familiar from Wittgenstein and Davidson suggests that this may not be possible.⁹ The case being made here – and I am compressing somewhat the lines of what must remain a more elaborate formulation – is that we may be required to reorient the focus of our investigations, into ourselves, into (say) what our traditions are and what their limits might be, by pressing more insistently than ever upon the problem of 'inheritance': of what we are heir to, and whether there is only one legitimate heir? The question, to be sure, inhabits a substantive historical ground of appraisal, but it is the more analytical point that this animates – places in perspective – that I am interested to foreground, if one is to grasp that line of reasoning with

reference to which the question of traditions is being raised here. Our accounts of ourselves, of traditions per se, to the extent that they can (and ought to) obtain as normatively compelling, require us to have an independent conceptual grasp of the relevant identifying norms. We might require a 'philosophy' in order to tell a story about anything, after all.¹⁰

One might confess to a certain perplexity about what is being entailed. Cannot the claim about tradition implying a certain process of handing down be taken to signify, precisely, the axis of such a retrieval – that it could yet constitute the basis of a higher order conviction, an independent conceptual grasp of the relevant identifying norms vis-à-vis processes of transmission that is tradition? Perhaps, but I have the problem of reconciling this near-relativist construal with the lessons that our above considerations incorporate. The fact of difference is salient but not, of itself, crucial. What must preoccupy us is the question of the conclusions to be drawn from a proper recognition of this fact. Indeed, the question will only be seen in sharp relief when one weaves the position that our point of view has led us to with (say) the work of Wittgenstein. Consider the following:

But how can a rule show me what I have to do at this point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, "in accord with a rule". That is not what we ought to say, but rather: any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning (Wittgenstein 1968: #198).

Can one say that at each step of a proof we need new insights? ... Something of the following sort: If I am given a general (variable) rule, I must recognize each time afresh that this rule may be applied here too (that it holds for this case too). No act of foresight can absolve me from this act of insights. Since the form in which the rule is applied is in fact a new one at every step. But it is not a matter of an act of insight, but of an act of decision (Wittgenstein 1974: 301).

The challenge is: what construction to put on these remarks? Wittgenstein's point would be missed by anyone who took him to be simply arraigning against the realist case (the thesis, broadly, that thoughts are either true or false, and are so antecedently to our knowing which; in short, that there is something in virtue of which they are true or false). Again, it seems to me that the characteristic concern of these passages has nothing to do with the reality of states of affairs – whether traditional or modern – but is (as one might say) 'epistemological'. Read straight, they amount to a sort of idealist construal that the determinacy of reality comes from what we have decided or are prepared to count as determinate. But it is important to reiterate that the 'determinacy' in question is one of *sense* not of *truth*: "don't think, but look" (Wittgenstein 1968: #66).¹¹ There is again no

special problem, for this position, as to the relation between the sense and the reference it determines: it simply is in the nature of a sense to determine a referent. But ultimately the question would have to be faced, why *this* sense of something, and not another? Also, how it is that the existence of an activity or an idea could constitute grasping *any* particular sense?

Wittgenstein, in the remarks cited, is of course trading on the possibility of an oscillation between two orders of sense – between what one might term a *descriptive* pole (where, for a given order of entailment relations, it could be affirmed that they are necessary yet contingent, that is, they could be false and/or refuted by new experience) and a *normative* pole (where everything is what it is and not another, not just happening to be so but also, what is more, cannot be otherwise). And yet, it is important to note, not quite obliterating the difference between the two poles. When Wittgenstein states that “interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning” and/or that there need not only be one correct way of being guided by a rule, he is supposing that the order of reasons can be separated from what those reasons are about, and hence what we are responding to when we raise validity claims about a state of affairs. The latter too are *responses*, that is, they record the place of the pull of the world in claims of that kind.¹² What all this would require is an order of appraisal which asks, of any given claim – be it of what can be known or what must be done, or even what should be hoped for, within or about traditions – not only why it must be so, but also the relevant identifying norms that bear upon it.

In focus, then, is not some ultimate truth about traditions, but rather the cultivation of an attitude – an order of conviction – proper to that question. The tendency to think that something is not quite right about a tradition, as indeed the thought that there can only be one correct way of enunciating or applying a tradition, leads us to think that the conventions proper to a tradition could not possibly guide another tradition, since (as is claimed) the situations specific to these traditions are so different. It is precisely in order to dispel us of this fixation that I have sought, in the foregoing pages, to orchestrate some analytical remarks on the enterprise of seeking traditions as a whole. In what follows, I propose to give further body to this evaluation, while going on, in a final sweep, to mediate another locus for bearing upon the question of traditions today.

III. FURTHER ANALYTIC PROTOCOLS

The foregoing, in a sense, constitutes the dynamic under which to generate our hypotheses about traditions as a whole. One is still left baffled however

as to the hypotheses themselves: what can they amount to and how should they be understood? Let me take up the latter question first – this first of all since it bears upon a dynamic about how traditions could be extended (as separate, say, from being universally applied) – before gravitating, without necessarily specifying so, into the former question.

A deep source of interest in the arguments condensed above is the help they provide in opening up the space of traditions to a normative reading or rendering. It wasn't that we began with an alternative between which one had to decide; and yet, everything that I have just discussed seems to me to lead in only one direction, namely, the analytical construal of the act of appraising traditions. It is important to be quite clear about what is in question here. If the warrant for any kind of judgment about traditions is the carrying out of an elaborate argument for it (or against it), then this simply cannot be so: one cannot decide about its normativity *tout court*, from a mere thought about its contents and contexts. That indeed was the whole problem in the first place, although, in the course of deliberating it, we were also concerned to mediate an appraisal that would emphasize methodical ways of working with traditions; within recognitions, that is, which properly belong to the formation and application of socio-political precepts, whose imperative/prescriptive character is also a hallmark of traditions conceived as alternative forms of life and ideas. The basic form of this mediation was of course derived from Wittgenstein, but then an ambiguity seems to attach itself to the procedure here. It is far from clear whether, in foregrounding a thought given over to recuperating traditions, one is seeking after an alternative *to* it or an alternative *for* it. We need some firmer hold on this contrast, before coming to resolve it either way. Some scholars have, in fact, read this indeterminacy back into the very heart of the Wittgensteinian corpus; and, to be sure, it can be seen to underly all proposals for or against traditions. Allow me a staging, preparatory to a determination.

The question has conventionally been whether, in thinking the ground of our traditions as well as conceptualizing divergent outlooks, we have to think in a relativistic way, in a way that argues, for instance, that 'truth-claims' and 'value-claims' are to be relativized to the culture within which they are made. The aim of relativism, so conceived, is to resolve disagreement, "to take views, outlooks, or beliefs that apparently conflict and treat them in such a way that they do not conflict: each of them turn out to be acceptable in its own place" (Williams 1985: 156). The problem however, as Williams himself avers, "is to find a way of doing this, in particular by finding for each belief or outlook something that will be its own place" (*ibid.*). It is important, for our purposes, to see what Williams is getting at here. According to him, "social practices could never come

forward with a certificate saying that they belonged to a genuinely different culture, so that they were guaranteed immunity to alien judgments and reactions" (1985: 158). This claim, however, in our multicultural times, characterized by the self-assertion of groups and lifestyles, all seeking to entrench themselves more fully into the political system, might well have to be qualified. More particularly, Williams's thought here is being directed at a heuristic which, while accommodating the relativist's concerns about divergent outlooks - of viewing others as "at varying distances from us" - also confronts "the relativist suspension of assessment" (1985: 160-62 *passim*). The possibility that is inscribed - what is termed a "relativism of distance" - would consist in rendering the confrontation between divergent outlooks "notional" rather than "real":

We should distinguish real and notional confrontation. A real confrontation between two divergent outlooks occurs at a given time if there is a group of people for whom each of the outlooks is a real option. A notional confrontation, by contrast, occurs when some people know about two divergent outlooks, but at least one of these outlooks does not present a real option (1985: 160).

Now the concept of 'notional confrontation' is significant. For one, it saves the relativistic standpoint from the charge of inconsistency or confusion. For if, in keeping with relativism, 'truth claims' and 'value claims' are to be relativized to the culture within which they are made, then there hardly can be a disagreement between them or a confrontation to settle across them. Also, what is more, the concept of the 'notional' allows us to think the moral and conceptual concerns of another culture, even to use a language of appraisal across cultural boundaries, without necessarily implying a substantive relationship between 'our' moral and conceptual concerns and 'theirs'. According to Williams, it is the presence of some *substantive* relation between the various concerns of different cultures that alone can give any *point* (or substance) to the appraisal. As long as this is avoided, the evaluation of traditions, even 'alien' ones, could proceed without invoking charges of 'moral absolutism' or 'conceptual dogmatism'.

There is a sort of crossroads here that one must acknowledge, if we are to accommodate aspects of above discussion to the notion of seeking after traditions. It should be made clear that our advocacy of notional confrontation has nothing to do, as it seems to be in Williams, with asserting a 'truth *in* relativism' (or, even, the plausibility of a relativistic standpoint defined in terms of a "distance that makes confrontation notional" [Williams 1985: 162]). Nor is it meant, strictly, to ward off a criticism about our procedure of appraisal here, in the though implicating all our pages above, that it seems to presuppose some form of an appeal to

universally accepted criteria as *the* ground from which to negotiate traditions per se. The issue clearly is not one of universalism *versus* particularism, where the 'versus' often translates into a jettisoning of one side of the divide for the other. Indeed, as we inferred earlier, this very divide would need unpacking, for one, because the very idea of a 'particular' gains its force, so to say, from a 'universal' (or, better still, is being raised to the possibility of a universal).

I do not for all that have any intention to push the concept of notional confrontation to its extreme; and, as Matilal (1994: 146) has tried to emphasize, the distinction between 'real confrontation' and 'notional confrontation' can remain a delicate matter. Nevertheless, in offering a way of gathering together the many problems that surround the direction of the treatment of traditions today, the concept seems to me essential to any procedure – such as ours – given to explaining what it is that substantive disagreement over traditions and/or the application of a tradition could consist in. The latter must always already presuppose some agreement – indeed, that one cannot even say, of a norm or a tradition, that it is 'alien' or 'other', unless one could also identify something tantamount to it. Or, again, that any apparent disagreement about traditions could disappear if the parties concerned are, after all, arguing over the application of different criteria.¹³

IV. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

To be sure, the issues are much more complicated than what this condensation would permit. For one, it seems to be adducing to a level of normativity that goes beyond, if you will, an *internal* (broadly, understandings in which traditions are made intelligible by being revealed to be, or to approximate to being, as they rationally ought to be) and *external* (a style of understanding in which one makes traditions intelligible by representing their coming into being as a particular instance of how things generally tend to happen) norm in operation and held to underly the study of traditions generally. Now, of course, one could ask whether this sort of approach is compatible with the ground being deliberated in this paper. Here allow me to do little more than set the scene for an argument that I hope to comprehensively formulate in the near future. I am afraid the analytical line of appraisal would have to be endured.

To be sure, an analysis given to tracing the history of effects through which a tradition (or an 'identity') effectively took shape may be necessary; only, I remain unconvinced about its sufficiency. As if to implicate a possibility from within this impasse, the theorist Vivek Dhareshwar has recently suggested that we make a distinction between "Western theories

about us" and "Western theories about its own experiences that nevertheless impinge on us" (Dhareshwar 1998: 223). The distinction is salient, but not of itself crucial; and to the extent that it is made to subserve the requirement of offering a "metatheory of *Western* theories" (ibid.), it inevitably connects up with the Orientalist enterprise (albeit as the latter's flip side or dialectical other) of making comprehensible what actors are doing and thinking out of a context of tradition interwoven with the self-understanding of actors. I think this matrix of genealogy simplifies what is really a complex matter – about judgment, about the translatability of traditions and the kinds of necessity that bind previous or parallel instances of a tradition (or practice) with a new one – while also failing to reflect upon the ontological status of discourses directed at creating a normativity out of themselves.

All the same, it should be obvious that a simple sociological dualism of tradition and modernity will not do. Surely we need a counterpoint to work for which the dualism of tradition and modernity appears less as a theoretical issue than as a question recounting the fate of tradition in modernity. But my point is that a more complex schema issuing off the historical study of multiple modernities will not do either.¹⁴ Indeed, in the context of the latter, the very meaning of modernity as destruction or overcoming of tradition, as also the idea of the production of tradition within modernity, have both ceased to resonate. The historian Christopher Bayly has implored the need for taking a *longer* perspective on contemporary (read, modern) India, in order primarily "to soften the sharp break between tradition and nationalist modernity, and between East and West, which still impoverishes the historical literature" (Bayly 1996: 180). I think we need to take this suggestion on, while of course contriving to separate object-level contentions about context from the meta-level issue of whether contexts could be explicated free of normative criteria. Perhaps, then, we ought to be returning to the founding coordinate of this analytical orchestration. The point surely cannot be to comb through traditions for their difference, but for the resolution of the problems that the difference(s) is invented to solve, a problem that is as real for philosophers and social scientists as for those reject their sense of contingency, as real for Indian scholars as for their western counterparts.

Coda: further thoughts on the prescriptive and descriptive

In the normal course, my paper ended above – somewhat tantalizingly poised, the choice of a pathway of work negotiating specific traditions and substantive histories quite unclear and undefined. Without doubt, the analytic nature of my construal has something to do with this

indecisiveness (although it might seem paradoxical that properly analytical work should yield to such an atmosphere of uncertainty, even unpredictability). But I have had a most thoughtful response from Manas Ray, this journal's editor, and I feel honoured (and compelled) to offer some remarks, more in the nature of reminders for a task on hand, which I hope to accomplish in the near future.

I offer readers only a glimpse of Manas Ray's comments.¹⁵ He sees the paper as making two claims: one, articulating "another mode of situating tradition in the present – by giving a different analytical twist to understanding its normative make-up – which is neither universalistic nor relativist", and, two, positing "the existence of an imperative/prescriptive dimension of traditions that give them their currency over time". These are two direct inferences from my paper, and they are both productive ones at that. In fact, I am taken in by both, although I must admit that the latter point is not a defining motif of my paper. I will get back to this point later, but let me look at the structure of the first inference – that my paper is trying another mode of situating tradition in the present (by giving a different analytical twist to understanding its normative make-up) which is *neither universalistic nor relativist*. Mark the phrase that I have italicized: it is well put, and captures an aspect of what the paper was attempting. I am only not too sure that the analytical move I was making through Saberwal and Ramanujan has been adequately captured in the claim that (as he puts it) "every attempt to situate 'tradition' in the grid of contemporary knowledge systems misses the contemporaneity of tradition by bringing in a dose of universalism which among other things ignores the contingent life of a tradition by inserting discursive protocols that we assume to be modern". Perhaps I need to rethink this along the lines that Manas Ray is positing, but my point off these scholars mentioned was somewhat different, broadly in keeping with the analytic nature of my construal. I saw the position represented as oscillating unauthorizably between two levels of discourse, the prescriptive and the descriptive; and, what is more, that the language of their appraisal entailed a sort of straining within and against 'significant language' that any reflection on traditions *must* accept. To be sure, I am categorical that we need to be taking these dimensions seriously, if (as I have said early on in this paper) we are to avoid dissolving the contingency that one is describing.

Of course, dissolving contingency is one thing; putting in place a proper heuristic to address it is another, and it is this latter axis that I am interested to explore. Before pushing this further, let me take up the second inference: the point that I am positing the existence of an imperative/prescriptive dimension of traditions that give them their currency over time. Manas Ray here pointedly asks, "But are you also

attributing a kind of normative kernel to a tradition – if you at all agree to call it so – across different historical and discursive circumstances?"; while going on to observe (and I shall be quoting him at some length):

I guess what I am pondering is whether there can be 'an articulability' cutting across histories and discourses. In other words, are we denying that norms or normativity get(s) one life in one discursive context and another in another context? *Can we read the prescriptive outside the descriptive*, though the importance of not to flatten the two up into one is paramount? Can we identify and understand the significance of norms outside the processes of transmission? (Emphasis added).

These are astute questions, sharply posed and deeply challenging. In what follows, I will try to lay out the basis of an answer. I shall be persisting with the analytic mode.

To be sure, there is a large amount of critical writing on the problems of instituting and managing a tradition and/or ideological inheritance. One could be asking a range of questions about what 'we', as a people handling an ideological inheritance or managing a tradition, should be aiming at, even whether we should be aiming at anything at all; whether the normative visions that are informing a society (or a time) is a code for something else, indeed whether, in the context of multiple visions and multiple claims to inheritance and transmission, there could be anything stable; about how are comprehensive norms related to such other modern values as efficiency, merit, liberty, the rule of law; and so on. These questions can – and have – been raised from a variety of standpoints, and are open to historical, sociological and normative-political modes of elucidation. I am inclined to the view, however, that much less attention has been devoted to the more abstract question: "What is the character of 'our' – any collectivity or segment of a population's – deeper commitment to treating a tradition or ideological inheritance as foundational, a commitment which is held to *underlie* particular protestations?" Note, not "What are its implications?" but "What does this foundational ascription amount to?" and "What it is based on?"

One way of capturing this difference of viewpoint is by positing a dichotomy between, yes, the prescriptive and descriptive interests in a foundational tradition, that is to say, interest in a foundational tradition as aim as opposed to interest in a foundational tradition as a fact or as a descriptive claim. This framing is certainly problematic; and in fact, if one were to formulate from within the evidence presented by historical and sociological scholarship, it can never obtain. Indeed, as extant modes of historical and sociological prognoses testify (while not themselves rendered in these terms) prescriptive and descriptive views are hopelessly mixed up and the terrain of 'tradition' is pushed and pulled in all directions – right, left and centre. Now while a softening of the contrast between

prescriptive and descriptive interests in a foundational tradition is desirable, one must be wary also of an unwarranted oscillation between these two types of interest. There is the imperative yet to capture the difference yielded by our abstract question, although I will have to be brief here (considering that my thoughts on the question have not crystallized fully). The fact that a space of power informs strategies of individuation and control underlying traditions clearly implies that it is the character of our deeper commitment to a tradition which is in question. As already mentioned, it is not a commitment that translates into a contrast between a prescriptive and a descriptive interest in a foundational tradition. Rather, it is a commitment which seems to underlie an interest in tradition as an aim, and interest in tradition as a background commitment that underlies many different aims/positions. Indeed, I am inclined to push the point even further: the interest in a tradition as an aim must presuppose the importance of that tradition as a background commitment that underlies many different aims.

I must hasten to clarify that the boundary thus delineated is not to be construed as a boundary between empirical and transcendental frames of reference. In an important sense there is no such boundary, and so nothing outside the realm of the contingent and the contextual. Tradition in the first instance, accordingly, is to be understood as a background commitment, not in the sense of acts of claiming but in the sense of claimable contents that would be expressed by such (possible) claimings.¹⁶

One last clarification and I am through (although I suspect the terrain has been opened up for further scrutiny).¹⁷ Quite apart from the formal nature of my appraisal, what further lends credence to my remarks here is the idea lurking behind any concept of 'tradition', namely, the suggestion that social and cultural life in the present begins with some kind of inheritance from the past; but far from inflecting this idea outward, I was concerned to mediate an 'internal' conversation about where 'we' – philosophers and social scientists, primarily – stand relative to a process of inheritance. In a manner of speaking, I am concerned to fashion a heuristic of inquiry – one which is neither (in Manas Ray's terms) universalistic or relativist – which works off the insight that since "reason operates only within tradition" (MacIntyre 2006: 11), it (reason) has to rely on the standards of some specific and ongoing approach to a given subject matter, and since these standards can change as different theories are devised to handle new problems, no tradition in this sense simply passes down unaltered some supposedly age-old pieces of wisdom: "a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition" (ibid.: 16). Of course, I have been concerned to put some pressure on this mode of assessment as well. Hopefully, a precise heuristic is in the process taking shape.

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NOTES

1. The 'tradition' in question here related to certain Indian ideas about rules and laws, which my reconstructive appropriation sought to frame and contemporize. The imperative/prescriptive dimension of rules and laws in the Indian traditions that I ventured to theorize could be extended to a more generalized context of tradition per se. It is with this presumption that my current paper proceeds. The first three sections of the paper, therefore, mark an adaptation of the terms offered in that earlier analysis.
2. Cf. Habermas: "What does universalism mean, after all? That one relativizes one's own way of life with regard to the legitimate claims of other forms of life ... that one does not insist on universalizing one's own identity, that one does not simply exclude that which deviates from it ..." (1992: 240). Broadly, this is what is being meant by *the rendering of traditions from the standpoint of their universalizability*.
3. This is the import of what I take to be Saberwal's remarks against relativism, as well as his recourse to a concept of 'resilience' (see his 1995: esp. pp.20-1).
4. Wittgenstein, of course, was querying our capacity to rationally discourse about ethics: that ethics is an attempt to say something that cannot be said, a running up against the limits of language. See his 'A Lecture on Ethics' (1965). Of this lecture, a recent biography has noted: "In what was to be the only 'popular' lecture he ever gave in his life, Wittgenstein chose to speak on ethics. In it he reiterated the view of the *Tractatus* that any attempt to say anything about the subject-matter of ethics would lead to nonsense, but tried to make clearer the fact that his own attitude to this was radically different from that of a positivist anti-metaphysician" (Monk 1991: 277). But see the considerations to follow.
5. The scholarship on this question is vast, but for one that bears on aspects of our problem, see Osborne (1992). Balibar (1995) is another provocative place to grasp the complexities that attach to this formulation.
6. By way of an elaboration, Wittgenstein further contrasted *absolute* with *relative* value, taking the latter to involve a pre-determined standard (as when we say that this is a good table, and mean by "good" that the table comes up to a certain standard of excellence for tables). Thus such judgments, being relative to a pre-determined standard, are, on Wittgenstein's view, simply disguised statements of fact. As such they do not express what he regards as absolute or ethical value (1965: 5-6). Rendered thus, I suppose, there can be a way of judging a condition, without smoothing over what that condition can entail, namely, contingency.
7. Although the construal, on the face of it, sets up a sort of contrast (or, the very

least, a dualism) between behaviour prescribed "in the sense of laying out areas of obligation" and "codes of conduct considered to be exemplary or desirable", I am glossing the same in terms of an idea of prescription. Besides, the recognition among philosophers and jurists alike that there are difficulties in treating tradition as command, that the bulk of traditional rules are not in the form of prescriptions - which, incidentally, Das forces us to engage (1995: 38, n.9) - seems to be an attempt to query a specific idea of prescription, and not prescription *per se*. Note also that a concept of tradition as 'stipulative' inflects the vocabulary of prescription in a certain direction.

8. For a further framing of this economy of power, see the piece from which I have been extrapolating thus far, namely, Hegde (1998). The decision to avoid a substantive ground of appraisal here in this current paper is deliberate. It opens up the space for a more formal ground of appraisal. The rest of my text rehearses this analytical ground more fully and deliberatively. Social scientists not given over to reflective philosophical work might find the sections abstruse and tedious. I can only implore their patience and capacity for deliberation.
9. See Davidson (1985). He has argued that, as a consequence of the nature of interpretation, "we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts of beliefs radically different from our own" (1995: 143), that therefore there could not be others with concepts or beliefs radically different from ours, and thus the idea of a dualism of 'scheme' and 'content' is incoherent. I shall return to Wittgenstein presently, and am therefore avoiding a reference here.
10. To generalize our terms somewhat: the point, note, is *not* that if there are no decisive reasons to live in one way rather than in another (among the more or less disparate forms of life - or traditions, if you will - that are known or that can be conjectured) then we may as well conduct ourselves as the people around us expect - whether or not they themselves have any good reasons for regarding their rules of life as right and proper. This would be to take for granted the relativist arguments that since forms of life (or traditions) differ, none of them are absolutely right. But this is logically mistaken. Numerous though forms of life/traditions may be, and however discrepant they may be from one another, it could still be the case that just one of them was (or is) absolutely right. It is not self-contradictory to assert as much, and plainly it is a logical possibility. The question, however, as to how we should discover the one right form of life is separate, and not a purely 'logical' matter. But the consideration that has to be borne in mind is that the relativist has given us no proof that it is not to be found. Note also the arguments that follow.
11. Whether Wittgenstein's position here is "a triviality", as Williams (1981 *passim*) has tried to suggest, might have to be readdressed in this light. Note also that our point about the 'determinacy' in question being one of *sense* and not of *truth* is drawn from Winch (1981: 163). It is again, I might add, a moral of Wittgenstein's thought that what we need to learn is not the right view of language, but rather how hard it is to look. What this must imply for our efforts to re-inscribe the secular-communal question is perhaps only too obvious.
12. Our point, note, is not about either denying facts or asserting that all facts are interpretations; rather, that there are plenty of facts, but then insisting also that

- to identify anything as a fact is itself to make an interpretation.
13. Note, Williams himself has formulated this elsewhere (1981 *passim*) as the need for an element in conflicting claims which can be identified as the *locus* of exclusivity.
 14. For a fuller appraisal of these schemas, see my extended review essay encountering the theorization of modernity both in the larger context of social and political theory and the specific post-colonial context of India (Hegde 2000).
 15. I am drawing on his detailed email comment on my paper. All quotations henceforth are from this comment. I have been greatly stimulated by his remarks, and I am grateful.
 16. A delicate point, which is not quite the same thing as 'orders' of exposition. For, whereas explanatory priority requires that one can grasp the explaining concepts first, independently of any sort of grasp of the explained ones, I am claiming that in rendering something as normative, something over and above explaining, one can make various aspects of it explicit without explicitly mentioning background commitments, but that when one does, what one sees is that a background commitment can amount to and is itself based on many different positions. I certainly realize that this claim can be stretched to an objectionable kind of positivity, although it is still defensible. My thoughts on the question have been clarified by Robert Brandom (1994).
 17. Manas Ray has in his communication raised more issues: I hope to take these on separately elsewhere. All the same, my thanks to our editor for this conversation, which enabled me to extend the terms of my argument.