IN PRAISE OF FOOLISH CONVIVIALITY

Some thoughts on the unthinkable connection between tradition, spontaneity and ethics

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Abstract

In this article conviviality is examined as a constitutive part of human life. On the basis of (ethnographic) examples and discussion, it is maintained that it is a fundamental good, necessary for the valuation of most other goods. The role and function of conviviality, however, are often obscured in theory. Aristotle's view of the virtues still allowed room for it. Most modern scientific and philosophical approaches ascribe a thinkable motive to interactions that stimulate our spontaneity and faith in life, such as the motive of solving problems that can be construed in objective terms (as in neo-Darwinism), or of seeing reality correspond to reflexive representations of life (as in hermeneutics). Maurice Blondel's critique of intellectualism and his view of tradition are invoked. By accepting conviviality as a prerequisite for human spirituality, we can focus on aspects of Christianity – like a respect for concrete traditions – that tend to disappear into the background when we frame its teachings and promises in intellectual terms. The argument also points to dangers connected with the fact that instrumental logic largely determines the shape of modern life: we easily forget one of the key conditions for experiencing human life as fulfilling and worthwhile.

Keywords: spontaneity, tradition, ethics, anti-traditionalism, Aristotle, moral virtues, Maurice Blondel, hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, anthropology, transcendence, Christianity.

As the adjective 'foolish' in my title suggests, this article is not about conviviality as a concept, but about something we stumble upon in concrete social life. It is about a quality of behaviour and life that we can purposefully help to create and maintain without being able to offer any useful definition of it. In fact, I believe it is impossible to give a 'real definition' of my subject; meanwhile, I hope to go beyond a purely nominal one by giving illustrations. What makes the term 'conviviality' fitting for my purpose, is that it manages to evoke a connection between a *mood* or *atmosphere* that requires the presence of others, implying a certain passivity on the part of the subject, and the dedication of individuals, who *want this mood to reign* and take responsibility for it. On the part of the individual, conviviality requires an attitude that can be (loosely) qualified as 'amiability', 'cheerfulness', 'gracefulness' or 'graciousness'. Ultimately, people want conviviality because it gives them and others a taste of happiness which they could not conjure up on their own. The main questions I shall be occupied with here are these: what kind of good is conviviality, and how does it relate to other goods human beings strive to realise? I shall proffer the view that conviviality, as a quality of life, is fundamental; that we need to know and value it, before we can conceive of ethical ends, or any human values for that matter.

We are dealing with a foundation here, however, that is not easy to unearth and exhibit using the tools of philosophical speculation. The difficulty partially must be attributed to its very fundamentality: we would not be able to talk or think, if we hadn't responded appropriately to the spirit of conviviality from early childhood on. Even when we think, therefore, we build on it. But there is something else, having to do with the 'ethos' that pervades Western scientific and philosophical speculation. In order to make clear how this ethos makes my subject seem more elusive than it needs to be, first let me explain, in the shortest possible way, what I mean by 'tradition' in this article.

How to create and maintain a spirit of conviviality is not something we learn in the same way we learn facts about life, or learn to formulate and test hypotheses. We learn it by developing expectations of traditional ways of acting which have been cultivated by generation after generation. As long as these brings forth 'fruits' which people sample and enjoy, few feel the need to ask what is being achieved, and why it is worthwhile. Such ways

of acting cannot be realised on the basis of project-like planning and control. If we start from theories about life, we will never produce the recipe for a successful feast, or any other really fulfilling experience; or if by chance we hit upon it, we won't be able to explain why it works. Tradition, as I see it, is a form of social direction which is trusted to make human spontaneity fall into patterns which are 'meant to be' (and in that sense can be called 'meaningful'), and hence is felt to warrant faith in spontaneity.[1]

Now, Western thinkers have felt it to be their calling to help improve on the direction of tradition; and some, since the Enlightenment, wished to see it replaced altogether by a new kind of direction, based on rational principles. Their hostility towards specific intellectual, cultural and political traditions (such as those connected with feudalism) is often understandable enough, and has undoubtedly contributed to human progress and to the redress of certain wrongs. But their hostility tended to be too general, extending to everything that owed its existence to tradition-conditioned spontaneity. For some – like John Stuart Mill, Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer –, progress became virtually synonymous with the eradication of tradition. (Mill: 'The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement...')[2] Still, many Western thinkers do not want to take tradition seriously (as Edward Shils, and Phillips and Schochet, among others, have pointed out).[3] The select few who make tradition the object of study usually portray it as mobilising the sort of things they can grasp when taking a reflexive stance towards life (ambitions, ideas, meanings, etc.). Thus, the effect of the presence of concrete others, and the 'function' of forms of traditional direction that require their presence, is factored out. Conviviality, obviously, is among the first victims of this homogenisation of reality to what can be thought of in isolation.

If I want to talk about conviviality as experienced in everyday situations in a philosophical way, it is not just because I feel that there is a blank to be filled in our theoretical representations of human life. In the field of theory, the neglect of things which have fuzzy outlines and conditions, and are therefore difficult to grasp, is at most a sin of omission. Many, surveying the achievements of Western science and speculation, might want to exclaim: *felix culpa!* But this sin of omission has consequences far outside the theoretical field, in a society in which explicit views play such an important role in education, planning and problem solving, and so (often indirectly) determine the quality of life. I believe that at least there is nothing wrong in asking if we, or others, pay a penalty for this 'sin' which consists in factoring out things that do not satisfy our desire for theoretical clarity, and that frustrate our wish to be in control of life.

I

Let me attempt to show what I want to talk about. On purpose, I have selected as commonplace an example as I could find. Here's a description of a visit by a grandmother to a homestead, in which at the time of her arrival only her grandchildren are present, taken from a novel by the Cameroonian writer Kenjo Jumbam:[4]

> We were playing among the banana trees in our own compound when Lavran suddenly shouted:
>
> 'Yaya élé élé. Yaya élé élé. Yaya too.'
>
> Beri and I looked up, and there was Yaya coming up the hill. She had one bag on her head, one slung on a stick across her shoulders, and in her right hand she held a strong walking stick.
>
> 'You'll make me fall! We'll fall, you children! Wait! Hold on. Just look at these children trying to knock me down,' she complained. But she was smiling at us.
>
> 'I'll take the bag,' I shouted, trying to grab the bag on her head.
>
> 'No. I said it first,' cried Beri. 'I should carry it.'
>
> 'Give me the walking stick, Yaya,' pleaded Lavran.
>
> 'No. No. No. No to all of you. You'll knock me down. The bag is too heavy for a child and I can't walk without my stick. Let's all go up to the house together. Go on. Run and open the door for me.'
>
> We all ran up, each one fighting to open the door for Yaya. She reached us while we were still fighting at the door but she let us open it. Then we all went in.

This passage describes a meeting that is obviously experienced by all as a festive occasion. It shows all present contributing in their own spontaneous way to the joyful mood. The arrival of the grandmother releases an almost animal energy and boisterousness in the children, and yet, if we look closer, we see their responses are specifically human. Obviously, the children feel they don't have to do anything to earn the old woman's affection – they see through her mock grumpiness –, and respond by acting foolishly in a way that they all enjoy, which presupposes a sense of humour. They fight to take over the things she is carrying, not so much in order to relieve her of her burden, as to give a sign of their willingness to contribute to the

general good feeling. They compete with each other in bringing this message across, but this competition is also an enjoyable kind of play.

Now, let me try to bring out some of the characteristics of the human interaction represented in this passage. What the actions are aimed at, and the intentions conveyed by signs, cannot be separated from the atmosphere, which in turn serves as a catalyst for spontaneity. Meanwhile, the atmosphere cannot be separated from the awareness of the presence of real, individual, conscious, free human beings. It is clear that affection, sympathy and empathy go into the making of this experience. But can we describe adequately what is presupposed and mobilised by what? Indeed, one of the things I want to establish is that, whereas is it easy to recognise conviviality, here it is impossible to penetrate, as Brentano and phenomenologists following his trail envisaged, by reflection to 'basic components' found in perception and experience, and specify the relations between them.[5] If we try to distinguish the conditions and effects of conviviality by a reflexive procedure, we risk losing sight of its proper character and *raison d'être*. Therefore, if we want to talk about it in a philosophical way, we shall have to rely heavily – even when deciding what we want to talk about – on common sense. This may seem a hazardous procedure. However, precisely because the experiences we are dealing with are so basic, we do not have to fear too much that common sense will make us fall prey to cultural bias – that is, unless this bias leads us to ignore the subject altogether. I think the similarities and differences we find across cultures are analogous to those we see in any one situation in which the spirit of conviviality prevails: everyone who is open to it, experiences the same mood, at some level, while at another level their experiences and responses differ (I may respond to your actions and presence, but not to my own in the way you do; and in a group, we shall interact in a different way with different people). It is as if all who are present are floating on some invisible liquid, and experience, in the same way, their collective buoyancy, while keeping the ability to act and experience in their own, personal way; and in fact, the personal spontaneity of all is required to create and maintain the cherished atmosphere. So here, as when we compare manifestations of conviviality in different cultures, we see that actions and perspectives vary, while at the same time there is something that is constant, which warrants conviviality the status of a separate subject. (This suggests, by the way, that conviviality may be a point of contact between cultures, and I believe it is. Many sing the praises of dialogue these days, but the actual resolution of conflicts, from the village level to that of international relations, may depend to a great extent on the ability to create an atmosphere of conviviality.)

The 'convivial' behaviour in my example is not ritualised, as it may be to a higher degree at other occasions – like an organised celebration or dance. This helps to bring out that, although the creation of a convivial atmosphere can be said to be an end in itself, it need not be the manifest aim of all activities in which it is realised. Even during a festival (I am thinking of celebrations I took part in in Africa) people providing food or cleaning pots may feel as much a part of the whole thing as those dancing. Conviviality may also be experienced, at least intermittently, outside situations designed for its expression: while working on the field, for example, or while building a house. (This, however, is more common in traditional societies than in our own.) Families and groups of friends may come together just to experience conviviality. Larger groups usually experience it at occasions which are nominally organised for another purpose. Here we can think of commemorations, religious festivals, or other special days dotting the agricultural or cultic calendar. However, conviviality is hardly ever just accidental to such occasions. It is precisely because their coming together is required by religious or other reasons, that strangers or half-strangers may easily become 'convivial' and establish personal ties. In this way the sense of community is reinforced and extended.

II

Looking at the sort of behaviour and experience that make for conviviality, and noticing the important role played by spontaneity, we may think we are dealing with human accomplishments remote from the spheres of the rational and the ethical – especially when we like to think the purest ethics allows for a rational justification of moral judgments. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to say that conviviality establishes necessary conditions for our having faith in life and in our faculties – including our sense of morality. Therefore, some connection must exist between the spontaneity engendered by conviviality and ethics. Is it possible to *think* this connection, or at least to say something sensible about it? At first sight, it seems we must aestheticise ethical principles (reducing morality to a desire for the sensation of joy or pleasure), or else are faced with an unbridgeable chasm.

In most strands of post-Enlightenment thought human spontaneity and tradition are usually seen as things to be explained away, or to be improved upon (I shall return to this topic). They are rarely trusted, or seen as an irreplaceable source of human values. In recent years, there has been a change, leading to a renewed interest in the concept of virtue. Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* is a signal manifestation of this trend. MacIntyre wants to avoid

what he sees as the pitfalls of Enlightenment thought, by wedding an Aristotelian-Thomistic virtue ethic to an hermeneutical view of tradition.[6] In my own view, his approach is still too intellectualistic (he treats intellectual traditions as paradigmatic) to really do justice to what tradition is and does for us, and therefore also to the subject at hand.

It is easier to describe conviviality as something which requires virtues, or even as a virtue in itself, if we return to Aristotle. Aristotle's approach to the virtues (exemplified in his *Nicomachean Ethics*) is descriptive and shamelessly commonsensical. He shrugs off Meno's paradox, simply assuming it doesn't bother us in practice: we acquire virtues, he says, by practicing them.[7] (I would say tradition is allowing us to get around the paradox.) What we acquire by practicing virtues, according to Aristotle, is an attitude or habit (*hexis*) that helps us find the proper mean between extremes (which are vices).[8] Conviviality can be associated with two moral virtues listed by Aristotle: those pertaining to conversation and to social conduct. He calls the one 'wittiness' and the other has been described by others (because Aristotle doesn't name it) as 'friendliness' or 'agreeableness'.[9] They are considered to be the mean between the extremes of boorishness and buffoonery, and surliness and obsequiousness, respectively.[10] Now, I believe that what sets the 'convivial' virtues apart, is that the mean is so easily arrived at spontaneously, at least in certain common settings, that the extremes do not come into view. If someone deviates from the 'norm' of conviviality, it is bound to be noticed, and evoke questions like, 'Are you okay?' or 'What is the matter with you?' If we want to see this norm as a mean at all, we can place it in the centre of a whole field of opposites. Here are just some examples: being too much taken up with one's emotions - being impersonal; freaking out (as on a 'dance event') - being self-conscious; imposing oneself - effacing oneself; and some 'vices', like being preoccupied with concerns not relevant to the occasion, don't seem to have an antipode. The fact that we – with the proper stimuli – find it easy to arrive at the proper mean, explains (if we follow Aristotle) why conviviality is an easily accessible source of pleasure. According to Aristotle, pleasure accompanies activities which are done well, and spontaneously, and he suggests that that is why we think of the 'flower of youth' as really blooming. Each activity and virtue, according to him, is perfected by its own pleasure.[11]

Then let us ask, thinking about conviviality: what is the thing done well that explains the pleasure, and what distinguishes this pleasure? It seems we are concerned here with a virtue that is different from all others, because we cannot distinguish the end – contributing to an atmosphere which makes people happy – from the pleasure we derive from successfully practicing it. This doesn't mean the experience of conviviality is devoid of moral or cognitive

value (a statement I shall support later). I rather think that if any virtue qualifies as that which contains all other virtues, it isn't justice, as Aristotle maintains, but the ability to contribute to conviviality. Or if 'contains' is too strong, I would say it creates the conditions for the development of all other virtues, including the intellectual ones. If we did not feel co-responsible for the good atmosphere in a personal relation or a group, we would not be able to develop any sense of responsibility, or feel the value of getting it right when we think about something.

Aristotle recognises a connection between what he calls the rational and the irrational parts of the soul. He ranges the virtues conducive to satisfying, pleasant social intercourse among the moral (irrational) virtues. He sees them as susceptible to some kind of rational direction, however; he thinks we are able to understand, given experience, what is the right mean to aim for. The rationality employed is not the same as that used in theoretical reasoning: it needs to be informed by an intuitive awareness of what makes for happiness, and it must accommodate itself to the workings of a *habitus* which reflects our choices without making every decision a matter of deliberation.[12]

At some point, Aristotle allows for the possibility that the rational and irrational parts of the soul presuppose each other, that they are 'like the convex and concave aspects of the circumference of a circle'.[13] Elsewhere he considers the intellect to have a basis independent of concrete existence; indeed, he claims it has its own divine cause and an eternal proper object.[14] Thus, from the moment he starts singing the praises of contemplation and self-sufficiency, he sets up an opposition between the sphere of practical life, in which we must rely on *phronesis* (best translated as 'practical common sense'),[15] orienting ourselves on things that are changeable (and, as I would say, dependent on tradition), and the sphere of theoretical truth, in which the intellect turns toward the unchangeable and necessary. *Phronesis* is supposed to provide at most a second-degree happiness, contemplation is presented as the road to perfect happiness.[16]

This second 'model', which comes close to the Platonist view (rejected by Aristotle at other places), has had a great impact on the development of Western thought. Practice was seen as a stepping stone to theoretical activity; establishing the connection between facts – considered to be there *for theory* – was seen as a way to rise to a higher level of existence, which was supposed, somehow, to enable the thinker to share in the (presumed) self-sufficiency of theoretical truth. Being able, by the power of reason, to rise from praxis to theory, has often been considered to be the epitome of human achievement. The other view, which considers the rational and irrational parts of the soul to be intimately connected, has

never been entirely forgotten. Thomas Aquinas, for example, elaborates on it; he sees the will through love responding to something that is of a higher nature than knowledge, and is careful not to divorce the senses from the intellect.[17] Michael Polanyi and Maurice Blondel can also be seen as taking their cue from this view. Polanyi points to the fact that reflexive thought presupposes *tacit knowing*, transmitted in concrete, traditional life.[18] In Blondel's 'philosophy of action' the interrelation between reflection and action (both evolving and extending their sphere, in personal and social life, dependent on, yet irreducible to each other) is a key principle.[19] We can only have faith in our ability to act, Blondel points out, if we embrace the beginning of a solution to 'the problem of action' (or 'the problem of life'), which cannot be reduced to a theoretical problem.[20] He develops a view of tradition, encapsulated in this sentence: 'That what a human being cannot completely understand, he can completely do it, and it is by doing it that he keeps alive in himself the awareness of that reality [given with tradition] which is still half-obscure to him.'[21] However, even with these thinkers we find the same ambiguity as with Aristotle. For Thomas, the contemplative life remains more excellent than the active life.[22] For Polanyi, *tacit knowing* is merely a necessary, if often neglected, condition for the formulation and understanding of scientific theory.[23] For Blondel, whatever we experience in life is incomplete and unsatisfactory, and therefore reminds us of our 'real goal': to let our selves be replaced by God (conceived in the Cusean way, as the unthinkable link between everything which exists). He thinks we are not really satisfied until our experience and knowledge are all-encompassing and co-extensive.[24]

Now, what would it mean to yoke the practical and rational motives more closely together? It might seem we would either end up with a dizzying panlogism or with an opaque voluntaristic relativism. But here, I believe, it is good to take to heart Blondel's maxim never to lose sight of, and contact with, the concrete (though I'm not sure he himself held on to it long enough).[25] Looking at human life as it is – which I have tried to do, first as an anthropologist, before venturing onto the field of philosophy –, I noticed that most people seem quite content with the integration of thought and action they can achieve within traditional life. Now, here in the West, there's a tendency to contrast this attitude (which we take in ordinary life) with one we idealise, or idolise – one characterised by a desire to break through the limits of tradition-conditioned existence and knowledge, by virtue of passion or (intellectual) power. But if we allow this tendency to govern us, we forget to ask how the integration of thought and action is achieved that we need in order to develop as conscient, responsible, thinking beings, and to have expectations of life and of our powers in the first place. Too easily, we think we can leave the traditional solution to 'the problem of action'

behind; we might even see the impulsive rejection of it as a sign of being drawn by something higher. Our desire to transcend traditional life makes us ignore or look down upon the transcendence *found in it*; we either don't see it at all, or else think of it as a lower, weaker, 'unfree' form of our own desire to rise above it (to put it in a way that brings out the questionable nature of the thought process).[26] Now, if we restrain this tendency, we shall see that a desire for transcendence manifests itself in the most simple human acts, and is present in conviviality – where we see persons transcending the sphere of their own feelings and thoughts, and finding a kind of happiness they know they cannot give themselves. The fact that we need this sense of transcendence to feel that, by acting and thinking, we can do something worthwhile, makes it doubtful whether what we 'really want' is to exchange the support we find in others, and in tradition, for something entirely beyond it, like an eternal, all-encompassing truth.[27]

III

A Cameroonian Carmelite father, Léger Tchakounté, once told me: 'The African is no-one without the other' – and what he meant by 'the other' was not some 'Other of the philosophers', but a concrete, present other: someone who is there in the flesh. Now, we, modern Westerners do many things alone, and therefore we can easily think the other is some sort of accessory – useful at times, but at other times a burden or an unwelcome source of distraction. I won't say there is anything wrong with learning to hatch plans and do things on one's own. But there is a temptation to forget that the self, in order to exist at all, must be 'born' and nourished within concrete tradition-dependent life. Easily, we conceive of our self (and the selves of others) as placed, almost like a necessary or eternal truth in the Aristotelian sense, outside the flux of social life (thus lending credence to the cult of autonomy). Here we find, on an intra-psychical level, the reflection of an anti-traditionalist attitude that pervades Western life and thought.

In reality, I believe, nearly all human motives, especially those that are experienced as the most spontaneous and personal, are the product of the internalisation of the motives of concrete others, that we somehow 'deduce' from their actions. I am using quotation marks, because I think the process is more like osmosis, and cannot be fruitfully compared to deduction in the field of theory. (With Blondel, I am convinced there is a 'logic' of concrete life of which the logic employed in theory or interpretation is only a partial extract.)[28] Some of the motives we recognise in others we make our own, to a certain extent. Which ones

appeal to us most, depends on our own preferences, which in turn depend on things like our personality, gender and social situation. We want to appropriate them, because we believe they can *help us to become ourselves*, which is always something we feel we haven't fully achieved yet. (Here again I am echoing Blondel.)[29] Motives, therefore, remain 'clothed' in concrete ways of acting that are never fully transparent, and that cannot be isolated from a traditional way of life. If we internalise them, they really function like motives, in the sense that we are being *moved by them*. They become part of us, in the sense that when we are moved by them we experience *our own spontaneity*. And yet, because we found them, rather than made them, and because we want to discover who we can become by being moved by them, they are never fully *ours*. As we cannot have a sense of being someone in particular without interacting with (concrete) others, we can say our 'spirit' is never really our own.[30] What we are or want to be, cannot be fundamentally distinguished from what we are and feel called on to be in social, traditional life. In other words, conviviality is more than just a catalyst in the process of developing a personal, spiritual spontaneity; in a very real sense it goes into the making of it.

However far we advance in life, everything that makes up traditional life, including the spontaneity of others, has a cognitive value and a relevance for us that cannot be exhausted in the present. And precisely therefore, I think, we can really be interested in seeing the world and others as they are. Conviviality makes it possible for us to see and value the differences between people; at the same time, it bridges the gaps between individuals by strengthening the belief that all, in their own way, contribute to the richness of a larger whole which exists in virtue of a collective dedication. This means that, as an end in itself, conviviality cannot be pitted against other ends, like those of excelling in different activities which are needed for a community to exist and flourish. This, in turn, means that the ways of acting that go into the making of it do not constitute a 'horizon' in the hermeneutical sense. Conviviality charges traditional life with a promise, which prompts us to keep looking for ways to take a more active responsibility for the whole movement effected by it (which depends partly on virtues that will forever remain virtual for us), and, by uniting the best motives to be found in it, to bring it further into the direction where we feel it wants to go. The end posited (implicitly) is something like what Charles Taylor calls 'a place of fullness'.[31] Conviviality teaches us that we can only discover and bring out what is most promising in us when we enjoy the company of others, whose actions we cannot substitute for by an act of our memory, imagination or reflection. Thus it opens up a perspective for realising ourselves further *in our dependency on what we love but can never consider fully our own*. The realisation that conviviality and

tradition presuppose the dedication of a variety of human types furnishes an irreplaceable basis for the respect of others – that is, for the conviction that their spontaneity deserves the right to express itself.[32]

Conviviality, as I see it, provides a necessary benchmark, or criterion, for successful and good ways of acting – including proper ways of thinking. Good and bad remain empty concepts unless we know how we can contribute to a good atmosphere in a relationship or group, and how we can disturb or destroy it. Therefore, the link between the ethical and the experiential can be said to reside in concrete experiences that cannot be converted into conceptual knowledge without severe loss. As I have tried to point out, these experiences do have a cognitive value, nevertheless, to a much greater extent than experiences we seek in order to satisfy purely aesthetic tastes. In fact, the most basic meaning of 'to know what one is doing' may be to accept voluntarily the responsibility for a quality of life that brings out the best in all, and makes them happy (or at least happier) and hopeful. Only if we have learned how to do this, can we have expectations of things done properly in other spheres of life. And although the ends of some activities may be irreducible to that of fostering conviviality, I believe we cannot fully commit ourselves to them, or feel a promise in them, unless we feel they contribute to conviviality (as producing food makes a feast possible), or can be engaged in in a spirit that is open to it.[33]

Just to be clear, I am not saying that an attachment to the kind of harmony found in conviviality suffices for someone to act morally. The ability to take responsibility for in-group conviviality, for example, doesn't automatically translate into fair dealings with people outside one's own group (though, on the other hand, it does constitute a necessary condition for an extension of goodwill beyond social boundaries). And, even within groups, problems between people are often as common as concord, and therefore, to act in a good way, and to resolve problems, may require tact and deliberation – things which come with an experience that encompasses much more than the experience of convivial harmony. I am just saying that without the experience and valuation of conviviality, questions about the right and good could never arise, and we could never be interested in methods for dealing with problems in social life.

IV

Conviviality is an end in itself in communal life, and many other ends that human beings pursue (though perhaps not all) can only be understood in connection with it. The spirit of

conviviality cannot be produced by other means than by a human spontaneity conditioned by tradition and needing concrete others to come into its own. This is what I believe to have established. Here, I want to see what remains of these 'truths' when we look at them from the points of view some influential theoretical approaches invite us to take. I am not denying that each of these approaches has its merits. I only want to point to the fact that, if we trust them exclusively (and most of them pretend to exclusivity), we are bound to ignore a crucial dimension of human life.

Before plotting the courses of theoretical currents, however, I feel the need to digress a little, so as to be able to situate them in relation to other forces that shaped Western culture. It is one thing to point to theoretical views and say they reinforce a habit of disregarding the role of tradition-conditioned spontaneity in life; it is quite another thing to blame them for having created this habit. Some see Enlightenment thought as inaugurating anti-traditionalism, by creating a sharp break, first in thought, then in life. I am convinced the roots of anti-traditionalism lie buried much deeper in Western history, and were initially not dependent on nutrients found in books at all. Here I can only offer a brief sketch of my view on the matter.[34] Of crucial importance is the fact that in the West the ruling class was separated by a wide gap from the people, and did not feel called upon to ensure the well-being of all. There were no traditions that provided a life-perspective for high and low alike, or a shared moral order. Of course, elites that exploited the people could be found outside the West; but they generally felt obliged to justify their power with reference to a common good. The use of violence was felt to require some 'higher-level' justification. The ruling class that for a long time held sway in the West took a different view.

Let me try to be a little more specific. The most useful definition of 'the West' as a culture area, I believe, is this: it is the part of Europe that was controlled for centuries by one specific caste, that of Germanic warriors, who called themselves 'nobles'. During the Middle Ages they ruled over the greater part of Europe, including many areas where the majority of the people were of non-Germanic stock (like the Celts in France). The attitude to life of the members of this caste of nobles remained virtually unchanged since pre-Christian times. They lived to prove their mettle in war, or other violent activities (like jousts). They felt nothing but contempt for 'commoners' who preferred peace, and risked their lives only reluctantly. An attitude like theirs has frequently been attributed to the members of all Indo-European warrior aristocracies;[35] however, the important thing to note is the way the power of the warriors is justified. As Georges Dumézil has shown, on the basis of a survey of religious and mythological traditions, in most Indo-European societies the warriors occupied a second place

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in the social and ideological hierarchy. They were to enforce an order that was prescribed by religious and ritual specialists, to whom fell the task of ensuring harmony between human society and a divine 'model'. In these societies, the supreme god was a guarantor of order, justice and the effectiveness of ritual. The Germanic system was anomalous, in that it conceded the highest place and function to the warriors. This anomaly is reflected in the sphere of religion: the highest god (Wodan/Odin) had become a god of violence, passion and madness; his favourites were nobles and berserkers.[36] The nobles, accordingly, could consider their own preferred activities to be self-justifying. They felt free to stake everything and everyone in wild adventures, in order to be acknowledged as warriors possessing an indomitable, godly passion. Their positive valuation of restlessness, energy, and an urge to transcend limits, would give Western culture its distinctive character. Tradition itself was perceived as limiting. The nobles had their own traditions, of course; but these mostly celebrated their glorious deeds which were supposed to reflect their innate, superior qualities. The people also had their own traditions, but they knew that whatever they affirmed was despised by the nobles, and was always hanging by a thread. Many folk traditions can be said to have had a therapeutic function, offering an escape from harsh reality – for example at wakes which allowed people to relax and enjoy an unconstrained atmosphere, drinking or playing, without responsibility.[37]

I am not suggesting that life in the West hardly changed since Germanic nobles set their stamp on it. During the Middle Ages some lower-caste groups managed to extract themselves from feudal power relations in autonomous cities. As the bourgeoisie they were later to wrest power from the nobles. True to their 'common' roots, they continued to focus on productive and commercial activities. But they took their cue from the nobles in considering these activities to be self-justifying. They resented any resistance to 'progress' (or developments promising an increase in profits) stemming from an attachment to tradition. Everything that stood in the way of their economical exploits, had to give way. They also took over another element of the warrior ethos, a belief in the wholesomeness of strife and competition, albeit in a somewhat tempered form – because they were more attached to safety, comfort and earthly goods than the nobles of old. However, they had no qualms about ruthlessly using military and economic power to reach their goals, as would soon be noticed in many parts of the world, when commercial companies took over colonial projects and started trading in slaves.

All this took place, of course, long after Christianity had come to the West. It may seem that in feudal times, with the clergy constituting the first estate, the 'Germanic anomaly' had become a thing of the past. But in fact, during the Middle Ages, church leaders were to a great

extent 'at the mercy of their fierce and greedy lay neighbors' – the nobles.[38] The attitude of some 'princes of the church' was even hard to distinguish from that of other princes; they were wont to use violent methods in regard to both their 'subjects' and their enemies. Christianity also went a long way – especially in philosophy and theology – towards accommodating itself to the anti-traditionalism prevailing among the ruling classes. Typically, when the intellectual and political traditions of Greek and Roman antiquity were held up as examples, they were presented as eternal models. Absolute, timeless validity was claimed too for the Word of God, or rather, for the official interpretation of it. The church did criticise the nobles' love of war and other forms of violence (such as tournaments), and later the bourgeoisie's greed, but it normalised them at the same time, by seeing them as natural for unredeemed man. The justified distrust of certain Western traditions thus spilled out into a distrust of all traditions, and sometimes all human spontaneity. The church presented its own tradition as above all traditions, which, ironically, would make it quintessentially 'traditional' in the eyes of later critics.

When Western thought evolved, first in schools established by the church, elements taken from Greek and Roman thought were put to a new use. They were employed in a concerted effort to reform society and the behaviour of elite groups, according to 'rational' norms claimed to have absolute validity. The generally disappointing results of such attempts at reform created a demand for new reflexive recipes to be applied; a cycle that has continued from Charlemagne's time up to today. The instability ensuing from the repeated reform efforts further weakened the hold of concrete traditions on life.

Seen against this background, Enlightenment thought cannot be praised or blamed for having given birth to anti-traditionalism. A lack of faith in what traditions had to offer was already a distinctive trait of Western culture. Actually, Enlightenment thinkers rather emphasised values that are central to many traditions. They brought the common good to the fore, and there is a direct connection between their condemnation of the irresponsibility and despotism of the nobility and the introduction of universal suffrage in the twentieth century. In so far as Enlightenment thought *was* anti-traditionalist, it followed a rut scholasticism had created.

Most strands of Western intellectual thought dissuade us from realising that we need to feel at home in concrete traditions, and be stimulated by the spontaneity of concrete others, in order to do things that we can experience as being worthwhile. The traditional conditions of the action of theoretical thinking are thus hidden from view as well. Various ideas were invoked to effect the disappearing act. In scholasticism it was the idea that the human mind had access to eternal essences and truths, partly through the intellect and reasoning, partly through Revelation. In Enlightenment thought, which rejected the tradition of realistic epistemology going back to

Aristotle, and which presented any appeal to intellectual or religious authority as suspect, it was the idea that experience and rational thought processes sufficed to construct a reliable representation of reality, and posit realistic ideals. Either it extolled a 'pure' spontaneity (as Rousseau did), or it advocated the replacement of traditional forms of social direction by more rational forms. The triumphs of the newly developed experimental sciences (epitomised by Newton's mathematical model) emboldened the Enlightenment thinkers. Their focusing on concrete facts and practical problems also reflected the basic attitude to life of the bourgeoisie. Humanity could only go forward, it was thought, by developing more reliable practical knowledge, and by soberly assessing, on the basis of science, what life had to offer.

This brings us to one important strand of post-Enlightenment thought, represented for example by nineteenth century positivism and by today's evolutionary biology. All reality is reduced to physical phenomena and processes controlled by fixed laws. 'Scientism' is perhaps the best term for the general approach. The world is represented as a mechanism that can be manipulated in order to create certain preferred states, capable of being specified in objective terms. The 'paradigm' dictates an urge to close the theoretical circle by reducing human preferences to physical processes as well. As Galileo and other scientists had distinguished between primary qualities, such as form and weight, and secondary qualities, such as colour and smell – so here all the qualities that tradition-dependent experience lends to life are being reduced to more basic, objective facts and configurations. Human spontaneity is seen as a manifestation of forces beyond conscious control, but at the same time as amenable to theoretical explanation; for example as belonging to a definable stage in an evolutionary scheme, or as performing an objective function warranted by natural selection. Allied with such views are some approaches which are less overtly reductionist, such as pragmatism, but which adopt the general scheme: they focus on how human beings manage to get things done. Now, there can be no doubt that the effort to understand the world as an objective mechanism has been exceedingly productive, in terms of both theoretical and applied knowledge. Whether it has also yielded a consistent philosophical explanation of human action and experience, is more doubtful. It is certainly possible for someone to think that he lives only in order to survive or spread his genes; it seems far more difficult to explain how someone can actually think such a thing without allowing for a lot of other human concerns.

This line of thought was accompanied by another, which reflects a different bourgeois preoccupation, that of safeguarding legal rights and political freedoms (initially only for the well-to-do). It developed in the course of an attempt to construct a new moral order, which took shape as the rule of law. The natural sciences supplied the ideal of universally valid laws

– contrasting with the arbitrariness and irrationality of feudal customs –, but they offered no moral guidance. Recognisably Christian materials were deemed unsuitable, not only because they had been used before, but also because their claims to universal validity had created discord rather than order since the break-up of Western Christianity. Instead, principles like the natural law, the social contract, and human rights were invoked. Man was portrayed as a autonomous, rational agent, who owed it to himself to scrutinise the 'maxims' (to use Kant's term) he acted on, relying on his own wits: he was supposed to direct his moral life in the same calculating way as the bourgeois entrepreneur directed his projects – and 'was supposed to' here also has a prescriptive sense. Political freedoms were seen as necessary for this type to come into its own, and if this happened, so it was believed, liberty, justice and progress would be assured. From the nineteenth century onwards, nationalism, Marxism and (social) Darwinism would, each for their own reasons, abandon the search for a fixed moral law that would profit all. Rights-based views, nevertheless, continued to have the support of the Western bourgeoisie, who propped them up with whatever theoretical materials they could find, and promoted the adherence to them by indoctrination and efforts to placate the disenfranchised. I am not suggesting that these views were accepted by the majority either in bad faith or in blind faith; in the absence of shared traditions and religious convictions, they offered a moral orientation and a basis for social integration which nothing else could supply. However, the bourgeois moral order was continually under strain, partly because of the pressures exerted by rival ideologies, but mainly because the wealthy and powerful managed to bend the laws to their advantage. This strain shows today in a widespread concern about corporate power, which is felt to undermine the ability of democratic systems to serve the common good. It is worth noting that rights-based views, whatever good they did, colluded with scientific and liberal economical views in justifying the destabilisation of traditional social structures. The consequences are now felt in societies all over the world. Many Westerners may worry about of the ecological and social impact of their way of life (which, with some alterations, is adopted by non-Western middle classes). But most still cling to anti-traditionalist ways of thinking, which seem to prefer being challenged, or even discouraged, by the failures and excesses which it has engendered, to taking stock of what has been achieved on the basis of a different view of life.[39]

There is yet another current of Western thought, that originated around the same time, but in a different cultural climate: that which saw the birth of a unified German culture. A desire to transcend everything that people learn by participating in concrete traditions is much less evident in it. In fact, the interrelated movements of *Bildung,* romanticism and historicism show an

obsession with the potential of culture and tradition. (This focus can be linked to the fact that in the German states, where the nobility remained in control, many avenues for political change were closed off).[40] Step by step humanity was to rise, in the slipstream of artistic and literary geniuses, to a state of perfection. Culture was seen as a vehicle, not as an obstacle. But here, culture was defined in a quite narrow sense, as art and the productions of the humanities. In the end, I believe, the aim of transcending the limits of 'naive' human experience was even more central to this movement than to that of the British and French Enlightenment, although it was pursued in a different way.[41]

The offshoot of this movement that is most influential today, is hermeneutics. In the form proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer it flies straight in the face of Enlightenment principles. Gadamer defends precisely the kind of authority that Enlightenment thinkers saw as stultifying for thought. He considers uncritically accepted 'prejudices' to be a precondition for any process of interpretation; but, as we shall see, he too abstracts from the conditions that concrete traditions create for giving meaning to life. He treats the kind of interpretative activities that can be engaged in without the presence of concrete others as paradigmatic: trying to understand texts, works of art, etc. Now, undoubtedly, there is much we can learn about these subjects that we cannot learn when we are submerged in social occasions. But the presumption that by climbing up out of these occasions and kicking the ladder away, we can come to a deeper understanding of the function of tradition in human life – here I am paraphrasing the claim Gadamer makes for his philosophical hermeneutics –, seems fanciful to me. I see no good reason for assuming that all that 'speaks to us' in traditional life speaks to us in the same way as texts or paintings that are isolated from the conditions of their production, or that we would want to understand it in the same way. True, Gadamer compares the process of understanding to a conversation; but to him it seems not to matter whether we talk to a real person or to ourselves, and moreover, he models every conversation after a Socratic dialogue, engaged in with a view to clarifying things in thought. He believes the ideal of a total transparency of the world for reflexive thought (posited by Hegel) cannot be realised, because of our dependence on tradition and our historical situatedness. Meanwhile, he thinks the desire to move towards this unattainable limit is the most fundamental human motive.

So here I have (loosely) identified three main groups of Western thinkers: objectivists who explain what we do by pointing to what we want to get done, envisaging the world as a mechanism; 'secular humanists' (I can't think of a better word) who impress on us the value of freedom, without being able to state what we should do with it except preserve it, and without offering the support of anything but principles in the face of developments that erode human

rights; and hermeneuticians, like Gadamer, who present our experience as the product of interpretation, and as limited in the same way as we are limited in our efforts to understand a text. None of them, I believe, can bring us to a proper understanding of what we do, and what we rely on, when we act out of a felt responsibility for a traditional world deemed to be *worthy of dedication*.[42]

I shall dwell a little longer on the limitations of the hermeneutical approach, mainly because it is considered by many to be appropriate for the kind of subject I am dealing with.

<center>**V**</center>

Early on, thinkers belonging to the movement of *Bildung* had compared language and art to a game. This comparison allowed them to imagine a link between ordinary human action and artistic creativity, and to see game-like practice as a model for a 'better life'. Gadamer (like MacIntyre, by the way) parades the comparison too.[43] Let me try to bring out its strengths and weaknesses, focusing on my own subject again. With Gadamer, we can say that situations that foster conviviality share something of the character of a game, in which the players are being 'played by the game' and thus freed 'from the burden of taking the initiative'.[44] However, Gadamer seems to take these formulas too literally; and furthermore, he makes them the basis of his view of tradition. We are all being 'played' by cultural interpretations, according to him. What we take to be our spontaneity (or our 'self-awareness') is really only 'a flickering in the closed circuit of historical life'.[45] He still believes he can tell what is going on: he safeguards this possibility by assuming that text-dependent ways of interpretation offer the best clue to the way we give meaning to actions and happenings in ordinary life. He claims the way we make alien things our own in life is analogous to translation.[46] For him, translation – i.e. combining two linguistic representations – is a way to increase our understanding. He may be right here, but I fear that if we assume that all human behaviour is linguistic in nature, as Gadamer does, a lot will be lost on us before we can make more of it in translation.[47] As I see it, bracketing individual spontaneity, or presenting it as the epiphenomenon of a supra-individual organism composed of cultural meanings and interpretations, is tantamount to throwing away a key that will allow us to understand many common social 'phenomena'.

I am convinced we are in a better position to explain the tradition-conditioned behaviour of human beings if we assume that spontaneity does exist, and treat it as an *explanans*, rather than as an *explanandum*. If we do this, we shall notice more of what is

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going on at actual traditional events, in different cultures. Yes, people are relieved, once a feast starts, from the burden of taking *any other kind of initiative* than that which contributes to the success of the feast. And precisely because of this, they can be spontaneous, show their individuality, and contribute to the joy of others *in their own way*. And this is not just a condition for something else – like understanding the world. It is something that is sought and valued in its own right, and, I am sure, felt to justify the faith in tradition more than anything else.

Let me go a little deeper into an example taken from my experience in Africa. I witnessed, and participated in, a number of 'death celebrations' in Bafut, Cameroon. Their religious purpose (generally highlighted in anthropological literature) is to effect a transition of the deceased to the status of ancestors. And surely, some ritual actions are performed, with a view of ensuring the well-being of the dead 'on the other side' (most of them Christianised by now). Staging these celebrations is also still considered a duty; the welfare of the whole community is thought to depend on it. (People can even be banished from their homes by traditional authorities if they allow too wide a time gap to fall between deaths and their celebration.) But the form the celebration takes cannot be deduced from such religious ideas. Elaborating on hints from old friends, some of whom are elders now, let me try to explain what these celebrations are about – without pretending to be exhaustive. Their main purpose is to show gratitude for the former existence of family members who once were a source of joy to others, by offering them a 'show' of joyful life, which must go on continually for several days and nights. The 'medium' in which they really could show who they were, and were at their happiest, is to be recreated in their honour. In turn, such celebrations offer an environment in which others can shine, and show themselves as people will want to remember them later. It is true, human beings are also reminded of their being situated in relation to 'higher powers'. The celebration is considered not to be complete without the performance of masked dancers, who infuse something like a supra-human energy into the atmosphere. (They don't belong, however, to the most sacred and unapproachable class of masks, and it is possible for others to dance with them.) This 'pagan' element may have been more central one day. (It is resented nowadays by most Protestants; Catholics, typically, choose to keep and folklorise it. In the family that I know best, that is mixed, the planning of celebrations invariably involves a lot of discussion.) These dancers play a role that is different from that of ordinary participants. They greet the dead by walking over their graves, for example, something no-one else would dream of doing. But even their presence seems rather to underline the value of human spontaneity than to belittle it. Like others employed in a specific

role (e.g. singers and musicians), they contribute to the general, festive atmosphere, which is to be enjoyed *by human beings*, alive and dead.

Now, I am convinced that the joy that many obviously experience during these celebrations is not derived from their 'game-like' character. In fact, many of the roles that are being performed (with the exception of that of the masked dancers) sit rather loosely on the personalities of those performing them, and the celebration as a whole is far from being a tightly orchestrated event. I believe Aristotle is closer to the truth: the joy is there as the flowering of virtues, which are felt to be conducive to happiness. The chief virtue here may be that of contributing to the joyful atmosphere itself (which, by the way, doesn't preclude expressions of mourning); and this serves to heighten the personal qualities and 'virtues' of the participants. Even if we wanted to stress the game-like character of the activity, we would have to say that the 'rules of the game' are followed mainly because they help create the conditions for a fulfilling experience, which requires and fosters spontaneity, and not because they help create a situation that conforms to a representation. The game is not something in which the individuals dissolve; rather, it allows them to be really present to each other as individuals.

I think the activity of a hermeneutician, who can sink into a routine of contemplation as long as he can ask questions about a text or work of art, fits more closely the model of the game Gadamer seems to have in mind, than most traditional, social activities. In ordinary life, playful actions – like role playing – are often engaged in humorously, and serve to increase the sense of conviviality and presence by highlighting the immediate understanding between participants. This requires interpretation, yes, but not the embracing of interpretation as an answer to 'the problem of life'. The motives involved in more ritualised forms of play may be more difficult to pin down. But when we search for them, too, I would say, we do well to guard ourselves against views that posit too close a link between 'symbolic' forms of expression and their *raison d'être*.

Wittgenstein was right, I believe, in suggesting that different 'language games', belonging to different activities, cannot be seen as variations on any definable kind of game.[48] And even if there were any 'paradigmatic game', the hermeneutical game seems to me to be a most unlikely candidate for it. For one thing, the seriousness of it, linking it to the extremely serious cult of literature and art that developed in eighteenth century Germany among the *Bildungsbürger*, sets it apart from most games people have played during human history. So does its aim: the production of interpretations waiting to be interpreted. In hermeneutics, every sense of promise that people experience in life is being reduced to the promise of

successfully bringing to an end a state of cognitive dissonance. I would say this can only seem self-evident for someone who projects the concerns of a particular kind of scholar (the product of an exceptional historical tradition) onto humankind in general.

VI

A good deal could be said about the role of conviviality in religion – especially in regard to Christianity. Let me just say a few things here. Reflecting on the importance of conviviality, we may become aware of a normal human 'folly', which a god who has the intention of furthering the good of humankind might want to save and reinforce, and which philosophers are likely to look down upon.[49] And, of course, many churches have actually seen it as their mission not just to spread the faith, but also to foster conviviality.

Some may wonder if, by denying the existence of any spontaneous desire on the part of human beings to exchange the changeable for the eternal, I haven't burned all bridges connecting the realms of philosophy and theology, and if I won't be stuck with a Durkheimian idea of religion: that of a group celebrating its own existence and 'virtues'.[50] I don't think this is the case. I believe we get a better idea of Christianity, and especially of Catholic religious traditions, if we accept that human conviviality and tradition are essential to human life – i.e., a better idea than if we believe they should be replaced by something entirely different.[51]

Let us consider the central idea (or dogma) that God became man, and 'lived among us'. On the basis of what we read in the gospels, it seems clear that Christ, while on earth, needed face-to-face relations to make others feel the attraction of what he wanted to bring to humanity. The love of it was to spread, it seems, in the same way that the attachment to a traditional way of life is transmitted. When Christ's followers were robbed of his physical presence, the spreading of the faith continued to depend on human relations. Christianity may be said, thus, to accept humankind's dependence on tradition. At the same time the Christian tradition was supposed to need some form of support and guidance 'from above' – from grace and the Spirit. But it seems this supernatural support could only be provided after the taking up of human 'material' (the humanity of the Son of Man, followed by the saints) into 'heaven'. Could it be, that an assimilation of different tradition-conditioned forms of human life and spontaneity into the sphere of the divine was required, in order to realise a divine assistance accommodated to different traditional ways of life, and to the wide variety of human predicaments?

If there is anything to this – in the sense that respect for tradition is implied in the Christian faith –, it means that anti-traditional (e.g. nominalistic) theological views, or the idea of *sola scriptura*, might be a hindrance if we want to understand what Christianity is about. It may well be that a foretaste of 'eternal life' can only have any taste at all for someone who can appreciate a human feast. The offered friendship with God may be a refinement of a 'material' found in ordinary human life, that could perfectly well be described as conviviality. And we may be best placed to grasp the meaning of grace (as a Christian concept) if we value gracefulness, as a personal quality that goes into the making of conviviality. I am certainly not saying (as some anthropologists do) that religion is just a projection of human relations and experiences beyond the human world. I would rather say that actions that bring out the dedication-worthiness of human traditions may be felt to be the ones that a god who wants to further the good of humankind may take most pleasure in, and might want to make more attractive by engrafting upon them the added joy of grace. The alternative would be to suppose that human beings can only be brought to completion by having their tradition-conditioned spontaneity replaced by a purely divine spontaneity. We must then presume there is an infinite distance, or even an opposition, between the supernatural and the eschatological on the one hand, and the experiences realised in traditional life on the other. But if it is true that human conviviality depends on tradition, and is constitutive of human spirituality, obviously, the proposed 'salvation' would amount to the destruction of that which makes human beings human. This hardly sounds like 'Good News'. I think that essential elements of the Christian religion – especially those most perplexing to the modern mind – fit much better together, if we consider grace and the Spirit to be there in order to make traditional life richer, without fundamentally changing its nature. The New Covenant, instituted by the divine Son of Man, may serve to introduce a new form of conviviality into the relations between the divine and mankind, which, just like ordinary conviviality, doesn't swallow up, but strengthens the spontaneity and freedom of individuals. And this new conviviality may continue to have traditional conditions, and be experienced in its 'purest' form in human communities ('For where two or three come together in my name, I shall be among them').[52] Human wisdom may not be able to supply or fathom this 'solution to the problem of life' (Aristotle rejected, on what he took to be rational grounds, the possibility of friendship between man and God),[53] but, as it turns out, the same can be said of everything that is experienced as fulfilling or promising in traditional life. I am not pretending to have proved anything here; my only aim has been to show that the attempt to do justice in thought to conviviality, as experienced in traditional life, might help us to gain a fresh perspective on

religious 'phenomena' (especially those connected with Christianity), and to find a principle of integration that is easily lost on us if we choose a more intellectualistic approach.

VII

Thinking about conviviality, and the conditions it requires and creates, is somewhat frustrating, because when we sit alone to reflect, we are deprived of the very conditions we want to talk about. Some sort of indirect communication is possible, as I hope to have shown by providing examples, but it clearly cannot substitute for the 'real thing'. And yes, we can realise – for instance when we return to theoretical puzzles after talking to a friend – that we cannot mobilise by ourselves what is mobilised in us by the presence of others. Aristotle was acutely aware of the gap between reflexive activity and the actual exercise of human moral virtues. That, it seems, is why he referred to the actions of the prudent man (or the man with practical common sense) in his definition of virtue.[54]

When it comes to the virtues required for conviviality, there is a 'redeeming virtue', which I mentioned earlier. The ways in which people make others feel at ease, or welcome, come with 'signs' that are easily understood across cultural borders. Noticing the universality of this kind of behaviour, however, we might easily fall into the trap of thinking that it has no traditional conditions. It clearly has. We can only contribute to the good feeling of others if others have shown us how to do it, in a convincing way. If we realise that conviviality is necessary for being human, and requires faith in tradition, we are bound to conclude that in the modern world, because of economisation and atomisation, the conditions for a really human existence are threatened in many places. And the question arises whether at least a part of the psychological problems prevalent in modern populations might not be the result of a lack of opportunities for experiencing conviviality, and for developing and exercising the required 'virtues'. Modern people may be more 'other-directed', to use David Riesman's term, than people in the past – and nowadays can be in daily contact with hundreds of persons, thanks to social media networks. But precisely because of that, traditional forms of conviviality may easily suffer from lack of care, and be lacking when one needs them most, as a basis for commitment and reassurance. The world we have somehow created, can easily appear – and become – inhospitable. It has a harsh side, even for those who do not have to face it alone. Many consider it to be a good thing to bring people out of their 'comfort zone', in order to make them devote themselves to things that really matter. This may be a useful strategy to encourage them to find solutions to theoretical or technical problems. But it won't

help them to understand, or hold on to, what is good, or even to realise what it is to be human, or rather humane.

There are no easy solutions on offer. Just promoting anything that can pass for conviviality clearly won't do. When conviviality is sought mainly as a means for earning respect and becoming successful, in a world seen as hostile or as fair game (as in gang culture, or in old boys' networks), it becomes more of a problem than a solution for anything. At the same time, we do well to realise that a sense of responsibility for a larger whole, and for others, can only be cultivated together with an atmosphere of (real) conviviality. If we try to inculcate moral responsibilities without providing the support from traditional life they need, or even coupled with a contempt for tradition, I fear we will be imposing something like a religious law that will remind people only of their shortcomings. And those who don't care about this law will generally prosper more than those who struggle with it. We can appreciate the efforts of churches to maintain islands of conviviality, and we could wish for them to grow, but obviously, at least in the West, the trend is in the other direction – partly, I would say, because within churches the goal of making traditional life richer is given too little attention, or pursued in disingenuous ways. Some immigrant groups (Christian or Islamic) seem to do better in keeping alive a spirit of conviviality, but their influence on the culture as a whole is limited.

We, Westerners, seem very careless in protecting the kinds of environments that conviviality needs in order to show what it can do for us. Of course, nowadays we can point to the pressures of life, and to cutthroat competition on a global market... But behind it all, I believe, there is a tendency (manifesting itself over the centuries) to celebrate the breaking of any resistance rooted in the attachment to tradition as a 'heroic act'. Without thinking, we easily think *other things* are more important than everything tradition-dependent life has to offer. I have attempted to show that this belief can be questioned in a philosophical way. But the best reasons for questioning it, I would say, are literally staring us in the face. The faces of people who are in the habit of fostering conviviality wherever they go, have a special beauty that we easily recognise and respond to – a beauty that sort of defines what it is to be human. The faces of those who are failing or unwilling to respect the 'norm' of conviviality not only miss this beauty; some of them have a special ugliness that equally sets them apart from (even the most ferocious) animals. Of course, most people have different faces which they show in different circumstances, alternately testifying to humanity's *grandeur et misère* (Pascal). The beauty and ugliness I am talking about, show moral qualities, not intellectual – and of course not physical – ones. The mean between them, which would be to be like an animal, seems to

be neither desirable for nor accessible to human beings.[55] If the proper love and abhorrence of these qualities are not cultivated in human traditions, the sense of meaning and promise human beings need in order to have faith in life and in themselves, will erode. Now, it is not too hard to see, on the basis of common sense, that certain decisions, if taken by those in charge of organisations, companies or nations, are going to increase the number of disgruntled and grim faces (usually accompanied by disillusioned, blank faces). It is much harder to say what can be done to increase the number of contented and gentle faces. Shouldn't this give us pause for thought? Spontaneous 'felicific estimations' – not to be confused with gut feelings – seem to carry remarkably little weight in our world (except for people who are in love, and thus being foolish). If we invoke them, we can expect to hear, 'That's not an argument.' Now, perhaps the best one can hope for from a piece of writing like this, is that a few of its readers might mutter, 'That's odd.'

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Note on the contributor

Peter Abspoel was born in 1962 at Haarlem, The Netherlands. He studied cultural anthropology at Utrecht University, and did research in Mali, Cameroon and Nigeria. He contributed to ethnological exhibitions, and worked as a literary editor and translator (translating African literature, among other things). For ten years, as a staff member of a national refugee organisation, he participated in the public debate on asylum policy and human rights issues. In 2015 he received a PhD in philosophy from Radboud University Nijmegen. Tradition, anti-traditionalism, religion and secularisation have for long been his main intellectual foci. He is a free-lance writer of non-fiction and a board member of PEN Netherlands.

Endnotes

[1] Here I am wilfully putting a positive face on tradition. I feel justified in doing this, since my aim is to point to its role in facilitating conviviality, and with that, faith in life. There is no denying, however, that there is another side to tradition; it is hard to miss when we look at traditional societies. The belief that all must go well as long as everyone follows 'the way of the fathers', may lead to scapegoating and fruitless self-questioning when misfortune strikes. Traditions tend to develop an arsenal of bizarre explanations and techniques to deal with inconvenient, ineluctable facts. However, if we focus too much on them, we will fail to see that they are meant to safeguard the 'normal functioning of tradition', which is generally much more than a vague ideal.

[2] *On Liberty*, p. 78.

[3] Shils, *Tradition*, p. 7; Phillips and Schochet, *Questions of Tradition*, p. x.

[4] *The White Man of God*, p. 2.

[5] *Cf.* Brentano, *Descriptive Psychology*, p. 4.

[6] See also *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition*, chapters 3-6.

[7] *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.1, 1103a25-1103b1.

[8] *Ibid.*, II.6, 1107a1-27.

[9] *Ibid.*, IV.5, IV.8.; for the English terms see *Aristotle's Ethics*, p. 104, and MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 183.

[10] A connection with friendship, especially in its higher forms, where the good of the other is a concern, can also be made, but Aristotle doesn't treat friendship as a moral virtue in itself, though he says it is 'like a virtue'; see *op. cit.*, VIII.1, 1155a3.

[11] *Ibid.*, X.4., 'flower of youth': 1174b33.

[12] *Ibid.*, I.8, 1102a26 ff.

[13] *Ibid.*, I.8, 1102a27-1102b1, tr. J.A.K. Thompson and Hugh Tredennick.

[14] *Ibid.* VI.3, X.7, 1177a12-b4, 1177b26-1178a9.

[15] Hugh Tredennick in *Aristotle's Ethics*, p. 209, n.1.

[16] *Op. cit.*, X.8.

[17] See for example *An Aquinas Reader*, p. 265.

[18] *The Tacit Dimension*, chapter I.

[19] See for example 'L'illusion idéaliste'.

[20] Introductions to *L'Action (1893)* and the later *L'Action*, Tome II.

[21] 'Histoire et dogme', p. 440.

[22] *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 182, Art. 1-2.

[23] See *op. cit.*, chapter 3, and *Science, Faith and Society*.

[24] See for example *L'Action (1893)*, p. 354 ; *La Pensée*, Tome I, p. 98, p. 297-298; *L'Être et les êtres*, p. 14, *L'Action*, Tome II, p. 395. Blondel's metaphysical view betrays a strong influence of Leibniz on the development of his thought. In some respects, as I see it, he is also closer to some German idealists (like Schelling and Hegel) than he is willing to admit. He differs from them in believing that our inner unrest is not just occasioned by a disproportion between a self, feeling in itself the pull of some supersensible whole (in which all is one), and the ideas it is forced to posit (from its limited point of view) about the nature of the world and of life. The self realises itself through acting, Blondel claims, and he reminds us that 'action' and 'the idea of action' are very different things (see *La Pensée*, Tome I, p. v-vi, and *L'Action*, Tome I, p. 13-14). In order to realise ourselves, we need the support of reflexive views, but these are like a skeleton, growing in and with a living organism (see 'Saint Augustin', p. 442-443). An 'integral philosophy' should make us aware of the *relation* between speculative views and the movements of the larger 'organism', adapted to 'the problem of life'. Blondel maintains that theoretical notions or art cannot substitute for what we are to learn through acting. There is no process of reflexive mediation or dialectics that can close the gap between what we are and what we want to be (in the end, he believes, only a supernatural assistance can help us to cross over). However, he adopts the general scheme: the self realises itself by realising in itself the same coherence to which the world as a whole tends.

[25] Frédéric Lefèvre, *L'itinéraire philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, p. 130.

[26] Of course, it can be said that in every culture and every human life only a part of humanity's potential is realised; this, however, is no ground for supposing that the transcendence that mediates in concrete realisations, if given free rein, would close the gap between the finite and the infinite.

[27] I am aware of the fact this statement has far-reaching implications. In my view, if there is a 'highest good' for human beings, it cannot be, as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas assumed, something entirely self-sufficient and purely transcendent; it must be accommodated in some way to human, tradition-dependent existence. See also section VI below.

[28] See for example 'Principe élémentaire d'une logique de la vie morale'.

[29] See 'Le point de départ de la recherche philosophique'.

[30] See my *Zingeving in het Westen*, p. 111-121.

[31] *A Secular Age*, p. 6 and p. 780.

[32] I am not pretending that all traditions testify to, or encourage, this respect of others in an exemplary way. With some justice, many traditional societies are taken to task for discriminating against groups of people, notably women and homosexuals. Many Westerners feel it is better to protect 'personal autonomy' by law (see also section IV below), and to allow individuals to identify with a 'greater whole' of their own choosing. This law-based approach certainly has its advantages; but, when embraced as an integral alternative to tradition, it offers little to hold on to. The elevation of individual freedom to a fundamental principle may lead to indifference being considered a virtue, and makes it hard to defend the principle when it comes under attack. Whatever *real* respect there is in our society for others, and for diversity, I would say, still rests on an appreciation of different human talents and temperaments which is nurtured in traditional environments (like family and community life).

[33] Surely, we can, at least at times, decide to expect everything from something else; we can extract ourselves from the tangle of traditional motives, and let ourselves be propelled by our personal desires; and we can believe that by doing this we can find something better than traditional life has to offer. But I think that even then, in order to feel the attraction of the goal we are pursuing, we need to project or transfer onto it something of the appeal that other goals have had for us in traditional life. We can never really get away from the self we owe to traditional, 'convivial' life – although we *can* try.

[34] Here I present the bare outline of a view which I have presented and defended in my *Zingeving in het Westen*.

[35] This is the view taken by, among others, Nietzsche, Christopher Dawson, William McNeill, and, recently, Ricardo Duchesne; see *ibid.*, p. 158-161, and p. 171 (including notes).

[36] See Georges Dumézil, *Les Dieux des Germains*. It is unclear how this anomalous situation emerged. It may be that religious specialists of sacred kings were displaced by warlords, when Germanic peoples started moving to the West. However, it seems the changes occurred before the Huns appeared on the scene. See *ibid.*, p. 167.

[37] The exceptional nature of this situation can be brought out by focusing on cultural differences across Europe. In the areas where the Germanic nobles were most at home, we find a tendency to disparage traditions that foster a sense of community, and any kind of human spontaneity except that which offers the promise of prevailing in some sort of struggle (political, economical or artistic). The love of peace is regarded as something for weaklings. In these areas, thinkers tend to be more adventurous and uncompromising, and seem to be stimulated by the prospect of some sort of 'total victory' over reality. Normal human life is regarded as something that at best serves as a springboard from which to jump to something *completely different*. In the other areas (like Italy or the Slavic regions) this attitude is much less marked; people are not ashamed to identify with local traditions, even if they are unable to say what they value in them.

[38] Brian Tierney, Sidney Painter, *Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, p. 169.

[39] Of course, it needn't be a matter of either/or. Many traditional ways of life include regrettable beliefs and practices (see note 1 above). And the Western dissatisfaction with traditional views and methods has yielded a wealth of knowledge and useful techniques that no sane person would want to do away with. At the same time, the neglect, in both Western thought and practice, of the traditional basis of human existence is unmistakably a source of alienation and human suffering. Logically, the best thing to do would be to attempt to combine 'the best of both worlds'. But this is easier said than done. Not only would it mean venturing into uncharted territory, but traditions in the West have been weakened to such a degree that they would have to be reinvented (and might easily be turned into parodies) before being able to serve as an 'ingredient' for a synthesis. Some viable synthesis may be realised one day, but it is not likely to happen (first) in the West.

[40] This theory was first proposed by Mme. De Staël, in a rather crude form (see Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760-1860*, p. 3); the view that German thinkers were apolitical is still defended today by Wolf Lepenies, among others (see Peter Watson, *The German Genius*, p. 30-34). Pinkard qualifies it (*op. cit.*, p. 2-12, and p. 164-171); ideas and social structure, he suggests, were 'grating against each other' at the time of the *Aufklärung*; and some German thinkers welcomed change when it came (with Napoleon's armies); meanwhile, he too sees the relative stability of the political structures as an important factor in the development of German thought.

[41] Leibniz lay the groundwork, by seeing human spontaneity as a finite, limited participation the universe as a whole, pictured as a complex of interrelated beings, aspiring at all levels to a more complete unity. Kant introduced the idea of the a self-legislating subject, cut off from all 'things in themselves'; at the same time he saved the goal of progressing towards a self-transcending unity by presenting aesthetic spontaneity (the 'free play of faculties') as a way of experiencing a purposeful order which was out of reason's reach. For most Romantics and Hegel, the end of life was indistinguishable from the overcoming of a gap between human self-consciousness, which was supposed to exist in virtue of a desire to experience nothing as alien to itself, and the experience of the world, and of history, which seemed to frustrate this desire. Understanding the meaning of art and history became a 'divinatory' activity (Schleiermacher), and was supposed to be a precondition for human progress. This German recipe for collective self-perfection was often deemed to be superior to everything British and French intellectual traditions had to offer. (The others might have *Zivilisation* only the Germans had *Kultur*; see Watson, *op.cit.*, p. 30-32.) Thus, the 'respect for culture' paved the way for pernicious forms of nationalism (already found with Fichte).

[42] The concept 'world worthy of dedication' is central to the view of the traditional way of giving meaning to life which I expound in the first part of *Zingeving in het Westen*.

[43] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, chapter 2 and *passim*, MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 14.

[44] *Op. cit.*, p. 106, p. 105.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 278.

[46] *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 19.

[47] *Ibid.* For the 'linguisticality' of human existence and behaviour, see for example *ibid.*, p. 3: 'Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world.'

[48] See his *Philosophical Investigations*.

[49] Conviviality is closely connected to *agape*, as I see it; therefore I think my discussion can help us to see the much-debated relation between *eros* and *agape* in a new light. We will not have to suppose the latter is some

kind of refinement of the former, or can only be felt by those who are 'born again'. We are dealing here with two desires that are constitutive of human life from the beginning: a desire for things that can satisfy our individual cravings or needs, by being possessed or ingested; and a love of the life we share with others, which owes its beauty and value to things we cannot consider our own, and cannot possess in isolation.

[50] See *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*.

[51] See the third part of my *Zingeving in het Westen*.

[52] Mt. 18,20.

[53] *Op. cit.*, VIII.7, 1159a4-5.

[54] *Ibid.*, II.6, 1106b35-1107a1.

[55] I am not proposing a clear-cut division here between animal and human life, based on the absence or presence of conviviality. What I would call specifically human is the capacity, and the felt need, to consciously take responsibility for conviviality, or – what amounts to the same thing – to experience conviviality as pregnant with a promise and constitutive of a life-perspective.