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Does an appeal to tradition rest on mistaken reasoning?

Jim Gough
Red Deer College

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Author: Jim Gough
Response to this paper by: Claude Gratton

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1: Introduction: *The Importance of Tradition*

To pose the question "Does any appeal to tradition rest on mistaken reasoning?" is to open up a field of critical inquiry. It is to establish the critical basis for a quest.[1] It is within the scope of this field of inquiry that I propose to consider a set of possible responses to this question.

First, it will be useful to begin a critical response to this question with a discussion of the significant difference that separates proponents of acceptable appeals to tradition from opponents. These two audiences for any particular argument involving an appeal to tradition take a significantly different dispositional attitude to any such appeal. The difference in attitude serves to determine, psychologically, an initially positive or negative response to our question. The core belief or commitment which separates these two groups is a priority given to either *telos* over *process* by proponents of tradition or *process* over *telos* by potential opponents of any particular appeal to tradition in an argument.[2] More often than not, the first group uses the appeal to tradition in an argument and the second group criticizes its use. This produces a distinct problem because the second group must convince the first group that they have made a mistake and particularly a mistake in process. Proponents of any appeal to tradition initially assume that there is no mistaken reasoning involved in such appeals while opponents make no such initial assumption. So, opponents who are disposed to believe in the authority of a critical process assume that any appeal to tradition could be faulted depending on how it fits or fails to fit an acceptable critical process. This establishes the basis for a different relationship by each group to the same argument, which contains an appeal to tradition. Initially then, one group is disposed to believe that any appeal to tradition does not make any mistake in reasoning while the other group is open to the possibility that some appeals to tradition could contain an identifiable fallacy in reasoning and hence make a mistake in reasoning.[3]

Second, several textbooks in critical thinking or informal logic provide accounts of what is identified as a fallacious appeal to tradition or the wisdom of the past.[4] The definitions used to identify this unique or distinctive fallacy differ significantly. This provides a motive to critically evaluate these definitions. This evaluation will be used to determine which of these purported definitions is acceptable and thereby capable of being applied to particular examples. The application to particular examples will be used in order to determine legitimate appeals to tradition from illegitimate or fallacious appeals to tradition. A brief critical analysis of some selected textbook definitions gives us some reason to reject some candidates as unacceptable definitions and hence incapable of being used as a test of legitimate appeals to tradition. This gives some

support to proponents of appeals to tradition (telos over process) since they can claim that since attempts to acceptably define a distinct fallacious appeal to tradition fail, there is reason to doubt that such an appeal is fallacious. However, potential opponents of appeals to tradition or process-centred critics could claim that this is simply a fault in some definitions of the fallacy and not all of them. The situation makes clear the need for more critical care in devising acceptable definitions of any fallacy and in particular this one. So, the impasse remains between the two groups over an acceptable response to the initial question of whether an appeal to tradition involves a mistake in reasoning.

Third, both groups need to take account of a possible paradox of tradition. The paradox suggests there is a strong presumption in favour of existing or traditional distributions over new or future distributions, practices or patterns of behaviour. This may mean that, initially at least, any appeal to an existing traditional pattern is as relevant as any appeal to a change in this pattern. This creates a kind of standoff situation where neither the existing tradition nor any proposed change can provide evidence which can be assumed to be necessarily more relevant than the other. Any proposed definition and application of a claimed fallacious appeal to tradition must somehow take account of this possible paradox in order to provide a satisfactory account of any mistake in reasoning.

Finally, in a process reminiscent of reflective equilibrium,[Rawls 1971:291] we can critically evaluate two examples of arguments, which contain appeals to tradition, to determine whether or not each provides acceptable and/or relevant support for a controversial conclusion. The initial test will be to determine whether or not each argument fails on account of fallacies, which do not contain any explicit reference to a fallacious appeal to tradition. Then we can determine whether or not the application of one proposed definition of a fallacy of an appeal to tradition makes any difference to the evaluation of the examples of arguments considered. That is, the final test will answer the questions of when and under what conditions a fallacious appeal to tradition could occur in an argument.

2: The *Process* and *Telos* Division

Appeals to tradition have a place in informal arguments. Their place may be legitimate or illegitimate depending on certain membership conditions, which will be specified and tested on particular claims shortly in this paper. Whether an appeal to tradition rests on mistaken reasoning or not will depend on whether the appeal satisfies some of the membership conditions used as the test for legitimacy. Without prejudice, proponents of appeals to tradition will be identified by a disposition to initially accept appeals to tradition because of the prior importance given to the end or purpose such that appeals to particular traditions serve. Alternatively, without prejudice, those who initially accept that there could be good reasons to reject any appeal to tradition in an argument will be identified as someone who puts process ahead of *telos* (or, who makes the process itself the *telos*).5

Appeals to tradition will be tested as to whether or not they satisfy both the *process* and the *telos* conditions for legitimate membership within the domain of argumentation or reasoning. The process condition deals with *how* the appeal to tradition is made within the argument context. So, for example, the process of philosophical inquiry as described by Bertrand Russell is one which begins with (a) critical questioning which *leads to* (b) a situation of uncertainty (for the traditionalist and non-traditionalist) which *leads to* (c) liberating doubt (from bias and prejudice born of the uncritical acceptance of traditional beliefs, according to Russell) or (c*) (potentially) debilitating doubt (for the traditionalist but not the non-traditionalist) which (for (c) but not (c*)) *leads to* (d) new possibilities of knowledge. [Russell 1991:89-94]

The process is continual and cyclical so that the new possible knowledge at (d) is itself subjected to (a) critical questioning, (b) uncertainty and (c) liberating doubt. The end to be sought is a systematic and unified relationship between the self and the universe but this end is not sought using any process other than the one he describes. So, it is not the end which is of primary importance but the end connected to or arrived at using a particular process of critical inquiry. Any failure of an appeal to tradition will be due to a failure to follow this process not a failure to achieve the end. Russell claims that critics of philosophy fail to understand not only the process he describes but also the importance of this process over any possible achieved end. I am not convinced that this is the only description of the process known as "philosophizing" but it offers a useful example of how an emphasis on process – if not this one, then one very much like it - is valued in critical thinking and informal logic texts. Fallacies are often described as those appeals, which violate one or more of the components of a critical process, like the one described by Russell. This is the basis for claiming that there is a fallacious appeal to tradition.

Russell, however, believes that what is crucial is the relationship in his process between (b) and (c). For the liberated individual (that is, Russell's philosopher or student of philosophy) the uncertainty experienced in (b) is a good situation which leads to (d) new possibilities for knowledge and eventually a new relationship between the self and the universe. This process is working, as it should, according to Russell's description. For the *telos-oriented* person we might call the traditionalist, however, the situation is quite different. The uncertainty experienced by this person in (b) leads to (or, at least, could very likely lead to) (c*) which is the experience of debilitating doubt. The uncertainty does not necessarily produce good results for the individual in a situation of debilitating doubt. So, the situation must be changed by a renewed appeal to the stability and security of tradition. Russell might find such a response reprehensible and intolerable but the supposed moves from (b) to (c) to (d), consistent with his support for the process, are always open to continued critical questioning.

The *telos* condition involves an emphasis on the purpose, goal and use of an appeal to tradition to achieve a predetermined and prescribed goal. In some versions of the contrast between political liberals and conservatives, the

difference may be between the liberal's belief in the primacy of a critical process and the conservative's belief in the primacy of an end embodied in a certain kind of community or political society. Any failure of an appeal to tradition will be due to a failure to achieve the imagined or conceived end - a stable and secure community - which is built on bonds involving central appeals to tradition connecting the present to the past. Those who support this general *telos-based* view of tradition include Roger Scruton, Socrates and Carl Friedrich.

Roger Scruton argues that tradition is "essential to conservative dogma" [Scruton 1980:40] since traditions form a central part of the identity of a society and the individuals within it. Traditions arise and form a transcendent bond to "define the citizen as subject".[Scruton 1980:42] They are a reminder of a flourishing past revealing a "successful history"[Scruton 1980:42] engaging the loyalty of their participants. They provide continuity and stability in the social order, satisfying the end or purpose of the conservative state, even if no telos-independent reason can be given for any particular tradition. Scruton goes as far as to claim that "there is no general explanation of how men re-create and accept traditions"[Scruton 1980:42]. One paradigm example he provides of a necessary enduring tradition is that of the patriarchal family. The philosopher of history, W.H.Walsh, seems to echo Scruton's ideas about the use of historical traditions "we can grasp them [thoughts and experiences from the past] in a unique way because we can re-think or re-live them, imaginatively putting ourselves in the place of the persons, past or present, who first thought or experienced them…[this] is central in historical thinking, and explains why that study can give us the individual knowledge which other sciences fail to provide."[Walsh 1960:44]

Carl Friedrich suggests that, in some interpretations, tradition provides a divine link between the past and the present such that "tradition has, since the ancients, been linked to the sacred, indeed the divine".[Friedrich 1972:34] The maintenance of traditions provides a link to a revered past, one which is honoured and respected by present citizens. The end is specified and the means provide the satisfaction through traditions of this end. While Socrates rejects a version of Friedrich's divine tradition claim, he introduces the idea of new traditions to satisfy the same end – stability and harmony within the state. This end is echoed in Scruton's use of an appeal to tradition(s) as support for his version of conservatism.

In the *Republic,* Socrates argues that the traditional patriarchal dependent role of women should change dramatically so that women can assume managerial duties within the rulership of the ideal state. In his discussion with Glaucon, Socrates tests the new proposal to determine whether it serves the purpose of the new state by being practical or possible as well as beneficial or useful. Having satisfied these test conditions, the discussion turns to the creation of new traditions to insure that this fundamental change in the relationship between the genders will survive. New traditions will be created to insure harmony, stability and unity within the new state and the means used to create

these new traditions include lies and deceit for the good of the citizens since "all such things are useful as a kind of drug"[Plato:469d], according to Socrates. Traditions are again used to supply the means to an end and the process used to create and maintain them is essentially irrelevant to the predetermined end. It is just the opposite for the process view, where usually the means is more important than the end.

Scruton's claims about the use of traditions are mirrored in the criticism of them by Eric Hobsbawm who claims, contrary to Scruton, that many traditions which claim to be old are in fact of recent origin, invented and re-invented to suit some present social, political or ideological purpose. Also, the original intent of some traditions can become subverted or given a different use and goal by contemporary adherents. So, traditions are always fluid, not fixed. They are in a process of being invented or re-invented to suit someone's or some group's intended purpose or goal. Although the goal may change, the *telos-priority* remains with the appeal to tradition forming the basis for this priority. While the *telos-based* view relies only on the satisfaction of the end, the process inspired view relies essentially on the use of an acceptable *process* to achieve the end. Outside the use of an acceptable process, the end is irrelevant or unacceptable. In evaluating the use of an appeal to tradition, the traditionalist relies on a *telos-based* view while often the critic of an appeal to tradition relies on a *process-inspired* view. This produces a break in the audience for an appeal to tradition. One audience is initially predisposed to accept an appeal to tradition because of the end that it supports. Another audience is not committed to the end. So, this audience believes that the process is faulted or misapplied. However, it seems necessary that both of these general conditions, process and telos, must be satisfied for the appeal to tradition within the context of an argument to be legitimate. While this may be necessary for a clear resolution of any disputes, it may not be possible because of the rifts between the two audiences.

Any appeal to a tradition within the context of an argument is irreducibly an appeal to an acceptable process of transfer to achieve a prescribed goal. It is a transfer of something from the past to present. Some transfers are legitimate and some are not, depending on what is the intended result, for example, of the transfer: explanation or justification.[6]Transfers that are illegitimate may rest on one or more different kinds of mistake or misunderstanding of the accepted process to follow. That is, the critic of the use of a particular appeal to tradition in a passage may mistake the intention of the writer's transfer as argumentative when it is really explanatory.

Tradition involves a transfer of something, something from the past to the present. The transfer relation can be interpreted according to the intentions of the delivery. The transfer may be a combination or one of authority, justification, explanation or authentication. Whether the transfer is legitimate or not depends on whether the intention is to use the appeal to support an advancement of our knowledge (explanation) or to support a contentious claim. For present purposes, I will focus only on the difference between the explanation and

justification modes of transfer. If an explanation is intended to enhance our understanding of something, advance our knowledge of something or provide a causal account of the relationship between a set of events, then, in this respect, it is different from a justification which is designed to support a contentious or controversial claim using an argument. [Govier 1997:15-21]Sometimes when an appeal to tradition is made the intention is to convey an explanation not to provide a component of an argument. So, if this intention to enhance an explanation or transfer relation is <u>not</u> satisfied then no fallacy is committed, even though the explanation may fail on some other account or test for a satisfactory explanation. It is a mistake to confuse this error in an explanation with an error in argumentation since the two functions are not identical in purpose or intention.

3: Explaining or Arguing for the Authority of Tradition?

The appeal to tradition is often an appeal to an authority and <u>not</u> a process. Indirectly it *may* be an attempt to subvert a critical process. A process typically leaves a sought after end or goal underdetermined, while an appeal to authority is distinctively marked by an attempt to fix an end – the continuation of a belief, practice or symbol – by means of an appeal to an authority. Often the appeal to tradition is an appeal to an unquestionable authority – one that is, in principle, not open to being questioned. How do you critically question such a tradition? You do this by critically questioning whether or not the tradition achieves the goal, end or purpose it was designated to achieve. It is often not possible to question or to discover (even, in principle) the author(s) or source of the tradition. While proponents of a tradition may identify themselves and their world with a tradition, this identification is often an identification with a suitable or successful reification for which no justification by a proponent seems in order and any rejection by an opponent *seems* to the proponent irrelevant. [Scruton 1980:42]

This appeal to authority is characteristic of irrelevant appeals which most texts identify with the fallacy of tradition. Many texts claim that either the appeal is irrelevant because it is a version of an irrelevant or improper appeal to authority or because it appeals to the irrelevant authority of feelings, emotions or other reputedly irrelevant psychological factors. It is always included in a classification that is a version of an irrelevant appeal to authority. How it differs or is distinguished from other appeals to authority remains underdetermined, which is a serious problem for establishing its unique credibility as a fallacy on its own. Of course, all such appeals to tradition either appeal to the past, wisdom from the past or customary contemporary practices or relationships from some version or interpretation of the past. However, this doesn't distinguish it from many other appeals to authority. Equally problematic is the situation that for some audiences the appeal to a particular tradition is acceptable or relevant, while for other audiences it remains unacceptable or irrelevant. The process-inspired audience, for example, often considers this appeal to tradition (like many other such appeals) to be a subversion of a necessary critical process. The relevance of the appeal to tradition is then itself

relative to an audience's prior acceptance of the appeal to this tradition or that particular tradition. As Douglas Walton suggests, this still leaves open the possibility for what he calls "positional reasoning" for both the *process* and *telos-oriented* audiences. [Walton 1985:263]

It is a significant problem for both the *telos* and *process-oriented* position that there is often no prior designated mode of alteration or accepted procedure for change incorporated into the acceptance of most traditions. For example, when a flag is created in a traditional form, there is often no explicit agreement about when and how its structure, form, content and use will change and evolve over a fixed period of time. This is similar to other symbols and other practices which serve as instantiations of the same tradition or even different traditions. So, the result is that proponents view any proposed change, which directly or indirectly involves alteration, change or diminished authority for a tradition, with possible alarm and suspicion. This is because change implicitly threatens the desired end or purpose for the acceptance of the tradition. Change to a tradition can be rejected because of the imagined chaos that could occur to the desired end of stability and conformity with a perceived authority.

It is both the fixed end which is of primary importance along with the tradition which serves to guarantee this end. For traditionalists, a *contingent relation* is imagined to be some kind of *necessary relation.* This can help to establish the basis for potential intolerance within a dependence on a tradition. This can be part of a process sometimes known as reification. A sense of honour and sometimes reverence or respect is attached to a tradition. What was a sense of honour or respect, pride, dignity and self-esteem can become a kind of dependence that generates possible intolerance for opposing views or critics of the tradition. Those who intolerantly condemn intolerance often fall prey to the intolerance that they share with their newfound tradition.

In the last thirty years in Canada the country has witnessed the responses by *vox populi* to a change in the military forces from three forces, army, navy and air force to one unified force, a change in the national flag from the Canadian ensign to the Maple Leaf, a change in the system of measurement from Imperial to Metric, a change in the national constitution from the British North American Act to the current constitution.[7] In all of these cases, it is possible to find ample evidence of (i) a confusion between a necessary and a contingent relation between a tradition and a present practice (symbol, ritual, distribution, pattern of behaviour), which can serve to foster intolerance, (ii) the lack of any acceptable mode of altering a tradition and the incumbent fears for enduring stability and authority that follow this situation, and (iii) belief in the relative nature of ascription of appeals to relevant authorities (authorities depend on whether a particular audience accepts them or not, which seems to be beyond the pale of argument).

In the previous discussion, there was an attempt to show that whether an appeal to tradition committed some fallacy, involving a mistake in reasoning, depends on the intention or nature of the delivery of the appeal relative to an

audience. If there is a bona fide mistaken appeal to tradition, then this should not depend on the appeal to an audience especially if there is taken to be something universal about the appeal. To test this latter hypothetical, it may be useful to critically evaluate some textbook definitions of the so-called fallacious appeal to tradition.

4: A Critical Evaluation of Some Textbook Definitions of the Fallacy

A short (and *definitely* incomplete) survey of some informal critical thinking texts provides an interesting, yet potentially confusing, array of variable definitions of a fallacious appeal to tradition. The fallacious appeal to tradition can (according to the authority represented in this set of critical thinking/informal logic texts) consists in one of the following:

a. appealing to an audience's feelings of reverence or respect for some custom or tradition instead of evidence in order to support a viewpoint, [Barry 1992:417] *or*
b. assuming or arguing that something is good or desirable simply because it is old or traditional, [Rudinow 1999:285] *or*
c. the argument that uses the past to justify claims made in the present, [Soccio 1998:69] *or*

(d) someone suggests that a belief is true because it has "always" been believed [LeBlanc 1998:190], *or*

(e) when a tradition is questioned on its merits, it is a fallacy to argue that raising the question is revolutionary, scandalous, or irreverent, or to merely restate the tradition without showing its desirability. [Fearnside 1997:12]

Each of these five possibilities gives a different definition of the fallacy of an appeal to tradition, which might suggest that each response is one component of a complete, comprehensive definition of the fallacy. However, clearly some of these definitions refer to mistakes in reasoning that have other designations. So, most of these definitions do not refer to anything that one could uniquely identify as a fallacious appeal to tradition. For example, version (e) seems to refer in the first part to a fallacious appeal to what is identified in other texts as loyalty or blind loyalty and commits one version of the fallacy of begging the question, in the second part of the definition. Interestingly, this fallacy occurs in the text under the general heading of psychological fallacies. There is some reason then to question the implicit claim in (e) that there is a clear, distinct and unique fallacious appeal to tradition. It may be a mistake to charge a fallacy where there is nothing either unique univocal to identify the purported mistake in reasoning.

The claimed definition in (c) fails to be an acceptable definition because it is both too vague and too broad, since it potentially includes a wide range of non-fallacious uses of appeals to the past. If it were acceptable, then much of what constitutes serious scholarship in history would be rendered *a priori* fallacious,

contrary to good counterarguments. As one writer puts it "the notion that the present needs the past in order to become the future is a truism."[Jurist 1992:181] This proposed definition for the mistake seems implausible as it stands since it suffers from serious *definitional defects*[8]. This makes it open to serious doubts as to its acceptability because the definition is too broad and as such indeterminate in what it refers to or picks out.

If we consider the definition proposed in (a) there is a serious difficulty in the assumption implicit in the definition of what constitutes "evidence". There is a contrast between "an audience's feelings of reverence or respect" and "evidence" suggesting that the first is contrary or inconsistent with the second, while leaving the second seriously underdetermined. However, the spectre of a false dichotomy looms if one incorrectly assumes that "feelings" are not evidence and diametrically opposed to evidence, when clearly a reference to feelings is a reference to some kind of evidence. Feelings may not be "relevant evidence" that is used as authority in an argument but feelings do exist and are nonetheless evidence of certain dispositions or attitudes. This provides the sort of evidence collected by pollsters in their frequent surveys of attitudes and beliefs. That is, there is a well-supported belief that feelings are evidence of something happening or occurring. The actual contrast is between two sets of evidence or kinds of evidence, one taken to be relevant and the other not relevant. It is clearly false to claim that the contrast is between *evidence* and *no evidence*, especially when no acceptable definition of "evidence" is supplied. So, this definition is seriously suspect since it could fall into the trap of committing a fallacy itself. This leaves us with two possibilities out of the initial five considered, definitions (b) and (d) both of which refer to the irrelevant use of references to traditions or consistent repetitions as support for a conclusion or sub-conclusion in an argument.

The reference in (d) to something "always" being believed is a version of the fallacious appeal to authority sometimes identified as an appeal to numbers, popularity or majority. Even though the reference to "always" suggests that time is a relevant factor, clearly the focus is on the authority of numbers or popularity represented by the unbroken period of time from the large set of believers in the past to the present. So, it is not just because something is traditional or old but rather because this feature of it represents its popularity. It seems possible that this version is also not identifying a unique fallacy of an appeal to tradition but another version of an appeal to authority sometimes called the appeal to popularity. This, then, could be another failure to identify the defining conditions of the unique fallacy of an appeal to tradition. It, however, seems to come closest to the most acceptable definition represented in version (b) even though I will subsequently show how this latter definition is open to significant problems which could be addressed by revising this definition in various ways.

5: The Tradition Paradox

The tradition paradox is characteristically not identified in many textbook responses to the fallacious appeal to tradition. The paradox may be expressed

as follows: *Any relevant change (RC) to the traditional existing (symbols) patterns of behaviour introduced in order to bring about improvements, a redistribution of existing traditional patterns or new patterns of behaviour, will inevitably run headlong into the relevant obstacle (RO) of existing traditional patterns of behaviour.*[9]The paradox is that RC is, at least, as relevant as RO. So, no determination of relevance (either positive or negative) can, by itself, unequivocally determine that RC is relevantly better than RO. Yet, paradoxically, this seems precisely the basis for arguing in favour of the change. This so-called obstacle (RO) represented by the traditional practice is a relevant one because the endurance of certain patterns of behavior or practices over time can make a positive difference to their cognitive or psychological acceptance while making little or no difference to their logical necessity or acceptance.

This *positive psychological* weight falls on the present existing practice, grounded in the past, not the present projected towards an uncertain future. [Gough:1985 and Walton 1985:263] The paradox is mirrored in the predominant psychological tendency of a *telos-based* traditionalist audience to accept the authority of existing traditions and resist any attempted change to them. This is a factual psychological claim not a prescriptive claim about what *should be* the situation. This is the basis for Hume's problem.[10] Critics of appeals to tradition may confuse these two. Correct intuitive judgements about any new patterns of behavior or distributions themselves rely on past evidence and the relative success of these experiments. The new pattern at the time it is suggested will be projecting some good, speculating on some consequences or outcome and cannot immediately be demonstrated to be superior beyond some hypothetical claims.

Our beliefs are organized into priority catalogues as John Dewey suggests or within force field models as W.O.Quine maintains so that traditional beliefs are held fast even under severe bombardments by new information at the periphery.[Dewey:1984 and Quine:1970] The burden of proof *seems* to the traditionalist to be on the proponent of change or process as opposed to the traditionalist's *telos* bent, since the latter provides a clear measure of trust, security and stability which is always in principle unavailable to the former because of the difference in the relation of time. The past is taken to be more certain than the future, even though it is constantly revised by varying interpretations of present views. Any identification of a fallacious appeal to tradition must take account of this paradox in the qualified description of this possible mistake in reasoning. Failure to do so leaves further room for doubting that there is a bona fide claim to a fallacy known as an appeal to tradition.

6: Testing Possible Examples of a Fallacious Appeal to Tradition

It may be useful to critically evaluate two examples, which intuitively could contain an appeal to tradition. First, to determine whether there is any use for the identification of a fallacious appeal to tradition, each example will be

critically evaluated to determine whether or not the premises provide the basis for a cogent argument or not --without any appeal to a fallacy of tradition. Second, each of the arguments will be tested with the use of an appeal to a fallacy of tradition to determine whether (a) the latter makes any sense and (b) the latter adds anything of any critical significance to the former interpretation. This is to test whether there is anything added to a critical evaluation of an argument with the addition of the charge of a fallacious appeal to tradition. If not, then the repertoire of faults in reasoning – without the addition of any fallacious appeal to tradition – is sufficient to critically evaluate those examples reputed to contain the fallacy. This may cast further doubt on the efficacy of a fault in reasoning identified as a fallacious appeal to tradition or wisdom of the past.

Example 1: Against Reductionism

Arguing in favour of what he calls *humanistic holism* against other "defective" versions of ecological holism, Don Marietta rejects any version of ecological holism that "denies humanistic and personalistic values by reducing human beings to their ecological role". [Marietta 1999:241] In this example, Marietta makes reference to "generations of responsible thinkers" which intuitively seems to be an allusion to the wisdom of the past or traditional views of the past. He offers the following brief argument to demonstrate the "logical flaws in the extreme forms of holism".[Marietta 1999:241]

P1: Reduction simplifies things by ignoring matters that are evident.

P2: Reduction simplifies things by ignoring matters that have been held important by generations of responsible thinkers.

So,

C: Reduction is flawed.[Marietta 1999:242]

(a) Interpreting the structure and relation of the content of this argument within its context I have separated two claims connected by the conjunct "and" to indicate two separate ideas. If this is plausible, then P1 on its own could fail to support the conclusion because the referent for "matters that are evident" is *indeterminate and vague*. This is the same problem with the referent "generations of responsible thinkers" which also fails on account of the *fallacy of vagueness*. So, we are in a position to claim that the two pieces of support provided for the conclusion fail to provide acceptable support and so the argument fails to be cogent.

(b) If, however, P1 should be connected to P2 in linked fashion, then the referent for "matters that are evident" repeats and/or refers to "matters that have been held important by generations of responsible thinkers" in P2. The premise P2 then could be faulted for committing the fallacy of tradition either on its own or together when linked to premise P1. This makes the reference to the wisdom of the past central to the claim in either the second premise or both

premises. What is significant is that both P1 and P2 on either interpretation employ one version of the fallacy of improper appeal to authority, in this case, an authority from the past. Both involve an appeal to an authority in which, at the very least, the domain of expertise is vague. So, the argument can be shown to fail on (a) and (b) interpretations without any use of a so-called fallacious appeal to tradition to identify a unique mistake in reasoning.

Example 2: Protecting traditions of a language

The following example occurred in a newspaper report of comments made by a French cabinet minister about aspects of the language employed in the province of Quebec, Canada. The cabinet minister was reported to have criticized Quebecers for "bending the French language in the name of political correctness".11 In this example, there is an explicit reference to tradition in one of the premises and an implicit reference in another premise. The argument suggested by the comments reported in the article could be standardized as follows:

P1: Using the term "personne" (person) to refer to both genders is against French judicial traditions and philosophy.

P2: The term "homme" (man) is normally used to represent "people" in the singular term (even though the term can mean, "man").

P3: Canadians, Quebecers and the United Nations in the name of political correctness cannot bend The French language.

P4: The French language should not change because of pressure exerted by Quebec feminists.

So,

C: Quebecers are wrong to use the gender-neutral term for "person" instead of the word "man".

  a. In this argument there are two clearly irrelevant versions of *ad hominem* attacks in P3 and P4 as the disreputable motive of "political correctness" is impugned to the entire group of those who propose the change to the French language in P3 and an attempted guilt by association is put forward in P4 with proponents of change associated with purportedly disputed feminists.
  b. So, the identification of any possible appeal to tradition occurs primarily in premises P1 and P2. To determine whether or not the arguer commits any serious fallacy or fallacious argument "that may be psychologically persuasive, although incorrect"[Copi 1986:100] it may be useful to consider what is intended in these two premises. What could be intended is an explanation to help an audience understand the conclusion or P1 and P2 could be intended as premises of an argument

to provide a justification for the conclusion (either directly or indirectly). If the first interpretation is plausible, then there is no fallacious appeal to tradition at the heart of this argument's failure to be cogent.

On the basis of our evaluation of both these examples, we have some support for the following claims. First, in both these examples, it is possible to determine serious faults in the arguments and the reasoning used to support the conclusion without applying any evaluation based on an appeal to the fallacy of tradition. The application of such an appeal seems unnecessary and any use of it would simply repeat the defining conditions of other fallacies. So, this gives us some reason to believe that an appeal to the fallacy of tradition may be superfluous since the mistakes made are based on fallacies other than the appeal to tradition. The addition of this fallacy to our evaluation of both examples would add nothing of any significance to our testing repertoire.

Second, any attempted appeal to the fallacy of tradition listed as potentially acceptable version (b), which states the fallacy as: *assuming or arguing that something is good or desirable simply because it is old or traditional*, fails to distinguish between references to tradition in an argument which are used not to support a controversial claim in a conclusion but to explain something or advance our knowledge of something. So, in the first example, the two premises *may be* explaining the process or consequences of the process of reductionism and in the second example, the first two premises may simply be explaining French judicial and language traditions without implicitly claiming their plausibility as pieces of support in an argument. Even if the two arguments contain appeals to tradition, it is not clear that these would be fallacious appeals since there is no attempt to separate their use as a piece of explanation from their use as a piece of justification. These critical considerations open up some reasonable doubt about the viability of a claim to a fallacious appeal to tradition.

7: Why Some Claimed Fallacious Appeals to Tradition May Fail to Persuade

We are now in a position to summarize the reasons why some claims to a fallacious appeal to tradition fail to be persuasive. First, the appeal to this particular fallacy is a confused appeal since the mistakes made are often to another fallacy not the one identified as demonstrated in the evaluations of the two examples. Second, the claim to the fallacy is often confused by some questionable definitions used in some informal logic textbooks, definitions which suffer some serious faults of their own. Third, the audience variance leaves all uses of the irrelevant appeal to tradition open to question since whether such an appeal is irrelevant is itself relevant to a particular audience with a predisposition for process or telos. Finally, any appeal to change an existing traditional practice or relationship runs up against the potential problem of the paradox of tradition which demonstrates that the force of relevance rests with the existing or traditional practice not the proposed alternative. These considerations lead one to suppose that, at the very least, it is not obvious that any appeal to tradition even in an argument is necessarily

fallacious and perhaps that some arguments which contain such appeals fail for other reasons.

Endnotes

1Simone de Beauvoir provides an excellent example of the approach suggested here in her seminal work, The Second Sex, which I cannot hope to approximate, as she instigates the important intellectual quest in response to the question "What is a woman?"

2For a more detailed discussion of this critical point, see Gough:1985.

3At least one textbook discusses this important notion of audience variance and its relationship to the belief systems of different audiences (Groarke 1997: 199-201). Earlier references can be found in: "The Use of Irony in Argumentation", Christopher Tindale and Jim Gough, Philosophy and Rhetoric, 20:1987.

4The survey I conducted is incomplete and unscientific since it is based on a random set of texts sent to me by various publishers over the last few years. There is no respect in which this survey is representative of the entire set of texts in the area.

5I use the legal phrase "without prejudice" to indicate that the use of this term is as a heuristic device not to bias one interpretation over another or to beg the question. It is my speculation that there will not be a great deal of variance in the entire set from this set.

6In a paper "Tradition and Ways of Life" presented to a conference at the University of British Columbia, March 13, 1998, I argue for four possible ways of transferring traditions including an explanation for the difference between an explanation and justification as well as authentication and authority. I will not repeat that discussion here.

7In a Sourcebook for Critical Thinking [Gough:1983] there are several examples in which the writer disagrees with a change to tradition. For those interested, these minimally include examples 25,42,44,46,47 and 50 in this text.

8Most informal logic texts contain a chapter or section on mistakes in reasoning that involve definitions. For example, both Groarke [1997] and Govier [1997:98-110] provide full and useful explanations. So, I leave it to the reader to match their discussion to these examples and my critical evaluation of them.

9An example of this kind of "Reformers Paradox" can be found in Nicholas Rescher's text, Distributive Justice, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1966, 121.

[10]There is a useful and accurate discussion of this problem in Govier:1997 page 296.

[11]This example is adapted from an article "That's not French", Red Deer Life, Sunday, March 30, 1997. The accuracy of the article is always open to some doubt.

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