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### Commentary on Gough

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**In Response To:** Jim Gough's [Does an appeal to tradition rest on mistaken reasoning?](#)

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We are justified in giving a distinct fallacy label to a type of defective argument only if we can identify some clear cases of that argument, and show that it is defective in a way that is distinct from other fallacies. Prof. Gough argues that it is difficult to satisfy these two necessary conditions in the case of the fallacy of an appeals to tradition. I will argue that despite some of these difficulties, some fallacious appeals to tradition do satisfy these conditions. I will first present a few paradigm cases of appeals to tradition, describe what seems to be their general form, show why in some cases these arguments are either sound or unsound, and then comment on Prof. Gough's arguments. In this paper I provisionally define "tradition" as a group of beliefs or habits that have given either meaning or direction to a group of people, and that have been handed down for at least a few generations. Given this definition, there can be religious, educational, scientific, military, monastic, domestic, artistic, etc. traditions.

I take the following examples to be model cases of the kinds of arguments that are labeled appeals to tradition:

(1) Women should stay in the home because that's the way it has always been.

(2) "Ask five people at a cocktail party how they feel about astrology, the study of Tarot cards, or the Oracle of Changes: I-Ching, and you're likely to get responses ranging from 'fun' and 'fascinating' to 'hokey' and 'suspicious'. However you look at it, *these divining tools have stood the test of time*, and of late have come to reside online in the software for Macintosh." ("A Primer on Divining", Anne Marie Feld, *MacHome*, May 1999, p. 52, my italics.)

(3) Whenever someone has ailment x, s/he should do y, for that is how it was treated in the past.

(4) Whenever someone transgresses rule z of our tribe, s/he should be banished because that's the way it was done ever since the remote past.

These model examples illustrate the following difficulties we can have with these arguments. First, such arguments typically do not appeal to a whole tradition but rather to the a belief or practice within a tradition. Secondly, it is sometimes not clear which tradition transmits a belief or a practice. Thirdly, it is often not clear whether there is in fact a tradition that transmits them. Fourthly, the word "tradition" is sometimes used even in cases where it is only the age of a belief, habit, or custom that is intended to provide the support of a conclusion. These problems suggest that the expression, "appeal to tradition", might not be the best label to group the kind of fallacy we are discussing.

Despite these problems, the model cases suggest the following general forms:

**(A) (1)** The belief that X is very old, or

(My ancestors believed that X, or

My elders taught me to believe that X, and

they acquired it from their elders, etc., or

Belief X is part of a tradition to which I belong), or ...)

So, **(C1)** X is true (argument), or

**(C2)** one is justified in believing that X (argument), or

**(C3)** one should believe that X (argument), or

**(C4)** now it is understood why one believes that X (explanation).

**(B) (1)** Practice/habit/custom Y is very old, or

(My ancestors did/practiced Y, or

My elders taught me to do Y, and

they acquired it from their elders, etc., or

The practice of Y is part of a tradition (to which one belongs), or...)

So, **(C1)** practice/habit/custom Y is justified (argument), or

**(C2)** one should practice Y (argument), or

**(C3)** now it is understood why one does Y (explanation).

I certainly do not pretend to have identified all the possible different groups of model cases of appeals to tradition that would suggest a form different from the one I have just described, but this will suffice for my present purposes. I describe different ways of expressing premise (1), and identify variations in the kinds of conclusions inferred from the premise. For one could be either attempting to convince one's audience that a belief is true, or justified, or should be believed, or trying to explain why one holds a belief. These distinctions are important because the appeal to tradition can sometimes establish one conclusion but not the others. (I do not pretend to have identified all possible variations of the kinds of conclusion supported by an appeal to tradition, and here too I invite you to add to the list.) I will focus my attention on the attempt to derive conclusion C(1). For the sake of brevity I will concentrate mainly on argument (A) because most of what I will say also applies with some minor modifications to arguments (B).

Argument (A) is fallacious because it makes an irrelevant appeal to time. The greater age of a premise is supposed to increase its support for a conclusion. If this were so, then there would be different degrees of support in the following arguments:

**(C) (1)** Venus and Earth revolve around the Sun.

So, **(2)** there is at least one planet in addition to Earth that revolves around the Sun.

**(D) (1)** Pluto and Earth revolve around the Sun.

So, **(2)** there is at least one planet in addition to Earth that revolves around the Sun.

Both beliefs C(1) and D(1) are true, C(1) is older than D(1) because C(1) was discovered much earlier than D(1). But both arguments provide an equal amount of support. Therefore, the age of a belief does not increase the support it already brings to a conclusion. Just as the greater age of a person does not entail that s/he has greater knowledge or wisdom, the greater age of a belief or tradition does not entail that it provides better support.

Of course the age of a belief has no relevance to its truth. For there are many false beliefs that are older than their contradictories. For example, the false belief that the Earth is flat is older than the true belief that the Earth is not flat. Hence, when contrasting two beliefs, the greater age of a belief is not sufficient for its truth. Similarly, there are many true beliefs that are not older than their contradictories. For example, the true belief that the Earth is spherical is not older than the false belief that the Earth is not spherical. Thus, when contrasting two beliefs, a greater age of a belief is not necessary for its truth.

The age of an argument is also logically irrelevant. If it were relevant, then there would be a logically significant difference between a sound argument completed a century ago and an identical argument completed just a moment ago. Of course the historical context helps us to interpret an argument, and different historical consequences arise from the different times when an argument is constructed. However, if two arguments in fact express what they are intended to communicate, and if they both express the same thing, then the age difference between them is logically irrelevant.

The time involved in generating an argument (or deriving a proof) is also irrelevant, even though it is a process that elapses through time. For if the lapse of time were relevant, then there would be a logically significant difference between an instantaneously constructed sound argument and an identical argument that takes a century to construct. Though there are different practical consequences between these two arguments, there are no logically significant differences between them. Therefore, the span of time involved in the construction of an argument is logically irrelevant.

In conclusion, the age of a belief has no bearing on the support it provides nor on its truth, and the age of an argument and the time it takes to construct it have no bearing on the strength of the argument. From these four points, especially the first two, whenever one intends to support the truth of a belief that *X only from the age of X, or only from the age of the evidence in favor of X*, then that appeal commits a fallacy of relevance. If the reasoning in the preceding paragraphs is sound, one can answer positively to Prof. Gough's question in his title: "Does Any Appeal to Tradition Rest on Mistaken Reasoning?".

The use of the label, "appeal to tradition" is supported for at least two reasons. First, this fallacy of relevance is clearly distinct for other fallacies of relevance. Secondly, there are many different ways of making an irrelevant appeal to time/age, and so, this label helps us to focus specifically where a defect lies. However, let us not forget that the problems mentioned in the third paragraph of this paper suggest that "tradition" is not the best word to guide the focusing.

Prof. Gough's question can be interpreted as inviting us to examine whether arguments that have the *appearance* of appeals to tradition can be legitimate. Though he does not pursue the matter, it could shed further light on the issue at hand. In the next part of this paper I will describe such arguments. I will first identify the assumptions required by a legitimate use of such claims as, **(E)** "Belief/claim X has stood the test of time", and those required by such arguments as **(A)**; and then describe the consequences that follow from this discussion.

Since time evidently does not do any testing whatsoever, the statement that a belief X has stood the test of time is obviously false, and so no reasonable person interprets that statement literally. What is probably assumed is that X has stood (a) many test, in the broad sense of the word "test". Since it usually takes time to test and verify something, the reference to time seems to be an indirect way referring to a large quantity of tests. However, this is not sufficient for the truth of X: it must also be assumed that X has stood (a) many (b) appropriate tests. Condition (b) is often not satisfied, and this is why the use of such statements as **(E)** as evidence is fallacious. However, if conditions (a) and (b) are satisfied, then the use of statements like "Belief X has stood the test of time" as evidence does not involve any fallacious reasoning, even though such statements are not effective ways of communicating all the relevant assumptions that are doing the work.

There are similar important assumptions underlying argument **(A)**. As presented, this argument is certainly invalid, for there are many counterexamples where all its premises are true and the conclusion false. A correct reconstruction of the argument will identify the implicit assumptions that block such counterexamples.

A person who does not mistakenly assume that the age of a premise (or

tradition) increases its support, will usually appeal to the transmission of a belief within a tradition by making the following kind of assumption:

**(A) (2)** Belief X was and still is justified within the tradition.

*However, conjoining (A)(2) to (A)(1) is still not enough to establish the truth of the conclusion. For what was and still is justified within a tradition might not be acceptable to those who do not adhere to the traditions that transmits belief X. In order to block such objections, an appeal tradition intended to establish the truth across traditions must make assumptions similar to the following:*

**(A) (3)** The justification of X within the tradition in question is sufficient to establish the truth of X .

A weaker version of this assumption is that

**(A) (3')** The justification of X within the tradition is adequate and acceptable to the audience of the argument.

There can be variation on this assumption:

**(A) (3'')** Belief X has stood (the appropriate, and sufficient number of) test "of time" across the relevant traditions.

Though the insertion of (A)(2) and (A)(3) renders (A) valid, one could object to this reconstruction on the grounds that the added assumptions render the given premise superfluous. Similarly, exposing the assumptions required by claim (E), belief X has stood the test of time, renders (E) irrelevant. Is this a defect of the reconstruction, or is the reconstruction evidence that statements such as A(1) and (E) are really logically irrelevant? Just as a statement expressing an appeal to authority in support of a claim X is not what is actually providing the support but merely points in the direction of what is thought to provide support, statements that have the appearance of appealing to a tradition do not provide support but vaguely point in the direction of support. This kind of "appeal to tradition" to support X, just as an appeal to authority to support X, is a way of calling attention to what does the real work to support X. Statements A(1) and (E) can be just calling attention to where the real work is done, but they themselves do not provide any support. Consequently, a correct reconstruction of arguments that have the appearance of appealing to a tradition, used to support the truth of X, would unavoidably expose the premise expressing the appeal as being logically irrelevant in supporting the truth of X.

One consequence follows if my description of certain so-called "appeals to tradition" is accurate. Consider the many traditions in the arts, sciences, humanities, engineering, trades, and crafts where many ideas and practices have been subject to many appropriate tests that are acceptable across many disciplines. Since there are many cases where these tacit assumptions are true, it follows that there are many legitimate arguments that misleadingly

appear to commit a fallacious appeal to a tradition.

The use of these arguments are rather precarious. For it is not clear whether an author is using the appeal to tradition as a way of referring to the appropriate assumptions that are doing the real work, or whether s/he is mistakenly assuming that the age of a premise increases its support.

In the third and final part of my paper I will focus my attention on some of Professor Jim Gough's arguments. He ends his paper with the conclusion that "at the very least, it is not obvious that *any* appeal to tradition even in an argument is necessarily fallacious" (my italics). I have already identified in the first part of my paper some conditions where such an appeal is fallacious, but I have also shown in the second part how some arguments that have the surface features of appealing to tradition are in fact good arguments.

In one of his arguments he examines two examples in which he identifies serious faults "without applying any evaluation based on an appeal to the fallacy of tradition". He then draws two conclusions: (1) "this gives us some reason to believe that an appeal to the fallacy of tradition may be unnecessary", and (2) "superfluous".

The first problem with this argument is that the very same reasoning shows that the other defects "may be" just as unnecessary and superfluous. For one could identify the fallacious appeal to tradition without applying any evaluation based on those other defects.

The second problem is that there is a need for some clarification here. The fallacy of tradition may be unnecessary for what? or superfluous to what end? Even if it is not necessary to expose a fallacious appeal to tradition in order to reject an argument because some other defect is sufficient for that rejection, this simply makes the fallacy of appeal to tradition unnecessary or superfluous from a practical point of view, it does show that the fallacy is logically irrelevant.

Another argument against the use of fallacy of appeal to tradition is that "Often the appeal to tradition is an appeal to an unquestionable authority - one that is in principle, not open to being questioned". This interpretation leads him to say that such a fallacy is either an appeal to an irrelevant authority or to irrelevant emotions. Such a conclusion arises from limiting one's attention to only the surface features of arguments that have the appearance of appealing to tradition. We can see this from the kind of examples he uses to argue that appeals to the "past, wisdom from the past" or customs do not distinguish such arguments from "many other appeals to authority":

(1) Reductionism ignores matters that have been held important by responsible thinkers.

(2) Reductionism ignores matters that have been held important by generations of responsible thinkers. [my italics]

The second statement is according to Prof. Gough as an example of an appeal to tradition. However, the surface features of (2) render it ambiguous. They are not enough to determine whether (2) is a genuine appeal to tradition, where the age of a premise or belief increases its support, as I have described it in the first part of my paper, or whether the temporal aspects of (2) are just a way of referring to a greater number of authorities, thereby making (2) an appeal to authority. And such ambiguity only shows that the appeals to tradition are sometimes (or perhaps often) misleading: it does not show that there are no authentic (and therefore fallacious) appeals to tradition. If we focus on just one side of the ambiguity, we can interpret all or most appeals to tradition as appeals to authority. But such a move already assumes that there are no genuine appeals to tradition.

There is a mistake in the section where he discusses certain definitions. Though he correctly shows "some of these definitions refer to mistakes in reasoning that have other designations", and that "these definitions do not refer to anything that one could uniquely identify as a fallacious appeal to tradition", it does not follow from these defective definitions that there is no good definition, or that there cannot be a good one, that does uniquely identify a fallacious appeal to tradition.

There are also difficulties with his appeal to audience variances: "audience variance leaves all uses of the irrelevant appeal to tradition open to question since whether an appeal is irrelevant is itself relevant to a particular audience with a predisposition" favoring a tradition. However the same reason applies to any accusation that someone has committed any other fallacy: anyone favoring what is labeled as being fallacious will similarly question the relevance of the reasoning leading to the conclusion that a fallacy has been committed. Since audience variance applies to any fallacy, including appeals to authority, this argument cannot be used to discredit the fallacy of appeal to tradition while favoring the fallacy of appeals to authority.

Professor Gough's discussion of the "tradition paradox" does not seem relevant to his final conclusion. He is certainly correct in saying that there is psychological resistance to changing a tradition even when it is an improvement of the tradition, and that "the force of relevance rests with the existing or traditional practice of the proposed alternative". That psychological resistance has no bearing on the logical objections against a tradition. He himself makes a similar point: "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".

The relevance of his telos/process distinction is not very clear. First, traditionalists take for granted that their tradition is an appropriate *means* for a goal. So why associate "process" only to the critics of the tradition? Secondly, the critics object to a tradition typically because it is not effective in reaching some important *goal*. So why associate "telos" only to the traditionalist?

In the first part of this paper I presented a few model cases from which I identified a general form of one kind of appeal to tradition, and then showed why such forms are fallacious. In the second part I described how legitimate arguments can misleadingly appeal to tradition, and identified some assumptions that are necessary for such arguments to be sound. These two parts helped me to answer partly Prof. Gough's question, "Does Any Appeal to Tradition Rest on Mistaken Reasoning?". In the final part I discussed some of his arguments and offered some suggestions for his continuing work on the fallacy of appeals to tradition.

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