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The Idea of Tradition in Del Noce

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On several occasions in the course of his reflections on the history of ideas, Augusto Del Noce (1910–1989) brings up the concept of “tradition” as key to understanding the fundamental conflict playing itself out in contemporary history. As is his intellectual habit, he deliberately goes beyond a purely phenomenological or sociological analysis and strives to understand the properly philosophical significance of this term. He argues that the concept “tradition” is fully meaningful only within a certain “metaphysical context” and quickly becomes ideological if it is separated from it. In what follows, I will review the main Del Nocean theses about the meaning of tradition and some of their implications.

1. Tradition is from the “past” but about the “eternal”

First of all, Del Noce emphasizes that there is an easy way to misunderstand the word “tradition”: by taking it simply in its etymological sense, without observing that from a philosophical perspective the etymology is in fact “rather ambiguous.” The word tradition means “handing down” but one can hand down both good and bad things. Clearly, “we cannot attribute ‘value’ based on tradition. It is clear that nothing ‘has value’ only because it has been handed down, since, for instance, the rituals of black masses or the most evil arts are also handed down and taught.” From this elementary observation Del Noce concludes that “it is completely evident that ‘value’ is the foundation of tradition and not the other way around. However, the formula ‘traditional values’ has the following meaning: there exist absolute and supra-historical values which ‘therefore’ must be ‘handed down.’ There exists an ‘order’ which is unchangeable, even for God Himself.”^[1] If there were no permanent values, there would be nothing to hand down, and each generation would be forced to define its own values based on historical circumstances. So, the philosophical presupposition implicit in the concept of tradition is that some values are not just historically conditioned. Tradition is “not the preservation of a past, but the recognition of an order of eternal and metaphysical values, which therefore must be handed down and transmitted from one generation to the next.”^[2]

The content of tradition comes *from* the past but concerns the *eternal*, the unchangeable. Reducing tradition to the handing down of a past falls into *traditionalism*.

2. Tradition presupposes the “metaphysics of being”

Thus, the idea of tradition is tied to what Del Noce calls “Platonism” because “it is impossible to speak of ‘tradition’ without making reference to the thesis that ‘truth in itself’ and ‘good in itself’ are absolute, eternal, etc.”[3] This thesis, in turn, is tied to the idea of a universal rationality, the Platonic *Logos*. Tradition properly understood is inseparable from “the essential metaphysical principle ... which says that everything that is participates necessarily in universal principles, which are the eternal and immutable essences contained in the permanent actuality of the divine intellect. ... The primacy of contemplation, the primacy of the immutable, and the reality of an eternal order are equivalent affirmations.”[4] So, in metaphysical terms, “[t]raditional spirit means affirming the primacy of being, the primacy of the unchangeable, the primacy of intellectual intuition, or affirming the ontological value of the principle of non-contradiction.”[5] Del Noce opposes this “metaphysics of being” to the “metaphysics of becoming” which in the modern age found its classical expression in Hegel, and which also shaped the thought of Marx and his successors up to our day. According to this second view, there is no “given” order of being because truth is the “result” of the dialectical process of history, and morality consists in serving such process. Therefore, the very concept of “tradition” makes no sense, since it presupposes a

metaphysical-theological conception of an objective order of being, such that morality consists in respecting it. According to this view, there is, in brief, a universal and eternal reason, higher than man, which provides the foundation for the hierarchy and the absoluteness of values. Therefore, values cannot be reduced to any psychological and sociological explanation ... Participating in this order is regarded as the foundation of man’s autonomy and dignity.[6]

Participating in this order is also the foundation of the possibility of a form of authority which is liberating (because “the affirmation of the super-human is what frees man from dependence on other men”[7]) and not repressive.

In order to be handed down, a value must be eternal, must “transcend” social, economic, and cultural circumstances; but by this very fact, that same value cannot ever be “exhausted” by the historically-conditioned ways in which it is expressed by the thinkers of any historical period.

3. Tradition involves historical formulations of meta-historical truths

Del Noce’s observation that the content of tradition is necessarily meta-historical has a very important consequence: tradition cannot ever be entirely reduced to the specific formulation

given to it by a particular historical age. This is probably the most profound aspect of the Del Nocean reflection on tradition, though it may seem, at first, paradoxical. In order to be handed down, a value must be eternal, must “transcend” social, economic, and cultural circumstances; but by this very fact, that same value cannot ever be “exhausted” by the historically-conditioned ways in which it is expressed by the thinkers of any historical period. To be genuine, tradition must be “old” and “new” at the same time. Every generation faces new circumstances, and thus needs to rediscover anew what is handed down from the past and make it its own by discovering what Del Noce calls new “virtualities” of tradition, meaning aspects that went unnoticed by our predecessors because they faced different questions. In order to continue, tradition must “react” to the new historical questions we face so that we can verify its truth yet again.[8]

To explain this dynamic of tradition, Del Noce refers to Plato’s idea of ἀνάμνησις (anamnesis):

The meta-historical and super-human nature of the truth implies that its fixity includes the aspect of being ulterior to every possible way of expressing it, and thus of being inexhaustibly capable of expressing itself in yet-to-be-defined forms. However, this statement must be purified of all subjectivist aspects: it is the same identical truth which, because of its transcendence, is reached through an ascesis of conscience which necessarily has a historical character: it is a “personal perspective.” This type of rediscovery recalls the Platonic theory of anamnesis. It is a knowledge that man has forgotten, even though somehow he still possesses it obscurely. Such knowledge is reawakened, not without great difficulty and effort, in the presence of the sensitive world. This theory stops being a myth if one understands the meaning of “sensitive world” in the more general sense, which includes the world of history.[9]

As he says elsewhere, “An idea needs to be distinguished from the formula in which it is expressed,”[10] because “metaphysical truth simultaneously reveals and hides itself in the sensible formula that expresses it, which is simply an occasion for anamnesis ... When neo-positivism looks at the sensible formula, it has every right to declare it meaningless.”[11] Therefore, a tradition cannot ever be “fixed” in a “treatise,” in a closed set of propositions. To do so inevitably leads to forms of rationalism and ultimately to the betrayal of the tradition itself, by denying its power to address and judge new historical circumstances. In the history of thought, Del Noce says, the question of explicating the “virtualities” of tradition and of freeing eternal truths from their contingent historical formulations was the focal point of the work of John Henry Newman. Del Noce considered a thorough examination of this question essential to arrive at an adequate (non-relativistic) redefinition of “liberalism” in the political sphere.[12]

4. Tradition is tied to the religious dimension

This awareness of the “transcendence” of the truth also explains why there exists a necessary link between tradition and religion in the broadest sense, as the discovery of the mysteriousness of reality. Genuine traditional thought recognizes that the truth remains “obscure.”

The meta-historicity of the truth and its obscurity establish the connection between tradition and the sacred. It is the affirmation of the eternal within man, of the locus where the foundation of the human order and the foundation of being coincide; hence, “authority.” At the same time, obscurely, so that

authority must be realized as discipline in order to eliminate the elements of deceit which prevent the intuition of the truth (where the word intuition is used according to its etymology, in which “intueri” means “to see.” The visual metaphor indicates that truth is not man’s doing). The need to explain this obscurity is the reason why philosophy according to the traditional spirit is inseparable from the idea of a fall, of an original sin.[13]

Conversely, the “metaphysics of becoming” is tied to *rationalism*, to the denial of transcendence and the affirmation of the “normality” of the human condition, which in Del Noce’s view is the original option which in the long run led to modern atheism.[14]

5. *Revolution as the negation of tradition*

According to Del Noce, the negation of the idea of tradition is the modern idea of *revolution*, as found in particular in Marxism. It is important to emphasize that for Del Noce what makes Marx a paradigmatic thinker is not his social-historical analyses but the fact that he grasps perfectly the philosophical significance of the idea of revolution, and its opposition to the idea of tradition. “At the theoretical level Marxism draws its significance from being the most radical negation, simultaneously and inseparably, of original sin and of the principle of non-contradiction, the affirmation of the primacy of being over becoming, which is the foundation of classical metaphysics and of the idea of tradition. Every revolutionary negation of traditional value depends on this initial negation.”[15] Thus, for Marx, “revolution means radical liberation from authority, but such a rejection implies also the rejection of tradition, and the rejection of tradition implies the rejection of metaphysical-religious thought.”[16]

It is important to observe that Marx’s philosophy has been the paradigm of other forms of revolutionary thought that have marked culture over the last two centuries. In particular, the revolutionary idea is very much present in what Del Noce describes as the “affluent” or “technological” or “permissive” society of the modern West. Even if this society rejects the specifically Marxist form of (class-based) revolution, its proposal “pushes to the limit the idea of total revolution, if revolution means a radical break with tradition.”[17] Starting in the mid-1950s

renewal was understood as liberation from the constraints and ideals of tradition, which were regarded as invalid precisely because they belonged to the past; ... Therefore, man was cut off from the past and at the same time deprived of any tension toward the future (in order to be “new” he had to conform to a world that kept changing at a faster and faster rate, but without any interior change; in short, the technological world). He was reduced to pure present—and was peculiarly celebrated as “creative freedom” because of this liberation. Nothing was handed down to him (tradition derives from *tradere*), he had nothing to hand down ... At this point, man’s freedom thus understood reduces to man’s fragmentation. He can derive his vitality only from “novelty.” Novelty derives its value only from the fact that it “denies” and inebriates man, thus giving him a refreshing feeling of being alive.[18]

The most characteristic expression of this “renewal” was the (appropriately named) sexual revolution, which was explicitly anti-traditional, because “the idea of family is inseparable from the idea of tradition, from a heritage of truth that we must *tradere*, *hand on* ... [but] if we separate the idea of tradition from that of an objective order, it must necessarily appear to be ‘the past,’ what has been ‘surpassed,’ ‘the dead trying to suffocate the living,’ what must be

negated in order to find psychological balance.”[19]

6. *Nationalism as an incorrect idea of tradition*

One last aspect of the Del Nocean reflection on tradition that deserves to be mentioned is the relation between tradition and nationalism. Del Noce believes that nationalism captures a truth, namely, that “the reality of the *nation*, as man’s relationship to his tradition and history, cannot be deduced from the *economic*, as relationship between *man and nature*.”[20] Every human society ultimately formulates a collective narrative which cannot be reduced to material-economic factors and which always includes assumptions and values of a “religious” nature. However, nationalism typically tends to put these values at the service of the preservation of the nation. Thus “people speak of ‘national tradition,’ inverting the correct order and subordinating the ‘traditional spirit’ to the philosophical position most opposed to it, namely pragmatism ... In this way, values are not respected—even if they are said to be supreme—inasmuch as they are considered only from the perspective of their civilizing function.”[21] As a result, in many historical situations “the relationship between tradition and religion ... was turned upside down, in the sense that it was not the latter that provided the foundation of the former, but rather it was the preservation of the former that implied that of the latter.”[22] In this sense, nationalism “harbors an intrinsic contradiction”: “it presents itself as traditionalism, as an effort to perpetuate a heritage, such heritage being legitimated in most cases by referring to transcendent values, even though then there is the tendency to regard them only as functional to the legitimization of a heritage (which is why nationalism can be viewed as the final outcome of an incorrect idea of tradition).”[23]

7. *Conclusion*

Hopefully this synthetic review has achieved its main goal: to illustrate how in Del Noce’s view the concept of tradition, despite its apparent simplicity, sits at the intersection of several foundational philosophical questions. This makes it both important and easy to misunderstand. Of course, appealing to tradition has been a recurring feature of most “conservative” responses to the modern world. This is not surprising, considering to what extent modernity has defined itself in terms of the idea of revolution which, as we have seen, can be viewed as the exact antithesis of the idea of tradition. However, one cannot simply oppose revolution and tradition as the preservation of the past, or even the reality of the nation as the repository of values. Contemporary history has demonstrated that even the strongest national traditions crumble unless they are continually “verified” in the life of the people, and Del Noce’s analysis shows that this verification is of an essentially religious nature. Under the onslaught of secular modernity, only a *present* experience of the sacred (of the “eternal”) makes it possible to grasp the content of tradition and vivify it, while mere repetition of formulas is just a different way of letting tradition die.

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[1] Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity* (from now on *TCM*) (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 57.

[2] *Ibid.*, 179.

[3] *Ibid.*, 104.

[4] Augusto Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization* (from now on *TAS*) (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 241.

[5] *TCM*, 196.

[6] *Ibid.*, 139.

[7] *Ibid.*, 196.

[8] Augusto Del Noce, *The Problem of Atheism* (from now on *TPA*) (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 59–60.

[9] *TCM*, 196–97.

[10] *Ibid.*, 146.

[11] *TAS*, 142.

[12] *TPA*, 59.

[13] *TCM*, 197.

[14] *TPA*, 289ff.

[15] *TCM*, 57–58.

[16] *Ibid.*, 217.

[17] *TAS*, 155.

[18] *TCM*, 113.

[19] *TCM*, 161.

[20] *TPA*, 118.

[21] *TCM*, 196.

[22] *Ibid.*, 238–39.

[23] *TAS*, 101.

