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“Believing so doesn’t make it so, and
neither does believing so for a really,
really long time”

History is always present in the here and now, possibly dipping below the horizon in the whirlwind of contemporary events, but never completely disappearing. Because history colours the way we think of things, (what is imaginable, possible to question, “the way things are”), our attitudes (including the prejudices we inherit), the practices we engage in, indeed, even the words we use have a history (and its clandestine power can be great, the memorable words of Bathsheba come to mind: “It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language, which is chiefly made by men to express theirs.”¹). It might not be obvious to us, we live in contemporary times, and the wealth of new experiences, inventions and ideas often obscures how much of daily existence is a motley of the new, the old and the really old. But now and then echoes from the past break through the noise of the present, and we realise that although perhaps we’ve come a bit further on (whether the direction is right is, of course, another matter), we also carry with us the past. Indeed, even when we rebel, rise up against seemingly unacceptable historical remnants, we implicitly confirm the power of what has been. As William Faulkner memorably put it in *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

In today’s world, the past in the form of traditions of thought and cultural practices is as potent a force as it’s ever been. Maybe it’s because the future appears rather bleak, maybe it’s because things in the present appear really precarious, maybe because of the increasing movement of

¹ Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, ch. 51. (Penguin Books).

people across borders, or maybe there are other forces in play, the past has become a prime motivation in the present, not just in individual lives (adhering to past traditions, passing them on to the next generation), but also for policies (legal and political) that ostensibly aim to protect a past that is in danger of disappearing. But the past can also become a prison, compartmentalising people, placing them within confines whose borders are determined precisely by age-old religious and ethno-cultural practices and traditions. How to navigate these perilous waters? Undoubtedly, being anchored in the past can be extremely important, belonging, being part of and taking part in a tradition, but just as important is to avoid an unthinking acceptance of its present embodiments – not least in addressing “the persistently grotesque subjugation of women”² in today’s world. Violations of women’s rights are often legitimised precisely by appeals to traditions that can be traced back millennia, traditions that are presented as unquestionable aspects of “who we are”, and women are then made the repositories of these identities.

But isn’t there a way to reconcile the past with the present? These are of course extremely complex issues, but let’s begin with one aspect of this complexity, namely, what are we valuing when we value a diversity of traditions and practices? Cherishing them, transmitting them to new generations, being anchored in reality by ties to the past – of course this can be valuable? But I believe we must tread carefully here – rhetoric can easily cloud the vision of even the most clear-sighted. Diversity is a good thing, it opens up possibilities, provides a mirror to things done and believed, allows a possible fruitful clash of ideas. And belonging is also good, being part of, understanding oneself against a background of ideas, being rooted in a history that gives meaning to what otherwise would be a merely transitory existence. But is every tradition worth holding on to? Might there have been mistakes in the past that we, rather than uncritically accept, ought to reconsider? More controversially perhaps, given tendencies in today’s world – maybe we ought to tweak, perhaps even abolish traditions and practices, those that are wrong and harm individuals, and whose only justification is that “this is what we’ve always done”, and “we believe this to be right”.

Because as the title of this essay has it: believing so doesn’t make it so and neither does believing so for a really, really long time. You might not believe that phi-ing is wrong to do, but if phi cannot be justified (made

² Amartya Sen’s *The Idea of Justice* (Allen Lane: Penguin Group, 2009), p. 103.

intelligible as a human good, a valuable aspect of being and doing), then you believe falsely, and what you do is wrong. And this is true also if there are many of you who believe this, (this just means that there are many who believe falsely), and whether or not this belief has a long history (this just means that falsehood can be perpetuated throughout the ages, and that untold lives can be destroyed in the process). Think of the widespread, not always articulated, but terribly mistaken belief that women are “differently human” as expressed in and given context through religious and ethno-cultural traditions and practices.

Does this make you a bit nervous, am I not perilously close to criticizing others and telling them that they’re wrong in what they do? No, I’m not perilously close, I’m right in there, in a critical engagement with tradition and practices that I might belong or not belong to. And I believe this is important, because one reason why many wrongs are perpetuated in today’s world is precisely ignorance, thinking that you’re in the right, while acting in ways that are completely unjustifiable. But I admit, many hesitate, and there are many ways to explain this hesitation – fear of confronting others, mistakenly thinking that respecting people means respecting whatever beliefs they happen to have (arguably a fallacy of the first order), maybe falling into the trap of characterising critical engagement as arrogantly “telling others”. Fear there might be, (in recent times, this fear has been proven tragically realistic), and of course we must think about how we engage others (whether they’re people you “belong with” or not), but critical engagement is absolutely essential. The point of contention is not the explanatory claim that “we believe that women are differently human” (of course you do, that’s why I’m challenging you), but the claim that “women are differently human”.

But maybe you will object – yes, truth matters, but maybe other things matter too, and among these things is precisely the respect for tradition. In other words, that culture represents a domain of reasons that justify in their own right. I believe this is a fallacy, and in the following I will try to answer this objection in more detail. But to begin with a bit of terminological clearing up – culture as I understand this concept is essentially a domain of practice, that is, through culture we’re handed ideas about what ought to be done, what’s good, right and what gives meaning to existence, and in this way being part of a culture is inescapable, indeed, we wouldn’t be able to function without such a context. But this way of thinking of culture, descriptively as a domain of practice, “what we

do” and “what we believe” cannot answer the justificatory question of whether we ought to do phi or believe p.

To expand a bit, there are actually two versions of this fallacy. The first is of a more rhetorical type, and is typically found in arguments that begin with a description of what traditionally is done, and then move to a claim that there is a right, not always conclusive, but nonetheless a right to continue doing this. But this is clearly fallacious: there are perfectly valid explanations why we hold on to traditions, whether religious or ethno-cultural – expressions of belonging, fear of transgressing boundaries, maybe fear of the unknown³, and, of course at times, the importance of what they embody. But whatever the explanation, that we do something can never settle the normative issue of whether we should be doing this, or whether there is a right to do this. At best, what is done to people is not bad or worthless, perhaps it is even positively good. At worst, it means that wrongs are perpetuated under the guise of being a right of sorts – violence against women, racial and religious taboos that speak of shame and defilement, and exclusion of homosexuals. It is always important to get the facts right, (“is this really what the tradition requires”), but it takes further and other arguments to decide the normative issue of whether this is what we or they really should be doing.

The other version of this fallacy is not as easy to pinpoint, but here is one way to put it. That which constitutes reasons to do phi are those evaluative properties that make intelligible why phi is worth doing, or why phi is valuable. It is also these evaluative properties, that we turn to in assessing of what people do. “Why do you do that?” “Because” (and then hopefully we’re given a reason that makes intelligible why phi is worthwhile or the thing to do). But if the only answer is that the practice is part of the Chinese or the Inuit culture or belong to the Catholic tradition, you’ve arguably not provided an answer that could justify anything. That it is a Chinese tradition or practice can explain why a Chinese person would do this (maybe even feel duty-bound to do it), maybe it can also provide a motive for a Chinese person to do it, (“maybe I should phi since this is what other Chinese people do”), but, again, neither point to any justification for why phi is the thing to do.

³ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, “There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching toward him and to be able to recognise or at least classify it”, p. 15.

Take table manners: in China they eat with chopsticks, in Europe they eat with knives and forks. Does the fact that people come from China give them a reason for eating with chopsticks, or is this not rather the explanation of why they eat with chopsticks rather than European implements? The reason Chinese people eat with chopsticks is (and here I improvise) that it is good to eat with implements (cleaner, perhaps more hygienic, etcetera), and chopsticks are one of many types of implements that can be used, the one as good as the other. Put differently, the normative considerations that justify and make intelligible what the Chinese do (eating with chopsticks) have to do with health and cleanliness, not that this is what they do and always have done in China, which is simply a descriptive fact that explains why this specific implement is chosen.

It might be objected that this example is too easy, but I think it generalises well. The fact that I am Swedish is a descriptive fact about who I am, but as such it does not necessarily provide me with any reason to do anything. True enough, it can be a normatively relevant fact, but only, I would argue, given the presence of other normative considerations. For example, to whom do I pay taxes and how much, given that there is a normative reason to contribute to public expenditures. Further, being a Swede can also give rise to certain expectations regarding the way I should behave and how I should respond to the reasons there are – a case in point I think are reasons of respect – and this of course can also be normatively relevant.⁴ Another way in which ‘being a Swede’ as such could give rise to a reason (and not just be normatively relevant) are those situations in which I want to manifest to others that I am a Swede, (“Hey, I do what Swedes do!”), but the question is how strong this reason would be in individual cases. Finally, the fact that I was brought up in this culture probably explains a lot of the things I believe to be true regarding what ought to be done or ought not to be done. However, when challenged why I believe the things I do and why I act accordingly, hopefully I can provide reasons other than “because I am Swedish”, namely reasons that point to real normative properties, that alone can make intelligible to others not only that this is what we do around here, but why we believe this to be the right thing to do.⁵

⁴ I am indebted to David Enoch for raising the point about legitimate expectations.

⁵ Cf. Thomas Nagel, “Universality and the Reflective Self”, in *The Sources of Normativity*: “To decide from the reflective standpoint what to do you have eventually to stop thinking about yourself and think instead about the question at issue – not in this case

It is this distinction that is often muddled in today's debate surrounding the problems that diversity raises: many times the descriptive fact that a practice is Chinese or Catholic or Inuit and has been since time immemorial etcetera is taken as a reason for doing x, y and z, or for there being a right to do x, y and z, but in case the argument just made is correct, this is a fallacy. At most, this fact can explain why an otherwise valuable thing, for example being respectful, is done in a certain peculiar way, and why those who happen to be born into that culture (a purely arbitrary fact) do it in this way. But it alone cannot provide any justification, because being Chinese or Catholic or Inuit (or any other term denoting cultural belonging) are not evaluative properties. Rather they are arbitrary facts about persons who just happen to be born in a place that happens to have certain borders and a certain history, and maybe also a certain culture (or more likely cultures in the plural). It is true, and in this critics might be right, that coming to understand this could be corrosive of practices whose only justification is "this is what we always have done". But in case there are no reasons to act as tradition prescribes, or there are good reasons why people ought not to act in this way, or believe as they've always believed (that women are "differently human" comes to mind), then why would corrosiveness be a problem?

Have I been too quick here? Perhaps it could be objected that the fact that a certain practice is part of the historical traditions of a certain group makes it theirs in a thicker sense, so that merely by being a part of this culture as such constitutes a reason to act as tradition prescribes. Joseph Raz, in *Value, Respect and Attachment* recounts the story by Saint-Exupéry of the little prince who grows attached to a rose, and because of this attachment, the rose is no longer just an ordinary rose, but one with a particular value to the little prince. He has made it his, and this gives it a value that other roses do not have. Maybe a particular tradition to which Chinese people are attached could be seen as analogous to the prince's rose. To take part in this tradition, play the role it assigns them, is part of who they are, their identities as Chinese. Perhaps it even gives their lives meaning, most certainly it has a meaning for the Chinese, which it does not have for others, precisely because it is their tradition. Is this not enough for it to constitute a reason to act accordingly? Not really, as Raz

about what entities the world contains, but about whether what has made you want to do something really is a reason to do it. The answers to such questions may partly determine your identity, but they don't derive from it," p. 206.

rightly points out concerning the rose, attachment, even when embraced willingly, is not enough to confer value on an object. It must be a valuable attachment for this to be the case, remember, what the little prince is attached to is a rose, a beautiful flower.

Put in other words, mistakes can be made in these contexts, and if this is so, then the practice that is based on such a mistaken idea, however deeply rooted and however much it forms part of people's identities, is without value. For traditions and practices cannot become valuable just because people are attached to them, or believe that they are "as they ought to be and cannot but be". In other words, there is no escaping the evaluative question: Can this thing we do be justified?

Why is this important? Assume you encounter a Chinese person, who, on being asked why he does *phi*, answers, "because I'm Chinese and this is an age-old Chinese tradition", the answer might be fine in the case of chopsticks, because we understand without further ado what is good about eating with implements, and why not chopsticks? But what if the practice that he engages in is less obviously of value or positively of dis-value. In China, prior to the revolution in the early twentieth century, there was a cultural tradition to the effect that if you were a woman born into the higher echelons of society, (but the practice was imitated in other strata of society too), the bones in your feet were broken just a few days after birth, and bound to create what essentially with time were deformed feet.⁶ Not only was this an excruciatingly painful and drawn out process, it also meant that these women for the rest of their lives were incapacitated and thus completely reliant on the assistance of others. Now I'm sure that those who engaged in this practice believed that they were acting as they should, otherwise why did so many participate in this practice, maybe even the women who were subject to the ordeal thought so too. It is also likely that had they been asked, they might have been able to explain why this was done (part of Chinese traditions from time immemorial, a way to control female sexuality by effectively secluding them in their homes), but it is less likely that they would be able to come up with an explanation that would make it intelligible why this is a valuable practice, without relying on false beliefs ("women are differently human"), prejudices ("women are weak and must be protected") or mistaken facts.

⁶ Cf. Gusset & Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, (University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 70–71 et passim, Gerry Mackie, "Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Convention Account", *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996), pp. 999–1017.

In the domain of values there are of course difficult issues, but not everything can credibly be thought of as valuable: we're dealing with human beings and how they as human beings ought to be treated.

Here then we come to the nexus between intelligibility and value with which I began. The problem is not that Chinese people did something that others do not do, but that they do something that others (and possibly, indeed probably, some of their own) could not do, because what they do has no comprehensible value. Assume that the Chinese practice of bound feet had not been eradicated in the beginning of the twentieth century, and that to this day, Chinese women were thus incapacitated. Is there any way that this could be explained as contributing to the value of their lives – the women's, that is? As something that could be seen as an instantiation of something that is intelligible as a human value.⁷ And in case this is not so, but the practice can only be explained by invoking false values, perhaps themselves the result of factual mistakes, or metaphysical mistakes about the nature of women – that women are divinely created to be the handmaidens of men, and thus must be confined to the home, that the allure of women is a danger to men's ability to contemplate the higher heavens, and thus must be hidden away, possibilities are endless – then why would the fact that this is a Chinese tradition make any normative difference? Rather, what we face is a practice that is objectively wrong (because it gives rise to chronic pain, incapacitation, and makes women completely dependent on others etcetera). They thought they had a reason to do what they did because this is what they have “always done”, but they were wrong – the distinction that is often muddled in the debate, between the descriptive and the evaluative, remains clear.

In conclusion, there is nothing uniquely privileged in the idea of the past, rather traditions of thought and cultural practices must be assessed as other phenomena in the normative domain, by trying to discover what values this or that practice embodies. And when we question a certain practice, our own or that of others, what we want to know is whether it can be made intelligible why this is not just the thing to do (tradition, religious commands, ideological decrees), but the right thing to do (justifiable in terms of true values). Catholics, Chinese and Inuits do

⁷ Maybe one could point to an aesthetic value, that this made them more beautiful according to the cultural norms of China. But even then, surely, an argument could be made that this aesthetic reason is not strong enough to outweigh the moral reasons there are not to engage in this practice, and can be explained by the pain, the incapacitation et cetera.

things differently and there is nothing problematic about that, indeed, if anything, it adds to the beauty of things. But with respect to diversity, not everything is intelligible as a valuable aspect of living together, most certainly not the things that inflict harm, humiliate and demean a person or that portray her as of lesser worth. Unfortunately, and too often, these things are done to women, and often in the name of past traditions and practices. And then what is done is wrong, period.⁸

As a coda, let's turn from China to the Nordic countries, which of course have had their own traditions and practices, things people have been attached to, practices they adhered to, but that we now view with dismay – and not that long ago. Read Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and hear the response of Torvald when Nora questions the practices that imprison her and treat her as a child, without agency: "Can you not understand your place in your own home? Have you not a reliable guide in such matters as that? – have you no religion?" Clearly this idea of denying women agency, denying them education, denying them employment and a life of their own, was in the Nordic countries, as in most other countries of the world at the time (and till this day in many countries) a deeply rooted tradition that many believed was right and good, but just as clearly Torvald was wrong, what he and his contemporaries did couldn't be justified, in fact it was demeaning to women, treating them as children unable to lead their own lives on their own terms. And luckily for me and other women, there were those who realised that however long the history and however deeply rooted in their religion and culture these ideas were, they must be done away with. And this happened – but the Nordic culture remains and flourishes, just with certain aspects – oppressive, demeaning and morally unjustifiable absent.

⁸ Admittedly, in case one rejects this idea that culture (religious or ethnic) doesn't have a value apart from the way its various expressions contribute to the value of individual lives (and this includes women's lives), the argument doesn't go through. And maybe this is the real tragedy in today's world, that there are those who just do not think in this way, but rather treats individuals as expendable items in the name of "advancing a culture".

