In Defense of Tradition

http://bonald.wordpress.com/in-defense-of-tradition/

It would seem that conservatism is internally incoherent. Most conservatives acknowledge two sources of authority: natural law and tradition. Both are essential if the conservative is to fulfill his role as defender of particular cultures without falling into complete cultural relativism. However, there is a priori no reason to think that these two authorities will always be consistent. Nor is this point academic—liberals never tire of pointing out many allegedly wicked customs of past ages: enslavement of enemies, infant exposure, temple prostitution, gladiatorial combat, polygamy, foot-binding, etc.

How not to defend tradition
There are two common defenses of the authority of tradition. The first argument was used by Burke and developed by Friedrich Hayek. It claims that societies have, over time, passed through a process of natural selection, and the folk ways people have ended up with are those that proved successful. Society is so complex that we may not be able to understand the function a given tradition serves, but to assume that it has no function and that institutions can be redesigned at will defies evolutionary logic. The second argument also goes back to Burke and has been advanced most recently by Roger Scruton. Prejudices and superstitions are, it concedes, irrational, but the irrational emotions they cultivate serve rationally identifiable purposes, such as solidifying group loyalty. However, the emotional manipulation can only be accomplished if its ultimate end is hidden by a veil of tradition from its participants.

There is danger in relying on these sorts of defenses. They both associate tradition with ignorance, because if people had a perfect understanding of society tradition would be either unnecessary (in the first defense) or ineffective (in the second). Such defenses of tradition might cease to apply as society’s self-knowledge improves. The standard arguments are forced to invoke ignorance because they implicitly concede that tradition must ultimately justify itself by utilitarian liberal standards to be justified at all. If we drop this requirement, we can defend our cherished customs straightaway.

The meaning of tradition
In fact, most arguments for and against tradition are irrelevant because they have nothing to do with the things actually defended as traditions. Both the criticisms and the defenses imagine that a tradition is any custom which has lasted a long time and whose existence is not obviously justified on utilitarian grounds. However, nobody feels an obligation to uphold every kind of old custom. Only a special subset of a people’s customs should be called traditions in the strict sense which I will use. By this special sense of tradition, I mean a custom which 1) makes a moral claim and 2) establishes a bond among those
who observe it by 3) allowing the members of the community to collectively recognize some objective good in a culturally particularized way. The good apprehended and secured through the tradition is known perfectly well by its participants. They are also entirely aware that the tradition is not universal. The very fact that a tradition is only followed by one group allows it to serve as a group marker and to intensify the bond between members. Its efficacy in no way depends on ignorance, irrationality, or obfuscation. It is the insider-participant, not the outsider-anthropologist, point of view which discloses the tradition’s essential meaning, as we shall see from looking at some of the most important examples.

**Codes of behavior**

First, there are traditional rules of behavior. For example, all cultures have codes of modesty which require that some parts of the body be covered in public and that the conjugal act be protected by some veil of privacy. Its meaning is to recognize the dignity of persons as separate centers of subjectivity. Through modesty, we acknowledge that each person is a “secret world” unto himself and that he can reveal himself through his body in a unique way in the marital act. Ironically, it is the very fact of concealment which trains us to recognize this dimension of depth in each person. Clothes remind my eyes how little of a person I can really see. The sharing of subjectivity by the participants is of the essence of sex, so the outsider’s viewpoint is inherently degrading and must be excluded. Thus we exclude outside viewers.

Cultures also have established standards of courtesy which recognizes persons as dignified by an accepted place in society. Addressing people by titles (“miss”, “doctor”, “sir”, etc) obviously fulfills this role. So do expressions like “hello” or “excuse me” which convey no information except “I recognize you.” As Montesquieu noted, each people also has its own conception of freedom, the dignity we accord persons as beings with free will addressed by the moral law. This culturally conditioned freedom can be quite different from liberal autonomy. For example, a soldier is a free man rather than a slave—even if he was conscripted, even though his life is minutely regulated, even though he may be ordered to risk his life. What makes him free is, ironically, his duty to obey. To command someone over whom one has recognized authority is to appeal to him as a moral agent. An animal could only be conditioned, and a slave could only be threatened. The distinctive mark of freedom is also seen in the treatment of criminals. A free society does not excuse or condition them; it punishes them. Punishment appeals to a belief in free will and a common standard of justice.

Each of the above behavior codes varies from culture to culture. In some aboriginal cultures women bare their breasts, while in some Arab cultures women cover their faces. This doesn’t scandalize the traditionalist, any more than one would worry that different languages have different words for the same thing. The thing itself is always the same, but to communicate effectively a
community must agree on a word. The same is true of traditional codes: they articulate objective moral truths. Every woman really is a sacred mystery. Modesty doesn’t condition me to believe arbitrary nonsense; it trains me to recognize something real. Still, I can only respond to these realities through the rules of a particular culture. Without these rules, words like “dignity”, “respect”, and “honor” are practically meaningless. Within a culture, one can know exactly what they demand. And within that culture the demands of tradition carry the full force of the natural law. It really is wicked for a woman to publicly show her knees or her breasts in one part of the world even though it is unproblematic in other lands.

Rituals
A second class of traditions involves rituals—funerals and weddings being common examples. It is becoming more and more common for a person to modify the traditional forms in order to express the idiosyncrasies of his personality, such as when couples write their own wedding vows. The conservative can only lament this trend of “personalizing” ceremonies, because the significance of ritual formulae comes not only from the words themselves, but also from the very fact that they are the words used by our ancestors and descendents across time and by our contemporaries across space. To step into a ritual role is indeed to step outside of one’s personality, but this de-personalization makes possible a truly authentic response to the event being commemorated.

How can this be? A man tends to form an idea of his personality which resembles a fictional character defined by a few traits: “I’m too shy to do that.” “I wouldn’t say something so solemn. I’m just a regular chap.” “I’m the sort of person who always does this.” This self-image hides a man’s full freedom from himself, and the call to “be yourself” often encourages a person to go more deeply into this inauthentic state which Sartre called “bad faith.” When I participate in a ritual, I step out of the illusion of personality and become everyman. The words I say are not conditioned by “the sort of thing I would say” but come solely from the thing being confronted: the reality of marriage, the reality of death. I realize that what I am experiencing is not just an event in my own life, but that I am participating in something universal. As, let us imagine, I speak the sacred words and offers sacrifice at my father’s grave, I remember how he once did the same for his father, and I think of how someday my son will do the same for me. Time collapses; all ages and all generations which performed the ritual seem present to me. Rituals take place in what Mircea Eliade called “sacred time”—by re-enacting the archetypical action of the gods (e.g. the marriage of the first god and goddess) the gods’ original action in the mythical beginning is made present again, and its divine power is shared with the participants. Thus, by ritually stepping outside myself, I can better see both its aspect as a permanent feature of the human condition and the link it gives me with past and future generations. Again, these insights should not be considered illusory just because they rely on tradition. There is no hidden function which is
the “real” reason for the ritual. Nor is it problematic that different cultures have different ways of establishing marriages or honoring the dead.

Conclusion
I conclude that the objections against tradition fail. A tradition proper is a particularized embodiment of the natural law, and cannot contradict this law without negating its own nature as a tradition. Historical examples of bad “traditions” usually refer to bad customs which were not understood to be morally obligatory the way a tradition is. For example, it was never considered morally obligatory to keep slaves or be a slave or to have more than one wife. Note that moral progress has always involved a tightening of moral strictures, never a loosening. Current liberal efforts to loosen traditional morality are thus not analogous to past instances of moral progress. A tradition may indeed be corrupted if people lose sight of the good it serves to reveal; then reform and renewal are called for. However, we must not abandon tradition itself, lest we lose access to the goods which can be apprehended in no other way.