Tradition-based Rationality

Brad Kallenberg

University of Dayton, bkallenberg1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel_fac_pub

Part of the Ethics in Religion Commons, Philosophy Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

http://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel_fac_pub/69

This Encyclopedia Entry is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Religious Studies at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.
Tradition-based Rationality

By Dr. Brad J. Kallenberg
Accepted for publication at the Colossian Forum on Faith, Science and Culture

The term “tradition-based rationality” derives from the works of Alasdair MacIntyre. Human reasoning, argued MacIntyre, is both tradition-constitutive and tradition-constituted.

By the first phrase he means that all reasoning, especially moral reasoning (i.e., thinking about what “good” means), involves people sharing a conceptual language (rather than a natural language like English or Chinese). For example, think of how widely three persons may differ on their use of the word “good” when applied to their jobs. The driver of a beer truck will claim his job is “good” because he is paid well; he is resoundingly welcomed wherever he goes; and he has predictable hours, time off, perhaps even pension benefits and discount on beer. In contrast, imagine a woman who has surrendered a lucrative upper management job to become the coordinator of tutoring and after-school programming in an urban school district. The job is tough, the hours are long, and the pay is poor. But she insists, “I have a good job.” In strong contrast with both of these stands Mother Teresa of Calcutta, whose “job” neither paid well nor, truth be told, made predictable differences in the lives of the dying lepers whom she hugged (sometimes yes, sometimes no; hard to tell). Still, Mother Teresa would also insist that she had a “good” job.

Each of these persons can compose a sentence in English, “I have a good job.” But they do not speak the same conceptual languages. Nor could these three settle among themselves whose job is “most good” by using the word “good,” because “good” means something radically distinct in each case. The driver’s pursuit of personal perks cannot be compared with the coordinator’s goal of “making a difference,” neither of which can be compared with Mother Teresa’s quest “to resemble Jesus come what may.” The driver and the coordinator may come to appreciate Mother Teresa’s meaning, but that will require of them a radical change in outlook (called “conversion”).

One learns a conceptual language not by reading a dictionary, but by immersion in a way of life. One comes to read music with comprehension while learning to play an instrument (or sing in a choir) with other musicians. So too for the language of theology. By participating with others in those activities in which the word “God” is at home — activities such as praying, confessing, thanking, evangelizing, worshiping — one will slowly become fluent in the language of God.

To share a conceptual language is to share a form of life. To share a form of life is to be a community, (Latin, communis, co-world). Being a community involves, among other things, perpetually teaching the children which goods are real, and therefore worth pursuing. Getting this pursuit right takes more than a single lifetime. So in a very real sense the living community needs to include those former members who are no longer living. Such a multiple-lifetime community is what MacIntyre calls a “tradition.” In After Virtue, he defines tradition as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument.”
The “argument” he refers to is none other than the ongoing discussion over what words like “good” (and “good news”) mean. Adherents to a living tradition show their understanding of such terms by the way that they talk and live with each other. For example, Christians understand “Good News” to entail daily acts of forgiveness. Christians’ forgiveness of each other ought thus to be regular enough for outsiders to recognize it in the pattern of Christian interactions. (Likewise, Christian communities that are devoid of such daily acts of forgiveness display that their concept of forgiveness is empty.) In MacIntyre’s terms, the Christian concept of “forgiveness” is “socially embodied.” Because this discussion and living out of the “Good News” carries forward from one generation to the next, the argument is both “historically extended” and “socially embodied.”

In sum, human reasoning is _tradition-constitutive_, because the entire web of conversations across time, conversations which employ the same concept of “good,” _constitutes_ a living tradition. MacIntyre’s second phrase, namely _tradition-constituted_, follows from the first. Human reasoning is always (can never but be) located within some tradition or other. Of course, this fact poses challenges for a tradition like Christianity whose good includes sharing a message to adherents of _rival_ traditions. To recall the earlier example, the three uses of “good” in “I have a good job,” cannot be translated from one conceptual language to the next. One can only understand a rival concept by being an _insider_ to the tradition that uses the term. (In a later book MacIntyre explains how becoming an insider may be aided by employing the kind of imagination an anthropologist uses when studying a new tribe.²)

But notice that _imagination_ is not _translation_. Incommensurable terms have no synonyms in the other tradition. So understanding is not achieved by translation. The message of “Christ crucified” remains pure lunacy to Greek thinkers (1 Cor 1:23). Nevertheless, one may possibly, if slowly, become fluent in the rival conceptual language.) The conclusion is this: Living conceptual traditions are themselves the “the repositories of standards of rationality … which are crucial to moral deliberation and action.”³

Said negatively, apart from the shared life within some particular tradition, “there is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument.”⁴

Said positively, the sharing of a conceptual language enables sharers to understand each other about what things are good, about what human life is for.

**For Further Reading**

Brad J. Kallenberg is Professor of Theology and Ethics at the University of Dayton (Ohio). His books include Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age (Brazos, 2002), God and Gadgets: Following Jesus in a Technological Age (Cascade, 2011), Ethics as Grammar: Changing the Postmodern Subject (Notre Dame, 1998), and By Design: Theology, Technology and the Practice of Engineering (Cascade, 2013). Other publications can be found by poking around on his webpage.

4 [MacIntyre, 1988 #2601350]