



# THE INTELLECTUAL AND TRADITION, PART II.

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"Returns to past styles are never the same thing since they are separated from what they return to." Tradition is a condition in duality for the intellectual; it is at once what grounds the intellectual and forms the root of his insight, but at the same time what ensnares them into the trap of nostalgia.

So, what role does tradition play to the institution of the intellectual and how does the intellectual uphold tradition? Defining the relationship between the intellectual and tradition is the stepping stone to answering said questions, so let us start there.

Tolstoy [characterizes](#) tradition itself as "the collective wisdom of my greatest forerunners" which precisely fits how tradition acts to the institution of the intellectual. Tradition is where all intellectuals draw from, whether their relationship with traditional structure is destructive or preservationist they leap from the work of their predecessors.

This is because emerging intellectual movements universally draw from past movements by making them points of focus. New movements use the questions and conclusions of previous movements to build their own answers, irrespective of whether these new movements are direct successors or deviations from pre-existing movements.

Take naturalism as an example, which concludes that only observable, material laws and truths apply in the world. As a successor movement it has the aforementioned logical empiricism, which takes the naturalist conclusion as a foundational piece from which all its emerging theories must conform to.

Naturalism is taken as a core assumption and is taken to its full extent, meaning all logical empiricist theories are naturalist and reject metaphysics. As a deviation of naturalism, you have modern metaphysics which focuses on proving the naturalist conclusion false, by showing that not all truths can be derived from physical phenomena.

In doing so, it studies the naturalist tradition, understands it, and draws from the work of the naturalist movement to validate its rejection of naturalism and therefore form its answers. (take second look at this)

Both the successor and deviating movement incorporate their naturalist predecessor's conclusion, though latter does so by making its rejection a fundamental piece of its movement, while the former does so by making its affirmation a first principle, meaning that all its theories must take naturalism as a base assumption.

Therefore, both do ground themselves upon tradition, but they do so slightly differently. Logical empiricism chooses to carry on the naturalist conclusion by adopting it as a core foundation upon which it builds its own conclusions, so it functions as an upholder of the naturalist tradition.

Modern metaphysics also takes the naturalist conclusion as a foundational question; however its own conclusions are built on dispelling said naturalist conclusion. Logical empiricism has a preservationist relationship with naturalism while modern metaphysics has a destructive relationship with it.

It is this fundamental choice between dispelling or carrying on tradition that determines the role of the intellectual as an institution. Taking the institutional view is important here, because at the individual level all intellectuals draw from tradition and partake in varying degrees of destruction, thus defining the role at the individual level is meaningless because it is in flux; taking the institutional/aggregate view allows one to proscribe whether movements carry on or dispel tradition, which is a less daunting task.

Tradition can also be characterized as existing institutions or systems of thought, or even more simply put – as structure. Under this logic, intellectuals universally rely on existing structure, but the choice between advocating for current structure or calling for the destruction and creation of new structure separates them.

At the most extreme view, those roles can be segmented into the intellectual upholding tradition or deeming it inadequate. Believing in tradition is to believe in existing structure, but even under this definition tradition is incredibly vast, all intellectuals will reject some tradition and accept other tradition.

Let us take focus on the first role however. Upholding tradition involves the justification and defense for existing institutions, doing so is the key characteristic of the intellectual institution taking the role of tradition as opposed to destruction.

Tradition here starts to take on a duplicitous meaning, at once it is the structure or collective wisdom that has been inherited which must be relied upon to create new structure, but also reverence for that structure. We will make them distinct by calling the latter traditionalism.

Tradition does not necessitate that the institution is completely averse to change of structure, rather it means that it understands or looks constantly towards the “why” for existing paradigms, and so needs strong justification to deviate from them. When that justification is provided, the institution can act dynamically and adopt the new paradigm.

A famous case for such an adoption is the transition from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics in the past century. Newtonian physics had a strong case for being most valid physical paradigm, due to its ability to accurately predict engineering needs and creation of explanations for many physical phenomena.

Knowing this, Newtonian physicists were highly skeptical of moving towards the Einsteinian model of physics when it was presented, because they understood the history, accuracy, and accordingly the justification for the Newtonian tradition.

Once Arthur Eddington (a Newtonian physicist) managed to [develop proof](#) for General Relativity by showing definitively that the Einsteinian paradigm was more correct, it provided the justification needed for physics to gradually deviate from the Newtonian tradition.

Traditionalism consequently also has a role in mitigating the destructive properties of the intellectual - the unplanned elimination of structure, because when the institution takes the traditionalist position it requires strong justification to deviate from existing paradigms.

In contrast to the destructive role, there is an emphasis on finding the cause for working structure along with natural reluctance from strong deviation, so the institution takes the role of challenging new ideas and filtering them before adoption. The institution reveres structure in this role, so it seeks to prevent the unraveling found in the destructive role.

The Einsteinian example shows a potential problem with the traditionalist stance however, the tendency to protect potentially broken or inadequate structure when an emerging structure is superior.

If structure is revered totally for its own sake without understanding of its function and inadequacies, the institution can preserve existing structure without regard as to whether it is the best, most complete structure. Even a corrupted structure can be defended in this fashion.

The institution taking the role of tradition does not however entail that it just preserves existing structure, it can also call for return to former structure. If the institution is dissatisfied with existing structure, it can look to past structure and see it as superior to the current, and so it pursues a return to past structure. This ironically morphs the traditionalist intellectual into taking on the destructive role, as a return to past structure requires elimination of the current.

Neo-Eurasianism in Russia is a recent example of this, it is an intellectual movement which after the Soviet collapse focused on return to core "Russian-ness", pursuing traditional Russian values and moving away from both Soviet values and liberalism associated with the west.

This meant a return to pre-Soviet Russian values and the restoration of Orthodoxy. Accomplishing this entailed the destruction of existing post-Soviet institutions to facilitate the return of previous structure, so the traditionalist Neo-Eurasian movement took on the destructive role for the sake of a return to tradition.

Like the intellectual taking on the destructive role, the intellectual pursuing a return to tradition faces the problem that the destruction of current institutions does not necessarily result in creation of better institutions.

Movements can run into the trap of destroying institutions without replacement or creating institutions

which are unplanned and often even more inadequate than the previous.

Returns to tradition are especially prone here, because returns to tradition do not tend to be pure reflections of the past institutions which they hope to regain, many institutional shifts tend to occur since the time the original institution was in style, so regaining its original form is next to impossible - it is not easy to replicate a pure form of core "Russian-ness" unless you can effectively remove 80 years of imprinted Soviet culture and institutions that separate you from it.

Returns to tradition therefore tend to deviate from the original tradition rather than serving as pure emulations.

When the institution pursues tradition in this fashion it also has a proneness to being enamored by nostalgia. Nostalgia here is defined as the separation between memory and understanding, the intellectual cares more for the memory of the institution and is motivated by an affection for the institution which is not borne from understanding of its meaning or purpose.

Intellectuals here may pursue a return to an institution without understanding it wholly, and also not understanding the failings which caused its initial destruction.

The institution of the intellectual is particularly predisposed to nostalgia because it constantly interacts with old ideas and old structure through study. It understands ideas at an intimate level. It is not much of a blind following of tradition that makes it prone to nostalgia, but rather the close interaction with tradition.

There are also more systemic causes for returns to tradition, that can stem from outside the intellectual institution, but serve to lionize it for a pursuit of tradition.

The [work of](#) Leonid G. Ionin is useful here, he concludes that a collapse of culture can lead to mass societal disorientation, which spews forth nostalgia. He uses the post-war collapse of Soviet culture as an example, coinciding with our [previous discussion](#) of Neo-Eurasianism and its pursuit of tradition.

Cultural collapse triggers an immediate loss of identity and institutions, returning to tradition and past institutions is a solution to both these qualms. Tradition becomes identity, in that past institutions fill what is lacking.

Since these returns don't match the originals however, they are hardly satisfying.

When the institution takes on the role of tradition/return it can also adopt the idea of inversion. Inversion is the other extreme of the idea of progress, it is an understanding of humanity and the world as in constant decline rather than progression.

Just as a belief in total progress does not accurately represent history, the idea of total inversion does

not explain history as well, as the course of history is filled with both moments of advancement and moments of lapse.

Similarly to how destructive movements use progress as justification for destroying existing institutions, traditionalist movements use inversion as cause for why a return to tradition is needed.

Inversion is paired with the belief that traditional virtue is being flipped – humility is replaced with pride, self-restraint is replaced with indulgence. René Guenon's [theory](#) of intellectual decline is an example of inversion, it claims that since the Renaissance the West has been in a state of decline.

Belief in complete inversion tends to result in the creation of movements that worship tradition itself, instead of upholding past structures through understanding, they uphold the idea of past structure or tradition itself.

Aleksander Dugin's [fourth position philosophy](#) is an example of a movement that takes up inversion, it holds that the progress of both right and left-wing liberalism places the world in a state of decline, and therefore a fight for tradition itself must be pursued. *[Amazon no longer sells Dugin's work on its platforms - Ed.]*

Here, tradition itself is pursued, almost irregardless of what that tradition is, Dugin even proposed an alliance with Islam due to its traditionalism "The new phase of the Beast's world strategy consists in the subordination of the Russian people to global power, on the one hand, and in an attack against the most solid bastion of tradition, now represented by Islam, on the other."

Tradition is a move towards adolescence for the institution of the intellectual, it understands the "why" for existing institutions, but it can succumb to destructiveness when embroiled with nostalgia.

Movements which worship tradition over the ideas represented by tradition tend to pursue blind returns, these returns tend not to match the original structures, and ironically morph into the same utopianism that destructive movements engage in.

***The [photo](#) shows, "The Korin Brothers," by Mikhail Nesterov, painted in 1930.***

