RESPONSE

Mark T. Mitchell

Let me begin by thanking Colin Cordner, Will R. Jordan, and Matthew Sandwisch for doing what every author hopes his readers will do: take his arguments seriously and provide thoughtful feedback. I am grateful for their comments and for both their kind words and penetrating critiques. An author can hope for nothing more. All three interlocutors raise important questions about my argument, and while I do not have the space to deal with them all, I will try to touch on what I take to be the most penetrating.

By way of summary, for those who have not read my book, I argue that liberalism is characterized by an epistemological incoherence that manifests itself in a variety of political and social pathologies. The incoherence is this: liberalism is, so I argue, characterized by an inner urge to be liberated from limits. This desire to shake off limits has occurred on several levels. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the limits seemingly imposed by nature and by God were rejected by many of the most "advanced" thinkers. In the seventeenth century, we see a rejection every bit as sweeping and consequential: the rejection of the role of tradition in the knowing process. I argue that the epistemic role of tradition is unavoidable; thus, any attempt to reject tradition and at the same time to retain our rational faculties is to traffic in a profound incoherence. One cannot remain rational and at the same time jettison the role of tradition in achieving and maintaining rationality. Yet, so I argue, this is precisely what characterizes the essence of the liberal project. To demonstrate the systematic rejection of tradition, I explore the ideas of two of the founders of the modern world, Francis Bacon and René Descartes, both of whom make the rejection of the authority of tradition a centerpiece of their revolutionary systems. I turn then to three twentieth century thinkers who seek, in different but complementary ways, to provide an alternative to the liberal rejection of tradition. These three are Michael Oakeshott, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Polanyi.

The definition of liberalism is a real point of contention not just among the three respondents here but also in the debate over the identity and future of liberalism that is currently raging. All three respondents question, in various ways, whether my definition of liberalism is too narrow or if it over-simplifies a reality that is much more variegated and complex. This is an important point, and anyone who has spent much time in the literature realizes that liberalism is a notoriously slippery term and has been called upon to serve a variety of purposes. I'd prefer to avoid getting sidetracked by

these debates at least for a moment. As an exercise in imagination, let's provisionally suspend the use of the term "liberalism" and instead attempt to define certain salient features of the modern mind, features that Polanyi, I think, would largely agree with. Tradition represents an authoritative past that, at least to some degree, bears on the present. Tradition requires a degree of submission to an authority that one perhaps does not fully comprehend. It is, so I argue, impossible to completely rid oneself of dependence upon tradition. As Polanyi points out, even something as basic as language acquisition depends on submission to standards inherited from the past. Culture, in general, and this includes the culture of science, is transmitted via a dynamic engagement with tradition. As Will Jordan points out, Tocqueville's analysis is helpful on this point. Democratic ages are enamored, above all, by equality. When equality is the highest ideal, the problem of authority becomes acute, for authority implies hierarchy, the very opposite of equality. When thinkers such as Bacon and Descartes seek to create methods of inquiry that systematically and explicitly reject the role of tradition, we need to take notice. When Tocqueville asserts that the independence of mind that typifies Cartesian thought is also evident in the mental habits of Americans, we should pause. Americans, he writes, are disciples of Descartes even though they have never read him. This disposition, I argue, has not abated and, in fact, has only become more acute since Tocqueville visited in 1831.

Thus, what I'm trying to describe is certain contours of the modern mind, features that include, at the very center, a problematic relationship with tradition. And on this point I want to be clear. We can understand "tradition" in a variety of ways. We can think of it as discrete bits of cultural or familial inheritance (our family has goose for Christmas dinner). It can be understood as an entire network of deep and overlapping inherited structures (the Western tradition or the Christian tradition). Or it can be understood as an unavoidable feature of the knowing process, a basic and necessary condition for rationality. The focus of my book is tradition in this third sense, and it is the denial of this understanding of tradition, either implicitly or explicitly, that, so I contend, constitutes the essence of the modern mind. Of course, to deny something that must be affirmed is a recipe for incoherence, and that is precisely the condition that we find ourselves in. We have attempted to deny the role of tradition in the rational process and in so doing have failed on two levels: 1) we've created the conditions of incoherence, and 2) we have (thankfully) failed to eradicate in practice what we deny in theory, for if we were successful in jettisoning tradition as an epistemic necessity, we would summarily be rejecting rationality itself.

It is this ill-fated disposition to liberate the mind from its dependence on tradition that I identify as the essence of liberalism. If the term "liberalism" is so loaded with connotations that it distracts from the argument, then, at least at one level, I'm happy to set it aside and deal with the phenomenon, whatever we decide to call it.

With that said, one of the concerns leveled at recent critics of liberalism is that liberalism tends to be spoken of as if the concept, itself, had agency: "liberalism does this" and "liberalism causes that." This is a persistent danger when attempting to identify an idea or set of ideas and trace their genesis and influence. Liberalism is not an independent agent. It does not act. However, the disposition to liberation that, so I argue, characterizes the essence of liberalism, does foster certain patterns of thought and behavior that, together, constitute the modern mind, and in the process, results in actions.

Jordan notes that I "enlist the aid of Tocqueville" and from that perspective he wonders if the abandonment of tradition is the result of bad philosophy (exemplified by thinkers like Bacon and Descartes) or, rather, if it is a natural consequence of democratic equality. I like this question very much. However, I would respond with another question that points out the complexity of the concepts we're trying to nail down: is democratic equality the result of bad philosophy? If we follow Tocqueville, the answer is at least partially "yes." But it is more. According to Tocqueville, social structures shape the minds of the citizens who inhabit them. Democratic citizens see the world differently than those whose minds have been shaped by aristocratic social forms. But, the change from aristocracy to democracy is a complex story that includes philosophical changes as well as social, economic, technological, and political innovations. We could quibble about the degree to which philosophy drives social development or vice versa, but it seems likely that the causes are complex and deeply intertwined.

Sandwisch asks if the incoherencies of liberalism were there from the start or if at some point it took a wrong turn. This question, of course, turns on how we define liberalism. Clearly it would be a gross oversimplification to imagine that one day liberalism did not exist and then the next day it did. Such convenient accounts are only possible in retrospect and are always a shorthand for a complex development that happened over decades and sometimes centuries. At the same time, we must be able to identify significant changes that indicate shifts in understanding, alterations in the way people see themselves and the world they inhabit. In this respect, I would argue that when the various elements eventually converged and then congealed until an explicit rejection of the epistemic role of tradition came to characterize the essence of the system of thought, then liberalism emerged. Given that essential incoherence, liberalism is infected from the start. This is not to say that the various elements that contributed to what came to be called liberalism were, in themselves, infected. The historical development was slow and complex.

Jordan poses a series of questions that turn on the content of various traditions and the real problem of how to distinguish between good and bad traditions. As he puts it, we need to ask "whether we are ever capable of bringing with us only the purest and most helpful parts of our tradition, without including the problematic and

even contradictory bits." This is a good question, and it relates closely to one asked by Cordner: "what place does *aporia* or doubt find in the 'Western' tradition?" There are no "pure" traditions. The human condition is characterized by the messiness of fallibility, uncertainty, and mixed motives. We live in the space between pure truth and absolute falsehood. We must acknowledge this fact and strive to improve what seems to be improvable, to maintain what seems good, and to excise that which appears harmful. We do so with the recognition that we could be wrong. Thus, a kind of doubt or uncertainty is present in all rational endeavors. There is, then, no blessed isle to which we can retreat or to which we can travel, where the limits and imperfections of our rationality are overcome. But the doubt of the honest inquirer is not the systematic, sweeping doubt of the bold skeptic. Doubt properly conceived is characterized by caution and humility, two traits noticeably absent from Descartes' project of radical doubt.

With that said, some traditions are clearly better than others. This, I suppose, is a controversial claim in some quarters, smacking of a sort of chauvinism. MacIntyre, however, goes to great lengths to explain how competing traditions can be evaluated and how the "rational superiority" of a tradition can be determined. Even then, it is not a fool-proof enterprise. Errors are possible. This fallibility highlights the need for a community of inquirers, a "society of explorers" as Polanyi puts it. Together a community strives—and often gropes—toward a better and more coherent articulation of reality. This is precisely how a tradition develops. This is an important Polanyian point: a tradition is an expression of reality. It is never perfect, but a tradition, to the degree that it is healthy, reflects the real and is not a pseudo-reality imposed by the dominating will of a group or an individual.

In this regard, and addressing a question raised by Cordner, the study of history is an essential part of the enterprise. When we engage in a serious and sustained study of the past, we will come to better understand the contours and nuances of our tradition, and what is more, we likely will come to see the various strands of competing traditions that we have inherited. In this sense, it is not simple to speak of "the tradition" as if what we inherit is a monolithic and unified whole. In reality, the tradition we inherit is a complex amalgam of different traditions, some elements incompatible with other elements. We are better able to tease out the incompatibilities when we are deeply informed by a sense of the past and when we have some grasp of the trajectory that the tradition(s) we have inherited have developed over time.

Cordner argues that I drift into "cliché language" and steer into the "ideological topoi of contemporary American factionalism." Yikes. I do, it is true, attempt to show how the consequences of liberalism tend, under some circumstances, to foster some of the most extreme illiberal rhetoric and actions on both the left and the right, but I do not limit the argument to the American context. Some of the same dynamics are at work in Europe. In a related comment, Sandwisch regrets that I do not address

some of our contemporary challenges using Polanyi's framework of moral inversion. Indeed, this is something that could have been more fully developed. My forthcoming book will attempt to work through some of the contours of contemporary issues in a way that, while not explicitly expressed in Polanyian terms, clearly complements his analysis.

What is clearly evidenced in this give and take exercise is something that Cordner points out and that Jordan and Sandwisch implicitly demonstrate: participating in a living, vibrant tradition requires that the participants engage in an ongoing, open-ended quest for the truth. In this regard, disagreement requires an underlying agreement that makes communication and progress in understanding possible. Epistemic humility is necessary. The encouragements of my three interlocutors confirms my belief that an initial intimation, when pursued more fully, would yield fruit. Their criticisms have led me to think more clearly about some matters, have led me to see new avenues that might be pursued, and have even led me to see how I could have more effectively developed certain arguments. For the twin gifts of praise and criticism, I am grateful.