

Tradition in fragments:

Inherited forms and fractures in the ethics of south India

ABSTRACT

"Tradition" is a vital concept for anthropology, framing cultural and ethical life in the present as a field of inherited possibilities. The work of Alasdair MacIntyre yields useful means for understanding the concept, but certain of his postulates concerning the necessary coherence of moral traditions may be queried and loosened. I explicate this argument with evidence drawn from a fragmentary tradition of moral virtue in south India, one that persists through scattered forms of moral argumentation, rival narratives and images of a moral selfhood, and diverse domains of ethical practice through which such arguments and narratives find articulation. [*tradition, ethics, selfhood, fragment, narrative, practice, India*]

The concept of "tradition" suggests that cultural life in the present begins with some kind of inheritance from the past. Persistent attention to modern experience as a condition of rupture and breakage, however, has made such inheritance difficult to think. Tradition itself has been widely taken as a residuum of modernity, often appearing as little more than an ironic "invention" (Hobsbawm 1983) of the past for deliberate ends. Arguments to this effect, although instructive, risk obscuring the specific ways in which discourses, precepts, and practices of the past continue to shape the actuality and eventuality of the present and future. This subject is of particular concern for an anthropology of ethics: an engagement, that is, with the myriad ways in which people work on themselves and others as moral beings. The work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, 1988, 1990) has yielded anthropology a crucial resource for grappling with the moral efficacy of tradition, and, I argue in this article, his work is also useful for a revitalized anthropology of tradition. I also argue, however, that certain postulates in MacIntyre's work concerning the necessary coherence of a vital moral tradition—the unity of its canonical foundations, of its narratives of selfhood, and of its collective practices—ought to be loosened for a fuller realization of this possibility. Drawing on ethnographic evidence from south India, I suggest that far more fragmentary forms of the past and its inheritance may nevertheless serve as effective orientations for an ethical life in the present. Consider, for example, the following instance.

Early one evening in 2002 in a village of the Cumbum Valley of Tamil Nadu, I sat with elderly Karupayi, listening as she related a dream she had had over 30 years earlier. The millet fields that she and her husband had been guarding that year were wilting, she told me, as it had not rained in two months. Worried, she lay down to sleep only to dream of two gods sitting side by side on a rope cot. They had offered to grant her any boon of her choice. Landless and poor, she nonetheless asked for nothing more from

them than rain. The deities sympathized with her plight: “The poor thing,” they said. “One in a hundred, she is asking for rain on behalf of everyone. Let all receive the rain that falls for just one good person.” She awoke shortly thereafter, she told me, and the rain came down as promised, hard like stones and unhusked grain. The rain that Karupayi described was showered on behalf of one virtuous individual, yet it also seeped outward to grace those who deserved it much less. I asked her to explain why the less deserving should be rewarded along with the deserving. Calling on her experience as a cultivator, she made a second analogy to better clarify the gift: “We plant paddy, and grass grows among it,” she said. “As the paddy grows, so does the grass. Just like that, rain that falls for good people falls for everyone.” Water for paddy, rain for all: Both of these images supported an ethical practice of sympathetic giving. But the coincidence of these two aqueous figures, I later learned, was something more than an accident of speech.

While Karupayi and I sat speaking on her tattered cot, two of her grandchildren clamored and chattered to each other on the floor beside our feet. She told them to be quiet and not to interrupt, and I paid little attention to their young voices. It was only the next year, in California, when I began to transcribe my audio recording of Karupayi’s dream, that I heard for the first time the faint traces of what these two small children were repeating back and forth to each other as we spoke. Much more than juvenile prattle, they spoke lines of strangely formal and archaic Tamil verse:

*Nelluk kiraittanīr vāykkāl valiyōṭip
pullukkum āṅkē poṇiyumām tollulakil
nallā roruvar ūlarēl avarporuṭ
ellārkkum peyyum malai*

Water drawn for the paddy will run along the channel
to soak too the grassy weed—
in this old world it rains for everyone
on account of one good person.

Listening through my headphones, I felt a shiver of wonder. This was the very verse from *Mūturai*, a collection of 30 moral maxims attributed to the 12th-century Tamil poetess Auvaiyar, that Karupayi herself seemed to have echoed, paddy, weed, rain, and all (Rajagopalan 1998). The children would, no doubt, have memorized these lines in the nearby government primary school, where the official Tamil Nadu state curriculum introduces such moral works to children as early as the first grade. But Karupayi herself was an unlettered daily wage laborer who had hardly attended school and who did not identify her words with Auvaiyar, speaking, instead, from her experience as a cultivator, mother, and devotee. The gulf in their ages and the contrasting forms of their utterances suggested, too, that neither she nor the children—perhaps no older than four or five—had taught the verse to the other. How, then, was I to

account for this uncanny resemblance between the didactic lines recited by these children and the expository language of their grandmother?

This incident yields a glimpse of a moral tradition in south India that is constituted through processes of both continuity and fragmentation. Certain unmistakable elements of continuity and coherence drew Karupayi and her grandchildren together: the natural exemplars of sympathy as they returned to the present from the past, the agrarian and devotional practices that rendered these images both intelligible and persuasive as guides to everyday conduct, and the unity of a good life conceived and exercised in relation to them. But certain undeniable breaks or ruptures also challenged the assumption that these moral discourses and practices could be sustained by a singular cultural whole: gaps between spoken word and literary referent as embodiments of moral discourse, between official pedagogy and popular knowledge and practice as arenas of transmission, and between the moral qualities of “one good person” and a prevailing social indifference inviting drought and desiccation. Across these bridges and between these gaps lay the contours of a moral tradition in fragments: a tradition of virtue that had maintained both intelligibility and vitality despite its dispersion across multiple domains of pedagogy, practice, and subjectivity. In this article, I seek to outline the fragmentary quality of moral tradition in contemporary south India—the impossibility of its assimilation into a coherent whole—but also the ethical life that it nonetheless enables.

In what follows, therefore, dispersed fragments of discourse and practice do not testify to the failure, decay, or death of a vital tradition. Rather, they may be understood as the very form in which the moral resources of the past survive and work as spurs to ethical conduct in the present. In the following pages, I present three arguments concerning the character of moral tradition in rural south India, drawing from but also critically inflecting the work of MacIntyre on the subject of tradition and the necessary forms of its coherence. First, I argue that discourses and practices of virtue are brought forward into the present as a series of fragmentary and often anonymous echoes from the past, easily unmoored from the canonical body of literary verse from which they borrow authority. Second, I suggest that the “topography” of the moral self and its virtues is fragmented in this case across a plurality of narrative forms that endow their subjects with diverse means of engaging themselves critically and that challenge both the possibility and the desirability of a narrative unity of selfhood. Third, I track the dispersion of one mode of virtuous conduct across scattered domains of practical life, arguing that its recurrence, too, may be taken as a form of fragmentation intrinsic to the articulation of moral tradition in south India. I rely throughout on ethnographic evidence drawn from the Cumbum Valley, a fertile agrarian region located in the southwestern

reaches of the Tamil country of south India.¹ Before turning to these arguments and these materials, however, I consider more closely the analytical challenges posed by tradition and its fragmentation, and their significance for an anthropology of ethics.

Tradition, survival, and fragment in the anthropology of ethics

Tradition is an unsettling term in contemporary anthropology. Both as a means of marking a historical experience and as a way of narrating the distinctive character of the present, the rhetoric of modernity has long been founded on a tension with the “weight” or “drag” of tradition (Shils 1981:201). Scholarship of a political and historical bent has called attention to the many ways in which pasts of tradition have been reinvented anew by disparate actors in modern times (Hobsbawm 1983; Keesing 1989; Linnekin 1983; Thomas 1992). This critical orientation, as Saba Mahmood (2005:114–115) has rightly noted, can sometimes obscure the ways in which contemporary forms of ethical discourse and practice continue to rely on inheritances from and engagements with a deeper past. Such debts to the past are of particular significance for anthropological engagements with the domain of ethics: the myriad practices through which people engage their own acts, desires, and feelings as objects of deliberation and critique, cultivation and transformation. Ethics in this sense—an object of scholarly inquiry greatly inspired by the later work of Michel Foucault (e.g., 1986)—refers to diverse forms of quotidian engagement with some variant of the question, “how ought one to live?” (Williams 1985). Tradition arises here as a crucial problem, for it is difficult to trace particular ethical formations without making reference to the inherited forms of discourse, practice, and personhood that lend them authority and intelligibility.

For anthropologists investigating such problems (Asad 1986; Hirschkind 2006; Laidlaw 2002; Lakoff and Collier 2004; Lambek 2000; Mahmood 2005), the work of philosopher MacIntyre on the subject of tradition has been of particular value in grasping “those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present” (1984:223). Any practice, MacIntyre has argued, “depends on a mode of understanding it which has been transmitted often through many generations” (1984:221). This idea of practice challenges any simple opposition between “tradition” as such and “modernity” as such: Indeed, MacIntyre has written of political liberalism as a tradition (1988) and of the sustenance of rival traditions of inquiry in the modern milieu of the university (1990). In the widely influential *After Virtue*, he argues that “a living tradition is a historically extended, socially embodied argument” (1984:222) concerning the goods proper to a particular community, outlin-

ing here the integration of the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues into the practical reason of social life and the ongoing articulation of its desirable ends in the classical Greek polis. MacIntyre's exegesis of this tradition and its subsequent fate calls attention, more generally, to three aspects of a living tradition deeply significant for an anthropology of ethics: an ongoing argument with canonical ideas of the good, a narrative quality to the lives of those pursuing such good, and a set of embodied practices through which such narratives may be enacted.

The substantive sections of this article take up each of these aspects in turn, as three distinctive angles from which to approach the subject of moral tradition and ethical formation in south India. Each of these sections suggests, however, that we may need to loosen up certain presumptions toward moral coherence embedded in MacIntyre's articulation of these three aspects if we are to grasp most effectively their relevance for the subjects of a more fragmented moral life. For MacIntyre, the fragmentation of a shared cultural whole into disparate domains of thought and action marks the limit of a tradition's vitality and efficacy. In *After Virtue*, for example, he argues that the fragmentation of contemporary life into dissimilar social communities and practical ends has left morality “in a state of grave disorder” (MacIntyre 1984:238). Individuals now have access to no more than a series of “fragmented survivals” from the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues or “implausible modern inventions” that have been elaborated since, all rival and essentially incommensurable claims (MacIntyre 1984:256–257). For MacIntyre, the renewed possibility of tradition under such conditions requires “the construction of local forms of community” (1984:263) that educate an individual “into self-knowledge of his or her own incoherence” (1988:398), thereby enabling the virtues to organize conduct again into coherent forms. Here, I hope to show that fragmentation need not be taken as antithetical to the vitality of a tradition.

MacIntyre has borrowed some of the strongest buttresses to his philosophical case for the moral necessity of coherence from the discipline of anthropology, a point that his anthropological interlocutors appear as yet to have left unremarked. Consider, for example, the following claim in *After Virtue*:

What we need here is not only philosophical acuteness but also the kind of vision which anthropologists at their best bring to the observation of other cultures, enabling them to identify survivals and unintelligibilities unperceived by those who inhabit those cultures. One way to educate our own vision might be to enquire if the predicaments of our own cultural and moral state may not resemble those of social orders which we have hitherto thought of as very different from ourselves. [MacIntyre 1984:111]²

Here, the concept of the “survival,” familiar to anthropology since the 1871 publication of E. B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1958), orients one kind of vision that MacIntyre takes from the discipline. *Survival*, in fact, is the crucial term through which the idea of the “fragment” is often explicated in *After Virtue*, and its pairing with *unintelligibility* in the passage quoted above testifies to its specific conceptual heritage.³ Tylor had argued that meaningless and inexplicable cultural elements among present-day peoples were best taken as durable “fragments” derived “from an earlier state in which the proper home and meaning of these things are to be found” (Hodgen 1931:307).⁴ MacIntyre’s debt to this anthropological understanding is elucidated most clearly, perhaps, by his own discussion of a famous instance in historical ethnography.

In the late 18th century, MacIntyre writes, Captain Cook and his men had been astonished to discover that the Polynesians of the South Pacific prohibited men and women from eating together. When they had asked why this was the case, it seems, they were able to glean nothing more by way of a reason than the statement that the practice was “taboo.” MacIntyre takes this limited explanation to imply that the natives themselves did not understand the word that they were using and the practices that it identified as restricted. He concludes, in an implicit echo of Tylor, that “there is no way to understand the character of the taboo rules, except as a survival from some previous more elaborate cultural background” (MacIntyre 1984:112–113). This failure in the “intelligibility” of rules and practices that were once “in good order” but now “have been fragmented and thrown into disorder,” MacIntyre (1984:113) argues, explains the ease with which taboos were declared abolished in Hawai‘i in 1819.⁵ This formulation of the problem of moral and cultural change, however, raises some questions. One may ask whether Polynesian rules and practices concerning taboo were meant to be “understood” in the first place, whether the taboos in Hawai‘i disappeared with “ease” because of a loss of intelligibility, and whether their fragmentation left behind the “moral vacuum” that MacIntyre describes.

Marshall Sahlins has insisted that the Hawaiian taboo be understood less as an item of belief and more as a principle “in the order of practice” itself (1981:52). As an essential means of drawing social distinctions between chiefs and commoners as well as men and women, the taboo system began to “disintegrate” around the time of Cook’s arrival because of certain realignments of chiefly authority propelled by Western contact. Rival and successive chiefly factions rallied first to abolish the practice, then revived it as a means of enforcing the codes of a missionary Calvinism, and then struggled to restore it as the foundation for traditional social hierarchies. Over time, chiefs also used taboo to assert their proprietary right over common terms of trade with Europeans, a “permutation” of meaning (Sahlins 1981:64)

still reflected today in the prominence of the Hawaiian term for taboo on road signs advising “no trespassing” (Sahlins 1985:142). Distinctions of taboo, in other words, continue to orient social practices of various kinds in Hawai‘i, long after the collapse of the social and political order that they once oriented. Nineteenth-century Hawaiian history betrays a certain fragmentation of moral life, with Western civilization, commercial enterprise, missionary orthodoxy, and a renewed Hawaiian traditionalism emerging as rival grounds for a virtuous existence. The struggle among these competing futures, however, did not take place in a moral vacuum framed by unintelligible imperatives. Rather, these rival possibilities relied in different ways on the complex and multifaceted survival of taboo itself.

With such anthropological evidence in mind, and with an eye to enlisting MacIntyre’s work for further productive conversation with anthropology, one might ask whether the tension between the vitality of a moral tradition and the condition of cultural fragmentation is as threatening as the philosopher has hitherto insisted. Does the fracturing of a coherent moral tradition into disparate practices and ends necessarily imply its demise? Under what conditions are the surviving remnants of a once-unified moral practice capable of directing its heirs to the proper ends of a virtuous life? Tylor himself, recall, had used the term *survival* to convey the “living-on” or “out-living” of fragmentary cultural elements deemed otherwise dead to modern civilization (Hodgen 1931:324). Read against the grain of Tylor’s Victorian evolutionism, this language suggests the faint yet tangible prospect of a certain vital afterlife of tradition, even in the absence of its availability as a coherent horizon of existence. Lastly, one may also ask whether an approach to tradition inspired by MacIntyre must always presume the original existence of a common moral horizon in relation to which ethical practices gain their intelligibility. Or, alternatively, are there cultural conditions in which moral traditions themselves may be identified as fragmentary in an originary sense?

These questions may be explored productively in relation to prominent anthropological engagements with MacIntyre’s work on traditions of virtue.⁶ In one early and important instance of such engagement, Talal Asad argues that Islamic traditions “aspire to coherence, in the way that all discursive traditions do” (1986:16–17). Following Asad and charting a complex field of argumentation, interpretation, and reiteration between everyday religious practices and canonical Islamic texts, Mahmood tracks “the process by which certain practices and arguments become hegemonic within a tradition” (2005:115). More recently, Asad has observed that “tradition is also the space in which one experiences a multiplicity of times and confronts a variety of memories,” and he notes the “tensions and contradictions that inhabit the individual” (2006:234–235) and often incite ethical disciplines and practices to undermine

themselves. This insight is borne out in Charles Hirschkind's work with the diverse and often recalcitrant listeners who submit themselves to the sermons of contemporary popular Islamic preachers in Cairo. Here, he argues, "fragments of buried experience have found new coherence and expression within a contestatory movement focused on the ethical," with skilled preachers working to weave "the classical narratives into the fabric of lived experience in an ongoing attempt to mend the fractures within ethical life" (Hirschkind 2006:122, 95). Within this lineage of work engaging explicitly with MacIntyre on tradition, fragments surface as cultural elements potentially assimilable into larger and sometimes coherent discursive and practical wholes.⁷

A different image of the fragment and its ethical stakes emerges from Veena Das's work with survivors of collective violence in Delhi. "Fragments" of experience, Das argues, ought to be taken not as "various parts that may be assembled together to make up a picture of totality" (2006:5) but, rather, as elements marking the "impossibility" of such an imagined whole. Writing in like terms with reference to the ethical experience of struggling Moroccan youths, Stefania Pandolfo contrasts the "encompassing discursive form" of "revivalist Islamic pedagogies making a claim for a collective new life" with a more fragmentary and solitary form of access to Islamic ethical and political concepts through pamphlets, audiocassettes, and television: "the fragmented, painful, and sometimes original ways of inhabiting a world where none of the available vocabularies can be fully inhabited, even when they are invoked" (2007:332). Pandolfo's language here and elsewhere yields an image of life in the present as a constellation of fragments, remnants, and ruins, a world of which sense can be made only fugitively "through a piecemeal work of recollection" (1997:220). In this understanding of the fragment, indebted, in particular, to the work of Walter Benjamin (1968b, 1985), elements of the past return to the present as reiterations of an originary condition of fracture and dissolution (McLean 2004).

I follow these works in taking the fragment as marking the impossibility of a whole and seamless horizon of experience rather than sustaining the possibility of its reconstruction.⁸ I suggest too, however, that this impossibility of coherence to which cultural fragments often testify does not annul the persistence and vitality of tradition as such. Recall that Benjamin himself, for example, invokes one kind of fragment—an "ancient statue of Venus," taken alone, as it would have appeared to the "clerics of the Middle Ages"—to support an understanding of "tradition" itself as "thoroughly alive and extremely changeable" (1985:223). Then, and also later in the Baroque era, Benjamin writes, such classical remnants of pagan divinity would survive as Christian allegorical figures for creaturely existence, even "as the living contexts of their birth disappear" (1985:226; see also Hanssen 1998:76). Benjamin too understands this as a

matter of "survival," although he identifies greater promise in such persistence than Tylor had found in this concept. Benjamin's *Fortleben* could be translated *afterlife* as well as *survival*, and, indeed, he describes such survival as "a transformation and a renewal of something living" in another form (1968b:73; see also Hanssen 1998:33).

These suggestions imply that traditions need not retain or attain coherence to survive and remain effective, an argument that Benjamin makes more explicitly with respect to traditions of thought. Turning to the image of a mosaic, he writes, "The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea, and the brilliance of the representation depends as much on this value as the brilliance of the mosaic does on the quality of the glass paste" (1985:29). Like the fragmentary pieces composing this image, Benjamin argues, interruptions in thought made by disjointed and digressive reflections could be taken as efficacious insofar as they made moments of contemplation possible, through what he describes as a "continual pausing for breath" (1985:28). His work had sought to find in the form of Baroque art itself a means of challenging the totalizing quality of metaphysical theories of art (Hanssen 1998:66). But, in broader terms too, the mosaic suggests the possibility of a tradition consisting of fragments, subsisting in fragments, and supporting the fashioning of new and meaningful cultural and moral forms even as the coherent horizon of their origin recedes irretrievably.⁹ In what follows, I discuss this prospect more concretely with respect to three aspects of moral tradition in south India, sketching a series of moments to pause, reflect on, and grapple with the nature of the self as it is given over to the present.

A fragmentary tradition of moral argumentation

One July morning in the Cumbum Valley, I tagged along with my middle-aged friend Kandasamy as he drove his small herd of goats into the fallow stubble to the south of KG Patti village. As we ambled along behind the animals, he told me about the many things he had done to try to make a living in the past—plowing fields, cultivating rice and peanuts, pilfering sandalwood and timber from the mountain forests—until his age and massive bulk had forced him to turn to this less strenuous task. The practical work at hand was grazing, but he also wanted to talk about another practice essential to our walk that morning: the act of speech itself. "The tongue is the most frightening weapon in the world," he told me, citing a well-known film song as he compared the tongue to other implements—the sickle and the ax—that he knew quite well. God had placed our tongues behind lips and teeth to restrain their potential for violent expression, Kandasamy said. But these means of restraint also raised the prospect of another kind of moral problem evident among many who had learned to choose

their words with craft and care: that of deceit. “Even back then, they sang a song [about deceit],” he continued, challenging the pursuit of adultery and other forms of clandestine desire in the village: “Whoever places on his tongue what is in his heart, only he is a man.” With this line he again quoted from a commercial Tamil film lyric, although Kandasamy could not identify the source or era of its composition or its author. Such usages illustrate quite well, I would argue, the way in which moral utterances and ethical orientations often surface in the everyday life of south India today: as a fragmentary cascade of anonymous yet powerful arguments from the past.

“A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined,” MacIntyre (1988:12) writes. This perspective is quite valuable, as it imbues the concept of “tradition” with a necessary sense of dynamism rather than a stubborn hostility to change. It also suggests that moral positions and practices find their ground in a heritage of argumentation concerning the good: that they struggle for a present and future openly indebted to the insights of the past. MacIntyre also stresses, however, that to flourish, a tradition must take as its “authoritative point of departure” a set of canonical texts that “remain as essential points of reference for enquiry and activity, for argument, debate, and conflict within that tradition” (1988:383). The point seems to imply not only a fidelity to the task of engaging with certain authoritative texts but also a clarity about the specific texts to which one might stand as heir. I would argue that this is one kind of coherence challenged by the fragmentary quality of moral inheritance in south India. Consider the vagueness of Kandasamy’s “even back then” and “they,” matched often in his moral argumentation, I found, by related invocations of concrete sense and indistinct reference: “as that song said” or “as that poet once said.” Rarely could he identify the song from which he drew the lines he quoted or the poet who penned them. In what sense could such claims be taken to embody a moral tradition?

Well over two millennia of Indian moral thought and practice have generated diverse and at times incommensurable ways of addressing the problem of how one ought to live.¹⁰ In the Tamil country of south India, moral experience today remains enlivened by a long tradition of *aram*, or “virtuous conduct” somewhat akin to the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues that MacIntyre (1981) has outlined so carefully. Here too, numerous virtues—restraint, sympathy, patience, propriety, justice, and so on—have been taken for centuries as cultivable dispositions or qualities of selfhood. Virtuous conduct emerges from this moral tradition as a practice of navigating the moral perils of quotidian life by turning one’s own desires, bodily acts, habits and customs, sensual indulgences, and social engagements toward some imagination of the good. One terse injunction concerning *aram* in the *Ātticūṭi*, an 11th- or 12th-century work

of Tamil didactic poetry, elucidates the kind of work on desire that is at stake in this tradition of reflecting on and exercising oneself in the practice of good conduct: “*Aram seya virumpu*” [Desire to do the virtuous]. The composition, like many other related works, encourages the cultivation of natural inclinations or tendencies toward engaging in good acts.¹¹

Indeed, an authoritative textual canon in south India supports this tradition of virtuous conduct. Tamil textual treatments of virtue were developed most fully in many of the *Eighteen Minor Works*, a set of works in verse likely composed between the sixth and eighth centuries C.E. Composed in a period of intense strife between rival religious sects and traditions, these works betray the traces of Jain, Buddhist, Saiva, and Vaisnava theology and philosophy to varying degrees. However, they are largely addressed to the possibility of goodness in this life and the next, rather than to any ultimate eschatological release from worldly existence. The milieu within which they propose the possibility of a virtuous life is often that of the royal court, but it also encompasses the towns and countryside inhabited by ordinary people. Like the prescriptive texts that Foucault (1986) discusses in his investigations into classical Greek ethics, these works are “eminently empirical, pragmatic, even practical,” as Kamil Zvelebil (1975:119) once described the sixth-century *Tirukkural*. As one of the 1,330 couplets that make up this text suggests, for example, “It gives distinction, it gives wealth: what greater gain for living beings than virtue?” (Varadarajan 1949:9). Such couplets represent some of the most durable elements of Tamil literary heritage, sustaining a long commentarial tradition that has sought retrospectively to present the *Tirukkural* itself as a coherent and tightly organized entity (Cutler 1992: 560–561).

At the same time, however—and here is where I would begin to distinguish the nature of this moral tradition from the image of tradition as sketched by MacIntyre—couplets and fragments from texts such as the *Tirukkural* have also widely traversed the limits of such canonization by lending substance to innumerable allusions and anonymous yet verbatim quotations in other works. As Norman Cutler has written, “In Tamil culture *Tirukkural* is the quintessentially quotable text” (1992:552), its terse formulations easily unmoored from their setting within the body of the text. Many such examples can be drawn from the diverse histories of its later citation. “Only those who live by eating what they plow do live—all others follow behind begging to eat,” one couplet from the *Tirukkural* proclaimed in the sixth century. This claim to the signal virtues of a life of agrarian cultivation was echoed explicitly by Auvaiyar’s *Ātticūṭi* in the 11th or 12th century (“eat by plowing the land”), by Adivirarama Pandiyan in his 16th-century *Verri Vērkai* (“beautiful for cultivators is wanting to eat by plowing the land”), and by many others later on. The crucial point to

emphasize with respect to such modes of quotation and reiteration is their flaunting of the coherence and even the identifiability of the texts from which they draw. Such forms of usage, in other words, may have as much to do with the poetic and affective force of these formulations as with the acknowledged pedigree and canonical authority of their textual provenance.¹²

To be sure, these moral elements have been drawn forward into the present by means of systematic propagation as well as more inchoate echo. At the outset of the 18th century, German missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1717) found educated Tamils in the Tanjore region prone “to confirm and demonstrate everything with one or the other verse” (Blackburn 2000:455) from the *Tirukkural*, and Tamil pandits asked even the youngest schoolboys to memorize medieval verses from Auvaiyar. In more recent years, as Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) has argued, Tamil nationalist discourse seized on language and literature as the crucial locus of cultural tradition in south India. In the nationalist reformulation—and, indeed, reinvention—of the Tamil literary canon, moral works like the *Tirukkural*, in particular, emerged as essential constituents of political, social, and educational discourse, “quoted on all occasions, claimed by every ideological hue and rejected by none,” as A. R. Venkatachalapathy (2005:546) has written with respect to this text.¹³ The impetus for such operations must be understood in relation to the pedagogic import of other moralizing forces in colonial and postcolonial India, with the writers, reformers, and ideologues of anticolonial nationalism drawing from the moral expectations of colonial public life as well as the ethical vocabularies of Indian literature and philosophy in crafting novel and hybridized ideas of a virtuous selfhood (Chakrabarty 1994).¹⁴ Even within this milieu of a reconstructed domain of autonomous tradition in south India, however, the discourse of Tamil nationalism remained haunted by a mood of irrecoverable integrity, a common sense of the classical past as a domain of originary loss and fracture (Ramaswamy 2004).¹⁵

Despite the intentions of social reformers to secure the boundaries of moral tradition through such deliberate tactics, ordinary forms of moral inheritance in south India retain a deeply fragmentary quality. The rural men and women that I came to know grappled with the moral quality of their own lives and those of their peers in relation to what they took as the *nallatu keṭṭatu*, or “the good and the bad.” They found their moral bearings by engaging with a diverse array of pedagogic media: didactic lyrics and dialogues in popular cinema and televised serials; cautionary tales printed in vernacular newspapers; lessons on character from schoolbook texts; rhetorical claims of public leaders; religious discourses broadcast through temple loudspeakers; and popular proverbs, jokes, and folk verses shared in tea stalls, courtyard stoops, and working fields.

These diverse media circulate a fragmentary language of moral argumentation, drawn alternatively from contemporary expressions of national and collective identity, from the moralizing legacies of state reformism, and from much deeper religious and philosophical traditions such as the discourse and practice of *aram*, or virtuous conduct, that I have described. Taken together, these remnants compose an irregular mosaic of moral possibility: a tableau in which archaic literary allusions, folk idioms of judgment, and novel principles of social and juridical right mingle in equanimity.

I do not mean to suggest that this moral language ought to be understood as fragmentary only insofar as it reflects forms of multiplicity and rupture characteristic of modern experience in India and elsewhere. Rather, I have tried to show that this tradition of virtuous conduct in south India has itself long depended on a fragmentary mode of transmission: that its arguments and elements have been widely circulated and reiterated as pieces wrested from the context of their original composition, even as commentators, teachers, and other moral authorities have sought repeatedly to lend them a more coherent body. These fragments, remnants of textual wholes not always identifiable as sources and not easily circumscribed in the kinds of practices they authorize, nevertheless constitute a tradition insofar as they present virtuous conduct as a problem of action in everyday life. And one may find them at work in situations as ordinary as the morning walk I took with Kandasamy and his herd of goats in the Cumbum Valley.

“Whoever places on his tongue what is in his heart, only he is a man,” Kandasamy had mused that morning. Although the immediate source of this quotation may remain unidentifiable, it echoes a Tamil textual history of demanding from speech a truthful consistency with the inner disposition of the heart. “Only sweet words spoken with a kind look and with the heart are virtuous,” one couplet from the *Tirukkural* insists (Varadarajan 1949:21). And a Christian missionary recorded the following criticism in the form of a Tamil proverb in 1897: “One thing in the heart, one [other] thing in speech” (Jensen 1982:30). It is quite difficult to chart direct lines of descent between such historic forms and the utterances of the present, and yet there are traces here of a certain kind of inheritance. One may argue the same point too with respect to the other claim that Kandasamy had made that morning, concerning the tongue as a fearsome weapon: He had quoted directly then from the well-known 20th-century Tamil film icon, N. S. Krishnan, but the line itself echoes a durable Tamil textual history of cautioning against the tangible verbal violence of the tongue. These usages testify to a tradition of moral reckoning, in other words, that persists through a notably fragmentary form of inheriting the past: Moral claims such as these refuse the coherence of textual sources even as they rely on their scattered remnants for argumentative force.

Narrating oneself in plural forms

Moral traditions make arguments about forms of selfhood as well as forms of good: about what kinds of beings those who make a life in their midst once were, are now, and are yet capable of becoming. This is another significant dimension of tradition that MacIntyre's work helps elucidate. MacIntyre suggests that one "think of the self in a narrative mode" (1984:206) and of actions as "enacted narratives" (1984:211): that actions, that is, be identified only in relation to the personal and social histories of intention that render them intelligible in particular ways. This argument helps to clarify the way in which collective traditions come to work so powerfully on the moral lives of individuals: through the circulation of narrative forms of self-identity that map inherited dispositions and inclinations in relation to potential trajectories of self-transformation. Again, however, MacIntyre insists on the necessary coherence of these narrative forms. The exercise of virtue, he argues, depends on "the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life" (MacIntyre 1984:218) and rendered intelligible through the pursuit of a singular teleological course. Although this image of a coherent self is drawn most explicitly from the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues and the arguments of its heirs, MacIntyre also suggests that "this is how the identity and continuity of human lives are or were understood in a great many, perhaps in all traditional societies" (1990:198).¹⁶ One must interrogate this notably anthropological claim and ask whether there are less coherent ways in which people come to narrate themselves as subjects of a moral tradition.

In the Tamil country of south India, a narrative mode in which people have long taken their own natures as moral problems and objects of ethical elaboration has to do with the domain of the heart. For centuries, various schools of Indian thought have identified the interior faculty of the *manacu* as a critical locus of reflective engagement within the self, the site simultaneously of desire, feeling, thought, and will. Spanning the distance between the English "heart" and "mind" and charged with guiding the senses and their restless attachments, the *manacu* is sometimes praised as a means of carefully discriminating between right and wrong and at other times rebuked for its own fickle and wayward nature.¹⁷ This indefinite ethical quality of the "heart," as I call it for the sake of simplicity, testifies to the interior struggle promised by a life of virtue. And crucially, for many in south India today, this struggle assumes certain specific and often deeply sedimented narrative forms, as individuals address their own hearts with both conventional expressions of despair and regret as well as more open hopes for change. These modes of address constitute both rhetorics and ethics of selfhood, for the specific forms in which the heart may be imagined shape the kinds of ethical work one may undertake with respect to oneself. Let me give an example of such usage.

Wandering through the agrarian uplands of the Cum-bum Valley one March morning in 2002, I stumbled across Kandasamy's younger brother Mohan and his wife Jayamani, who were working quickly to irrigate a bed of onion shoots they had planted in a plot of sandy red soil. As soon as he spotted me, Mohan lightly called out for me to take off my own shirt and get to work with them: Time was of the essence, and they could use another pair of hands. He showed me how to lead the running water along a winding course through the labyrinth of channels crisscrossing the field, using a short spade to cut off and turn the water quickly from irrigated bed to bed. "You have to make the water turn and come around," he explained later while we sat beside the field and took a break: If the water was allowed to flow directly downward from higher to lower beds, the latter would fill too much and too quickly and eventually rupture. But this danger, Mohan went on to reflect, relaxing with a cigarette after a morning of difficult toil, lay in the nature of all such flows. Water, money, liquor, or desire: Each had to be released and indulged with measure. "One should not follow the path the heart has taken," he added. "That too must be turned." Intrigued, I brought up this comparison again a few days later at the same spot.

"Here you turn the water," I said. "If you let the water take its own course, it will break the barriers and ruin your crop. To turn that water you pick up a spade and heap some soil up there: that's enough. To turn the path of the heart?"

"The spade called wisdom [*arivu enra manvettil*]," he replied. "One must take that spade of wisdom to cut off and to turn."

"Cut off what?" I asked.

"One must cut off the heart," he said. "Suppose we are going down a bad path. We must turn the heart, bring it around again. . . . For people, desire is like a wave. I say all this not because I lack desires. I too have desires. I should be well, live well, and even if I suffer, my children should not."

"Is it better then to represent the heart with agriculture or the sea?" I asked, intrigued by his sudden shift from the image of a spade to the image of a wave. But Mohan, either ignoring or failing to hear my question, continued to reflect on desire.

"Because of desire, one cannot live," he said. "But without desire, one also cannot live. Desires like 'I must get this, I must get that.' We would go to ruin. But if we think, and use what we've got properly, [desire] will let us live. . . . The heart, . . ." he said, trailing off. Then he picked up again: "The heart is a monkey, man's heart is a monkey. To leap from this tree to that one, from that one to another."

My audiocassette suddenly and loudly wound to a halt at that moment, and our talk also drifted to other matters. And yet, it was clear that much more than a crop of onions was being cultivated on the land that morning. Mohan had taken the work of irrigation as a practice of managing water

but also as an incitement to manage the fluid course of his own desires. Agrarian practice had yielded both model and milieu for a life of virtue, a relationship between agrarian cultivation and moral self-cultivation that I write about in much greater detail elsewhere (Pandian in press). But in the reflective course of his thoughts that morning, Mohan had turned as well to two other ways of sketching the interior nature of the heart, conjuring the image of an uncontrollable sea and the image of a restless monkey. Each of these images yielded him a different way of narrating his own life of desire: as courses to be turned with foresight and care, as forces that might suddenly crash into and overwhelm him, or as impulses to be checked and restrained. Each, in other words, might be taken to constitute a distinctive “moral topography of the self” (Laidlaw 1995:274) or, even more particularly, a distinctive topography of the heart: a particular way of investing one’s own interiority with pliable surfaces and workable depths.¹⁸

Describing the ethical work of three rival forms of such “embodied ontology” in the religious practices of Indian Jains, James Laidlaw (1995:230–274) argues that each operationalizes the body in relation to the possible perfection of the soul in a distinctive fashion.¹⁹ Here too, one may see that each of the forms through which Mohan had characterized the heart calls for a different kind of ethical practice, a different kind of work with respect to oneself and one’s own desires. To invoke what Mohan called the “spade of wisdom” is to seek to carefully turn the flow of want away from easy temptations and toward the pursuit of better ends through the exercise of virtues such as judgment or wisdom. To reflect, instead, on the heart as a sea of crashing waves is to remind oneself of the intractability of desire, to summon the virtue of patience or forbearance as a means of enduring the roughness of its trials. And to sketch the heart as a monkey is to challenge the immature and juvenile quality of fleeting sensual attachments, to call on the virtue of restraint as a means of slowing their restless course. Such narrative forms, however lyrical or ornamental they may seem, serve an essential ethical purpose in sketching the nature of the self as a specific kind of space, demanding a certain kind of work.

By no means was Mohan alone in narrating himself in this fashion, and elsewhere I detail the many other tangible forms of interior nature through which my interlocutors in the Cumbum Valley understood and struggled with the moral course of their lives (Pandian in press). Indeed, all of the images of interiority that had surfaced in our conversation that morning must be understood as inheritances of a moral tradition of engaging critically with the heart. Since at least the seventh century, for example, Tamil devotional poets have presented the heart as a figurative field to be weeded of vicious desires, plowed with truth, irrigated with patience, and sown with the virtues of a settled agrarian life. The echo of such usage in Mohan’s image of the

“spade of wisdom” is unmistakable. The image of desire as a restless sea of waves may also be traced through many centuries of moral and religious verse throughout India. And, although Mohan had lifted a pair of lines concerning the heart as a monkey from a popular 1967 Tamil film, entitled, in fact, *Manam Oru Kurangu* (The Heart Is a Monkey [Krishnaswamy 1967]), the monkey too is a figure that has long been chastised in diverse Indian literary works as the embodiment of a fickle and regrettable internal disposition. Each of these narrative forms, these stories about the kind of person one is and could be, brings the resources of the past to bear on the moral dilemmas of the present: Each draws its force from a tradition of ethical reflection and engagement.

The point I mean to emphasize with respect to these plural forms is that they render a narrative coherence or unity of the self both unlikely and undesirable, even as they carry forward a moral tradition.²⁰ Such unity is unlikely insofar as these forms multiply the moral topography of the self with crosscutting images of its disposition and contending understandings of its necessary virtues. But such unity is also undesirable insofar as these rival images and forms of narration seem to endow their subjects with a plurality of means and resources to engage themselves critically. Consider the quick succession in which these shifting forms of the heart emerged from Mohan’s narrative. One may detect an improvisational dimension of self-engagement here, an openness to the contingency of circumstance and the ethical possibilities that flash up episodically in everyday life. This posture reflects not only an attitude that one must engage oneself with whatever works whenever it does but also the character of a moral tradition that sustains such dispersed possibilities. In this sense too, one finds here a tradition of fragments: a long-standing fragmentation of the moral self across contending narratives of its nature and multiple modes of ethical work. Although these materials testify to the importance of narrative selfhood, as MacIntyre has argued, they also suggest that such selfhood may be artfully and effectively pursued even in the absence of a narrative coherence. If anything, the rivalry between these competing narrative forms and their plural ethical ends may be understood to deepen the moral gravity of the dispositions they engage, working as crosscutting forms of intensification rather than stultification.

Virtues diffracted in practice

Let me call attention to one more aspect of tradition that comes into focus through a closer engagement with MacIntyre’s work: the foundation of its durability in time and space. Traditions may be arguments extended over many generations, and they may also enable their subjects to form historical narratives concerning themselves, but MacIntyre (1984) also argues more particularly that

traditions are conveyed and circulated by “practices.” By this familiar term he means something specific and not immediately obvious: “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity” directed toward the realization of “goods internal to that form of activity,” such that “human powers to achieve excellence” are thereby extended (MacIntyre 1984:187). A painter engaged in the craft of portraiture, for example, may come through this endeavor to excel at the rendering of lifelike portraits but also, more generally, to discover “the good of a certain kind of life” (MacIntyre 1984:190): that of the painter inhabiting and contributing toward a community and milieu of painting.

This argument concerning practices and their ends is in many ways useful for an anthropology of tradition, and in particular, for an anthropological engagement with moral traditions. First, it allows for an understanding of virtues not as abstract moral laws, as the Kantian heritage of much moral argumentation in the modern West has implied (Mahmood 2005:26), but, rather, as those cultivated qualities enabling an effective exercise of particular practices and an attainment of their goods (MacIntyre 1984:191). We may also come thereby to understand how moral traditions persist in time: not, as Asad rightly insists, through the bringing forward of moral elements from the past “as though it was the passing on of an unchanging substance” (2003:222), but, instead, through the ongoing pursuit of practical aptitudes in various forms and arenas of quotidian engagement. And, lastly, with this expansive understanding of practices and their internal ends in mind, we may also find moral virtues at work in quotidian realms of life far beyond the religious practices, school-room lessons, and campaigns for social reform that studies of morality and ethics have most often sought to elucidate. Once again, however, one may also ask whether MacIntyre’s image of virtuous practice places too great an emphasis on the coherence of the activity at hand and its foreseeable internal ends: Would it not be possible, for example, for a skilled painter to find by accident that she has also become an effective photographer, as aptitudes honed in one arena resurface in another?

Let me pose this problem again with respect to a particular tradition. The moral tradition of the virtues in south India takes practice, in the sense just described, quite seriously. Virtues, as I have already suggested, have long been understood in this tradition as acts of rightful conduct whose goodness depends at least in part on their appropriateness for the situations of their exercise: royal and courtly milieus, ascetic retreats, domestic households, agrarian environments, and so on. Early Tamil moral literatures also identified specific moral practices as especially virtuous for specific kinds of people. “A youth’s restraint [alone is] restraint,” suggests one of the verses of the seventh-century *Nālaṭiyār*, for example, lauding this quality as akin to the

matchless generosity of the poor and the incomparable patience of the strong (Saravanan 2004). Popular didactic works such as Auvaiyar’s medieval *Ātticūṭi* encourage children to commit to memory the moral excellence of everyday acts engaged in particular ways: studying from a young age, retaining the company of good friends, bathing every Saturday, cultivating a taste for giving and a distaste for theft, caring for one’s own mother and father, and so on (Rajagopalan 1998). Turning also, however, to the manner in which such virtues find a place in the lived experience of ordinary people, one finds that they challenge the coherence of these domains of quotidian practice in significant ways.

Consider again the everyday rural domain of irrigation, but this time with respect to the wetland paddy fields that traverse the length of the riverine lowlands of the Cumbum Valley. Here, unlike the orchard tracts where individual cultivators like Mohan water their own crops, hired irrigators are responsible for tending, watering, and guarding large tracts of paddy fields in common. These men daily traverse the grassy and weedy banks between low-lying individual plots of rice paddy, managing a continuous flow of water through the channels that link these fields. There is, in fact, an ethos, a cultivated virtue or habit of conduct, at the heart of these irrigating practices, and that is one of generous giving. Irrigators broadcast paddy seeds over a full sheet of water held in a small bed, rarely allowing the moist soil and tender shoots of this nursery bed to dry. Once more mature shoots are transplanted into the wet mud of the fields, the latter are drained only once to allow an application of fertilizers to soak into the soil without escaping. “It just keeps on flowing,” irrigator Sivankalai said of this limitless flow of water, so unusual when compared with the regular bouts of desiccation endured by most other plants. And another irrigator told me with pride, as we walked through the fields under his care, that these paddy plants were fed with water as carefully and consistently as children.

This ethos of liberal giving, so essential to the success of this irrigating practice, finds embodiment in a well-known local proverb that closely echoes (and quite likely derives from) the medieval moral verse from Auvaiyar that I discussed at the beginning of this article: “Let the water for the paddy also irrigate the grass.” The proverb takes what necessarily happens on such lowland fields, that water running between paddy fields along small channels cannot help but also irrigate the grassy weeds growing along the channel embankments, as the foundation for an argument concerning the moral virtue of sympathetic concern and unstinting generosity. For those engaged in the very practice that lends life to this image, this proverb yields one means of claiming precisely such sympathy and generosity from the cultivators on whom they depend. “It is rich people that are paddy,” an irrigator named Chinnaramu told me. He has used this saying to settle quarrels over the distribution

of water among his younger colleagues: "Why should we wage laborers wrestle each other like this? What flows to the paddy also flows to us, the grass." In other words, the laborers could take themselves as the figurative grass to be "watered," or paid, along with the paddy each season: The latter could not be raised without tending to the former.

What must be emphasized about this tangible image of generosity is that it works to authorize practices of sympathetic giving not only within the material domain that it represents explicitly, that of irrigated fields, but also within other domains of quotidian practice. Explicating the image of paddy and grass in the conversation I described at the outset of this article, for example, Karupayi likened the principle at work to that of child rearing. Like a tender crop, she suggested, a young child will fall over and wither without enough moisture; only an endless series of fluid gifts will work to bring that creature to maturity: "A child is born. You must bathe it well and then put it to sleep. And then give it oil, sugary water, and milk, and then bathe it again the next day. And then again the next morning. And then six months later you give it a little rice. And then only it begins to eat on its own, and run off when it is full."

Although she spoke, perhaps, with the thought in mind of her grandchildren playing at her feet, recall that tender paddy plants can themselves be taken as children. In fact, the wet mud in which young paddy shoots grow is named *pillai toli*: a tender "child's mud." As irrigator Chinnaramu explained to me, "It is the same as a tender child, that crop and that mud." Like well-fed children, these plants too would grow without ailments only if they were prevented from "drying" or going hungry as they matured. "Just as you keep feeding a child milk," he observed, "you must keep on watering that tender mud." The virtues of proper irrigation, thus, come to orient the practice of parenting, just as the virtues of effective parenting come to orient the practice of irrigation. Cultivated moral qualities, in other words, slide easily between one domain of practice and another.

There are many other domains of quotidian life in which the proverbial image of paddy and grass may resurface as a claim to generous and unstinting giving: among women accounting for the liberality of tears they may shed on behalf of grieving others in funerary settings, for example, or even among local government servants angling for more substantial "flows" of bribery. And again, a south Indian moral tradition of conceiving sympathy and generosity in aqueous terms sustains such varied usages. Tamil textual treatments of virtue have long singled out rain, river, and well waters as emblems of pure and generous giving, presenting those rulers, chieftains, and benefactors who provide water to their dependents as liberal givers of livelihood. The quality of generous and sympathetic heart emerges from this tradition and still remains identified with the Tamil term for moisture, *iram*, as I write about in greater detail elsewhere (Pandian in press). What I emphasize here

is that this moral tradition of sympathetic care diffracts its possibilities for virtuous conduct across diverse domains of practical life. It is in this sense that one may identify another form of fragmentation intrinsic to the moral tradition at hand: The metaphorical quality of moral verse in Tamil sustains a "crossing over" of virtue from one domain into another. Through the pursuit of ends internal to one kind of practice, one may also come to discover the good of another kind of practice altogether. Here again, then, a loosening of the expectation for coherence allows a glimpse of the various ways in which effective moral traditions may widen their span.

Conclusion: Tradition and the contemporary moment

Modernity remains easily understood in commonsensical terms as a historical condition antithetical to the very possibility of tradition. This opposition is founded on the presumption that modern experience fractures the stable coherence of cultural life, that, indeed, "all that is solid melts into air," in the memorable words of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1985:83). It is founded as well on an image of traditions as necessarily coherent bodies of thought and practice, whose dispersion and disruption would threaten to compromise their efficacy as moral orientations of conduct. I have tried here to suggest a series of ways in which traditions might be understood to make the moral resources of the past available to the present in a more fragmentary form. Moral tradition "survives" in a disjointed fashion in south India: through scattered forms of moral argumentation, rival narratives and images of a moral selfhood, and diverse practices through which such arguments and narratives find articulation. These elements constitute a tradition in fragments, I have argued, for they challenge the necessity of holistic textual foundations, narratives of selfhood, and virtuous practices even as they maintain the vitality of a tradition of virtue. I have also suggested that these forms of fragmentation ought to be understood not as consequences of a modern rupture or breakage of traditional coherence in south India but, rather, as features essential to the tradition itself.

A material image of tradition that farmers and other rural citizens in the Cumbum Valley often articulate is that embodied in the Tamil phrase *vālai aṭi vālai*. The phrase might be translated literally as "banana under banana," evoking the way in which juvenile banana plants in orchard soils throughout the region may be expected to appear beneath the shade of a mature plant, growing out of a shared rhizomatic stem. People in the region invoke this image to account for many kinds of persistence between human generations as well: advice passed on from parents to children, modes of labor learned by working beside one's elders, the passing of a talent for theft from grandfathers to fathers to

sons, or the passage of a tendency to violence through familial lines of descent. Ordinary practices may be seen here, again, to yield arenas for the articulation of tradition and also images to depict its durability. But although “vālai aṭi vālai” presents tradition as a matter of persistence in both time and space, it also evokes a sense of frailty and rupture structured into the very means of transmission. Just as farmers struggle through their agrarian labors to ensure the appearance of juvenile plants above the surface of the soil, so too do communities and families struggle to ensure visible forms of generational continuity. Inheritance is always precarious, a matter of hope more than certitude, and its evidence is much more readily apparent in instances of moral shortcoming than in the transmission of virtue.

In broader terms, moral traditions may be understood as fragmentary to varying degrees; indeed, many such traditions aspire toward, and sometimes attain, the kind of coherence that MacIntyre and many of his interlocutors have written about. Such differences aside, I have sought to make a more general case for the usefulness of “tradition” as a concept for an anthropology of the present. As Asad has observed, “tradition is a more mobile, time-sensitive, more open-ended concept than most formulations of culture,” one that “looks not just to the past but to the future” (2006:289). Thinking with tradition moves anthropology toward a sense of the contemporary moment as rooted in the inherited forms of the past but also bearing the seeds of many possible futures. It returns us to an understanding of the “contemporary” close to its original sense in English: as the co-occurrence in time of many disparate entities, existing with one another.²¹ An anthropology of the ethics at stake in such a contemporary time might take the topos of the self as composed of “an infinity of traces” from the past, laid down, as Antonio Gramsci once suggested, “without leaving an inventory” (1992:324). The critical task would lie in tracking the ways in which people navigate among such traces, within and beyond themselves, and in identifying the many horizons of possibility they open toward.

Notes

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1. The material in this article is drawn in part from a larger work (Pandian in press) concerning the cultivation of the soil and the cultivation of virtue in south India. In that work, I focus, in particular, on the Tamil caste into which Karupayi *amma* (mother) and many

of the other individuals mentioned here were born: the Piramalai Kallars, a community of several hundred thousand individuals classified as a “criminal tribe” by the British colonial state in 1918 and subjected to a range of far-reaching measures in social, moral, and agrarian pedagogy. The larger project tracks multiple points of intersection between these modern interventions and the reverberating legacies of older moral discourses and practices of agrarian virtue in south India.

2. “Anthropologists have for a long time insisted that no alien culture can be adequately characterized,” MacIntyre has also written,

let alone understood, without actually living in it for a certain length of time. And the evidence that anthropologists have as a result accumulated makes it difficult to disagree; at the very least, understanding requires knowing the culture, so far as it is possible, as a native inhabitant knows it, and speaking, hearing, writing, and reading the language as a native inhabitant speaks, hears, writes, and reads it. [1988:374]

3. MacIntyre (1984:111), in fact, mentions Tylor in passing here and cites him as well in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990:192–194), in which modern European “morality” itself begins to appear as something akin to a Tylorian survival. Although MacIntyre would reject Tylor’s evolutionary progressivism and its radically antithetical understanding of modernity and traditional custom, his reliance on the Tylorian sense of a “survival” appears, nonetheless, to anchor his understanding of fragmentation as a problem of intelligibility.

4. See Hodgen 1931 for an early account of Tylor’s debt to the sciences of geology and archaeology, especially with respect to his concept of the survival.

5. MacIntyre neglects to name his evidentiary sources on Hawai’i, but the sense of unintelligibility that he describes evokes Cook’s report that he and his men were able to extract only a limited account of prohibitions on commensality from the people they encountered in Tahiti: “They were often asked the reason but they never gave no other answer, but that they did it because it was right” (Beaglehole 1968:123).

6. Michael Lambek describes MacIntyre and other contemporary moral philosophers as “yet relatively untapped resources for anthropology” (2000:317). James Laidlaw (2002) identifies an anthropological failure to engage in “fruitful dialogue” with MacIntyre and other philosophers who have called attention to the “concrete social arrangements” that sustain moral lives. Andrew Lakoff and Stephen Collier apply MacIntyre’s insights to a range of contemporary problems in bioethics and biopolitics to show that numerous “strands of anthropological investigation . . . can be fruitfully analyzed” (2004:420) by means of this work. Hirschkind (2006) and Mahmood (2005) rely in part on MacIntyre’s account of the Aristotelian tradition, and, more particularly, Asad’s (1986) critical engagement with his notion of “tradition” itself, to capture the distinctive ethos at stake in contemporary Islamic practices of virtue. Asad’s own engagement with MacIntyre, writes David Scott, is prompted by a concern for “the ways in which historical forms of life, binding experience to authority, are built up over periods of time into regularities of practice, mentality, and disposition, and into specific conceptions of the virtues, and distinctive complexes of values” (2006:140).

7. Hirschkind describes the Islamic textual corpus as a “living body of communally experienced wisdom” from which “stories, spoken maxims, and other fragments may be drawn” (2006:162). Hirschkind, Asad, and Mahmood also stress, importantly, that

MacIntyre's work reflects an inadequate engagement with embodiment and bodily practices of virtuous conduct.

8. My orientation here is also supported by certain strands of postcolonial criticism that have called attention to the ineluctable marking of modern experience by remnants of the past: not only through their deliberate reinvention and retrieval in nationalist and religious revivalist cultural politics but also through more diffuse currents of unintentional moral inheritance. "Pasts *are* there in taste, in practices of embodiment, in the cultural training the senses have received over generations," writes Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example: "They are there in practices I sometimes do not even know I engage in" (2000:251).

9. Benjamin's image of the work of translation as the piecing together of a broken amphora—"fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another" (1968a:78)—is also relevant, as here too the aim is not the restoration of an original form but the making of something new such that old and new are brought together as elements of a larger space of possibility.

10. Early Sanskrit scriptures identified *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama*—rectitude, prosperity, and pleasure—as the three ends of worldly existence, to be attained by means of knowledge, skill, and moral refinement. Various religious sects and texts have charted devotional and ascetic regimes of practice capable of freeing their adherents from the sufferings of terrestrial struggle. Medieval court literatures proffered advice on the pursuit of virtue to kings, courtiers, and other men of means. As Daud Ali has observed, moral action in such texts was attributed both to the qualities attending a noble birth and to the proper cultivation and training of an ethical sensibility, a tension that gestures toward a deep indeterminacy in Indian moral tradition between "particularistic and universalist tendencies" (2004:95). On the one hand, discussions of rectitude specified particular forms of worldly action appropriate for individual social milieus, castes, and classes. On the other hand, the universal virtues attributed to certain moral practices, injunctions, and qualities allowed those of diverse origins to claim them as their own: either through individual disciplines of personal practice or through broader movements of collective change, such as the process M. N. Srinivas (1966) has famously identified as "Sanskritization."

11. Virtue, in other words, ought to be understood here not as a struggle against desire as such but, rather, as a cultivation of higher forms of desire and a restraint of lower desires.

12. The discourse of Indology in the West has, of course, long identified Indian thought with an essential tension between universal and particular tendencies: "the one and the many" or a "unity in diversity," as many would have it (see Cohen 1998:39; Inden 1990). Scholars of comparative religion such as William Cantwell Smith, for example, described these two orientations—universal and particular—as "ancient, deep, and powerful" (1976:125) forces still active today. Among anthropologists, this line of reasoning found one of its most enduring formulations in the distinction between "great" and "little" traditions made by Robert Redfield (1956) and supported with evidence from India by Milton Singer (1955), McKim Marriott (1955), and others.

Redfield sketched "peasant culture" as a zone of intersection between two distinct yet interrelated "currents," which he described as the religious and philosophical thought "of the reflective few" and the quotidian practice "of the largely unreflective many" (1956:70). He wrote that "the great tradition is cultivated in schools or temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered" (Redfield 1956:70). What is problematic about such a distinction is its reliance on an opposition between coherent bodies of thought and incoherent domains of ordi-

nary practice. This contrast implies that daily life in rural milieus depends on a cultural heritage from elsewhere for its very intelligibility and also that literary and philosophical traditions maintain an essential and ongoing unity. So constructed, the difference proves unfounded, as the complex career of Tamil ethical discourse should make clear.

13. Novel 20th-century mythologies of the Tamil nation assimilated these texts into a singular body of cultural inheritance in various ways, depicting Auvaiyar, for example, as the sister by birth of the *Tirukkuraḷ*'s legendary author, Valluvar (Blackburn 2000).

14. Numerous colonial public servants and missionaries expressed open admiration for the *Tirukkuraḷ* and other ethical texts because of the absence of "idolatry" among them, finding a point of resonance with the moral dimensions of their own civilizing schemes (Blackburn 2000).

15. Ramaswamy (2004) provides a fascinating account of the narratives of originary loss that came to weigh on the Tamil nationalist imagination in colonial south India, as writers interpreted the loss of classical textual records as evidence that the lost continent of "Lemuria" had subsided beneath the sea south of the Indian peninsula, carrying with it the earliest traces of Tamil civilization.

16. He refers here to "societies as various as those of the many American Indian peoples or of the ancient and medieval peoples speaking the Celtic languages or of the many African tribes" (MacIntyre 1990:198). MacIntyre (1988:337) has also noted that such narrative unity is not meant to hold in the case of the political tradition of liberalism, but he takes this as a flawed tradition for this reason and suggests ways in which its subjects may cultivate a necessary coherence for themselves. Outlining a Nietzschean critique of such a project as articulated in *After Virtue*, William Connolly writes that "any effort to mold the self into a coherent, integrated, virtuous self must be seen as the imposition of an artificial unity upon an accidental phenomenon" (1982:318).

17. On the notion of this "mind" or "heart" as a faculty of thinking, feeling, and willing in Indian philosophy, see Chennakesavan 1991. On the historical relation between ontological, physiological, and sentimental vocabularies of the "heart" in the West, see Erickson 1997. For a related discussion in another Asian milieu, see Wikan 1990.

18. Each ethics of selfhood, Nikolas Rose notes, entails a certain "spatialization of the human being" (1996:38). I do not presume the prior existence of an interiority of selfhood here but am interested, instead, in the processes of its fashioning and deepening.

19. He summarizes these differences as follows: "The body is a weapon to use against the unruly mind and a tool with which to clean the soul; it is a filthy prison in which the soul is trapped and the mud with which it is stained; and it is a mirror of the soul, so that in temple images it is an icon of spiritual perfection" (Laidlaw 1995:274).

20. Such imagined forms of the heart also allow for an elaboration of particular modes of ethical self-conduct without making recourse to any naturalizing ontology of the self: psychic, disciplinary, affective, or otherwise. "Is it possible, then, that one might write a genealogy of subjectification without a metapsychology?" asks Rose (1996:37). These materials suggest one means of engaging in such an analytical project. They may also be taken to affirm James D. Faubion's suggestion that "tropology might in fact constitute the framework for a comparative hermeneutics of modes of subjectivation" (2001:95).

21. "Belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time," suggests the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This argument may recall Reinhart Koselleck's discussion of the "contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous" (2004:90), a formulation that appears to echo Ernst Bloch's earlier

discussion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*. Seeking to explain the success of fascism and the failure of socialism in early-20th-century Germany, Bloch wrote, "Not all people exist in the same Now . . . they carry earlier elements with them; this interferes" (Schwartz 2001:58). My thanks to Heiko Henkel for directing my attention to these early debates in German social theory.

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