On Practices

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I am grateful to Dr. Frohnen for providing me with an opportunity to elucidate further my analysis of tradition[1] and its place in social life. My response will take a step toward him but then two back.

A difference of terminology.

Frohnen suggests[2] that my analysis of tradition is too abstract in that it ignores the way traditions are embedded in habits and social interactions. However, I suspect the difference between us here is largely terminological. My concept of tradition refers to ideas or beliefs—though not necessarily conscious and rational ones—that we inherit and that then form the background to our later development. However, while I thus equate traditions exclusively with ideas or beliefs, I am happy to allow that beliefs and traditions are always embedded in actions and practices, perhaps the habits and social interactions invoked by Frohnen. Neither beliefs nor traditions exist as disembodied entities apart from their instantiation in our lives and activities. Indeed, we can come to ascribe beliefs to people, including ourselves, only through an interpretation of actions. Frohnen and I thus differ here only in our use of words: when he writes about traditions, he refers to what I would call practices, for I prefer to reserve the term tradition to refer to the beliefs or meanings that inform such practices.

Even after I shift my attention from traditions conceived as be-

[1] Mark Bevir, "On Tradition," *Humanitas* XIII, no. 2 (2000), 28-53; this article hereinafter cited in the text.

[2] Bruce Frohnen, "Tradition, Habit, and Social Interaction: A Response to Bevir," *Humanitas* XIV, no. 1 (2001), 108-116.

Boundaries between traditions are pragmatic categories.

liefs to practices conceived as the clusters of actions and interactions that embody such beliefs, however, two significant differences remain in the ways Frohnen and I would characterize such practices. One difference arises over what it means to say traditions are concrete, social realities. Although I am willing to allow that tradition is embedded in practice, which is, of course, part of concrete social reality, I do not think particular practices are natural kinds, or discrete chunks, with clear boundaries by which we might individuate them. There are no natural or given limits to particular practices by which we might separate them out from the general flux of human life. For example, the boundary of a Church does not clearly appear with those who attend weekly services, those who attend services once or twice a year, those who wander in for private prayer, those who go to secular events organized by the Church, or those who are helped directly by the social work of the Church. Where we locate the limits of practices must be a pragmatic decision that we can justify only by reference to the purposes of our so doing. Practices are concrete social realities, but they are not natural kinds. Thus, we have to allow, as I do but Frohnen does not, that in a sense we construct or individuate particular practices to suit our purposes. We should not pretend that certain practices have a natural place in social life.

Another difference between Frohnen and me concerns the nature of the conventions, shared understandings, or interactions that appear in practices. Although all practices exhibit conventions conceived as emergent entities, this does not enable us to conclude that the conventions "constitute" or structure the practice. Although I would accept that participants often seek to conform to the conventions of a practice, I would also point out, first, that they do not always do so, and, second, that even when they do, they still might misunderstand the conventions. Hence we should not think of the conventions as having a constitutive relationship to the practice. As I argued in "On Tradition" (32-39), we are agents who can modify, and who necessarily interpret, the beliefs that we inherit, and so, by implication, the actions appropriate to any practice in which we engage. This argument does not imply, as Frohnen suggests, that we are all Napoleons who, as individuals, have a significant effect on the historical direction a practice takes. It implies, rather, that we are agents who are capable of modifying our inheritance and so acting in novel ways. When we

do so, we are highly unlikely to have a significant effect on a practice unless others make similar modifications, and even then, moreover, the changes in the practice are unlikely to correspond to any we might have intended. Practices rarely, if ever, depend directly on the actions of any given individual, but they do consist solely of the changing actions of a range of individuals.

The crux of the issue: should practices be privileged?

No practice has a natural place in social life, and all practices consist solely of the changing actions of various individuals. Frohnen rightly suspects that this vision leaves little room for automatically privileging the authorities that currently seek to demarcate, control, and regulate discrete practices. Although he acknowledges our capacity for agency, he not only believes, as I do, that agency occurs within a social context; he also wants, as I do not, to encage agency in established conventions to which he implicitly ascribes a natural existence and an authoritative role. In contrast, I want to promote a more open humanism, one that allows for the contingent and fluid nature of social life, one that allows us to pose questions of those who claim authority over us.