Knowing Traditions: Self-Critical Rationalities
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Abstract
Ever since the Enlightenment, science has been associated with reason, and religion with tradition. This puts religion on the defensive, because modernity opposes the authority of tradition in the name of universal reason. Postmodernism begins with the modern insight that the socio-historical context of tradition is inevitable, even in modernity. This insight means that modernity must recognize itself as an anti-traditional tradition. What happens after that? Two possibilities come to mind: either irrationality is inescapable because tradition is inescapable (call this “leftwing postmodernism”), or traditions are not necessarily irrational but can be the home of rationality (call this “rightwing postmodernism”). The latter possibility, vigorously pursued by Alasdair MacIntyre, results in new way of conceiving the relation of science and religion, both of which can be self-critical intellectual traditions. This also implies that reason is not universal in quite the way modernity expects. There are many traditions of rationality—and in that sense many rationalities, of which Western science is only one, along with the great religious traditions of the world. How shall we conceive of the distinctive rationality of science when it does not represent the only kind of rationality there is?

For Further Reading
------Luther: Gospel, Law and Reformation (The Great Courses, 2004).
------Philosophy and Religion in the West (The Great Courses, 1998).
------The History of Christian Theology (The Great Courses, 2008).


Biosketch
Phillip Cary is professor of philosophy at Eastern University outside Philadelphia, PA, where he is also scholar-in-residence at the Templeton Honors College. His work focuses on the philosophical as well as theological development of the Christian tradition, with special focus on Augustine (354–430) and Martin Luther (1483–1546). In addition to numerous article (many of which can be accessed at his academia.edu page), he has written three books on Augustine, Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self (2000); Inner Grace (2008); and Outward Signs (2008) (2008), all with Oxford University Press. He is also the author of a Biblical commentary, Jonah (Brazos, 2008) and a book on the Christian life, Good News for Anxious Christians (Brazos, 2010). His most recent book is a dialogue on religion, violence and truth, co-authored with Jean Francois Phelizon, titled Does God Have a Strategy? (Wipf & Stock, 2015). He is perhaps best known to the public through a series of lecture courses published by The Great Courses, including courses on Augustine, on Luther, on the history of Christian theology and on the interaction of philosophy and religion in the Western tradition. He is married to Nancy Hazle, with whom he has three sons and two grandchildren.
Knowing Traditions: Self-Critical Rationalities

1. Tradition and Authority.

Modernity in the life of thought is a Western intellectual tradition that is averse to the very notion of traditions. This means that modernity comes to a kind of crisis when it recognizes itself as a tradition. Postmodernism is rooted in a kind of narrative of modernity, in which modernity cannot well survive this self-recognition.

The nature of modernity’s crisis can be spelled out in terms of the concept of authority. In its main usage in the Western tradition, “authority” (Latin auctoritas and its derivatives in European languages) was a characteristic not of rulers but of teachers. Rulers had power or command (potestas or imperium), but teachers had authority. We still use the term in that sense when we say a teacher is “an authority on her subject.” In a related usage, a “master” (magister) was originally a teacher, one who had mastered a subject and therefore could teach it (hence we still give Masters degrees). Thus a slave owner in ancient Rome was not called “master” (magister) but “lord” (dominus).

Ever since Augustine in the 4th century, authority and reason were contrasted with each other but also seen in relation to each other. Whenever we learn anything in science or religion, Augustine argued, we start out with faith in order to seek understanding. This means that in any academic discipline, we begin our education by believing what we’re told by our teachers who (if they are good teachers) are authorities deserving of our trust. But we do want to come to our own understanding—to see the truth for ourselves rather than simply hearing about it second hand. (Think of the difference between believing that a mathematical formula is true when you copy it down during a lecture, and learning enough so that you actually understand why it’s true.) So coming to intellectual maturity means moving from believing what you’re told to an understanding based on your own reason. Hence, to combine two key pairs of terms from Augustine, we move from faith to understanding, which is the same as to say from authority to reason.

To begin with authority is to be situated within a tradition. Tradition means a transmission of knowledge and skills from one generation to another (from Latin traditio, a handing down or handing over). But a tradition is not just a relation to a past, like an inheritance; it is also involves progress and learning new things, a use of the inheritance for new projects. So understood, both science and religion consist of traditions. But this is a commonality that modernity, that anti-traditional tradition, tends to obscure.

2. Enlightenment and Modernity.

The German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, late in the 18th century, gave a famous definition of “enlightenment” as a kind of coming of age, the courage and willingness to “make use of one's own understanding without supervision from someone else.” It is, in short, to live by reason rather than authority. As Kant proceeded to show in his famous little essay “What is Enlightenment?,” what he had in mind is the situation of intellectuals in 18th-century Prussia, who needed to be emancipated from state censorship and ecclesiastical control in order to pursue their scholarship in an atmosphere of academic freedom. His message was: it's time for scholars to be grown-ups, not acting like children under the tutelage of church and state. It was a declaration of independence for the rising German professoriate, which came to fruition in the 19th century, when the professors came to have much more intellectual authority than the pastors.
Kant's notion of enlightenment in fact undermined any intellectual authority other than science or scholarship (the German term Wissenschaft includes both). It did not simply eliminate authority, but vested real intellectual authority in the academic disciplines rather than an established church with its claims to possess divine revelation backed by state power (as was the case with the German churches of Kant's day). As a statement of the goals of the Enlightenment, it meant positioning the authority of science over against what came to be called “traditional” authorities such as the church. By the same token, however, it also tended to obscure the extent to which the academic disciplines themselves are traditions with their own kind of authority, involved in the transmission of inherited knowledge and skills from one generation to another. One of the reasons Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions had such a controversial impact is that it reminded scientists of the messy history of their own disciplines, which was never a simple story of the advance of reason, and indeed made science look a bit more like “traditional knowledge” than many scientists or philosophers were ready for.

3. Modernity and Postmodernity

Kantian “Enlightenment” can be taken as the intellectual heart of modernity. As a general proposition, it means that a civilization's intellectual life needs science but can do without traditional authorities. Postmodernism, by contrast, begins with modernity's own recognition, both philosophical and sociological, that this is naive. All our learning, scientific and otherwise, take place in a social context with a history. I call this “the postmodern insight”: the recognition of the inevitability of socio-historical context, even in modernity. There are various ways of describing the socio-historical context of science, for example: Kuhn calls it a paradigm, Lakatos calls it a research program, and Alasdair MacIntyre, moving from the philosophy of science to epistemology in general, calls it an intellectual tradition. The location of modern science within an ongoing intellectual context or tradition is something that modern science has in common with ancient religions. Indeed it is something that modernity itself, including not only modern science but modern politics (in particular, the tradition of liberalism) has in common with the traditional authority of religions. The recognition that the intellectual life of modernity also, despite its hostility to traditions, actually consists of traditions, is what makes “the postmodern insight” postmodern. Postmodernism is modernity coming to a knowledge that modernity itself is a tradition, which means that modernity is not what it thinks it is.

The fact that both sciences and religions are traditions does not mean there is no difference between them. It does mean, however, that the difference is not between rationality and irrationality, or reason and faith. By MacIntyre's reckoning, all rationality has its home in some tradition or other. There are irrational traditions, but tradition as such is not a form of irrationality—of blind faith or of unreasoned authority. Intellectual traditions are a social context in which individuals begin learning from the authority of their teachers but come to think for themselves. They involve inquiry, argument, contestation and even conflict—so that the picture of traditional life as homogenous or monolithic is also naive, a modern caricature. One of the most characteristic features of any tradition is ongoing conflict about what properly belongs within the tradition. The Christian tradition argues about what counts as orthodoxy and heresy; scientists (and especially philosophers of science) argue about what really counts as science.

I take MacIntyre's view to be a form of postmodernism, in that it shares the insight that modernity is an anti-traditional tradition that cannot well survive the recognition that it is a tradition. I venture to call it “right wing postmodernism,” because it seems to me to be one of two fundamental ways to respond to this self-recognition. On the one hand, one can retain the typically modern contrast between tradition
and reason, which means that if tradition is inevitable, then there is no escape from irrationality. I have taken to calling this view “left-wing postmodernism,” which I associate especially with the names of Derrida and Foucault. By contrast, rejecting the modern notion that tradition is opposed to reason results in the rightwing postmodernism of Alasdair MacIntyre and also (in a very different idiom) that of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The characteristic notion of rightwing postmodernism is that traditions are the bearers of rationality. Either form of postmodernism will regard both science and religion as traditions, but the rightwing postmodernist is in a position to see both scientific and religious traditions as forms of rationality.

4 Science and Religion

If both religion and science can take the form of traditions harboring rationality, how should we distinguish them? Both involve inquiry, argument and criticism, including self-criticism and the revision of previous positions. Both learn new things. But science, we could say, is all about learning new things, about making new discoveries, gathering new observations and coming up with new theories to explain them. Religion is different, because it’s not all about learning new things, although every religion has to learn new things to be survive and be intellectually healthy.

Think first of the three great Western monotheisms. All of them have an essential loyalty to their own past, which is not so essential in scientific traditions. They are based on what Islam calls a “revelation,” what Christianity often calls “the word of God,” and Judaism calls divine “instruction” (torah). Seen from within the tradition, this is a kind of gift of truth that must be guarded as a “deposit of faith” (in the New Testament’s phrase), as well as interpreted, lived by, and inquired into.

I suppose the Eastern traditions are rather different, in part because I am one of those scholars who thinks the Western label “religion” does not quite fit. Confucianism and Daoism are each more like an ethos than a religion. “Hinduism” refers to a wide variety of devotional practices, cultural mores, and social obligations, which only artificially (and under Western pressure) can be made into a “religious system.” And many forms of Buddhism look to Westerners more like a form of meditation than a religion. Rather than seeking something that fits the label “religion,” I would look within the cultural histories of the East for ongoing traditions of inquiry, with common texts and shared practices to interpret. There is surely more than one of these within the huge cultural phenomena that Westerners have labeled “Hinduism,” and likewise within “Buddhism.” Even so, it’s not clear to me that we can identify in them the kind of argumentative doctrinal and legal tradition that is characteristic of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. So from here on I will use the term “religion” to refer only to the three monotheist traditions. They provide a useful contrast with “science” because they include truth claims that can be compared and perhaps contrasted to scientific claims. They therefore raise an interesting question about the relation of science and religion that I’m not sure really arises with the Eastern traditions.

The three great Western monotheisms make substantive truth claims, argue for and against them, and sometimes change their minds about them. Each harbors rich traditions of distinctive forms of reasoning, which we can see on display in rabbinic debates in and about the Talmud, in Christian theological arguments and in Islamic jurisprudence. Like the scientific traditions, each one keeps having new challenges to face, new questions to discuss, new inquiries to engage in. They cannot simply invent new ways to defend old doctrines, like Ptolemaic astronomers inventing new epicycles. Like the sciences, they must keep learning new things.
But unlike the sciences, learning new things is not their *raison d'être*. They have a gift of truth to cherish, a deposit of faith to guard, and it is precisely in order to guard it that they need to keep learning new things, facing new challenges, being self-critical, engaging in their distinctive forms of reasoning. There is a kind of conservatism here, a devotion to their own past that one does not see in the sciences. Yet I think the label “conservatism” also doesn't get us to the heart of the matter.

The heart of the matter is that the religious traditions never outgrow the authority of their particular gift of truth. Enlightenment, in the sense of learning to think for oneself, can't be their whole goal. The reason why, as Kierkegaard saw (in the *Philosophical Fragments*), is that in this case God is the teacher. The importance of this is not simply that God knows more than any other teacher, but that there is nothing more important to know than the teacher himself. Here teacher and truth are one. To outgrow the authority of *this* teacher could only mean to give up the pursuit of truth.

In the three great religions, what we ultimately want to know is a person. And when it comes to knowing persons, there is no getting around their authority to speak for themselves. This is not a hindrance or a limitation, but the very nature of relations between persons. Knowing others as persons means being drawn into their self-knowledge, so it requires listening to the account they give of themselves. In this sense there is always a kind of secondhand structure to knowing other persons. You can't know other persons without their say-so, which means knowing other persons is not a matter of seeing for yourself but of trusting in the authority of testimony: the testimony of the other concerning himself. (It's different if you're “seeing through” a liar, as we put it, but I don't think this should be taken as a model for knowing other persons). Hence the gift of truth at the basis of the three Western religious traditions derives from the conception that what we want to know is a person who gives himself to be known by speaking for himself. That is the root of the authority these traditions claim for themselves. And it is why their own past has a kind of authority for them: this is where they find the primal gift of truth in which the person they obey and love has spoken and given himself to be known.

5. **The Difference Socrates Makes**

The differences between science and religion—or, to speak more precisely, the sciences and the religions—should not be allowed to obscure what they have in common: all of them are forms of rationality embedded in traditions, which gives them a definite shape, sets them particular problems and tasks. They are projects whose trajectory into the future cannot be understood without tracing their progress in the past.

And because they are *intellectual* traditions, they are constantly arguing about themselves, frequently riven by conflict about what belongs within the boundaries of the tradition (“is it really science?”), open to falsification (whether they want to be open to it or not) and subject to revision. In short, because they are intellectual traditions, they are inherently self-critical. I want to give a label to this self-critical element in every intellectual tradition: call it the “Socratic” element in the tradition.

I do think Socrates represents a watershed in Western history. I'm thinking not so much of the historical Socrates himself as of the extraordinary portrait of him in Plato's writings, as well as the Socratic legacy that spread outward from Plato's Academy, which includes the influence of Plato's most brilliant student, Aristotle. With Socrates, something irreversibly self-critical got into the Western bloodstream, and it spread well beyond Athens with the Hellenistic culture that affected the whole Mediterranean world after the conquests of Aristotle's student, Alexander the Great.
Socrates, famously, asked critical questions. What was new about them is that they were not the rhetorical questions of political speech and prophecy, designed to push and challenge an opponent, and they were more than the narrowly focused investigations of a court of law. Socrates' questions opened out onto a systematic inquiry into the nature of things. There was already in Greece a tradition of speculation about the nature of things, embodied mainly in poetry (Parmenides, Empedocles) and sometimes in gnomic sayings (Heraclitus). But the legacy of Socrates eventually turned these into the earliest versions of a project that we would now call science.

It began with Plato's dialogues, which did not merely present the results of inquiry but dramatized the process of inquiry. The key label for this process is dialectic, which originally meant something like dialogue or conversation, but after Plato came to mean the kind of critical give and take that Socrates questions got you involved in: thesis and objection, refutation and revision. The very notion of "critical" thought, as the West uses the phrase, has its roots here: in the need to make a judgment (krasis in Greek, from which both "crisis" and "critical") about what is true in response to the kind of questions Socrates has taught us to ask.

In Plato's Academy, students participated in dialectical exercises with each other, learning by practice how to ask and answer Socrates' type of questions—and in the process helping invent a new type of inquiry to which we now give the name philosophy. One of Plato's teaching assistants, helping him run these dialectical exercises, was the young Aristotle. The first books ever written on logic were the outgrowth of Aristotle's teaching methods in the Academy, giving an account of the systematic structure of dialectical give and take and the kind of judgments it results in. These works of logic by Aristotle became in turn the basis of his conception of science—the first time that science (Greek episteme, translated into Latin as scientia) becomes the name of a social project that spans the generations and develops into an intellectual tradition, as Aristotle invents the disciplines of physics and biology by combining empirical investigation with dialectical inquiry and a logical form of proof in demonstrating the results.

What emerges from the Academy by the time of Plato's death is something new in Western history, which I shall call "philosophy" in a rather technical sense. What I mean by it is a combination of two things, one universal and another a distinctively Socratic (or maybe Platonic) legacy.

The universal feature is the pursuit of wisdom. Every culture known to me has a wisdom tradition, a legacy of understanding about how to live well, how to speak well, how to grow up, how to raise children, how to judge disputes between contending parties. One looks for this wisdom in the elders of the tribe, in its sages, teachers, and judges. It is what one expects in its fathers and mothers and hopes for in its rulers. To understand a culture is indeed in large part to understand its wisdom, its way of teaching its members how to live well. To deny that a culture has a wisdom tradition is probably to deny it is a culture at all, or else to denigrate it as a culture savage and degenerate. To fail to see the pursuit of wisdom in a culture other than one's own is the mark of chauvinism or worse.

In Plato's Academy, imbued by the spirit of Socratic questioning, the Greek wisdom tradition was combined with the new practice of dialectic inquiry and supported by the new forms of argumentation made explicit in Aristotle's logic. People had thought logically before Aristotle, of course, just as they had spoken grammatically before grammar books. But putting the way people speak and think into a book that then guides practices, introduces a new kind of discipline in thought and speech. When Plato subjected the Greek wisdom tradition to Socratic questioning, and Aristotle began using his new account of logic to devise a framework putting the results into systematic form, the upshot was the
beginnings of Western philosophy and science: a distinctive wisdom tradition that could dialectically engage any culture, beginning with its own, making critical judgments that turned the pursuit of wisdom into a new kind of discipline, a systematic project of inquiry that became central to the Western tradition, beginning with the Hellenistic culture that confronted the world after the conquests of Alexander the Great and furthered by the expansion of the Roman empire which took up the legacy of Hellenistic philosophy and science as its own.

6. The Socratic Element in the Religions

Fatefully—or perhaps the better term is providentially—the expansion of Hellenistic culture found its most difficult and articulate opponent in the little area at the eastern end of the Mediterranean that was then called Judea, the land of the Judeans or Ioudaioi in Greek, which our translations of the New Testament typically renders, rather anachronistically, as “the Jews.” They were a tough nut to crack, because they already had their own written wisdom tradition, unlike most of the little nations around the Mediterranean (the great exception was Egypt; the literary tradition of Rome had scarcely begun when Hellenism first encountered the Judeans). The Judeans’ literary traditions included both powerful stories of liberation (as in Exodus) and a law that demanded exclusive worship of a jealous deity. Attempts to replace that law and worship by Alexander's successors in the region led to the successful Judaean revolt led by the Maccabee family. Later, Rome tried to avoid a repeat of that experience by allowing the Judeans, alone of all the peoples of the empire, not to worship the gods of the empire, including Caesar himself. (Gentile Christians were not granted this ethnic exemption, which is one of the reasons they were prosecuted).

The Judeans' political resistance to the empires that tried to assimilate them was supported by cultural resistance to Hellenism. But the cultural resistance was far from total. By the time of Jesus there was already a rich literature of Judaean or Jewish literature written in Greek. Living at the same time as Jesus was Philo of Alexandria, drawing extensively on Greek philosophy as he wrote dozens of commentaries (in Greek) on the Jewish Scriptures. Thus the legacy of Socrates was already part of Judaean thought by the time Jesus was hanging on a Roman cross that called him “King of the Judeans,” and it was already playing a significant role in the earliest Christian writings, those of the Hellenized Judaean we know as St. Paul, which of course became part of the collection of documents (written in Greek) called the New Testament.

What this means is that Christianity begins with the legacy of Socrates already entering its bloodstream. Within a century Christian thought is being developed by gentile church fathers, intellectuals who key task is to interpret a set of Judaean Scriptures (what we now call the Bible) by means of classical rhetoric, philosophy and culture, incorporating yet more of the legacy of Socrates. It is not so surprising, then—and certainly not alien to the spirit of the Christian tradition—when a thousand years later Thomas Aquinas is putting Christian theology in the logical framework of an Aristotelian science, explained by means of Aristotelian syllogisms and sandwiched between dialectical objections and replies, in the Summa Theologica. By this time the legacy of Socrates is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition.

But it was not just Christians. While the church fathers were wrestling with their Judaean books, the Judaean teachers still working in Hebrew and Aramaic were engaged in dialectical inquiries of their own, which were later incorporated into the text we know as the Talmud. Though theirs was a very different intellectual and rhetorical style from the Hellenism that was native to the church fathers, they too had clearly taken up something of the legacy of Socrates. They made no prophecies, they told
some fascinating stories, but mostly they argued, and thus founded the great self-critical intellectual tradition known as rabinic Judaism.

A story of the uptake of the legacy of Socratic dialectic by a great religious tradition can also be told for Islam, starting with the massive translation project begun in 8th-century Baghdad, turning Greek texts into Syriac and Arabic, and thus making Greek philosophy available to Muslim thinkers, who also began a long, self-critical tradition of arguing about exegesis as well as jurisprudence that was later instrumental in the intellectual re-invigoration of the Western middle ages, including Thomas Aquinas.

7. The Socratic Legacy in the Modern West

A tradition that has the legacy of Socrates in its bloodstream is a tradition that can question itself. Above all, it can learn to look critically at what it used to take for granted. This is what Socrates does in many of Plato's dialogues. He asks questions like “What is virtue?” “What is piety?” “What is justice?” and “What is knowledge?” with the result that his interlocutors find that they do not really know what they thought they knew. After Socrates shows up, the values of their own culture, which had seemed so obvious, suddenly appears to be difficult to define. Words that every Athenian had been using ever since childhood came to have an opaque meaning, demanding much further inquiry. To encounter Socrates is to learn that you have much more to learn about the most important things in your life, which you used to be able to take for granted.

Socratic questioning can put a person off balance. It's a regular experience when young people go to college nowadays. It has undermined many a naive belief, but it also leads in the end to a strengthening of healthy intellectual traditions. To pass through the process of Socratic dialectical inquiry is to know, at a much deeper level than before, why you think the way you think and live the way you live. Socrates is unsettling, but he's good for us. Without him we would not have Western science, logic and philosophy. And the great monotheist traditions, too, would be unimaginable without him: without Socrates, I think, there is no Aquinas or Augustine or even St. Paul, no rabinic dialectic and no Talmud, no Avicenna or Al-Farabi or richly-argued tradition of Islamic legal reasoning.

As a result of the critical legacy of Socrates that they share, Western science and religion have not, on the whole, encountered each other in the way the Kantian picture of enlightenment expects: as reason pitted against tradition. Rather, when they conflict, I think we see rival traditions of rationality in critical dialogue with one another. Hence the religious traditions should not accept much of the distinctively modern Western notion of the relation of science and religion. From my rightwing postmodernist perspective, that characterization is one more way that modernity fails to understand itself—fails to recognize itself as being itself a tradition.

I think Christians are in a particularly strong position to see this, because so much of Western modernity grows out of the earlier Western Christian tradition. In particular, modern Western secularism is predominantly secularized Christendom, still containing the residue—often a quite massive residue—of Christian values and habits. Hence critical discussion between science and religion is a commonplace within Western culture, as the existence of organizations like IRAS illustrate.

8. Encounters with the West

On the other hand, there are aspects of Western secularism that seem quite successfully to have cut
themselves free of the West's Christian roots. I'm thinking especially of Western technology and 
capitalism, which have great power to export themselves and—I think we can say—to impose 
themselves on non-Western cultures, without bringing along with them much at all in the way of 
religious baggage. The encounter with the West has constituted a crisis in the life of many cultures, 
sometimes mediated through religious encounters (e.g., with missionaries) but in the past century most 
often as an encounter with the sheer material power of the capitalist economy and Western technology 
(which includes, of course, the power of Western weaponry).

I have many questions in mind, which I do not know how to answer—perhaps do not even know how to 
properly formulate—about how the world's cultures may survive their encounter with the West. But my 
primary questions for our discussion at IRAS are about the role of the Socratic element in this 
encounter. There is a strand in Western thinking that I will label “chauvinism” (there are unkind labels) 
that categorizes cultures outside the West in much the same terms that the secularizing 
Enlightenment uses for religion: traditional, irrational, unreflected, dogmatic, superstitious. I'm 
thinking: cultures outside the West ought not to accept this Western characterization of themselves. To 
do so is to set oneself up for assimilation into Western modernity and loss of cultural identity. This is 
what happens when non-Western cultures become museum pieces, known mainly for their quaint 
clothing and interesting ethnic cuisine, not for the integrity of their way of life (including, for example, 
the kind of cultural prohibitions that run counter to Western ideals of individual freedom, and which are 
therefore not likely to be tolerated by a Westernizing government).

What does successful resistance to Western cultural hegemony look like? That's a question that will 
surely require a diverse set of complicated answers. But the capacity for self-critical reflection—the 
ability to sustain something like Socrates' questioning of the taken-for-granted—seems to me essential. 
To encounter any foreign culture is to be confronted with questions about what one's own culture takes 
for granted. These will be especially pressing questions when the culture you encounter has the 
enormous economic power and technological prowess of the West. But a culture that knows how to 
question itself will be surely do better in this encounter than one that has no Socratic element in its 
brookstream.

Once again, having something like Socrates in a tradition is essential for its intellectual health. So here 
is a question I want to ask but do not know enough to answer: what Socratic elements, what 
counterparts to the legacy of Socrates, are there in the cultures that have never had the kind of exposure 
to Hellenism that was important in the formation of rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam? May we 
find these counterparts more powerfully present in the great civilizations (India and China come first to 
mind), which clearly have intellectual traditions of their own? Might there be some way for the 
“smaller” cultures in Southeast Asia and especially Africa, to learn a thing or two from Socrates even 
now, if Westerners can learn how to share him with the world (I am thinking of the experience of a 
colleague and a student of mine teaching philosophy in Africa and in New Guinea, respectively)? 
There's surely something to be gained by such philosophical education, but also something to be lost. 
Getting Socrates into your cultural bloodstream does not leave your culture unchanged. But the 
example of the monotheist religions seems to me to indicate that there are ways of adopting Socrates or 
something like him as your own, so as to enhance the integrity of a culture rather than undermine it.

9. Traditions, cultures, and emotions

All this has something a great deal to do with our emotional lives, as my reading of Dr. Sundararajan's 
work has convinced me. Every tradition does something more than direct inquiries into the pursuit of
truth; it is a whole culture moving forward through time. It forms persons in the way they act and feel and well as think and perceive. In a key connection highlighted by Dr. Sundararajan: by giving shape to cognitive styles, it also shapes patterns of emotional response. The way you think shapes the way you feel. This should hardly be a surprise, but there are many cultural habits of separating intellect from emotion that can make the point harder to see.

What I'm wondering is how Socratic questioning plays out in a culture whose emotional life shows a strong preference for symmetrical relations rather than asymmetry, in Dr. Sundararajan's terms. Is a Socrates inevitably a symmetry-breaker? There are certainly a great many cultural settings, in the West as well as elsewhere, where critical questions are received as an impertinent challenge, at best impolite and at worst an intolerable offense. They seem to have gotten Socrates himself executed, after all.

This is one of the reasons, I take it, that Socrates was, famously, a practitioner of irony. He tried to frame his questions in such a way that they did not appear to be a challenge. Perhaps we could say he was trying to avoid breaking the symmetry that sustained the expected emotional relation with his interlocutors. He encounters a hypocritical old windbag named Euthyphro, for example, and asks him what piety is. He does not tell Euthyphro that he is ignorant, that his view of piety is unreflective and unfounded—even though the course of the dialog makes it quite clear that this is so. Rather, Socrates presents himself as Euthyphro pupil, asking to be informed by Euthyphro's superior wisdom—if only Euthyphro would be so kind as to bear with him a while and answer his perplexed questions. This is all a ruse, but it is a way of keeping Euthyphro involved in the difficult discussion, wrestling with critical questions without feeling that he is under personal attack. It is a way to present critical inquiry without making it appear to be—what it is often taken to be—a form of aggression.

So here is my final question: what are the forms of irony available in a culture such as China's, that could make critical questioning possible without breaking symmetry in a way that runs counter to the emotional expectations of the culture? For I am expecting that if Socrates himself had to be an ironist to practice his dialectic, then the possibility of critical questioning within any culture will have to be shielded with a fair amount of irony, as electrical wires are by insulation, lest those who handle them get burned.