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Narrative, Truth, and Relativism in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre

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# Narrative, Truth, and Relativism in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre

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Alasdair MacIntyre advances a narrative approach to moral philosophy in which the truth in ethics is sought by means of narrating the stories of contending moral traditions. Critics often argue that MacIntyre's narrative approach to moral philosophy entails relativism because it denies objective moral truth, fails to provide a way to judge between the truth-claims of rival traditions, and/or implies that one's commitment to a particular tradition must be arbitrarily determined. This dissertation argues that MacIntyre's moral philosophy is not subject to the charges of relativism urged against it by critics.

Chapter One presents some of the less controversial ways in which MacIntyre makes use of narrative. He sees narrative as the approach to moral philosophy through which action, human life, and the pursuit of the good receive their intelligibility. Considering these less problematic applications of narrative helps to show what MacIntyre means by narrative. Doing so also provides a foil to his more controversial use of narrative as it pertains to moral enquiry.

Each of the remaining three chapters considers one of the aforementioned charges of relativism brought against MacIntyre's moral philosophy. Chapter Two considers the "perspectivist challenge," the claim that MacIntyre's philosophy neither aspires to nor

allows for objective moral truth. This dissertation argues that MacIntyre overcomes the perspectivist challenge by advancing a robust, realist account of truth.

Chapter Three considers the “relativist challenge,” the criticism that MacIntyre fails to provide a way to adjudicate between the truth-claims of rival traditions. By virtue of his theory of how one tradition can defeat another in respect to their truth-claims, this dissertation argues that he overcomes the relativist challenge.

Chapter Four evaluates the “particularist challenge,” the claim that MacIntyre’s moral philosophy is open to relativism by not being able to provide a person outside all moral traditions with reason to commit to one tradition rather than another. While MacIntyre has not yet published a response to the particularist challenge, this dissertation argues that his particularism compels him to reject the notion of those outside all traditions. By rejecting that notion, he can successfully overcome the particularist challenge as well.

This dissertation by Brian Michael McAdam fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in philosophy approved by V. Bradley Lewis, Ph.D., as Director, and by Robert Sokolowski, Ph.D. and Angela McKay Knobel, Ph.D. as Readers.

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V. Bradley Lewis, Ph.D., Director

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Robert Sokolowski, Ph.D., Reader

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Angela McKay Knobel, Ph.D., Reader

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam  
and  
For Sarah

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# Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre concludes his 1999 article “Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism” with these words:

We can recognize and give respect to a variety of points of view, so remaining moral pluralists, without becoming moral relativists. So I conclude; but am I in fact entitled to this conclusion? It is important to note that in at least three respects my argument is incomplete. First, I have relied upon, but never spelled out, a particular understanding of the nature of truth, one that is very much at odds with some currently influential theories of truth. Secondly, my account of what I have called the ethics of enquiry is far too brief to be adequate. And thirdly, I have not considered what reply to my argument an insightful relativist might make. So that what I have presented is perhaps a gesture towards an argument, rather than argument, not a conclusion to which I am as yet entitled, but a conclusion to which I might become entitled.<sup>1</sup>

On the strength of the incomplete arguments of “Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism” alone MacIntyre questions the extent to which he can justifiably hold “moral pluralism without moral relativism.” Is he, however, entitled to this conclusion based on arguments he makes elsewhere?

MacIntyre’s desire to reject moral relativism while nevertheless arguing for moral pluralism, moral particularism, and the importance of historical context in moral enquiry

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism,” *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 1 (1999): 7–8.

runs throughout his writings from at least the publication of *A Short History of Ethics* in 1966 until the present.<sup>2</sup> Within his corpus he *does* articulate a theory of truth, provide a fuller account of the ethics of enquiry, and consider arguments that a relativist might bring against his position. And it is clear that on the strength of the arguments of his entire corpus MacIntyre thinks he is entitled to reject moral relativism while arguing for moral pluralism, moral particularism, and the fundamental importance of historical context in moral enquiry. In the Prologue to the Third Edition of *After Virtue*, for instance, he writes:

What historical enquiry discloses is the situatedness of all enquiry, the extent to which what are taken to be the standards of truth and of rational justification in the contexts of practice vary from one time and place to another. If one adds to that disclosure, as I have done, a denial that there are available to any rational agent whatsoever standards of truth and of rational justification such that appeal to them could be *sufficient* to resolve fundamental moral, scientific, or metaphysical disputes in a conclusive way, then it may seem that an accusation of relativism has been invited. . . . In the Postscript to the Second Edition of *After Virtue* I already sketched an answer to this charge, and I developed that answer further in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Yet the charge is still repeated, so let me once again identify what it is that enables, indeed requires me to reject relativism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1998); 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1966. See, for instance, p. 91 where MacIntyre writes, “If the kind of evaluative question we can raise about ourselves and our actions depends upon the kind of social structure of which we are part and the consequent range of possibilities for the descriptions of ourselves and others, does this not entail that there are no evaluative truths about ‘men,’ about human life as such? Are we not doomed to historical and social relativism? The answer to this is complex.”

<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xii; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1981.

While in Chapters 2–4 I will consider what, on MacIntyre’s view, requires him to reject relativism, at the moment I wish merely to draw attention to the issue of relativism in his thought. MacIntyre wants to reject relativism, and he thinks that he has in fact successfully rejected it. Yet critics continue to bring against his thought the charge of relativism. Thomas D’Andrea notes, “That, despite his intent, MacIntyre cannot, or at least does not in his stated views, escape relativism is a frequent criticism, particularly by those sympathetic to his general project.”<sup>4</sup>

MacIntyre’s “general project” is to provide a narrative approach to moral philosophy in which the truth in moral enquiry is sought by means of narrating the stories of contending moral traditions. He writes, “Of every particular enquiry there is a narrative to be written, and being able to understand that enquiry is inseparable from being able to identify and follow that narrative.”<sup>5</sup>

He thinks that the narrative approach to moral philosophy is *the* way to overcome what he regards as a crisis in moral philosophy. He cites as evidence of this crisis what he considers to be the shrill, interminable, unresolved, and seemingly irresolvable character of modern moral debate. He writes, “It is a central feature of contemporary moral debates that they are unsettlable and interminable. . . . Because no argument can

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas D. D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 403.

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues,” in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 168. First published as *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1990). The version in *The Tasks of Philosophy* is revised and expanded.

be carried through to a victorious conclusion, argument characteristically gives way to the mere and increasingly shrill battle of assertion with counterassertion.”<sup>6</sup>

MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment conception of rational enquiry is largely responsible for this unhappy state of affairs. The Enlightenment notion of rational enquiry as impersonal, universal, and disinterested (what he calls the “encyclopaedist” view) or else the unwitting representative of particular interests (the genealogist view) has given rise to rival versions of moral enquiry that are, in MacIntyre’s estimation, misguided and at bottom incommensurable.<sup>7</sup> Because the views of these rival versions have no common basis, debate between them is necessarily rendered sterile.

Given the inadequacy he finds in modern moral philosophy, MacIntyre proposes his narrative approach as the way to overcome, on the one hand, the relativism of genealogists and emotivists (whom MacIntyre sees as the product of the Enlightenment) and, on the other hand, the unsuccessful universalism of encyclopaedists. The issue of whether MacIntyre’s moral philosophy involves relativism is important because if it does, then his approach might be subject to the same criticisms he brings against the emotivists and genealogists, and it might fail to provide a serviceable alternative to the universalism of the encyclopaedists which he rejects. What was lost with the Enlightenment, and what

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<sup>6</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Why Is the Search for the Foundations of Ethics So Frustrating?,” *The Hastings Center Report* 9, no. 4 (August 1979): 16–17. See also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6–8 and 71–72.

<sup>7</sup> For a concise description of what MacIntyre means by the “encyclopaedist” and “genealogist” views, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 42. For an extended discussion of the “Enlightenment Project,” see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 51–78.

must be recovered, according to MacIntyre, is the conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition. By “tradition” he means, in the simplest of terms, “an argument extended through time.”<sup>8</sup> For MacIntyre, there is no access to truth save by way of tradition, and the only way to understand a tradition is to tell the story of its development.

That moral philosophy should be carried out by means of narrative, as MacIntyre thinks it should be, is an unusual and a controversial claim. Critics often argue that MacIntyre’s narrative approach to moral philosophy entails relativism because it denies objective moral truth, fails to provide a way to judge between the truth-claims of rival traditions, and/or implies that one’s commitment to a particular tradition must be arbitrarily determined. Louis Ruprecht, for instance, complains that in MacIntyre’s narrative, “We never get back to any *necessary* beginnings or first principles. There is no necessity, only narrative.”<sup>9</sup> MacIntyre has repeatedly denied that his moral philosophy involves relativism and has responded to his critics with fuller accounts of truth and of the ways in which tradition-constituted moral enquiry attains to truth. Critics have not always been satisfied with his replies.

Before presenting an outline of how, in this dissertation, I treat MacIntyre’s use of narrative and the charges of relativism to which it gives rise, I wish to highlight what is at

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<sup>8</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12. MacIntyre’s understanding of tradition will be discussed at length below in Chapter One, Section Three and, especially, in Chapter Two.

<sup>9</sup> Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr., *Afterwords: Hellenism, Modernism, and the Myth of Decadence* (Albany, NY: Statue University of New York Press, 1996), 92. Emphasis in the original.

stake in such considerations. First, MacIntyre advances his narrative approach to moral enquiry as a way to affirm moral particularism while simultaneously denying moral relativism. Many philosophical thinkers would deny that such a position is tenable. To their minds, if moral particularism is affirmed, then moral relativism must be affirmed as well. Alternatively, if moral relativism is rejected, then moral particularism must also be rejected. The case that MacIntyre makes for the position which many scholars would consider untenable is arguably the strongest case that anyone has made for it.

Understanding the case he makes is important because the failure of his case would strongly suggest that no position is defensible that affirms moral particularism while simultaneously denying moral relativism.

Understanding MacIntyre's narrative approach to moral philosophy is also important for those who see themselves as universalists, as relativists, or as those who perceive ethical debate as deadlocked and have no clear idea of how to proceed. While denying relativism as universalists do, MacIntyre nevertheless argues extensively against the view that reason is impersonal, universal, and disinterested. Those who think that such a conception of reason is not only possible but obviously desirable would be interested to consider MacIntyre's reasons for why it is not. On the other hand, while denying, as relativists do, the type of universalism championed by encyclopaedists, MacIntyre nevertheless argues extensively against the view that truth is relative. Those who agree with MacIntyre that the Enlightenment conception of universal reason failed would be interested to consider MacIntyre's reasons for why that failure does not have to lead to relativism. They would also be interested to understand how MacIntyre thinks it

is possible and correct to affirm moral particularism even while rejecting moral relativism. Furthermore, those engaged in moral philosophy today who perceive modern moral debate as deadlocked might find in MacIntyre's discussions of that issue an explanation of *why* modern ethical debate so often seems irresolvable. Moreover, in MacIntyre's understanding of the enquiry of traditions, they might discover how debate in moral philosophy can progress beyond stalemate by means of one tradition "out-narrating" or defeating another.

The above considerations point to what is at stake in this dissertation for scholars with a wide variety of interests, many of whom may not be especially familiar with MacIntyre's work. Those who are already familiar with or even immersed in his work, however, will be interested to consider the relationship between narrative and truth in MacIntyre's moral philosophy. The tensions to which that relationship gives rise are central to much of the scholarly criticism of MacIntyre's thought. In particular, many scholars think that MacIntyre's thought leads to ethical relativism, an allegation that MacIntyre has consistently denied. If his moral philosophy *does* lead to relativism, then, simply put, his project fails. In that case his thought would be subject to the same criticisms that he brings against the relativism of emotivists and genealogists. Also, he would have failed to provide a viable alternative to the universalism of the encyclopaedists, which he rejects. If, on the other hand, his moral philosophy does *not* lead to relativism, then he may well have successfully advanced a conception of moral philosophy that avoids the mistakes that he thinks encyclopaedists, emotivists, and genealogists make. Such a conception of moral philosophy might not only successfully

express real features of morality in hitherto uncharted ways; it might also provide a way beyond the deadlock of so much contemporary moral debate. In MacIntyrean parlance, his moral philosophy might provide a way out of “the moral wilderness.”<sup>10</sup>

In this dissertation I will both clarify MacIntyre’s understanding of the relationship between narrative and truth in moral enquiry and evaluate the extent to which it entails relativism. Chapter One will present some of the less controversial uses MacIntyre makes of narrative. He sees narrative as the approach to moral philosophy through which action, the unity of a human life, and the pursuit of the good receive their intelligibility. Considering these less problematic applications of narrative will help to show what MacIntyre means by narrative. Doing so will also provide a foil to his more controversial use of narrative as it pertains to moral enquiry.

Each of the remaining three chapters will consider a specific way in which the charge of relativism is brought against MacIntyre’s moral philosophy. The arguments of a number of critics will be evaluated, along with MacIntyre’s responses to them, in order to determine the extent to which MacIntyre’s view of the relationship between narrative and truth in moral enquiry entails relativism.

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<sup>10</sup> MacIntyre’s project can be viewed as an attempt to provide a way out of the “moral wilderness” that he describes in the following articles: Alasdair MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness: Part 1,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 31–40. First published in *New Reasoner* 7 (Winter 1958–59): 90–100. And: Alasdair MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness: Part 2,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 41–49. First published in *New Reasoner* 8 (Spring 1959): 89–98.

Chapter Two will examine MacIntyre's early articulation of the relationship between narrative and truth in moral enquiry. It will also consider the "perspectivist challenge" urged against these early formulations. The "perspectivist challenge" involves the claim that his philosophy neither aspires to nor allows for objective moral truth. Hans Oberdiek, Norman Dahl, and Joan Franks are among those who argue that by his calling "true" that theory which is "the best theory so far," MacIntyre reduces truth to, at best, a certain measure of dialectical success for a particular tradition.<sup>11</sup> The "perspectivist challenge" will be assessed in light of what he writes on the nature of truth and one's access to it, especially in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*; "First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues"; and "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification."<sup>12</sup>

Chapter Three will consider the "relativist challenge" and MacIntyre's response to it. According to the "relativist challenge," MacIntyre fails to provide a way to adjudicate between the truth-claims of rival traditions. Versions of this "relativist challenge" are brought against MacIntyre by critics including Hans Oberdiek, Richard Bernstein, and

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<sup>11</sup> See Hans Oberdiek, review of *A Short History of Ethics*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 9 (May 1969): 265–71; Norman O. Dahl, "Justice and Aristotelian Practical Reason," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 1 (March 1991): 153–57; and Joan M. Franks, O.P., "Aristotle or Nietzsche?," *Listening* 26, no. 2 (1991): 156–63.

<sup>12</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," in *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. Luke Gormally (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), 6–24.

Mark Colby.<sup>13</sup> This charge of relativism will be considered in relation to his view of how one tradition can defeat another. MacIntyre's "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science"<sup>14</sup>; "The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past"<sup>15</sup>; "Relativism, Power, and Philosophy"<sup>16</sup>; *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*; and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* will be guiding texts here.

MacIntyre has responded to the "perspectivist challenge" with a fuller account of truth and to the "relativist challenge" with a theory of how one tradition can claim superiority over another. Among those who acknowledge MacIntyre's responses to those challenges, some such as Robert George and John Haldane still think that MacIntyre's moral philosophy remains open to charges of relativism.<sup>17</sup> In *Whose Justice? Which*

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<sup>13</sup> See Oberdiek, review of *A Short History of Ethics*, 265–71; Richard J. Bernstein, "Philosophy & Virtue for Society's Sake," review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *Commonweal*, May 20, 1988, 306–07; Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity / Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992); Mark Colby, "Narrativity and Ethical Relativism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995): 132–56; and Mark Colby, "Moral Traditions, MacIntyre and Historicist Practical Reason," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21, no. 3 (1995): 53–78.

<sup>14</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *The Monist* 60, no. 4 (1977): 453–72.

<sup>15</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past," in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 31–48.

<sup>16</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power and Philosophy," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59, no. 1 (September 1985): 5–22.

<sup>17</sup> See Robert P. George, "Moral Particularism, Thomism, and Traditions," *The Review of Metaphysics* 42 (March 1989): 593–607 and John Haldane, "MacIntyre's

*Rationality?* MacIntyre writes that the book is primarily addressed to those “not as yet having given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry,” including those “alien to every tradition of enquiry.”<sup>18</sup> Finding this notion especially problematic for MacIntyre’s account, critics such as these argue that given the particularism of his moral philosophy, MacIntyre cannot account for anyone being outside of a tradition, much less can he provide an account of how a person uncommitted to a tradition could choose in a rationally meaningful, non-arbitrary way which tradition to commit to. Chapter Four will evaluate the claim that MacIntyre’s moral philosophy, even as defended in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, is open to relativism by not being able to provide a person uncommitted to a moral tradition with reason to commit to one tradition rather than another. I refer to this claim as the “particularist challenge.” Here the implications of MacIntyre’s moral particularism will be discussed.

In the dissertation I will argue that MacIntyre escapes the “perspectivist challenge” by virtue of his realist theory of truth and that he escapes the “relativist challenge” by virtue of his theory of how one tradition can defeat another, thereby manifesting its rational superiority. With respect to the charge that MacIntyre’s particularism involves him in a more subtle form of relativism specified in the “particularist challenge,” I will argue that while MacIntyre has not explicitly defended his

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Thomist Revival: What Next?,” in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 91–107.

<sup>18</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 393, 395.

philosophy against this charge, his philosophy furnishes him with the resources to do so.

Specifically, his particularism compels him to reject the notion of those outside all traditions. By rejecting that notion, he can successfully overcome the particularist challenge as well.

# Chapter One

## Narrative and Action, the Unity of a Human Life, & the Good

MacIntyre began to grapple with the importance of narrative in philosophy as early in his career as 1966. In *A Short History of Ethics* he describes what he means by historical narrative: “When I speak of a historical narrative I mean one in which the later part is unintelligible until the former is supplied, and in which we have not understood the former until we see that what followed it was a possible sequel to what had gone before.”<sup>1</sup> In later works, as we shall see, he greatly enriches his understanding of narrative and argues for its importance in understanding human action, the unity of a human life, the good, and moral philosophy itself. But his more developed understanding and application of narrative always agrees with the description of historical narrative he provides in *A Short History of Ethics*. For MacIntyre narrative always involves contextualizing the matter at hand, situating it in an historical sequence.<sup>2</sup> As Gerald

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 88; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1966.

<sup>2</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 206; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1981. There MacIntyre

Burns puts it, commenting on MacIntyre's thought, "The rationality of narrative consists in the way it contextualizes the random and contingent details of life."<sup>3</sup>

With the popularity of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's views on narrative gained a wider audience and began to meet with greater critical engagement. Kelvin Knight observes, "MacIntyre's use of the concept of narrative in *After Virtue* has attracted much attention. Postmodernists now commonly argue that narration plays an important part in all sorts of human reasoning but *After Virtue* was one of the first works in English to articulate this approach."<sup>4</sup> Several years after the publication of *After Virtue*, Paul Nelson noted the currency of narrative and drew attention to the fact that it is sometimes put to problematic use:

"Narrative" is, certainly, in vogue. Is it merely an academic "buzzword" or a fashionable rhetorical umbrella under which all sorts of related and unrelated ideas seek shelter? Unsatisfying as it may seem to narrative's fans and critics alike, my answer is "yes and no." Yes, narrative is often used quite vaguely and uncritically. . . . But, no, narrative in some of its manifestations, anyway, should not be dismissed as a passing fad.<sup>5</sup>

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emphasizes the historical dimension of contextualizing, which he there describes as a requirement for making something intelligible by means of placing it in its correct "setting." He writes, "I use the word 'setting' here as a relatively inclusive term. A social setting may be an institution, it may be what I have called a practice, or it may be a milieu of some other human kind. But it is central to the notion of a setting as I am going to understand it that a setting has a history."

<sup>3</sup> Gerald L. Burns, "Literature and the Limits of Moral Philosophy: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's Project," in *Commitment in Reflection: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Leona Toker (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1994), 253.

<sup>4</sup> Kelvin Knight, ed., *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 283.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Nelson, *Narrative and Morality: A Theological Inquiry* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), 141.

Surely the most controversial way in which MacIntyre uses narrative is in his insistence that moral philosophy itself is best understood in terms of a narrative and that moral truth can only be arrived at by means of narrating the history of a moral tradition and the histories of those moral traditions with which it comes in contact. In his very important article “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,” MacIntyre writes, “The history of ethics . . . is usually written as though it were not a moral narrative, that is, in fact as though it were not a narrative.”<sup>6</sup> While MacIntyre criticizes that approach, others criticize precisely the way in which he *does* cast ethics in terms of a narrative. Gerald Burns draws attention to the controversial nature of the way in which MacIntyre uses narrative in ethics:

Among literary people, after all, it is hardly controversial that a literature of character and action, or in other words narrative and dramatic literature, is what constitute ethical reality, since this literature shows us (as nothing else does) what a human life is. Storytelling, just to put it dogmatically, is human life’s only mode of intelligibility. But for a certain kind of philosopher this assertion is controversial in a fundamental way.<sup>7</sup>

Before discussing this controversial use of narrative, I will first consider some of the less controversial uses to which MacIntyre puts narrative. Specifically, I will present the ways in which he sees narrative as the approach to moral philosophy through which action, the unity of a human life, and the pursuit of the good receive their intelligibility.

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<sup>6</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” *The Monist* 60, no. 4 (1977): 456.

<sup>7</sup> Burns, “Literature and the Limits of Moral Philosophy: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre’s Project,” 245.

These discussions will help clarify what MacIntyre means by narrative, and they will serve as a foil to his more controversial use of narrative.

## Narrative and Human Action

Throughout his works and especially during the first thirty years of his career, when he was working extensively in the philosophy of the social sciences, MacIntyre frequently addresses the theme of human action.<sup>8</sup> In his very earliest considerations of the issue, he does not explicitly link human action to narrative as he regularly does in his later writings. Nevertheless, the trajectory of his early thought clearly points in that direction. In his 1959 article “Notes from the Moral Wilderness,” he writes:

What is it to understand any given piece of behavior as a human action? Consider the following example. If my head nods, it may be a sign of assent to a question or it may be a nervous tick. To explain the nod as a way of saying “Yes” to a question is to give it a role in the context of

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance: Alasdair MacIntyre, “A Mistake about Causality in Social Science,” in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 48–70; Alasdair MacIntyre, “Pleasure as a Reason for Action,” *The Monist* 49 (April 1965), 215–33; Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Antecedents of Action,” in *British Analytical Philosophy*, ed. Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (New York: The Humanities Press, 1966), 205–25; Alasdair MacIntyre, “Emotion, Behavior and Belief,” in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 230–43; Alasdair MacIntyre, “Rationality and the Explanation of Action,” in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 244–59; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 82–84 and 204–14; Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Intelligibility of Action,” in *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*, ed. J. Margolis, M. Krausz, and R. M. Burian (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), 63–80; and Alasdair MacIntyre, “Can One be Unintelligible to Oneself?,” in *Philosophy in its Variety: Essays in Memory of François Bordet*, ed. Christopher McKnight and Marcel Stchedroff (Belfast: The Queen’s university of Belfast, 1987), 23–37.

human action. To explain the nod as a nervous tick is to assert that the nod was not an action but something that happened to me. To understand the nod as a nervous tick we turn to the neurophysiologist for a causal explanation. To understand it as a sign of assent is to move in a different direction. It is to ask for a statement of the purpose that my saying “Yes” served; it is to ask for reasons, not for causes, and it is to ask for reasons which point to a recognizable want or need served by my action. This reference to purpose is important.<sup>9</sup>

For MacIntyre human action is distinguished from surd human movement by reference to purpose. Where purpose is present, a human “piece of behavior” is a human action. Where absent, it is mere human movement, something that the agent suffers rather than authors. Human action is human behavior with a narrative: namely, a narrative of purposiveness. To explain a piece of behavior as a human action is to be able to tell the story of how the behavior relates to the purpose or intention of the agent.<sup>10</sup> Fifty years further along in his career, MacIntyre puts this point rather dogmatically: “To identify an action just is to identify the intention or intentions embodied in that action.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness: Part 2,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 41. First published in *New Reasoner* 8 (Spring 1959): 89–98.

<sup>10</sup> In the context of his discussions on human actions, MacIntyre uses “purpose” and “intention” interchangeably.

<sup>11</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2009), 161. This dogmatic assertion comes in the context of a discussion of action and intentions, in which as part of his argument MacIntyre offers this helpful example: “Someone performing the physical movements necessary to moving a lever may be performing actions as different as opening a valve, testing the lever in order to discover whether or not it is broken, testing his own strength in order to discover whether he can still do what he used to be able to do, and so on. What makes his action one of these rather than another is the description under which he intends his action” (161).

Though insistent on the indispensable role of intention or purpose in the characterization of a human movement as a human action, MacIntyre acknowledges that the agent's purpose is not always transparent—sometimes not even to the agent himself. He writes:

The concept of a purpose must be elucidated further. When we ask “What was his purpose in doing that?” of a man, how do we expect to find an answer? We may either ask the agent or we may look to the context of his action. Sometimes one of these courses will afford either no answer or a false or misleading one. The agent's purposes may be so devious that only his own avowal will betray what that purpose is. Or his purposes may be so transparent that his denials and even his honest denials will carry no weight with us. An example of the former is the man who practises systematic conscious deception on others. An example of the latter is the man who is self-deceived, so that he does not recognize the ambition, jealousy or love in terms of which alone his actions are intelligible.<sup>12</sup>

This discussion suggests that while purpose is enough to qualify a human movement as a human action, it is not enough to render the action intelligible. Take the case of an agent with devious purposes. His action—and it *is* an action, for his behavior is informed by purpose—will not be intelligible to us. To illustrate this type of situation, MacIntyre likes to use as an example “that of the stranger standing beside me at a bus stop who suddenly says: ‘The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*.’”<sup>13</sup> His utterance is clearly not a mere reflex, like a nervous tic. It is a purpose-informed action. And yet as it stands, the action is not intelligible. For an action

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<sup>12</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Purpose and Intelligent Action,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 34 (1960): 93–94.

<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre, “Can One be Unintelligible to Oneself?,” 23. See also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 210.

to be intelligible, both the behavior and purpose of the agent must be able to be characterized in terms of some larger narrative. MacIntyre writes:

An action is intelligible only when where [*sic.*] is some characterization of it in terms of which others could respond to it as the action that it is. . . . In one way there is no difficulty in saying what the stranger did; but I cannot characterize what he did in such a way that I know how to respond to it as an action. For I do not know what action it is. Suppose I find out that the stranger has mistaken me for someone who recently in the local Natural History Museum enquired if he knew the Latin name for the common wild duck; in learning this I come to understand his action as intelligible—at least so far. I am able to give the requisite kind of characterization.<sup>14</sup>

To recap, for human behavior to be intelligible as human action, it must be able to be narrated in terms of purpose. As V. Bradley Lewis puts it, “Intentionality (including purpose) is for MacIntyre a *conditio sine qua non* of the intelligibility of human action.”<sup>15</sup> What the foregoing reflection on purpose further indicates is that while purpose is a necessary condition for the intelligibility of action, it is not a sufficient one. For an action to be fully intelligible, not only must the human behavior be able to be narrated in terms of the purpose of the agent, but that purpose itself must be able to be narrated in terms of a broader context. This requirement is especially clear in MacIntyre’s writing:

An unintelligible piece of behavior may nonetheless be an action. That is to say, it may be informed by intention and be performed deliberately and voluntarily. But it will be able to provoke in others only some kind of baffled response and the agent him- or herself will only be able to give a very limited account of what he or she takes or took him- or herself to be doing or have been doing in performing it. It is therefore not a sufficient condition for an action or a set of actions to be intelligible that it or they

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> V. Bradley Lewis, “Modernity, Morality, and the Social Sciences: A Look at MacIntyre’s Critique in Light of *Fides et Ratio*,” *Communio* 26 (Spring 1999): 120.

should be intentional—so that what I actually do does not implement or embody my intention, but it is of course a necessary condition. . . . In virtue of what then do we treat a particular action or set of actions as intelligible? The answer is: in virtue of its or their relationship to certain kinds of social institution and practice. The primary form of institutionalized social setting required for actions to be intelligible—in normal circumstances—is that provided by whatever the established routines are which in a particular social group constitute the structure of the normal day.<sup>16</sup>

Purpose itself, and thus human action (i.e., purposive human movement), can only be characterized, and thus made intelligible, in terms of socially recognizable criteria. As MacIntyre puts it, “We can only identify the purposes of those agents whose actions fall recognizably within the classificatory schemes which our social conventions afford us.”<sup>17</sup> In the example of a woman nodding her head, for instance, it is only because the nodding of one’s head is socially recognized as a form of assent that by doing so in response to a question the woman’s purpose can be seen as that of giving assent, and her nod can be understood as the action that it is. If the woman nodded just after the question was asked and yet she did *not* in fact mean to give her assent by virtue of her nodding head, then she would have to disclaim the nod as a form of assent. The standard narrative interpretation of the sequence of events “*yes-or-“no”-question-posed-to-a-woman, woman’s-head-nods*” is that the woman has answered “yes” by virtue of the socially recognized practice of giving assent by means of nodding one’s head. For the woman to protest that her nod did not mean “yes” but was some other action—say, a prearranged signal at the performance of which her friend was to bring her her coat—she would have to claim that

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<sup>16</sup> MacIntyre, “The Intelligibility of Action,” 65–66.

<sup>17</sup> MacIntyre, “Purpose and Intelligent Action,” 95.

the standard narrative interpretation of her nod did not in fact obtain in that case. Yet even in the case of the woman's disavowal of the standard narrative interpretation of her action, the primacy of the standard narrative interpretation shines forth. About the primacy of rendering actions intelligible by characterizing them in terms of the normal classificatory schemes afforded by social conventions, MacIntyre writes:

Social life is sustained by the assumption that we are, by and large, able to construe each others' behavior. . . . Consider what it is to share a culture. It is to share schemata which are at one and the same time constitutive of and normative for intelligible action by myself and are also means for my interpretations of the actions of others. My ability to understand what you are doing and my ability to act intelligibly (both to myself and to others) are one and the same ability. It is true that I cannot master these schemata without also acquiring the means to deceive, to make more or less elaborate jokes, to exercise irony and utilize ambiguity, but it is also, and even more importantly, true that my ability to conduct any successful transactions depends on my presenting myself to most people most of the time in unambiguous, unironical, undeceiving, intelligible ways.<sup>18</sup>

Although the standard context in which to situate an action in order to render it intelligible is provided by the normal established routines of a particular social group, sometimes, MacIntyre argues, a different context must be supplied (as in the case of understanding the actions of an agent engaged in deception, joking, irony, and the like). Characteristically this context will require knowledge of various particulars that inform the narrative operative in the agent's life. MacIntyre provides an example of a situation where an agent's ostensibly "normal" behavior would in fact *not* be intelligible to us if we were aware of certain details informing the narrative being lived by the agent.

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<sup>18</sup> MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," 453.

Someone is eating his dinner in the normal way at his usual time. Surely we might think that the actions which merit this characterization are a paradigmatic example of intelligible action. But suppose we learn that this person has just learned that someone very dear to him has suffered a serious injury and urgently needs a blood transfusion which only he can give. We shall find it, at least on the basis of the characterization so far, unintelligible that *he* should contrive to act like this. And that is to say, an action is intelligible not only in virtue of meriting a certain kind of characterization, but also in virtue of the action thus understood standing in a certain kind of relationship to the agent's antecedent states, relationships and transactions. To understand an action as intelligible is both to impute an intention to it and to relate that intention to considerations which not only could furnish good reasons for this agent in this particular situation to act thus, but which we ourselves have sound reason to believe did actually furnish such reasons.<sup>19</sup>

For an action to be intelligible, it must be explicable in terms of the story being lived by the agent. Characteristically and for the most part that story is one of participation in standard social practices. Sometimes, however, that is not the case. Yet regardless of whether the narrative displays conformity to what is normal or deviation from it, at bottom it is in terms of whatever narrative is in fact operative in the agent's life that actions must be viewed if they are to be seen as intelligible. "The intelligibility of an action," writes MacIntyre, "derives ultimately from narrative continuities in the agent's life. The form of our understanding of intelligibility is therefore narrative form. An action becomes intelligible by being exhibited as part of a story in that particular agent's life."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> MacIntyre, "Can One be Unintelligible to Oneself?," 23–24. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 24–25.

Among those elements that inform the narrative operative in the life of an agent at any given time, MacIntyre often draws attention to desires. Just as to understand human action is to narrate it in terms of human purpose, so, too, to understand human purpose is to narrate it in terms of human desires, wants, needs, etc. MacIntyre writes:

Human actions are not simple bodily movements. . . . How, then, do I exhibit a piece of behavior as an action or part of a sequence of actions rather than as mere bodily movement? The answer can only be that it is by showing that it serves a purpose which constitutes part or the whole of the agent's intention in doing what he does. What is more, the agent's purpose is only to be made intelligible as the expression of his desires and aims.<sup>21</sup>

When actions deviate from what is normative in a society, it is easy to see how an intelligible account of the action must take into consideration the particular desires and aims of an agent. But even when the action conforms to what is normative in society, that by no means implies that it is devoid of human desires, wants, needs, etc. On the contrary, it is in normal social practices that desires, wants, and needs are customarily pursued, and it is from them that social practices themselves receive their intelligibility. “We make both individual deeds and social practices intelligible as human actions by showing how they connect with characteristically human desires, needs and the like.”<sup>22</sup>

Aside from describing how desires inform the narrative in which the agent's actions are intelligible, MacIntyre's remarks on desire are also noteworthy for two other reasons. First, in a general way, they show how, for MacIntyre, narratives can be nested in yet larger narratives. This feature of his use of narrative has been implicit throughout

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<sup>21</sup> MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 82–83.

<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness: Part 2,” 41.

the foregoing discussion, as for example in the way in which bodily movement requires a narrative of purpose if it is to be accounted an action and purposive action requires a narrative of social setting in order for action to be intelligible. But it is worth making explicit the way in which narratives can be embedded in still larger narratives because of the degree of importance for MacIntyre's moral philosophy that nested narratives will take on in future works. By way of anticipation, we can preview such importance in an excerpt from his 1990 book *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, where he writes:

What is at issue here is in part the answer to the questions: in what larger story or stories, if any, is the story of each individual embedded? And in what still larger story is that story in turn embedded? And is there then a single history of the world within which all other stories find their place and from which the significance of each subordinate story derives?<sup>23</sup>

A second reason why MacIntyre's remarks on desire are noteworthy is that they begin to lay the foundation for the explicitly moral role that desire plays in his ethics. For MacIntyre desires, too, are to be understood and even evaluated in terms of a broader narrative, this time a narrative that relates them to the good pursued by the agent. MacIntyre writes that what "distinguishes nonrational animals in the generation of behavior from human beings, insofar as they are successfully rational animals, is that the desires and dispositions of such human beings are ordered to what they have truly judged to be their good."<sup>24</sup> Human actions become intelligible when narrated in terms of purposes, and human purposes become intelligible when narrated in terms of desire.

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<sup>23</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 144.

<sup>24</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 130.

Similarly, the rationale of desires is best understood in terms of the goods pursued by the agent, and for MacIntyre it is also in terms of the goods pursued that desires can be judged. For an agent to be accounted virtuous, MacIntyre holds that it must be the case that “what he desires are genuinely goods and that what he desires supremely is ‘the best.’”<sup>25</sup> In Section Three of this chapter I will return to MacIntyre’s account of goods and the good and to individuals’ pursuits thereof.

Although MacIntyre’s use of narrative in rendering human actions intelligible is much less controversial than some of the other uses to which he puts narrative, some questions still arise. J. B. Schneewind, for instance, disagrees with MacIntyre’s claim that an action cannot be intelligible without narrating it in reference to the intention of the agent performing it. Schneewind writes:

It is not true that the only characterization of behavior which is adequate to make it intelligible requires setting it in the frame of the “longest-term intentions” of the agent. We may adequately explain some movements by saying (e.g.) that the person is dancing a jig, and we can explain what a jig is without telling a story. . . . The actions in which we do a dance or carry on a tradition need not themselves be explained by a narrative.<sup>26</sup>

By way of response to Schneewind, it must first be remarked that he appears to conflate two issues which MacIntyre distinguishes. Schneewind begins his remarks by claiming that for an action to be intelligible, it is unnecessary to characterize it in terms of the intentions of the agent. So the first issue he raises is about the intelligibility of action.

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<sup>25</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “How Moral Agents became Ghosts Or Why the History of Ethics Diverged from that of the Philosophy of Mind,” *Synthese* 53 (1982): 304.

<sup>26</sup> J. B. Schneewind, “Virtue, Narrative, and Community: MacIntyre and Morality,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 11 (November 1982): 653.

But the example he uses of someone dancing a jig is meant to show that some movements can be adequately explained without telling a story. This claim seems not to be about the intelligibility of action—at least not in MacIntyre’s sense of “intelligibility of action”—but rather about what is required in order to identify a piece of human behavior as an action which, as we have seen, is for MacIntyre a different (albeit related) issue. Let’s look at this latter issue first.

With respect to the claim that we may adequately explain some movements, such as those involved in dancing a jig, without telling a story of the agent’s purpose, Schneewind is in one sense correct. Merely by watching someone perform a lively dance in triple time, we can recognize the human movement as a jig without knowing anything about the precise nature of the agent’s intentions. Although we may not be able to say what the agent’s intentions are in dancing a jig, we see the piece of behavior as intention-informed rather than as something that just happened to the agent. The jig is not a mere reflex like the nervous tick of a head might be. We see the jig as something authored rather than suffered. What makes it an authored action and not a mere reflex is the presence of purpose in the agent. While a precise knowledge of the agent’s intentions is not necessary in order to classify the movement as a jig, the movement must be seen as intentional in order for it to qualify as an action at all. What MacIntyre writes about understanding a nod as a sign of assent—understanding it, that is, as an action rather than as a reflex—applies also to understanding lively movements in triple time as a jig. MacIntyre writes, “To understand [a nod] as a sign of assent is . . . to ask for a statement of the purpose that my saying ‘Yes’ served; it is to ask for reasons, not for causes, and it

is to ask for reasons which point to a recognizable want or need served by my action. This reference to purpose is important.”<sup>27</sup> To understand lively movements in triple time as an action is, in the absence of actually *knowing* the agent’s intentions, to see those movements as intention-informed in such a way that it would be appropriate to ask the agent for the purpose of his movements, for the reasons “behind” his movements. A sneeze, by contrast, does not invite this type of questioning. A sneeze is seen not as an action but as mere human movement, and this is the case *not* because we don’t know the person’s precise intention in sneezing, but rather because we do not see his sneeze as intention-informed at all. Schneewind is correct in holding that we may adequately explain some movements, such as a jig, without telling a story of the agent’s purpose, provided that those movements are recognized as purposeful in such a way that a story about the agent’s purpose *could* be told, even if not necessarily by us (or the agent) here and now.

With respect to Schneewind’s other claim—that for an action to be intelligible it is unnecessary to characterize it in terms of the intentions of the agent—MacIntyre argues that he is wholly incorrect. MacIntyre responds directly to Schneewind:

What makes a particular sequence of human actions intelligible or unintelligible is *both* its relationship to antecedent episodes *and* its present character. So when Schneewind says that “We may adequately explain some movements by saying (e.g.) that the person is dancing a jig, and we can explain what a jig is without telling a story,” his use of “explain” is very different from my use of “make intelligible.” For someone’s dancing a jig on a particular occasion is never intelligible just because his or her action falls under the description and we understand what a jig is.

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<sup>27</sup> MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness: Part 2,” 41.

Someone's dancing a jig during a philosophical discussion, for example, is *prima facie* unintelligible. My thesis is that rendering a particular sequence of actions intelligible always presupposes some degree of assumption about the narrative context of that sequence.<sup>28</sup>

The point that MacIntyre is making here could also be made with respect to his own aforementioned example of "the stranger standing beside me at a bus stop who suddenly says: 'The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*.'"<sup>29</sup> The stranger's action can be "explained" in Schneewind's sense as that of providing a taxonomic identification. MacIntyre acknowledges as much, writing, "In one way there is no difficulty in saying what the stranger did."<sup>30</sup> Yet in another way the stranger's actions, as they stand, *cannot* be explained. They are "unintelligible" in MacIntyre's sense. The fact that the stranger's utterance (or the jig) is apparently informed by intention (and is thus a human action) is not enough to render it intelligible. As MacIntyre notes, "When an occurrence is apparently the intended action of a human agent, but nonetheless we cannot so identify it, we are both intellectually and practically baffled. We do not know how to respond; we do not know how to explain; we do not even know how to characterize minimally as an intelligible action."<sup>31</sup> We cannot characterize the stranger's action "in such a way that I know how to respond to it as an

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<sup>28</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Intelligibility, Goods, and Rules," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 11 (November 1982): 663–64. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>29</sup> MacIntyre, "Can One be Unintelligible to Oneself?," 23.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 209.

action. For I do not know what action it is.”<sup>32</sup> In order to characterize the stranger’s action in such a way as to render it intelligible, it must be seen in terms of some wider narrative. For instance,

We would render his action of utterance intelligible if one of the following turned out to be true. He has mistaken me for someone who yesterday had approached him in the library and asked: “Do you by chance know the Latin name of the common wild duck?” *Or* he has just come from a session with his psychotherapist who has urged him to break down his shyness by talking to strangers. “But what shall I say?” “Oh, anything at all.” *Or* he is a Soviet spy waiting at a prearranged rendez-vous and uttering the ill-chosen code sentence which will identify him to his contact. In each case the act of utterance becomes intelligible by finding its place in a narrative.<sup>33</sup>

In response to Schneewind, it must be affirmed that actions cannot be explained in MacIntyre’s sense of being made intelligible without telling a story. The utterance of the stranger at the bus stop is, on the surface, unintelligible, as would be a jig danced during a philosophical discussion. It is only by providing a narrative of the actions of the stranger at the bus stop that his utterance can be made intelligible. So, too, a jig danced during a philosophical discussion could be made intelligible only by means of explaining it in terms of some narrative, e.g., “So-and-so dared him to dance a jig during the discussion.” Pace Schneewind, the only characterization of behavior which is adequate to make it intelligible requires contextualizing it both in terms of the intentions of the agent and in terms of its narrative context.

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<sup>32</sup> MacIntyre, “Can One be Unintelligible to Oneself?,” 23.

<sup>33</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 210. Emphasis in the original.

That actions ultimately derive their intelligibility from narrative continuities in the agent's life is a thesis MacIntyre recognizes as being unpopular. He acknowledges, "That particular actions derive their character as parts of larger wholes is a point of view alien to our dominant ways of thinking."<sup>34</sup> He counterposes his thesis to those philosophies of action in which complex actions are analyzed into simpler components with the aim of arriving at "an action." Against this "tendency to think atomistically about human action,"<sup>35</sup> MacIntyre maintains:

There are no individual isolated actions and "an" action is only an action in virtue of being related to other actions in sequence and to webs of transactions, lacking which an action ceases to be intelligible as an action and so can no longer be treated as an action in any full-blooded or primary sense. For although we may legitimately speak of unintelligible actions, we do so only by contrast with intelligible actions. Intelligibility is not a property which some actions merely happen to possess. If we were deprived of the concept of an intelligible action, we should also have been deprived of the concept of an action as such, as we now possess it.<sup>36</sup>

Against those theories of human action that seek to understand action in terms of its constituent parts, MacIntyre asserts the primacy of intelligible action, that is, intention-informed movement in its narrative context. "The concept of an intelligible action," writes MacIntyre, "is a more fundamental concept than that of an action as such."<sup>37</sup> Intention-informed movement without a narrative context is only seen as action

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> MacIntyre, "Can One be Unintelligible to Oneself?," 25. See also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 214.

<sup>37</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 209.

in a derivative sense. From this perspective MacIntyre can reply to Schneewind that a jig abstracted from narrative context can be seen as an action only to the extent that we can conceive of narratives in which it might be made fully intelligible. Understanding a jig “without telling its story,” as Schneewind would have us do is, in this sense, parasitic on understanding a jig by means of telling its story.

About the importance of MacIntyre’s insistence on the primacy of intelligible action over and above that of unintelligible action, Stanley Hauerwas makes this startling observation:

If I am right about the trajectory of MacIntyre’s work, the central contention in *After Virtue* is his remark that “the concept of an intelligible action is a more fundamental concept than that of an action.” This may seem a small philosophical point, but much revolves around it: his understandings of the centrality of practical reason, the significance of the body for agency, why the teleological character of our lives must be displayed through narrative, the character of rationality, the nature of the virtues, why training in a craft is paradigmatic of learning to think as well as live, his understanding of why the Enlightenment project had to fail, his particular way of being a historicist, and why the plain person is the necessary subject of philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

While a significant amount of argument would be required to substantiate each point of this claim, Hauerwas does the reader of MacIntyre a service by drawing attention to the crucial role that narrative plays for MacIntyre even in the early uses to which he puts narrative in terms of his philosophy of human action. As we shall see, MacIntyre thinks that issues as varied as the teleological character of our lives, the character of rationality, and the nature of the virtues are fundamentally intelligible in terms of the narrative

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<sup>38</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre,” *First Things*, October, 2007, 35

contexts in which they are embedded. In this sense his later applications of narrative are extensions of his use of narrative in terms of human action, whereby actions are chiefly intelligible in terms of narrative.

Before considering these later uses MacIntyre makes of narrative, there is one other criticism of MacIntyre's philosophy of action worth pausing to address. Whereas Schneewind contends that some acts can be identified without reference to the intention of an agent, Susan Feldman argues that some actions cannot, on MacIntyre's account, be adequately identified because they involve more than one intention on the agent's part.

She writes:

MacIntyre suggests that the primary intention of an act determines the correct description of an act. But there are times when neither the subject nor an outside observer can say what the primary intention of an act is. The simple act of making a telephone call can at once involve the intention of contacting a lost friend, avoiding another unpleasant task, furthering a business deal. The subject herself may see the act in each of these terms, successively or simultaneously. The problem here is not that this is an inchoate behavior with no intention. Rather, it is an overdetermined action with multiple intentions.<sup>39</sup>

In critiquing MacIntyre's notion of "primary intention," Feldman is referring to MacIntyre's familiar example of gardening in *After Virtue*.<sup>40</sup> He writes, "To the question 'What is he doing?' the answers may with equal truth and appropriateness be 'Digging,' 'Gardening,' 'Taking exercise,' 'Preparing for winter,' or 'Pleasing his wife.'"<sup>41</sup> So far

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<sup>39</sup> Susan Feldman, "Objectivity, Pluralism and Relativism: A Critique of MacIntyre's Theory of Virtue," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (1986): 314.

<sup>40</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 206–08.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

MacIntyre's remarks pose no problem for Feldman's agent who could, with equal truth and appropriateness, be described as contacting a lost friend, avoiding another unpleasant task, or furthering a business deal.

MacIntyre goes on, however, to say that while the man could correctly be described as digging, gardening, taking exercise, preparing for winter, or pleasing his wife, the "truest" account of his action is the one that sees it as the expression of whatever the man's primary intention is in performing the action. He writes:

What is important to notice immediately is that any answer to the question of how we are to understand or to explain a given segment of behavior will presuppose some prior answer to the question of how these different correct answers to the question "What is he doing?" are related to each other. For if someone's primary intention is to put the garden in order before the winter and it is only incidentally the case that in so doing he is taking exercise and pleasing his wife, we have one type of behavior to be explained; but if the agent's primary intention is to please his wife by taking exercise, we have quite another type of behavior to be explained and we will have to look in a different direction for understanding and explanation.<sup>42</sup>

Feldman finds this notion of the agent's "primary intention" troubling for (what appear to be) three reasons. Although Feldman does not individually distinguish these three reasons, she mentions each of them in her above-quoted criticism, and because they are somewhat different points, they deserve to be considered individually.

First, and most fundamentally, Feldman holds that some actions simply do not have a primary intention. The example of the woman making a telephone call is meant to show this possibility. The woman's act is overdetermined in the sense of having multiple

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<sup>42</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 206.

concurrent intentions: the call can “at once involve the intention of contacting a lost friend, avoiding another unpleasant task, furthering a business deal.”<sup>43</sup> While Feldman’s example illustrates how an action can involve multiple even simultaneous intentions, it does not, in fact, show that the action lacks a primary intention. MacIntyre agrees with Feldman that an action can involve multiple concurrent intentions, e.g., “putting the garden in order before winter,” “taking exercise,” “pleasing his wife.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, the notion of a *primary* intention would be meaningless if MacIntyre did not acknowledge the presence of multiple, concurrent intentions. Yet MacIntyre thinks that even in the midst of a chorus of intentions, there is a primary one, and he thinks it can be identified by means of knowing the truth or falsity of certain counterfactual statements relating the agent’s beliefs and intentions to his action. He writes:

Where intentions are concerned, we need to know which intention or intentions were primary, that is to say, of which it is the case that, had the agent intended otherwise, he would not have performed that action. Thus if we know that a man is gardening with the self-avowed purposes of healthful exercise and of pleasing his wife, we do not yet know how to understand what he is doing until we know the answer to such questions as whether he would continue gardening if he continued to believe that gardening was healthful exercise, but discovered that his gardening no longer pleased his wife, *and* whether he would continue gardening, if he ceased to believe that gardening was healthful exercise, but continued to believe that it pleased his wife, *and* whether he would continue gardening if he changed his beliefs on both points. That is to say, we need to know both what certain of his beliefs are and which of them are causally effective; and, that is to say, we need to know whether certain contrary-to-

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<sup>43</sup> Feldman, “Objectivity, Pluralism and Relativism: A Critique of MacIntyre’s Theory of Virtue,” 314.

<sup>44</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 206.

fact hypothetical statements are true or false. And until we know this, we shall not know how to characterize correctly what the agent is doing.<sup>45</sup>

In Feldman's example, the woman who places the call intends to contact a lost friend, to avoid an unpleasant task, and to further a business deal. If shortly before placing the call she learned that the business deal had fallen through but that she could still contact a lost friend and avoid an unpleasant task, would she still have placed the

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<sup>45</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 207. Emphasis in the original. When MacIntyre says that we need to know which "intention or *intentions* were primary," it is unclear precisely what he has in mind by seemingly allowing for a plurality of primary intentions. In the discussion that immediately follows this phrase, he aims at identifying whether the primary intention of the man is in fact gardening for healthful exercise or gardening to please his wife (or some other intention). He seems to assume that the primary intention will be singular and simple. Preceding this discussion, however, he seems to allow for a different kind of primary intention when he mentions the possibility that "the agent's primary intention is to please his wife by taking exercise" (206). Here the agent's primary intention is not simple as before, but rather complex. It seems likely that, while insisting that an action always involves a primary intention, MacIntyre nevertheless allows for the possibility that the primary intention might be complex rather than simple in nature. In the case of a complex primary intention, MacIntyre would presumably allow for more than one counterfactual to be true at the same time in reference to a particular agent's action. If the man would leave off gardening *either* if (1) he no longer believed it healthful but still believed it pleased his wife *or* (2) he still believed it healthful but no longer believed that it pleased his wife, then it would seem that his action involves the complex primary intention of *taking-healthful-exercise/wife-pleasing*. The more counterfactuals are alleged to be true, however, the more fanciful the complex intention becomes, and the more likely we would be to doubt the veracity of the bundle of counterfactuals being alleged as true. To take Feldman's example, we would be hard-pressed to believe that the agent's primary (complex) intention is *friend-contacting/task-avoiding/deal-furthering*. Rather, we would suspect that one or more of the counterfactuals being alleged as true are in fact not true. Feldman, at any rate, is not presenting her example as an instance of such a complex primary intention. Rather, she is arguing that some actions lack a primary intention altogether. Note, however, that even when a primary intention is complex, it is still primary in the sense of excluding other concurrent intentions that inform the action in lesser ways. For example, *taking-healthful-exercise/wife-pleasing* could still be a primary (complex) intention while "preparing for winter" could be a concurrent, secondary intention.

call? If not, then furthering the business deal presents itself as her primary intention. If she still would have made the call, then we need to put her other intentions to the test in similar fashion in order to identify the one without which she would not have phoned. In this way her primary intention can be identified, and her action can be given its truest characterization.

The other two points that Feldman raises in her criticism of MacIntyre's notion of primary intention are less involved, and they are more easily countered. She says that an agent with the intentions of contacting a lost friend, avoiding an unpleasant task, and furthering a business deal may "see the act [of telephoning] in each of these terms, successively or simultaneously."<sup>46</sup> The harder case of an agent's exercising these intentions simultaneously has already been discussed. The situation of an agent's action being informed by different primary intentions that succeed one another presents even less of a problem for MacIntyre. A person might initiate a telephone call with the primary intention of contacting a lost friend, in which case the action would be properly described as *telephoning to contact a lost friend*. If, while in the course of speaking, the agent's primary intention in continuing to converse with the friend becomes to further a business deal, then the best description of the action at that point becomes *talking on the phone so as to further a business deal*. Nothing about MacIntyre's account of action is tarnished when the best description of an ongoing action is updated to reflect the current primary intention informing the action. For this reason the succession of an agent's

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<sup>46</sup> Feldman, "Objectivity, Pluralism and Relativism: A Critique of MacIntyre's Theory of Virtue," 314.

intentions does not present a problem for MacIntyre's account of how the primary intention of an act determines the correct description of that act.

The third objection Feldman raises to MacIntyre's position on primary intentions is that "there are times when neither the subject nor an outside observer can say what the primary intention of an act is."<sup>47</sup> This objection has a much stronger "subjective" coloring than the preceding two objections. Here Feldman suggests that a lack of *knowledge* about the agent's primary intention implies a lack of *existence* of a primary intention. In moving from lack of subjective awareness to lack of objective existence, the argument is fundamentally flawed. Just because neither a man nor someone observing him can say, for example, what is written on the back of the man's T-shirt, that does not mean that nothing is written there. Likewise, just because neither the agent nor an outside observer can say what the primary intention of the agent's act is, that does not mean that the agent does not have a primary intention. Primary intentions—like inscriptions on T-shirts—either exist or do not exist independently of the awareness that others may have of them, even when the "other" in question is the person performing the action or wearing the T-shirt.

The most that Feldman's suggestion can accomplish is to require from MacIntyre an account of how primary intentions can inform actions when neither the agent nor an observer can say what the primary intention is. The case of an observer not being able to say what the agent's primary intention is is easier to understand. In the familiar example

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

of a stranger standing next to me at a bus stop who suddenly says, “The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*,”<sup>48</sup> I may very well not know his primary intention in so acting. This lack of knowledge on my part, however, by no means implies that no primary intention informs the agent’s act. What my lack of knowledge *does* mean, on MacIntyre’s account, is that I will not be able adequately to characterize the action as the action that it is (i.e., I will not be able to render it intelligible) until I understand the primary intention informing it.

The case of the agent himself not being able to say what the primary intention of his act is might be thought to present a greater difficulty for MacIntyre, but as we have in fact already seen, he accounts for such a situation. He writes that with respect to identifying an agent’s intentions, the agent’s “purposes may be so transparent that his denials and even his honest denials will carry no weight with us. An example . . . is the man who is self-deceived, so that he does not recognize the ambition, jealousy or love in terms of which alone his actions are intelligible.”<sup>49</sup> An ambitious man, for example, who showers compliments on his boss but not on his peers or subordinates might not see the primary intention of his actions as ingratiating himself to his boss so as to move up the corporate ladder, though that might in fact be his primary intention. In such a case the man would be self-deceived if he claimed that the primary intention informing his acts was, say, a general desire to show others kindness.

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<sup>48</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 210.

<sup>49</sup> MacIntyre, “Purpose and Intelligent Action,” 94.

But even when a man is not self-deceived about the true nature of his primary intention, there is another way in which he might not know what his primary intention is: he may simply not have reflected on it or thought it through in such a way as to make himself fully aware of why he's doing what he's doing. MacIntyre's example of a man gardening showcases this possibility. The man might, in an unreflective sort of way, think that he is gardening with the purposes "of healthful exercise and of pleasing his wife."<sup>50</sup> It may not be until he is asked or until he asks himself a number of contrary-to-fact hypothetical questions (such as whether he would continue gardening if he learned it no longer pleased his wife) that he will become fully cognizant of the primary intention informing his action. Whether a man be self-deceived about or simply unreflectively unaware of the primary intention informing his action, it is still the case that, pace Feldman, an act might have a primary intention even when the author of the act cannot say what the primary intention of an act is.

To identify the agent's primary intention in *any* act it is necessary to see the act in terms of the narrative of which it is a moment. To identify the man's act as putting the garden in order before the winter is to see the action as "situated in an annual cycle of domestic activity, and the behavior embodies an intention which presupposes a particular type of household-cum-garden setting with the peculiar narrative history of that setting in which this segment of behavior now becomes an episode."<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, if the man's act is identified as that of pleasing his wife, then "the episode has been situated in

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<sup>50</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 207.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

the narrative history of a marriage, a very different, even if related, social setting.”<sup>52</sup> To know what action a particular intention-informed piece of human behavior is, we must understand what the primary intention is to which the action is meant to give expression, and we can only know the intention the action is meant to express by knowing the narrative of which the action is an episode. For this reason, MacIntyre holds that “narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions.”<sup>53</sup>

While Feldman finds this reference to genre helpful in terms of determining the correct description of an action, she questions how the selection of genre itself is to be made. “MacIntyre is right when he says that the choice of genre will help us pick out the appropriate descriptions of an act. But the other descriptions belong to other accurate and intelligible stories of that same life. By what criteria do we determine which genre, which themes, form the true narrative of a life?”<sup>54</sup> This question goes beyond MacIntyre’s use of narrative in regard to action. It raises the question of how MacIntyre makes use of narrative in terms of understanding the unity of a human life. To this second major use MacIntyre makes of narrative I now turn.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>54</sup> Feldman, “Objectivity, Pluralism and Relativism: A Critique of MacIntyre’s Theory of Virtue,” 314.

## Narrative and the Unity of a Human Life

D’Andrea notes that according to MacIntyre “adequately explaining human action requires that we discover what *story* the agent understands himself to be living out and extending in undertaking a given action—what episode in that story, that is, his action is attempting to enact.”<sup>55</sup> If a man explains his moving a rake in his garden as an act, say, of exercise rather than of pleasing his wife, he does so by narrating it in one way rather than another. To further explain why he is at present exercising rather than, say, working or napping, he will have to tell another story, a story that makes further reference to the broader narrative of his life. In that way he will be able to provide an “explanation” for his exercising, an explanation that situates exercising in the context of his beliefs, values, priorities, etc. Once again, we see how according to MacIntyre “one narrative may be embedded in another.”<sup>56</sup> In this case a narrative of action, in which the action is characterized as exercise, is nested in a larger narrative of the agent’s life.

Crucial to MacIntyre’s conception of the narrative of a human life is his understanding that “stories are lived before they are told—except in the case of fiction.”<sup>57</sup> That is, life is first lived as a narrative, and it is only because it is lived as a narrative that episodes in it can later be explained by means of telling a story. For example, it is only because and insofar as the man gardening is living out the story of his life that he—or

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas D. D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 276. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>56</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 213.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

others—are able to make sense of his moving the rake or his exercising. According to MacIntyre, such explanations necessarily take the form of telling a story, but the narration involved in explaining is secondary to and dependent on the lived narrative of the man’s life. MacIntyre writes, “It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.”<sup>58</sup>

To say that life has an inherently narrative structure to it is not to imply that a person can give her life, as an author of fiction can give her characters, any narrative whatsoever. Rather, we are at most co-creators of our stories. Within the constraints of any given person’s particular life-situation, that person may carry out her story in a variety of ways. But constraints such as culture, age, location, and family born into; genetic makeup and mental and physical abilities; and all aspects of a person’s lived past do partially determine the future trajectory of each person’s story. MacIntyre writes, “What the agent is able to do and say intelligibly as an actor is deeply affected by the fact that we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please. In life, as both Aristotle and Engels noted, we are always under certain constraints.”<sup>59</sup>

Take, as an example in support of MacIntyre’s contention, Aristotle’s discussion of liberality and magnificence in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle holds that while a man may be able to realize the virtue of liberality with respect to the giving and taking of

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 213.

small amounts of money, he will not be able to be magnificent unless he is endowed with riches; for magnificence, as Aristotle understands it, is the virtue concerned with the giving of large sums of money. Aristotle writes, “With regard to money there are also other dispositions—a mean, magnificence (for the magnificent man differs from the liberal man; the former deals with large sums, the latter with small ones).”<sup>60</sup> The man not endowed with riches cannot, on account of his lack of wealth, be magnificent (nor, for that matter, can he be niggardly or tastelessly vulgar—the deficiency and excess, respectively, flanking the mean of magnificence). The trajectory in which he can carry out his story is limited, in this case, by a financial constraint. But despite that constraint, he can still carry out his story in a variety of ways. With respect to the giving and taking of small amounts of money, for instance, he can become virtuously liberal, or he can become mean or prodigal—the deficiency and excess, respectively. So while he cannot carry out his story in *any* way he chooses, he *can* carry it out in a variety of meaningful ways, depending on the choices he makes and the habits he forms through his actions. “If the narrative of our individual and social lives is to continue intelligibly,” writes MacIntyre, “it is always both the case that there are constraints on how the story can continue *and* that within those constraints there are indefinitely many ways that it can continue.”<sup>61</sup> The trajectory of our lives is neither completely predetermined, nor is it wholly the matter of our fashioning, as are the lives of characters in a fictional story.

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<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1107b15–19.

<sup>61</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216. Emphasis in the original.

Rather, as MacIntyre puts it, people are characteristically co-authors in the story of their lives.

The above reference MacIntyre makes to an *intelligible* continuing of the narrative of one's individual and social life is important. For MacIntyre "either type of narrative may lapse into unintelligibility."<sup>62</sup> That is, not any carrying out of the narrative of one's life will be intelligible, either to others or even to the subject herself. MacIntyre observes that "when someone complains—as do some of those who attempt or commit suicide—that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement towards a climax or a *telos*."<sup>63</sup> On MacIntyre's account, one carries out the narrative of her life in an intelligible way when her life is unified in the pursuit of the (as of yet unspecified) good. He writes:

What is important is to recognize that each life is a single, if complex, narrative of a particular subject, someone whose life is a whole into which the different parts have to be integrated, so that the pursuit of the goods of home and family reinforces the pursuit of the goods of the workplace and vice versa, and so too with the other diverse goods of a particular life. To integrate them is a task, a task rarely, if ever, completed. That task is to understand those diverse goods as contributing to a single overall good, the ultimate good of this or that particular individual.<sup>64</sup>

As MacIntyre acknowledges, many thinkers would object to the idea that human life is a unified whole the successful living out of which involves pursuing a variety of

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>64</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 1 (2002): 10.

goods understood as contributing to a single overall good. He writes, “Any contemporary attempt to envisage each human life as a whole, as a unity, whose character provides the virtues with an adequate *telos* encounters two different kinds of obstacle, one social and one philosophical.”<sup>65</sup> The social obstacle involves what MacIntyre describes as the compartmentalization of life. The philosophical obstacles involve thinking atomistically about human actions and what are, in MacIntyre’s view, erroneous ways of understanding the relationship between an individual and her roles. By looking at these obstacles and MacIntyre’s response to them, a clearer picture of what he means by the narrative unity of a human life emerges.

MacIntyre describes the social obstacle of compartmentalizing as seeing human life as fundamentally partitioned into the variety of “modes” or “arenas” which a person inhabits. On this view, what is required of a person—and even, in certain respects, who a person *is*—changes, as one’s clothing might, from youth to old age, from home to work, etc. He describes such compartmentalization as

the way in which modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behavior. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms. And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms of which we are taught to think and feel.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

For a life thus fragmented, there could be goods to be pursued in each segmented area, but it wouldn't make sense to speak of an overarching good for the individual as a whole. Also, such a compartmentalized understanding of human life would provide no way of evaluating the proper place that a person should accord the goods of each segment of life.

That there are, so to speak, “segments” of life, each with its own goods, MacIntyre readily acknowledges. In fact, his well-known account of practices acknowledges precisely the vast variety of goods which can be pursued. By a “practice” MacIntyre means

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>67</sup>

Practices can range from playing football or chess to architecture to farming. While a lengthy discussion of MacIntyre's notion of a practice would be off topic, it is worth mentioning his notion of a practice to show that he readily admits of a variety of arenas in life, with each arena—or segment, or compartment—having goods proper to it. In fact, his understanding of practices provides him with the first part of his three-part definition of virtue: “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 187. For short but helpful discussions of MacIntyre's understanding of “practices,” see Christopher Higgins, “MacIntyre's Moral Theory and the Possibility of an Aretaic Ethics of Teaching,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 281–88 and Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 42–44. MacIntyre's notion of “goods internal to practices,” mentioned here, and of goods in general will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”<sup>68</sup>

While in this initial definition of virtue MacIntyre acknowledges the goods proper to various areas of life, the definition as it stands is, on his account, radically incomplete. He calls it “partial and tentative,” needing “amplification and amendment.”<sup>69</sup> What the first-stage of the definition of virtue lacks is any way to evaluate and order the place that the pursuit of the goods of a variety of practices should have in the life of an individual. He thinks that such an evaluative standpoint is needed, and he appeals to the commonsense of his readers to see if they can help but agree with him. While practices ranging from football to farming each offer real goods to be pursued, few would deny that the pursuit of the goods of farming should, in the case of a man who supports his family by farming, for instance, take precedence over his recreational pursuit of the goods internal to football. Although through his practice of football he may realize the goods internal to football, if his pursuit of that practice be inordinate, he will fail not only to realize the goods of farming but, more importantly, he will fail to realize such important goods as those involved with supporting his family. The narrative unity of his life—where his roles as farmer, husband, and father, for instance, are more central to “his story” than is his role as recreational football player—provides a vantage point from which his pursuit of goods proper to various arenas of his life can be criticized and ordered. D’Andrea puts the point this way:

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<sup>68</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

A practice that occupies a disproportionate place in an individual's life—one that costs him or her time, energy, attention and so on to the detriment of other worthwhile or necessary practices in which he or she is or could be or should be engaged—can be criticized from the perspective of the wholeness and the unity of the individual's life. . . . The human qualities which MacIntyre has called virtues, and which derive their initial point and purpose from practices, are qualities of *agents*—agents who have both a continuous identity through time and a multitude of spheres of actions. The larger good of these agents' lives requires that these qualities or virtues have a scope and a horizon for action beyond that of some individual practice. So, while virtues can first be thought of as instrumental in the constituting and sustaining of practices, they can next be seen as of value in serving the realization of the self over its longer and broader history.<sup>70</sup>

When an inordinate pursuit of lesser goods (let alone a pursuit of evils) threatens to derail the pursuit of what would be greater goods for an individual, the virtues of a unified life—as opposed to the virtues of a particular practice—support the individual in that pursuit. MacIntyre expresses this idea in what is the second-stage of his three-part definition of virtue:

The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 273. Emphasis in the original. See also V. Bradley Lewis, "The Common Good against the Modern State? On MacIntyre's Political Philosophy," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 16, no. 2 (2009): 368: "The virtues constitutive of human flourishing are acquired through the pursuit of goods internal to practices through participation in those practices. One must order the practices in one's own life."

<sup>71</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

Leaving until the next section the examination of MacIntyre's notion of a narrative quest for the good, we can pause briefly to notice one feature of MacIntyre's understanding of the narrative unity of a human life that is important for his ethical theory as a whole. As Thomas D'Andrea points out, such "unity (of an as yet unspecified content) can act as the *telos* of an individual life, giving needful moral bearing to the agent, and providing her with a point of reference by means of which she can rank order the goods of her life."<sup>72</sup> According to MacIntyre, without a conception of the *telos* of a whole—as opposed to a compartmentalized—life, "our conception of certain individual virtues has to remain partial and incomplete."<sup>73</sup> In the case of justice, for instance, where the question is what one deserves, or in the case of patience, where the question is how long one ought to wait attentively without complaint, the goods internal to practices cannot provide adequate answers to those questions. How long a teacher should *keep* being patient with a slow pupil, for instance, requires the consideration of goods above and beyond that particular pupil's educational development. Such goods might include time that the teacher ought to devote to the educational development of *other* pupils or time that the teacher ought to devote to activities outside the classroom, such as caring for his family. "The content of the virtue of patience," writes MacIntyre, "depends upon how we order various goods in a hierarchy and *a fortiori* on whether we are able

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<sup>72</sup> D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 274.

<sup>73</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 202.

rationally so to order these particular goods.”<sup>74</sup> The narrative unity of a human life provides just such a means of ordering various goods in a hierarchy. It also enables us to say that a person is, for instance, patient *overall* and not just patient qua working with pupils but not patient in other areas of his life. MacIntyre writes, “The unity of a virtue in someone’s life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole.”<sup>75</sup> Such unity not only contributes significantly to virtues such as justice and patience, but, MacIntyre notes, it completely constitutes the virtue of integrity or constancy, wherein “this notion of singleness of purpose in a whole life can have no application unless that of a whole life does.”<sup>76</sup>

Pointing to the way in which people rank-order various goods in their own lives or expect a certain rank-ordering of various goods in the lives of others provides MacIntyre with one way to argue for the narrative unity of human life over and against other forces of modernity that try to partition “each human life into a variety of segments.”<sup>77</sup> But there is a second way in which MacIntyre supports his claim that human life possesses narrative unity. MacIntyre argues that the narrative unity of human life is presupposed by and required for ascriptions of personal accountability. His strategy here is to notice that ascriptions of personal accountability are commonplace and then to argue that it is an (often implicit) understanding of human life as possessing

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 202–03.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 204.

narrative unity that makes such ascriptions possible. This strategy is analogous to the way in which, in his philosophy of action, MacIntyre argued that it is only by virtue of the fact that life itself takes a narrative form that actions can be explained, as they characteristically are, by telling a story. In both cases MacIntyre takes note of phenomena that present themselves in everyday life—viz., explaining an action by telling a story or assigning accountability to a person—and then he argues that certain narrative structures make those phenomena possible. He writes:

Human beings can be held to account for that of which they are the authors; other beings cannot. To identify an occurrence as an action is in the paradigmatic instances to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent's intentions, motives, passions and purposes. It is therefore to understand an action as something for which someone is accountable, about which it is always appropriate to ask the agent for an intelligible account.<sup>78</sup>

And:

To be the subject of a narrative that runs from one's birth to one's death is, I remarked earlier, to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life. It is, that is, to be open to being asked to give a certain kind of account of what one did or what happened to one or what one witnessed at any earlier point in one's life than the time at which the question is posed.<sup>79</sup>

Again, MacIntyre notices that as a matter of fact we do hold people accountable for what they do and for what they previously did and for what they experience and for what they previously experienced. As we have seen, to ask a man moving a rake in the garden for an account of his actions is to ask him for the story of how those movements

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 217–18.

relate to his intentions, motives, passions, and purposes. But to ask him for an account of why he, say, sought exercise through gardening last autumn but is not doing so this autumn is to invite from him a story relating his intentions, motives, passions, and purposes of last autumn to those of this autumn. Regardless of how he in fact replies, what is important is that the question itself presupposes a storied answer which, in turn, presupposes that the man lives a storied life, a life whose episodes are united from beginning to middle to end through his living them out as does a character in a story. “In what does the unity of an individual life consist?,” asks MacIntyre. “The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life.”<sup>80</sup> A man can be held accountable for what he did or experienced in different episodes of his life because his life possesses narrative unity such that those episodes are but different chapters in the same story, the story he is co-authoring.

By way of summary, according to MacIntyre his “attempt to envisage each human life as a whole, as a unity, whose character provides the virtues with an adequate *telos* encounters two different kinds of obstacle, one social and one philosophical.”<sup>81</sup> The social obstacle MacIntyre describes as “the way in which modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behavior.”<sup>82</sup> Against such a compartmentalized view of human life, MacIntyre argues that

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

what is important is to recognize that each life is a single, if complex, narrative of a particular subject, someone whose life is a whole into which the different parts have to be integrated, so that the pursuit of the goods of home and family reinforces the pursuit of the goods of the workplace and vice versa, and so too with the other diverse goods of a particular life.<sup>83</sup>

He argues for such “narrative unity of a human life” by showing how it is presupposed by and required for (a) the way in which people rank-order various goods in their lives or in the lives of others and (b) the way in which people hold others accountable for their actions and experiences across time.

The philosophical obstacles opposed to the unity of a human life are twofold, according to MacIntyre. The first philosophical obstacle is the tendency, especially of analytic philosophers, “to think atomistically about human action and to analyze complex actions and transactions in terms of simple components.”<sup>84</sup> MacIntyre’s reply to this tendency is already given in the first section of this chapter. There we saw a number of arguments he makes to support his contention that “particular actions derive their character as parts of larger wholes”<sup>85</sup> and that “narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions.”<sup>86</sup>

The second philosophical obstacle that MacIntyre considers derives from tendencies at home in existentialism and modern social theory either to draw a sharp

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<sup>83</sup> MacIntyre, “Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne,” 10.

<sup>84</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 208.

distinction between the individual and the roles he plays or else to liquidate the self into the various roles an individual plays. The first tendency is found, for instance, in “the Sartre of the thirties and forties” who MacIntyre also identifies as “Sartre/Roquentin to distinguish him from such other well-known characters as Sartre/Heidegger and Sartre/Marx,”<sup>87</sup> Roquentin being the protagonist through whom Sartre speaks in his 1938 novel, *La Nausée*. Sartre argues that the individual is in no way—and should in no way be—identified with his roles. MacIntyre writes, “Sartre . . . has depicted the self as entirely distinct from any particular social role which it may happen to assume. . . . For Sartre the central error is to identify the self with its roles, a mistake which carries the burden of moral bad faith as well as of intellectual confusion.”<sup>88</sup>

The second tendency, which MacIntyre finds for instance in the social theory of Erving Goffman, appears at first blush to be entirely opposed to the tendency found in Sartre. Whereas for Sartre the self is to be completely differentiated from its roles, for Goffman, by contrast, the self is to be completely identified with its roles. MacIntyre writes that Goffman “has liquidated the self into its role-playing, arguing that the self is no more than ‘a peg’ on which the clothes of the role are hung. . . . For Goffman the central error is to suppose that there *is* a substantial self over and beyond the complex presentations of role-playing.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 32, 214.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original. For an earlier, complementary account of Goffman’s view of the self see Alasdair MacIntyre, “Corporate Modernity and Moral Judgment: Are They Mutually Exclusive?,” in *Ethics and Problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*,

While the two tendencies appear at first to be diametrically opposed, they in fact agree, significantly, in seeing the self as entirely unsubstantial:

The two apparently contrasting views have much more in common than a first statement would lead one to suspect. In Goffman's anecdotal descriptions of the social worlds there is still discernible that ghostly 'I', the psychological peg to whom Goffman denies substantial selfhood, flitting evanescently from one solidly role-structured situation to another; and for Sartre the self's self-discovery is characterized as the discovery that the self is 'nothing,' is not a substance but a set of perpetually open possibilities. Thus at a deep level a certain agreement underlies Sartre's and Goffman's surface disagreements.<sup>90</sup>

The agreement between Sartre and Goffman is further characterized by the way in which they discriminate sharply between the self and the social world. For Sartre the self is nothing because it cannot and should not be identified with the social roles it cannot help but inhabit. For Goffman, the self is nothing in itself but *only* the social roles that it cannot help but inhabit. "They agree in nothing more than in this, that both see the self as entirely set over against the social world. For Goffman, for whom the social world is everything, the self is therefore nothing at all, it occupies no social space. For Sartre, whatever social space it occupies it does so only accidentally, and therefore he too sees the self as in no way an actuality."<sup>91</sup>

The understanding of the self as set over and against the social world is, according to MacIntyre, both distinctively modern and mistaken. It represents a loss of a

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ed. K. E. Goodpaster and K. M. Sayre (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 129–32.

<sup>90</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 32.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

premodern—and, as we shall see MacIntyre argue, correct—understanding of the self as possessing a social identity and as oriented teleologically toward the good. This modern view of the self is now “lacking any necessary social identity, because the kind of social identity that it once enjoyed is no longer available; the self is now thought of as criterionless, because the kind of *telos* in terms of which it once judged and acted is no longer thought to be credible.”<sup>92</sup> MacIntyre goes on to ask, “What kind of identity and what kind of *telos* were they?”<sup>93</sup>

The type of social identity that MacIntyre thinks individuals were understood to enjoy in premodern thinking is a social identity given through the host of roles and relationships into which an individual is born. “In many pre-modern, traditional societies it is through his or her membership in a variety of social groups that the individual identifies himself or herself and is identified by others. I am brother, cousin and grandson, member of this household, that village, this tribe.”<sup>94</sup> These roles and relationships are not incidental to the individual’s identity but are rather partially constitutive of that identity: “These are not characteristics that belong to human beings accidentally, to be stripped away in order to discover ‘the real me.’ They are part of my substance, defining partially at least and sometimes wholly my obligations and my duties. Individuals inherit a particular space within an interlocking set of social relationships.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

In MacIntyre's understanding of the self, the notion of narrative comes once again to the fore. The self is partially defined by the roles and relationships into which it is born. He writes, "The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity."<sup>96</sup> The self enters the world not as a new character in a new story but as a new character in an ongoing story. "The characters of course never start literally *ab initio*; they plunge *in medias res*, the beginnings of their story already made for them by what and who has gone before."<sup>97</sup>

While MacIntyre urges, against Sartre, that social roles and relationships contribute importantly to the identity of an individual, he by no means sees the self as liquidated into its social roles as he says Goffman does. For MacIntyre, the identity of the self is in an important way informed by the story into which it is born. That story does partially determine the identity of the self, but it does not wholly define it. In a very important passage not only for MacIntyre's understanding of the self but for his understanding of moral particularism and moral universalism, which is the subject of Chapter Four of this dissertation, he writes:

Notice also that the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community. Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists. Yet particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated. The notion of

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 215.

escaping from it into a realm of entirely universal maxims . . . is an illusion.<sup>98</sup>

While the implications of this passage and others like it will be discussed much more thoroughly later, we can notice here how well this passage frames the issues of narrative, truth, and relativism in MacIntyre's ethics. Here narrative is important in its role of providing the self with unity. When MacIntyre says that "the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe," and when he says that "the notion of escaping from [particularity] into a realm of entirely universal maxims . . . is an illusion," he appears to be endorsing some form of relativism.<sup>99</sup> But when in the same passage he writes, "It is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for *the* good, for *the* universal, consists," he appears to uphold certain goods and truths in a way very much opposed to any form of relativism.<sup>100</sup> Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this dissertation will be devoted to the consideration of tensions such as these in MacIntyre's thought.

MacIntyre's emphasis on particularism is noteworthy for its implications on his ethical theory as a whole as well as for his understanding of the self. According to MacIntyre's view of the self as entering an ongoing narrative, that narrative both contributes to the self's identity and informs how the individual should live and act morally. MacIntyre writes, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 221. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.”<sup>101</sup> Once again, this emphasis on particularism sounds rather relativistic, for it seems that MacIntyre is allowing for different conceptions of the good life for those who find themselves a part of different stories. A superficial reading of the following lengthy excerpt, too, seems to mark MacIntyre’s position as relativistic. A closer reading of the passage, however, actually helps clarify how MacIntyre tries to avoid relativism through a nuanced understanding of the interplay between particularism and universalism. He writes:

What it is to live the good life concretely varies from circumstance to circumstance even when it is one and the same conception of the good life and one and the same set of virtues which are being embodied in a human life. What the good life is for a fifth-century Athenian general will not be the same as what it was for a medieval nun or a seventeenth-century farmer. But it is not just that different individuals live in different social circumstances; it is also that we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone’s son or daughter, someone else’s cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles. As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 220.

The threat of moral relativism is present in MacIntyre's saying that "what it is to live the good life concretely varies from circumstance to circumstance" and "what the good life is for a fifth-century Athenian general will not be the same as what it was for a medieval nun or a seventeenth-century farmer."<sup>103</sup> On one reading it would appear that, according to MacIntyre, the good for humans is not absolute but relative to the different circumstances, cultures, and/or times of different individuals. Saving a lengthy discussion of this issue for Chapter Four of this dissertation, let it suffice for the moment to note that a closer reading of the passage at once calls into question too quick an attribution of relativism to MacIntyre's view. In his narrative understanding of the self, the different circumstances, cultures, and times into which one is born comprise the individual's "moral *starting point*."<sup>104</sup> MacIntyre is emphasizing here the importance of acknowledging the uniqueness of each individual's moral starting point, as given by the narrative into which the self is born, because he is arguing against the non-narrative understanding of the self common to Sartre and Goffman by which the self is seen as fundamentally detached from the particularities of the story into which it is born. "The self so detached is of course a self very much at home in either Sartre's or Goffman's perspective, a self that can have no history. The contrast with the narrative view of the self is clear."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 221.

In emphasizing the uniquely conditioned nature of each individual's moral *starting point*, MacIntyre is firmly committed to moral particularism with respect to the beginning of each individual's moral life. But he is not thereby necessarily committed to moral relativism with respect to the good life for human beings in general. He is not, that is, necessarily committed to moral relativism with respect to the moral *end* for human beings. A suggestion—which will be explored more extensively later—that MacIntyre's view is not relativistic with respect to the end for human beings is found in his writing, “What it is to live the good life concretely varies from circumstance to circumstance even when it is *one and the same conception of the good life* and *one and the same set of virtues* which are being embodied in a human life.”<sup>106</sup>

Recall that for MacIntyre the fact that the self finds its identity through the particulars of the story of the community into which it is born “does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community.”<sup>107</sup> As an example, MacIntyre discusses how the way in which present-day white Americans should treat present-day black Americans or the way in which present-day Germans should treat present-day Jews involves the stories of the grievous injustices previously committed by white Americans against black Americans, by Germans against Jews. Concretely, the living out of a storied past that contains such injustices might mean, for instance, that white Americans owe black Americans and Germans owe Jews a greater degree of respect than that which they already owe other people. To say that such

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 220. Emphasis added.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 221. Emphasis in the original.

stories inform the identities of present-day Americans, Germans, and Jews and should have an influence on the moral behavior of those informed by such stories is not to deny that in the way all people treat one another certain “golden rules” such as doing to others as you would have them do to you should obtain. Nothing in MacIntyre’s moral particularism prevents him from affirming such universal maxims. What his moral particularism does, however, call for is an acknowledgement of how, pace Sartre and Goffman, the self is and ought to be informed by the ongoing story into which it is born and in which it lives as a co-author.

Before concluding the treatment of MacIntyre’s notion of the narrative unity of a human life, it is helpful to take stock of the ground covered thus far. According to MacIntyre his “attempt to envisage each human life as a whole, as a unity, whose character provides the virtues with an adequate *telos* encounters two different kinds of obstacle, one social and one philosophical.”<sup>108</sup> The social obstacle involves the compartmentalization of human life into discrete segments. The philosophical obstacles are twofold: first, thinking atomistically about human action; second, either drawing a sharp distinction between the individual and the roles he plays or else liquidating the self into the various roles played. Common to this second philosophical obstacle is the understanding of the self as set over and against the social world. According to MacIntyre, this understanding of self is distinctively modern and mistaken. It represents the loss of a premodern—and, to MacIntyre’s mind, correct—understanding of the self as

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 204.

possessing a social identity and as oriented teleologically toward the good. This modern view of self lacks “any necessary social identity, because the kind of social identity that it once enjoyed is no longer available; the self is now thought of as criterionless, because the kind of *telos* in terms of which it once judged and acted is no longer thought to be credible.”<sup>109</sup> MacIntyre goes on to ask, “What kind of identity and what kind of *telos* were they?”<sup>110</sup> We have seen what kind of identity MacIntyre thinks the self was correctly understood to have possessed in premodern thinking: an identity partially but importantly constituted by the particulars of the roles, relationships, heritage, history, etc. of the story into which it is born and in which it lives.

The kind of *telos* MacIntyre thinks the self used to be understood to possess in terms of which it once judged and acted is, in fact, the narrative unity of a human life, as he understands it. It is, on his account, “each human life [envisaged] as a whole, as a unity, whose character provides the virtues with an adequate *telos*.”<sup>111</sup> “This notion of unity of life,” writes D’Andrea, “was very much present, MacIntyre thinks, in the minds and in the theories of pre-modern virtue ethicists: it is the natural accompaniment to an account of the virtues as excellences of mind and character, and together with these, it comprises what he will refer to as the ‘narrative self.’”<sup>112</sup> We have already seen the way

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>112</sup> D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 274.

in which the narrative unity of the self contributes significantly to virtues such as justice and patience and completely constitutes the virtue of integrity or constancy. At a more fundamental level, MacIntyre points out how according to the pre-modern understanding virtue is not a skill—like, say, that of expertise in automotive repair—that helps one succeed in just one type of activity only (e.g., automotive repair). Rather, virtue is an excellence of character—like patience—that helps one succeed (albeit in a different sense<sup>113</sup>) across all of life’s activities, from automotive repair to teaching to waiting in line at the airport. MacIntyre writes:

Virtue is not a disposition that makes for success only in some one particular type of situation. What are spoken of as the virtues of a good committee man or of a good administrator or of a gambler or a pool hustler are professional skills professionally deployed in those situations where they can be effective, not virtues. Someone who genuinely possesses a virtue can be expected to manifest it in very different types of situation, many of them situations where the practice of a virtue cannot be expected to be effective in the way that we expect a professional skill to be. Hector exhibited one and the same courage in his parting from Andromache and on the battlefield with Achilles. . . . The unity of a virtue in someone’s life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> The exercise of expertise of skill brings about the desired effect on an external product without regard for the goodness or badness of the enterprise undertaken. The exercise of virtue, by contrast, presupposes a good end. As MacIntyre notes on p. 235 of “Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Knight, Kelvin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), “The achievement of excellence in activity characteristically requires the acquisition of skills, but without virtues skills lack the direction that their exercise requires, if excellence is to be achieved.” While the exercise of virtue may have a positive effect on an external product, the exercise of virtue is first and foremost perfective of the agent himself.

<sup>114</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 205.

In identifying the narrative unity of a human life as that which provides the virtues with an adequate *telos*, MacIntyre has thus far provided only a formal account of that *telos*. Mark Colby correctly points out that “the idea of the narrative unity of life is only formal, not substantive; it is silent, not just about which qualities are virtues, but more importantly about what *kind* of unitary, complete life is good.”<sup>115</sup> To explore what response MacIntyre would make to Colby, we must consider MacIntyre’s understanding of the good life and the role that narrative plays in that understanding.

## Narrative and the Good

MacIntyre’s understanding of goods, the good, and the good life, as presented in *After Virtue*, raises a number of questions. In part, his understanding there is incomplete and even flawed in ways that he himself often comes to see later in his career and to acknowledge and correct in later works. In part, his conception of goods and the good in *After Virtue* is misunderstood by critics. In this section I will present his understanding of goods and the good, especially to the extent that it sheds light on his use of narrative. Then I will consider criticisms of that understanding, asking whether they are well-founded or misconstrued and, if well-founded, whether MacIntyre adequately addresses them in later works.

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<sup>115</sup> Mark Colby, “Narrativity and Ethical Relativism,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995): 136. Emphasis in the original.

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre links the narrative unity of a human life to the good in the following passage:

In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask ‘What is the good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask ‘What is the good for man?’ is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. But now it is important to emphasize that it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provides the moral life with its unity. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. A quest for what?<sup>116</sup>

Before going on to describe MacIntyre’s understanding of this quest, it is worth considering an objection to the way in which he links narrative unity to the good in this passage.

According to MacIntyre, the unity of an individual life is the unity of a narrative embodied in that life. Schneewind and Colby wonder whether, on this account, every life is always to be understood as possessing unity—since every life seems, on MacIntyre’s account, to take a narrative form—or whether MacIntyre holds that some lives possess unity while others do not. And, if the latter is the case, how are some lives defective with respect to their narratives such that their lives lack narrative unity? Schneewind writes:

MacIntyre consequently faces a dilemma in trying to use the idea of narrative unity to ground virtue. On the one hand, if every act done for a reason is necessarily part of a unified narrative, then no human life, no matter how vacillating or inconsequential, will be without its own unity.

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<sup>116</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 218–19.

Narrative unity will not be something one needs to strive for: it will be a necessary from of human existence. On the other hand, if some lives are unified and some not, we need an account of how the distinction is to be drawn and of whether or not it depends on the agent's choice.<sup>117</sup>

MacIntyre's reply to Schneewind in a later article is that "narrative unity is not a property of every human life (what degree and kind of unity is possible varies with social structure), and I cannot give my life such unity simply by an act of choice. It follows that what kind of goodness my life as a whole *can* possess is not in my power."<sup>118</sup> Is MacIntyre entitled to that conclusion based on the strength of the arguments of *After Virtue*? And, if so, doesn't his claim that narrative unity is not a property of every human life undermine a variety of arguments he seems to make to the contrary in *After Virtue*?

Following Schneewind, Colby alleges that in *After Virtue* MacIntyre "does not distinguish between two conceptions of narrative unity: as necessary forms of human existence and as a goal that individuals strive for."<sup>119</sup> Perhaps it should be said that in *After Virtue* MacIntyre does not *clearly* distinguish between those conceptions of narrative unity. He seems to assume such a distinction, but he never makes that distinction explicit. He seems, that is, to use "narrative unity" in two ways.

In the first sense, he talks about narrative unity in reference to the essential structures of a human life. A person is born into an ongoing story; a person's actions can only be understood as expressions of a narrative being lived out; and the phenomena of

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<sup>117</sup> Schneewind, "Virtue, Narrative, and Community: MacIntyre and Morality," 659.

<sup>118</sup> MacIntyre, "Intelligibility, Goods, and Rules," 664. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>119</sup> Colby, "Narrativity and Ethical Relativism," 155.

holding people accountable for their actions and experiences presupposes a narrative structure, as does the identity of the self. When he writes, for instance, about his “attempt to envisage each human life as a whole, as a unity” or about “a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end,” he suggest that each life has, necessarily, the unity of a narrative.<sup>120</sup> This type of narrative unity is, to use Colby’s language, a necessary form of human existence.

But MacIntyre also uses “narrative unity” in a second way as, for instance, when he says that it is possible for “the narrative of our individual and social lives” to “lapse into unintelligibility.”<sup>121</sup> In this usage “narrative unity” is not a necessary form of human existence. It is something that a person can have to a greater or lesser degree. This type of narrative unity MacIntyre describes as a quest (for an as-of-yet unspecified good). Consider again his words: “The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest.”<sup>122</sup> To the extent that one’s quest for the good is merely to-be-narrated, one does not possess narrative unity in the second sense in which MacIntyre uses the term. For that reason he is able to reply to Schneewind that “narrative unity is not a

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<sup>120</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204–05.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

property of every human life.”<sup>123</sup> To the extent that one’s life embodies a quest for the good, one does possess such narrative unity. In this sense of the term, narrative unity is “a goal that individuals strive for,” as Colby puts it.<sup>124</sup> (Or, rather, such narrative unity is that by which individuals strive for the goal of the good.)

This interpretation, by which MacIntyre is understood to speak of the narrative unity of human life in two different senses, also makes sense of a passage we have looked at before where he relates such unity to the pursuit of the good.

What is important is to recognize that each life is a single, if complex, narrative of a particular subject, someone whose life is a whole into which the different parts have to be integrated, so that the pursuit of the goods of home and family reinforces the pursuit of the goods of the workplace and vice versa, and so too with the other diverse goods of a particular life. To integrate them is a task, a task rarely, if ever, completed. That task is to understand those diverse goods as contributing to a single overall good, the ultimate good of this or that particular individual.<sup>125</sup>

In this passage he first speaks of narrative unity in the sense of a necessary form of human existence when he says, “What is important is to recognize that each life *is* a single, if complex, narrative of a particular subject, someone whose life *is* a whole.”<sup>126</sup> But then he immediately transitions to a use of narrative unity that is not an essential part of human life but is rather something for which one should strive. Here a whole life is that “into which the different parts have to be integrated” which is “a task rarely, if ever,

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<sup>123</sup> MacIntyre, “Intelligibility, Goods, and Rules,” 664. Emphasis added.

<sup>124</sup> Colby, “Narrativity and Ethical Relativism,” 155.

<sup>125</sup> MacIntyre, “Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne,” 10.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

completed.”<sup>127</sup> For MacIntyre narrative structures underlie all human lives, giving them narrative unity in a fundamental way. But only those who quest for the good, who undertake the task of pursuing goods and understanding them as contributing to a single overall good, can be said to possess narrative unity in the second sense of the term.

It is this second understanding of the narrative unity of a human life that MacIntyre says provides the virtues with an adequate *telos*. Still, however, Mark Colby’s criticism is on point: “The idea of the narrative unity of life is only formal, not substantive; it is silent, not just about which qualities are virtues, but more importantly about what *kind* of unitary, complete life is good.”<sup>128</sup> A further consideration of MacIntyre’s understanding of goods and the good is required in order to meet Colby’s criticism.

MacIntyre describes the quest for the good as akin to a medieval quest, containing from the outset a partially formed, but *only* partially formed, notion of the *telos*.

Without some at least partly determinate conception of the final *telos* there could not be any beginning to a quest. Some conception of the good for man is required. . . . But secondly it is clear that the medieval conception of a quest is not at all that of a search for something already adequately characterized, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil.<sup>129</sup>

Just how determinate a conception of the *telos* MacIntyre requires and just how determinate a conception his ethics can provide are important questions. Richard Bernstein, for instance, criticizes MacIntyre’s conception of the *telos* as being far too

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Colby, “Narrativity and Ethical Relativism,” 136. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>129</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

indeterminate to do any work in MacIntyre's philosophy. Commenting on the passage of *After Virtue* in which MacIntyre introduces the notion of a quest for the good, Bernstein writes:

How does this bring us any closer to answering the questions: Is there a "*telos* of a whole human life?" What is the character of this *telos*? and How does this *telos* limit the range of practices and virtues that constitute a moral life? What constraints are there in answering the question "What is the good for me?" Can I not answer this by saying the good for me is to become the greatest chess player, football player, or espionage agent. . . ? Can I not say that I am willing to neglect friends, family, political responsibilities, etc., in order to achieve this good, "the good for me," that I will order all my life and deeds to strive for this goal? I may fail, I may be distracted, but this is and will be my narrative quest.<sup>130</sup>

Whether MacIntyre's understanding of the *telos* is determinate enough to do the work he assigns to it is an important question which will be discussed below, and Bernstein is right to raise the question. But Bernstein's criticism goes too far in its contention that MacIntyre's conception of the *telos* in no way limits the range of practices and virtues that constitute the moral life. To grasp how MacIntyre's notion of the *telos* does include such limitations, it is helpful to return to MacIntyre's understanding of practices and virtues, especially insofar as they relate to goods and to unity of life considerations.

From early on in his career, MacIntyre has understood "good" in Aristotelean terms. In *A Short History of Ethics* he writes, "Good is defined at the outset in terms of the goal, purpose, or aim to which something or somebody moves. To call something

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<sup>130</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," *Soundings* 67, no. 1 (1984): 18.

good is to say that it is under certain conditions sought or aimed at. . . . Aristotle is completely right in establishing this relationship between being good and being that at which we aim.”<sup>131</sup> This notion of a good as the *telos* of action—as that for the sake of which someone or something acts—remains throughout MacIntyre’s oeuvre as the core and most fundamental definition of good.<sup>132</sup>

MacIntyre’s unique contribution to an adequate understanding of the good is, as Higgins notes, “that we strive for the good in three different domains where goods and virtues receive their meaning and substance.”<sup>133</sup> Those domains are: practices, the unity of a human life, and traditions. The discussion of traditions will be deferred for the time being as Bernstein’s objections can be met from the perspectives of practices and the unity of a human life. As we have seen, MacIntyre means by “practice”

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 56.

<sup>132</sup> See, for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 63–64. There, while he expands this core definition of good, the core definition is still very much present. He writes, “The particular goods achieved by different types of activity . . . are identified as goods both because they are objects of directed activity and so of desire, the satisfaction of which completes the activity, and also because they contribute to and are partially constitutive of such well-being.”

<sup>133</sup> Higgins, “MacIntyre’s Moral Theory and the Possibility of an Aretaic Ethics of Teaching,” 281.

<sup>134</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

As noted previously, practices can range from football or chess to architecture to farming.

In his definition of a practice, MacIntyre mentions “goods internal to practices.” Internal goods (or “goods of excellence” as MacIntyre calls them in later writings) are to be distinguished from external goods (or “goods of efficiency/effectiveness”). External goods “are those contingently related rewards—candy, money, reputation, status, power—which may derive from successful participation in a practice; internal goods are those achievements of excellence which exhibit human aesthetic, imaginative, intellectual, and physical power at their highest.”<sup>135</sup>

On MacIntyre’s account, practices are the first and most basic domain in which people develop an understanding of goods and the virtues needed to achieve them. The goods *external* to any practice can frequently be obtained outside of the practice itself and/or through means that do not necessarily exhibit any excellence related to the practice. Take, as an example, a chess match with a monetary prize awarded to the winner. The monetary prize is an external good. On the one hand, that external good can be obtained outside of the chess competition. An equal sum of money could, for instance, be earned through work or won in another, wholly unrelated, type of completion. On the other hand, the prize money could be obtained through the chess

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<sup>135</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Objectivity in Morality and Objectivity in Science,” in *Morals, Science and Sociality*, ed. H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. and Daniel Callahan (New York: Institute of Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences, 1978), 28. For more on the distinction between “goods internal” and “goods external” to practices, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187–96; Higgins, “MacIntyre’s Moral Theory and the Possibility of an Aretaic Ethics of Teaching,” 285–88; and Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 96–98.

match by cheating during play. In that case it would not be excellence of chess play but rather dishonesty that would secure the external good. The goods *internal* to any practice, however, can only be obtained by means of “standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity.”<sup>136</sup> The goods internal to a chess match involve playing chess (by the rules) in an excellent manner. Those goods cannot be achieved outside of the practice of chess, nor can they be achieved through non-excellent means such as through cheating.

As goods internal to any given practice are realized, “human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”<sup>137</sup> To continue with the example of the practice of chess, as chess players realize the goods internal to chess, both the conception of what excellent chess play itself entails and the ability to achieve it are extended. Note, however, that many of the excellences—virtues—required to achieve the goods internal to chess are not specific to chess but are, rather, shared across many or perhaps even all practices. Mental focus, the ability to recover from a mistake, and patience, for instance, are excellences not only required for and developed through masterful chess play. They are also excellences required for and developed through other practices. It is such excellences that MacIntyre describes in the first stage of his three-part definition of virtue: “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those

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<sup>136</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”<sup>138</sup>

Although MacIntyre describes the first part of his three-part definition of virtue as “partial and tentative,” needing “amplification and amendment,”<sup>139</sup> he himself draws from this definition a grievously erroneous conclusion in *After Virtue*—a conclusion that contributes significantly to Bernstein’s criticisms. MacIntyre ends up suggesting that certain qualities, even when not integrated into an overall life of virtue, are in fact virtues so long as they answer to his initial description of virtue as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”<sup>140</sup> I wish not only to show how he arrives at this conclusion but also to argue that his own ethical philosophy does not allow it. Then I will reply to Bernstein’s criticisms.

Shortly after providing the first part of his definition of virtue, MacIntyre asks whether some practices might not be evil. This question presumably arises for him on account of the wide range of practices he observes, practices that at first blush seem to fit his definition of a practice. He writes:

I have defined the virtues partly in terms of their place in practices. But surely, it may be suggested, some practices—that is, some coherent human activities which answer to the description of what I have called a

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

practice—are evil. But how can a disposition be a virtue if it is the kind of disposition which sustains practices and some practices are evil. . . ? I want to allow that there *may* be practices . . . which simply *are* evil. I am far from convinced that there are.<sup>141</sup>

A consideration of whether MacIntyre's account of practices does, in fact, allow for evil practices would take us too far away from the point currently being addressed: namely, MacIntyre's stating that a disposition could be a virtue despite the fact that it sustains an evil practice. For the sake of argument, I will allow the possibility of evil practices, even though I tend to agree with MacIntyre who doubts that evil practices do in fact "answer to the description of a practice which my account of the virtues employs."<sup>142</sup>

MacIntyre erroneously supposes that something that sustains an evil practice might be accorded a virtue for the following reasons. At the time of his writing *After Virtue*, he rejected the Aristotelian/Thomistic understanding of the unity of the virtues.<sup>143</sup> Without accepting the unity of the virtues wherein, for instance, courage can only be had together with prudence, which directs the individual to a good end, MacIntyre finds himself unable to distinguish between true courage and that resoluteness which a certain Nazi, for example, might display. He writes that while a particular Nazi might lack humility and charity, it would be a mistake "to deny that that kind of Nazi was

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 199–200. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 200. For an argument that MacIntyre's definition of "practice" does not, in fact, allow for the possibility of evil practices, see Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 98–102.

<sup>143</sup> For Aristotle's account of the unity of the virtues see, for instance, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b1–1145a6. For Aquinas' account see, for instance, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 65.

courageous or that his courage was a virtue.”<sup>144</sup> Without the ability to distinguish between true virtues (like prudence) and pseudo-virtues (like cleverness), MacIntyre is forced to conclude that a disposition may be a virtue while yet sustaining a practice that is evil. He writes, for instance, “I do have to allow that courage sometimes sustains injustice.”<sup>145</sup>

Fortunately, sometime after writing *After Virtue*, MacIntyre reversed his position on the unity of the virtues, as he acknowledges in the Preface to *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*. “I now,” writes MacIntyre, “think that my earlier criticism of Aquinas’ theses on the unity of the virtues was simply mistaken and due in part to a misreading of Aquinas.”<sup>146</sup> His corrected understanding entails that “virtues, unlike skills, direct us only to good ends.”<sup>147</sup> He even argues explicitly against the position that courage can “be put to the service of wickedness, without thereby ceasing to be courage.”<sup>148</sup> While his acceptance of the unity of the virtues furnishes him with resources to be able to dismiss the possibility of evil practices, his rejection of the unity of the virtues in *After Virtue*

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<sup>144</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 180.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>146</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, x.

<sup>147</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Social Practice: What Holds Them Apart?,” in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 117. First published in *Arbejdspapir* 113 (1992): 1–22.

<sup>148</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues,” in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 106.

contributed to his affirming in that work that dispositions that sustain evil practices ought to be accounted virtues. Had he drawn from two other arguments in *After Virtue*, however, I think that he would have been able to reject the notion of virtues serving evil practices. So doing, in turn, would provide a meaningful response to Bernstein's question "what constraints are there in answering the question "What is the good for me?"<sup>149</sup> What are those two arguments?

First, MacIntyre should have attended sufficiently to his own caveats that the first part of his three-part definition of virtue was "partial and tentative," needing "amplification and amendment."<sup>150</sup> Secondly, he should have rejected the idea of virtues sustaining evil practices on account of the "unity of life" considerations which he advances later in *After Virtue*. To recall, the first of his three-part definition of virtue is "a virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods."<sup>151</sup> On the strength of the first definition of virtue alone it is premature to ask, as he does, whether a disposition might "be a virtue if it is the kind of disposition which sustains practices and some practices are evil."<sup>152</sup> He has not yet adequately defined virtue by situating it in the two other domains

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<sup>149</sup> Bernstein, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," 18.

<sup>150</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 199–200. Emphasis in the original.

(besides practices) in which, according to him, virtues receive their meaning: the domains of the unity of a human life and of traditions. He fails to attend to his own caveat mentioned earlier in *After Virtue* that “there are no less than three stages . . . which have to be identified in order, if the core conception of a virtue is to be understood.”<sup>153</sup> By trying to decide, on the strength of his incomplete first-stage definition of virtue, whether a disposition that sustains an evil practice is a virtue, he lacks the robust notion of virtue which he later articulates and which, as I shall now argue, enables—indeed requires—him to reject such a possibility.

MacIntyre’s understanding of traditions (the third domain in which virtues receive their meaning) will be taken up later. His unity of life considerations (the second domain) alone provide him with resources to amend his claim in *After Virtue* that virtues can sustain evil practices. According to his first of three-part definition of virtue, a virtue enables us to achieve goods internal to a practice. But he goes on, as we saw in the previous section of this dissertation, to argue that it is “each human life as a whole, as a unity, whose character provides the virtues with an adequate *telos*.”<sup>154</sup> For MacIntyre a virtue must not only enable us to achieve goods internal to a practice but, importantly, it must find its place in a whole human life in which virtues are pursued and exercised. If a disposition or quality or ability helps a person to achieve goods internal to a particular practice but simultaneously wars against her ability to achieve goods internal to the other practices which are integral to her “quest for the good life,” then that disposition or

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 204.

quality or ability is not in fact a virtue in that person's life. To take MacIntyre's example, Gauguin may well have pursued and, for the sake of argument, even attained the "good internal to painting."<sup>155</sup> In his artistic pursuit he might well have acquired what appeared to be certain virtues of determination, dedication, and resolve. But those qualities also propelled him to abandon his family to paint in Polynesia. MacIntyre observes, "There may be tensions between the claims of family life and those of the arts—the problem that Gauguin solved or failed to solve by fleeing to Polynesia."<sup>156</sup> To the extent that Gauguin failed to exercise determination, dedication, and resolve in a way that contributed to the good of his life taken as a whole, those qualities should not be seen as virtues in his life.

In the Postscript to the Second Edition of *After Virtue*, which was published three years after the First Edition, MacIntyre makes precisely this point. He takes as an example the practice of wilderness exploration, in which a certain ruthlessness and relentlessness in driving oneself and others might very well be required for success and even for survival. He writes:

The ability to be ruthless and relentless . . . may require as a condition of its exercise the cultivation of a certain insensitivity to the feelings of others; caring about their feelings may get in the way of caring about their survival. Transpose that complex of qualities into participation in the practice of creating and sustaining the life of a family and you have a recipe for disaster. What seemed to be a virtue in the one context seems to have become a vice in the other. But this quality is in my account neither a virtue nor a vice. It is not a virtue, because it cannot satisfy the conditions imposed by the requirement that a virtue contribute to the good of that kind of whole human life in which the goods of particular practices are integrated into an overall pattern of goals which provides an answer to

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 201.

the question: “What is the best kind of life for a human being like me to lead?”<sup>157</sup>

Ruthlessness and relentlessness are good qualities to have and to use in wilderness exploration. They fulfill MacIntyre’s first of three-part definition of virtue by being acquired human qualities “the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”<sup>158</sup> Yet those qualities would not be properly accounted virtues in the life of a wilderness explorer who also employed ruthlessness and relentlessness in the practice of raising and sustaining a family. For ruthlessness and relentlessness to be virtues they must not only enable the person to realize the goods internal to a practice such as wilderness exploration or painting; they must also contribute to or at least not detract from the individual’s quest for a good life overall, not just a good life qua practitioner of this or that practice.

It is from this perspective that some of Bernstein’s objections can be met. In response to MacIntyre’s discussion involving “the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life . . . the unity of a narrative quest,”<sup>159</sup> Bernstein asks, once again:

How does this *telos* limit the range of practices and virtues that constitute a moral life? What constraints are there in answering the question “What is the good for me?” Can I not answer this by saying the good for me is to become the greatest chess player, football player, or espionage agent. . . ? Can I not say that I am willing to neglect friends, family, political responsibilities, etc., in order to achieve this good, “the good for me,” that

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 218–19.

I will order all my life and deeds to strive for this goal? I may fail, I may be distracted, but this is and will be my narrative quest.<sup>160</sup>

MacIntyre's notion of the unity of a narrative quest embodied in a single life *does* limit the range of practices and virtues that constitute a moral life. With respect to virtues, qualities are not rightly accounted virtues unless they both sustain practices and contribute to the good of the individual's life as a whole. Although MacIntyre stated this requirement in the First Edition of *After Virtue*, he himself failed to attend sufficiently to it, which is no doubt partly to blame for Bernstein's criticism. In the Postscript to the Second Edition of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre acknowledges his mistake and emphasizes the importance of that requirement. He writes:

I did *not* intend to suggest—although I clearly did suggest—that the initial account of virtues in terms of practices provides us with an adequate conception of a virtue which is then merely enriched and supplemented by being connected with the notions of the good of a whole human life and of an ongoing tradition. Rather it is the case that no human quality is to be accounted a virtue unless it satisfies the conditions specified *at each of the three stages*.<sup>161</sup>

It is, for instance, because the resoluteness of the above-described Nazi is not connected to the notion of the good of a whole human life that that quality is not, despite what MacIntyre initially thought, a virtue. MacIntyre's notion of the unity of a narrative quest embodied in a single life limits the range of virtues that constitute the moral life precisely by excluding those qualities that fail to promote the good of a whole human life even when they might sustain a practice.

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<sup>160</sup> Bernstein, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," 18.

<sup>161</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 275. Emphasis in the original.

Likewise, MacIntyre's notion of the unity of a narrative quest embodied in a single life limits the range of *practices* that constitute the moral life. As the example of Gauguin suggests, the place of a practice in one's life must be limited by the overall good of that life. D'Andrea summarizes this point:

Practices are embedded in, and are a part of the story of, the life of any given practitioner. Here we have the source of MacIntyre's unity of life consideration, his stage two element for the definition of a virtue. A practice that occupies a disproportionate place in an individual's life—one that costs him or her time, energy, attention and so on to the detriment of other worthwhile or necessary practices in which he or she is or could be or should be engaged—can be criticized from the perspective of the wholeness and the unity of the individual agent's life.<sup>162</sup>

By means of assigning practices their proper place and by means of ordering qualities to the good of a whole human life, MacIntyre's notion of the unity of a narrative quest embodied in a single life does, pace Bernstein, limit the range of practices and virtues that constitute a moral life.

Bernstein's criticisms are not, however, only about whether MacIntyre's ethical theory successfully limits the range of practices and virtues that constitute a moral life. Bernstein also worries that MacIntyre's notion of the *telos* is too indeterminate to be able to specify the human good. On MacIntyre's account virtues and practices are limited by reference to "the good of a whole human life," but Bernstein asks, "What constraints are there in answering the question 'What is the good for me?'"<sup>163</sup> What prevents someone

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<sup>162</sup> D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 273.

<sup>163</sup> Bernstein, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," 18.

from conceiving of his good as becoming the “greatest chess player, football player, or espionage agent” and then neglecting “friends, family, political responsibilities, etc., in order to achieve this good, ‘the good for me?’”<sup>164</sup>

Colby and Schneewind likewise criticize MacIntyre’s notion of the good. Like Bernstein, Colby alleges that MacIntyre fails to limit what might constitute “the good of a whole life.” He writes, “The idea of the narrative unity of life is only formal, not substantive; it is silent, not just about which qualities are virtues, but more importantly about what *kind* of unitary, complete life is good and worthy of a quest, about the normative conditions under which unitary lives questing for their good are possible.”<sup>165</sup> Similarly, Schneewind charges that “the notion of the good here, like the notion of narrative unity, is too weak to provide any distinctive ground for the virtues.”<sup>166</sup> What response might MacIntyre make to these criticisms regarding his conception of the good?

An adequate understanding of what MacIntyre means by the good must involve the following two considerations. First, in *After Virtue* MacIntyre does not try to specify the content of “the good.” He does not argue for a specific conception of the good but argues, rather, that some such conception must be presupposed by anyone who would search for a more adequate—a more determinate—conception thereof. He does, however, limit to some extent what such a conception can entail. Secondly, he argues

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Colby, “Narrativity and Ethical Relativism,” 136. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>166</sup> Schneewind, “Virtue, Narrative, and Community: MacIntyre and Morality,” 653.

that any adequate conception of the good will require the perspective not only of practices and of the unity of a human life, but of traditions. Ultimately, a determinate conception of the good could only be given through the progress made within and between traditions as arguments through time refine and advance that conception. Let's consider each of these two points in turn.

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre does not try to specify the content of the good that would constitute the good embodied in a single life. That he does not try to specify the content can be seen in this famous (or infamous) excerpt from *After Virtue*: “The good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man.”<sup>167</sup> It is important to note that MacIntyre prefaces that excerpt by describing it as “a *provisional* conclusion about the good life for man.”<sup>168</sup> The formal description of the good life for man contained in the infamous passage is provisional because, as MacIntyre argues, some at least nascent, material (i.e., not-merely-formal) understanding of the good life must be held in order to guide a person through the moral life toward an ever fuller conception of the good life. As was mentioned above, MacIntyre writes that “without some at least partly determinate conception of the final *telos* there could not be any beginning to a quest. Some conception of the good for man is required. . . . But secondly it is clear that the medieval conception of a quest is not at all that of a search for something already adequately characterized, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil.”<sup>169</sup> For his

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<sup>167</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

arguments about virtues, practices, and the unity of life to succeed, MacIntyre does not need to specify the content of the good life. Rather, he argues that inasmuch as one *does* have a partly determinate conception of the final good, one can begin the moral quest. Elsewhere MacIntyre states that social orders do characteristically embody such an understanding: “Every political and social order embodies and gives expression to an ordering of different human goods and therefore also embodies and gives expression to some particular conception of the human good.”<sup>170</sup> Even though the conception of the human good embodied and expressed by these social orders might be deficient in any number of ways, it characteristically provides individuals with enough of an understanding of the good to begin their moral quests. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre does not try to provide a determinate conception of the human good (though he does provide limitations that meaningfully constrain any such adequate conception, as I discuss below). Rather, he argues that where some such notion of the human good is in fact understood, there a moral quest can begin.

Inasmuch as MacIntyre does not try to specify the content of the human good, Bernstein, Colby, and Schneewind are obviously correct in not finding his expression of any such determinate content. Yet it is incorrect to suggest that MacIntyre’s notion of the good in no way meaningfully restricts what an adequate conception of the human good must involve. Bernstein, for instance, asks rhetorically, “What constraints are there in

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<sup>170</sup> MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good,” 235.

answering the question ‘What is the good for me?’”<sup>171</sup> The chief constraint is that what the good is for me must answer to my partly determinate conception of the final *telos*.

MacIntyre writes that the partly determinate conception of the final *telos* is to be drawn

precisely from those questions which led us to attempt to transcend that limited conception of the virtues which is available in and through practices. It is in looking for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life, that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good.<sup>172</sup>

In the previous section of this dissertation we saw MacIntyre argue that the widespread attempt people make to rank order the goods in their lives is only intelligible in light of some conception of the unity of their lives. Previously in this section of the dissertation we saw how that same unity of life limits which practice-sustaining qualities can rightly be accounted virtues. Furthermore, the virtues of integrity and constancy are only specifiable in terms of the unity of a human life. The question “what is the good for me?” must answer to the notion of the good that one has formulated first through his pursuit of the goods internal to practices and then through his ordering those goods in a unified life. A decade and a half after the publication of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre clarifies how an adequate conception of the human good and the good for me requires this unity of life which in turn involves the integration of the goods pursued in individual practices.

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<sup>171</sup> Bernstein, “Nietzsche or Aristotle?: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*,” 18.

<sup>172</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219. Emphasis in the original.

Human practices and activities are, on Aquinas's Aristotelian account, aimed at the achievement of a variety of heterogeneous ends: the goods that are ours by virtue of our animal nature and appetite, the goods that are specific to social animals capable of practical reasoning, the goods of particular theoretical inquiries that satisfy the desire for completed understanding, and the ultimate good to which all these other goods are ordered. . . . It is first through practical reasoning and later by theoretical reflection upon practice that we discover and identify an ordering of those goods, such that each contributes to the complex unity of the kind of life that it is good and best for human beings to pursue.<sup>173</sup>

Any adequate concept of the good for man must, on MacIntyre's theory, answer to one's partly determined conception of the good, and that conception, in turn, depends on one's success in having pursued the goods internal to practices and in having integrated those goods into a unified life.

While Bernstein is wrong to think that MacIntyre's theory provides no constraints in answering the question "what is the good for me?," he, Colby, and Schneewind are right to point out the variety of responses to that question that *After Virtue* allows. By itself, the good as described in *After Virtue* cannot, in one sense, provide an answer to these questions posed by Bernstein:

Can I not answer [the question about what the good is for me] by saying the good for me is to become the greatest chess player, football player, or espionage agent. . . ? Can I not say that I am willing to neglect friends, family, political responsibilities, etc., in order to achieve this good, "the good for me," that I will order all my life and deeds to strive for this goal?<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Aquinas's Critique of Education: Against His Own Age, Against Ours," in *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (London: Routledge, 1998), 98.

<sup>174</sup> Bernstein, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," 18.

*If* the type of exclusive dedication to one practice that Bernstein describes does not as a matter of fact interfere with the individual's pursuit of the good of a whole, unified life, then it is true that nothing MacIntyre says about the good in *After Virtue* would necessarily rule out that type of dedication.<sup>175</sup> *If*, however, becoming the greatest chess player, football player, or espionage agent does in fact occupy a disproportionate place in a person's life—if, that is, the person's engagement in one of those practices consumes time and energy that the individual should be spending in the living out of other practices—then that person's obsessive engagement in that one practice is unacceptable from the perspective of MacIntyre's "unity of life" considerations. That such exclusive dedication to one practice likely *would*, as a matter of fact, war against other important practices Bernstein himself suggests when he describes the dedication to one practice as involving the neglect of friends, family, and political responsibilities.

Like Bernstein, Colby criticizes MacIntyre's conception of the good. Colby argues that MacIntyre's account does not have the resources even to show that anything is ethically objectionable in the life of Attila the Hun. Colby writes, "The life of Attila

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<sup>175</sup> It should also be noted that for the exclusive pursuit of one activity to be capable of constituting, on MacIntyre's terms, one's quest for the good of a whole life, it is necessary that that activity first conform to MacIntyre's understanding of a practice. While farming and chess are practices on MacIntyre's account, MacIntyre doubts that espionage would qualify as a practice. In Alasdair MacIntyre, "Bernstein's Distorting Mirrors: A Rejoinder," *Soundings* 67 (Spring 1984): 36, MacIntyre writes in direct response to Bernstein's criticisms, "The types of activity that he claims fall under my account—spying, smuggling, the art of the executioner, and torturing are examples . . .—just do not, so it seems clearly to me, involve systematic extension of our conceptions of the ends and goals which excellence may serve—one central characteristic of practices, understood as I understand them."

the Hun reveals this [i.e., MacIntyre's understanding of the quest for the good] as a formalistic conception, admitting *any* ethical content. His life satisfies MacIntyre's conditions for an integrated life. . . ."<sup>176</sup> One reply that MacIntyre might make to Colby would be to argue that, regardless of whether Attila the Hun's life possesses a certain unity, it does not conform to MacIntyre's understanding of the quest for the good because the activities that Attila the Hun engaged in do not qualify as practices. MacIntyre's understanding of practices involves the idea that human conceptions of the ends and goods which excellence may serve are systematically extended through the activity.<sup>177</sup> If the activities that comprised the life of Attila the Hun do not qualify as practices, which involve the pursuit and extension of goods, then his life could not, on MacIntyre's terms, constitute a quest for the good.

If to this argument Colby were to reply that the notion of goods pursued by practices is itself indeterminate on MacIntyre's account, or if MacIntyre were to grant for the sake of argument that Attila the Hun's activities qualify as practices and that his life did possess unity, then MacIntyre could respond to Colby from the standpoint traditions, the third domain in which, as Higgins puts it, "goods and virtues receive their meaning and substance."<sup>178</sup> Like Bernstein, Colby, and Schneewind, Jeffrey Stout does not think that MacIntyre provides a determinate conception of the good in *After Virtue* (which he

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<sup>176</sup> Colby, "Narrativity and Ethical Relativism," 149. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>177</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

<sup>178</sup> Higgins, "MacIntyre's Moral Theory and the Possibility of an Aretaic Ethics of Teaching," 281.

does not). Unlike the other three scholars, however, Stout recognizes two important features of MacIntyre's argument about the good. First, by virtue of its unity of life considerations, MacIntyre's teleology *does* provide meaningful constraints on what any adequate conception of the good must involve. Secondly, although in *After Virtue* MacIntyre does not advance a determinate conception of the good, he does not say that there cannot be some such conception. On the contrary, his ethical philosophy fully allows for that possibility, and MacIntyre even provides the means by which such a determinate conception of the good could be attained: namely, through traditions. Stout writes:

MacIntyre's sociological teleology does not by itself yield a specific conception of the good, though it does place meaningful constraints on what a fully acceptable conception of the good must involve, constraints that determine a minimal interpretation of the virtues required for living well. More specificity in a conception of the good can come, by his reckoning, only from particular practices and traditions.<sup>179</sup>

Chapter Two of this dissertation is very much concerned with what MacIntyre means by traditions, how they function, and the criticisms to which his understanding of traditions gives rise. That chapter considers a variety of points that MacIntyre makes about traditions as his understanding of traditions unfolds throughout his entire corpus. In the remainder of this chapter MacIntyre's understanding of tradition is only considered as presented in *After Virtue* and only to the extent that it relates to narrative and the good.

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<sup>179</sup> Jeffrey Stout, "Virtue among the Ruins: An Essay on MacIntyre," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 26, no. 3 (1984): 269.

In the above section on narrative and the unity of a human life we saw MacIntyre argue against the non-narrative understanding of the self common to Sartre and Goffman by which the self is seen as fundamentally detached from the particularities of the story into which it is born and in which it lives. In opposition to that view, MacIntyre emphasizes that each person is born into an ongoing story.

I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles. As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point.<sup>180</sup>

I do not wish to repeat at length here the prior discussion of MacIntyre's view that each individual is born into an ongoing story that involves temporal, proximal, cultural, political, and familial situatedness. I recall these points here because it is in connection with them that MacIntyre introduces his main discussion of tradition in *After Virtue*.

In light of his understanding of how all people are born into and live in the midst of a situatedness that always involves relationships with others, MacIntyre points out that the narrative quest for the good is never an individualistic pursuit. It always involves those others with whom one shares a relationship (albeit to varying degrees depending on the nature of the familial, friendly, political, or cultural bond). He writes, "I am never able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only *qua* individual. . . . For the story of

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<sup>180</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 220.

my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity.<sup>181</sup>

Because those communities have a history, part of what an individual receives through the community into which he is born and lives is that history—the beliefs, customs, teachings, practices, ways of thinking, etc. that are characteristic of that community. What one receives, in other words, is membership in an ongoing tradition. MacIntyre writes, “What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition.”<sup>182</sup> Gary Gutting summarizes MacIntyre’s reflections on how an individual belongs to a tradition, writing:

Tradition enters the picture because no one is capable of carrying out a quest for the good of his life as an isolated individual. This is not merely a practical point (it’s too hard a job to do alone) but also a conceptual one. I necessarily take the stage of my life as a character in a story that has been going on for a long time. I am the child of a certain family, the citizen of a certain state, the member of a certain church. This, as MacIntyre says, gives my life “its own moral particularity” . . . a specific starting point from which I must begin. Having such a specific starting point is what MacIntyre means by belonging to a tradition.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 220–21.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>183</sup> Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1. See also Nelson, *Narrative and Morality: A Theological Inquiry*, 52: “MacIntyre believes that ‘the unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest.’ It is the unity of a life that displays the story of a search for a final *telos*, a ‘conception of the good for man. . . .’ The story of one’s life is embedded in the stories of those communities of which one is a part. Those communities have histories, and their stories are stretched out in time. Thus, each of us is the bearer of a tradition.”

Before advancing his own, positive understanding of tradition, MacIntyre disassociates it from two misconceptions that he fears his readers might draw. First, he makes the point discussed above that just because someone is born into a particular tradition, and just because that tradition constitutes the person's moral starting point, that does not mean that the person is constrained by the limitations of that tradition. "The fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community."<sup>184</sup>

Secondly, MacIntyre distinguishes his understanding of tradition from that of conservative political theorists such as Edmund Burke. For such theorists tradition is contrasted with reason, and the stability of tradition is contrasted with conflict. On MacIntyre's view, however, traditions are the bearers of reason and, unless they are dying, they always include conflict in the form of ongoing argument. (I consider both of these points at length in Chapters 2.) MacIntyre writes, "All reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought. . . . Moreover when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of

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<sup>184</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221. Emphasis in the original.

which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose. . . . Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict.”<sup>185</sup>

Having rejected conceptions of tradition with which his view might mistakenly be associated, MacIntyre defines positively what he means by tradition.

A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life.<sup>186</sup>

While I will consider other aspects of this definition later, what is important here are its implications on MacIntyre’s understanding of the narrative quest for the good. The good receives its meaning not only in the domains of practices and of the unity of a human life, but also in that of traditions. “In MacIntyre’s third and broadest domain,” writes Higgins, “We inquire into the good *qua* human beings and the virtues are understood as those ‘qualities the exercise of which leads to the human *telos*’. . . . Such inquiry is bound by the moral horizons of a tradition. Within the ethos of a culture and age, one finds a hierarchy of fundamental goods guiding its sense of what is worth striving for in human

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 222. For similar reflections on tradition which MacIntyre published while he was in the process of writing *After Virtue*, see MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 460–61 and Alasdair MacIntyre, “Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority,” in *Through the Looking-glass: Epistemology and the Conduct of Inquiry*, ed. Maria J. Falco (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979), 57.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

life.”<sup>187</sup> The narrative quest for the (unqualified) good takes place within the context of one’s tradition which already has a provisional (qualified) conception of the good.

Bernstein, Schneewind, and Colby allege that MacIntyre’s notion of the good is too indeterminate to do the work he assigns to it, and they claim that it is incapable of excluding evil practices or of showing that there is anything morally objectionable in the life of someone such as Attila the Hun. It is from the perspective of traditions that their objections can be most fully answered. For although it is the case that MacIntyre himself does not provide a determinate conception of the good in *After Virtue*, he argues that such a conception can be and characteristically is given through one’s tradition. To the extent that a particular tradition conceives of the human good as having no part in certain practices which it considers to be evil and/or conceives of the good life as excluding a unity marked by the inclusion of such evil practices, to that extent the tradition’s own determinate notion of the good meaningfully limits the range of practices and the kinds of unity of life that can constitute a narrative quest for an ever fuller understanding of and realization of *the good*. Lutz expresses this important point, writing, “MacIntyre’s third version of moral enquiry is tradition. The hard core of tradition is the self-conscious recognition that the good life, the standards of the good life, and the practices conducive to the good life can only be known and developed through the accumulated wisdom of a tradition.”<sup>188</sup> For MacIntyre virtues and goods receive their meaning (1) in practices (2)

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<sup>187</sup> Higgins, “MacIntyre’s Moral Theory and the Possibility of an Aretaic Ethics of Teaching,” 282.

<sup>188</sup> Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 54.

to the extent that they constitute a life united in a narrative quest for “the good” (3) with “the good” being given (at least as a starting point) by the tradition of which the individual is an inheritor.

MacIntyre’s understanding of traditions and the good life as conceived of by traditions does lend itself to other important criticisms such as the accusation of its being morally relativistic. Those criticisms are assessed in Chapters 2. With respect to the present discussion of the narrative quest for the good, it is worth mentioning that MacIntyre does not say nearly enough about traditions in *After Virtue*, and the criticisms of Bernstein, Schneewind, and Colby can perhaps be attributed in part to MacIntyre’s scant treatment of traditions in *After Virtue*, especially given the crucial importance his notion of tradition holds not only for answering those criticisms but for his ethical philosophy as a whole. Fortunately, MacIntyre says much more about traditions in works subsequent to *After Virtue*. It is that fuller understanding of traditions and the questions that arise in regard to it—especially insofar as they involve narrative, truth, and relativism—that I discuss in the following chapter.

## Chapter Two

### Tradition, Rationality, the Perspectivist Challenge, and Truth

In Chapter One I explored the ways in which MacIntyre understands narrative in relation to human action, the unity of a human life, and the good. Although critics raise a number of questions and criticisms in response to the uses to which MacIntyre puts narrative in those domains, those uses of narrative are *relatively* unproblematic. By considering those relatively unproblematic applications of narrative, a clearer picture of what MacIntyre means by narrative has emerged, and the stage has been set for a consideration of the more controversial use he makes of narrative as it pertains to moral enquiry.

In Chapter One, Section Three MacIntyre's understanding of tradition was considered in its relation to the narrative quest for the good. In this chapter I will present a much fuller account of what MacIntyre means by tradition. In the first section I will consider his views on tradition as they relate to embodiment in a community, argument and conflict, continuities of belief, and narrative. Then, in Section Two, I will examine MacIntyre's important claims that traditions are the bearers of rationality and that there is

no access to truth save by way of tradition. Finally, in Section Three I will consider the “perspectivist challenge,” the first way in which some charge that MacIntyre’s moral philosophy is relativistic. The perspectivist challenge involves the claim that his philosophy neither aspires to nor allows for objective moral truth. I will argue that MacIntyre’s thought is not subject to the perspectivist challenge because MacIntyre in fact holds that traditions characteristically claim truth for their positions, and he himself provides a robust, realist account of truth.

## **Tradition: Community, Argument, Continuities, and Narrative**

In his review of *After Virtue*, Robert Wachbroit observes the important role that MacIntyre assigns to tradition, but he comments, “Unfortunately, MacIntyre says little about tradition and the role it plays in his account.”<sup>1</sup> Happily, MacIntyre does say quite a bit more about tradition in other works. Even in *After Virtue*, however, he mentions (though does not elaborate upon) what I see as the six major elements that constitute what he means by a tradition: (1) its role in ordering the goods of practices and of the unity of one’s life, (2) its embodiment in a community, (3) the way in which a tradition involves arguments about the goods which constitute it, (4) the way in which it maintains continuities of core beliefs, (5) its narrative structure, and (6) its role as the bearer of reason and rationality. The first of these five points was discussed in Chapter One,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Wachbroit, “A Genealogy of Virtues,” review of *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Yale Law Journal* 92 (1983): 574.

Section Three. In this chapter I will explore the remaining five points and the criticisms to which they give rise—especially the charge of relativism in the form of perspectivism.

The second major point that MacIntyre makes about traditions is that they are always embodied in a community of some sort. In *After Virtue* he mentions that “a living tradition then is an historically extended, *socially embodied* argument.”<sup>2</sup> He discusses the social embodiment of traditions at greater length in his 1986 work “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions.” There he writes:

For its survival and flourishing a tradition requires embodiment in the life of institutionalized communities which identify their history with its history. To belong to a tradition is to be engaged in an essentially communal form of rational existence in which persons so engaged offer commentary upon the achievements of their predecessors and upon the limitations of those achievements, commentary which is then subjected to objections, elaborations and emendations of others at work in the same tradition.<sup>3</sup>

The notion that a tradition requires embodiment in the shared social life of a community harmonizes with the importance that we have already seen MacIntyre attach to the social dimension of action and of an adequate understanding of the self. Recall that in his theory of action MacIntyre argues that for a piece of human behavior to be understood as an action at all—let alone as the action that its author intends—a social context is required both by the agent and by one who would understand the agent’s action. He writes, “In virtue of what then do we treat a particular action or set of actions

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<sup>2</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 222; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1981. Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions,” in *Interpreting the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 22.

as intelligible? The answer is: in virtue of its or their relationship to certain kinds of social institution and practice,”<sup>4</sup> and elsewhere, “Consider what it is to share a culture. It is to share schemata which are at one and the same time constitutive of and normative for intelligible action by myself and are also means for my interpretations of the actions of others.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, recall MacIntyre’s emphasis on the importance of the social dimension for an adequate understanding of the self. On his account the identity of the self is in an important way informed by the story into which one is born. He writes, “The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity.”<sup>6</sup> Just as a shared social context—the culture of a community—is required to render actions intelligible and to provide an adequate understanding of the self, so too according to MacIntyre is it required as the locus of a tradition.

In maintaining that “to belong to a tradition is to be engaged in an essentially communal form of rational existence,”<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre strongly distinguishes the rational existence at home in tradition from the type of rational existence championed by Enlightenment thinkers. He writes:

It was a central aspiration of the Enlightenment to provide for debate in the public realm standards and methods of rational justification by which

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<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Intelligibility of Action,” in *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*, ed. J. Margolis, M. Krausz, and R. M. Burian (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), 65–66.

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” *The Monist* 60, no. 4 (1977): 453.

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.

<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre, “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions,” 22.

alternative courses of action in every sphere of life could be adjudged just or unjust, rational or irrational, enlightened or unenlightened. So, it was hoped, reason would displace authority and tradition. Rational justification was to appeal to principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all those social and cultural particularities which the Enlightenment thinkers took to be the mere accidental clothing of reason in particular times and places.<sup>8</sup>

The relationship between tradition and rational justification will be discussed at length in Section Three below. At the moment it is sufficient to note that whereas for Enlightenment thinkers rational existence ought to be extricated from social particularity and communal embodiment, for MacIntyre the rational existence of a tradition accords importance precisely to social particularities and to the community in which the tradition is embodied.<sup>9</sup> Gary Gutting notes this important element of MacIntyre's understanding of tradition: "A philosophical tradition in MacIntyre's sense is a historically extended process of reflection inextricably tied to the practices and institutions of a human community."<sup>10</sup> Members of a tradition can, on MacIntyre's account, still learn from those outside the tradition. This point will be discussed at length in Chapter Three. But the bulk of a tradition's progress is made by those who commune within the tradition—those who share linguistic and conceptual resources, beliefs, institutions, and practices; who accord canonical status to the same texts; who accord authoritative status to the same

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<sup>8</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 6.

<sup>9</sup> MacIntyre's "particularism" and the charges of relativism brought against it will be the subject of Chapter Four.

<sup>10</sup> Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 87.

people or positions. MacIntyre describes the enquiry of a tradition as follows: “Every such form of enquiry begins in and from some condition of pure historical contingency, from the beliefs, institutions, and practices of some particular community which constitute a given. Within such a community authority will have been conferred upon certain texts and certain voices.”<sup>11</sup>

In response to MacIntyre’s view on community and tradition, Julia Annas wonders how more than one tradition could coexist in one and the same society if a tradition requires social embodiment for its sustenance. In other words, how can one society sustain more than one tradition? That MacIntyre thinks that more than one tradition *can* coexist in the same society is clear. He writes, for instance, “As a matter of historical fact for very long periods traditions of very different kinds do indeed seem to coexist.”<sup>12</sup> And:

The older traditions are able to survive within liberal modernity, just because they afford expression to features of human life and modes of human relationship which can appear in a variety of very different social and cultural forms. . . . The historical particularities of traditions, the fact that each is only to be appropriated by a relationship to a particular contingent history, does not of itself mean that those histories cannot extend to and even flourish in environments not only different from but even hostile to those in which a tradition was originally at home.<sup>13</sup>

Given MacIntyre’s allowance that a plurality of traditions may well exist in the same society, Julia Annas voices the concern that “once it is allowed that different and

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<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 354.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

mutually hostile traditions can flourish in the same social setting, it becomes very hard to see just what is being required when it is claimed that a tradition must be embodied in some particular form of social and political life.”<sup>14</sup>

In holding that traditions must be embodied in communities, MacIntyre is not committed to the position that any social or political assemblage of people constitutes a community in the relevant sense. As mentioned above, in MacIntyre’s view a community is comprised of those who share linguistic and conceptual resources, beliefs, institutions, and practices; who accord canonical status to the same texts; who attribute authoritative status to the same people or positions. Further, a community transcends practices and the life of individuals by providing an account not of a good qua this or that practice or a good for this or that individual, but rather an account of the good for man as such. A community, properly understood, is “directed towards the shared achievement of those common goods without which the ultimate human good cannot be achieved.”<sup>15</sup> Within any given social or political setting there may be a plurality of communities each with their own conceptual resources, canonical texts, conceptions of the human good, etc. There may also be those who reject the very notion of there being a human good as such. What is important for MacIntyre is that traditions do not exist in the rarefied air of pure

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<sup>14</sup> Julia Annas, “MacIntyre on Traditions,” review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 391.

<sup>15</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, xiv. For a critical appraisal of MacIntyre’s understanding of the specifically political aspects of the common good, see V. Bradley Lewis, “The Common Good against the Modern State? On MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 16, no. 2 (2009): 357–78.

reason. Rather, they subsist in communities which express—both in theory and in practice—a common understanding of the human good. (That that understanding need not be static but can develop over time will be discussed below.) Indeed, traditions can be distinguished from one another by reference to their rival conceptions of the good: “Different traditions embody rival and incompatible claims about human goods and about the good, claims such that the truth of the central claims of one tradition characteristically entails the falsity of at least some of the claims of other rival traditions.”<sup>16</sup>

In *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre discusses a number of traditions that, having their own conceptions of “the good,” have at times coexisted within the same society. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, where he considers the Aristotelian, Augustinian, Scottish, and liberal traditions, he describes their status as socially embodied traditions in this way:

All four of these traditions are and were more than, and could not but be more than, traditions of intellectual enquiry. In each of them intellectual enquiry was or is part of the elaboration of a mode of social and moral life of which the intellectual enquiry itself was an integral part, and in each of them the forms of that life were embodied with greater or lesser degrees of imperfection in social and political institutions.<sup>17</sup>

In response to Annas, MacIntyre’s position is that these four traditions have at times coexisted within the same social/political setting because the separate communities that embody those traditions themselves have at times existed in the same social/political setting.

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<sup>16</sup> MacIntyre, “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions,” 24.

<sup>17</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 349.

The third key element in MacIntyre's understanding of a tradition is that it always involves argument about the goods which constitute it. In *After Virtue* he writes, "When a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose. . . . A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."<sup>18</sup> Again, the contrast between MacIntyre's notion of tradition and a Burkean notion is clear. On MacIntyre's account, a tradition that merely hunkers down to conserve the past is flirting with extinction: "Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead."<sup>19</sup>

In Chapter One, Section Three—"Narrative and the Good"—we saw how a tradition's conception of the good limits the range of practices and the types of unity that can constitute the good for human beings. Now we see that because, on MacIntyre's account, a tradition essentially involves argument about the goods that constitute it, a tradition's conception of the good can, itself, develop over time. *How*, precisely, the notion of the good is refined within a tradition will be discussed in the below sections of this chapter and in the next chapter. For now it is enough to note the role that argument about a tradition's good plays in defining a tradition and in giving it life. Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift summarize the important role that MacIntyre assigns debate within a tradition:

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<sup>18</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222. See also MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," 460–61.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

The communal understanding embodied in such traditions is neither hegemonic nor static; on the contrary, in a healthy tradition that understanding will be the subject of continuous debate at any given moment and across time. So, when an institution (for example a church, a university, a hospital, a farm) is a bearer of such a tradition, its common life will be partly constituted by a continuous argument as to what a good church or university or hospital or farm might be—an argument that is constrained by that tradition’s best self-understanding but that can move forward in an indefinite number of ways.<sup>20</sup>

Given the importance MacIntyre accords argument in constituting a living tradition, Mark Colby wonders how a tradition can be known and how it can be differentiated from other traditions if it is the case that even what constitutes a tradition is a matter of debate. He writes, “What is essential or integral to a tradition is itself a matter of internal controversy. A tradition partly is constituted by debate over what constitutes it. . . . This raises questions regarding essentialism in fixing the contents of a tradition and regarding the demarcation among traditions.”<sup>21</sup>

By stressing the importance of argument in tradition, MacIntyre distinguishes his notion of tradition from a Burkean notion, but he does so at the cost of inviting criticism such as that voiced by Colby. While MacIntyre answers this criticism more fully in works beyond *After Virtue*, an intimation of his answer is found even in *After Virtue* itself, where he writes, “Traditions, when vital, embody *continuities* of conflict.”<sup>22</sup> The type of argument that MacIntyre identifies as being vital to a tradition is in no way akin

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 90.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Colby, “Moral Traditions, MacIntyre and Historicist Practical Reason,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21, no. 3 (1995): 70.

<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222. Emphasis added.

to “the self-assertive shrillness of protest”<sup>23</sup> discussed earlier in *After Virtue* that arises when those arguing from incommensurable premises are *au fond* incapable of agreement. Within a tradition, wherein premises are commensurable and agreement possible, the type of conflict and argument involved has a certain directedness to it. MacIntyre writes, “A linked succession of theories or theses is not by itself sufficient to constitute a tradition. There also has to be a coherence and a directedness to the succession, the kind of coherence and directedness which is supplied by an extended argumentative debate.”<sup>24</sup> Even when important aspects of the tradition are debated, they are debated within a wider context of shared agreement by the members of the tradition. It is only when certain fundamental beliefs are shared by the members of a tradition that other beliefs—even important beliefs—can be profitably debated. By sharing linguistic and conceptual resources, beliefs, institutions, and practices; by according canonical status to the same texts; and by according authoritative status to the same people or positions, members of a tradition share enough in common that they can profitably debate that in their tradition which is unsettled, unclear, or problematic.

That a tradition, even in the midst of its internal arguments, must hold core beliefs together is the fourth key element of a tradition, according to MacIntyre. He writes, “A viable tradition is one which holds together conflicting social, political, and even

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre, “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions,” 22.

metaphysical claims in a creative way.”<sup>25</sup> MacIntyre mentions creativity because there is no rule that specifies in advance how a tradition must hold such claims together. “The activities which inform a tradition are always rationally underdetermined; that is, we can specify no set of rules, no set of rational procedures, which are either necessary or sufficient to guide the activity informing the tradition as it proceeds.”<sup>26</sup> In the Christian tradition, for instance, certain core beliefs about the monotheistic God and salvation through Jesus Christ cannot be abandoned without the tradition itself being compromised. But other questions in the tradition can be profitably debated even when those questions are important (e.g., how the nature of Christ is to be understood<sup>27</sup>) and/or when they involve argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives Christianity its particular point and purpose (e.g., questions about Christian morality, heaven, the Beatific Vision, etc.).

Colby mentions “questions regarding essentialism in fixing the contents of a tradition.”<sup>28</sup> On MacIntyre’s account the contents of a tradition, by and large, cannot be permanently established, especially not in the early stages of a tradition. That being said,

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<sup>25</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority,” in *Through the Looking-glass: Epistemology and the Conduct of Inquiry*, ed. Maria J. Falco (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979), 57.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>27</sup> Questions about how to understand the nature of Christ were in fact discussed within the Christian tradition at The First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), the First Council of Constantinople (381), The Council of Ephesus (431), and The Council of Chalcedon (451).

<sup>28</sup> Colby, “Moral Traditions, MacIntyre and Historicist Practical Reason,” 70.

certain core beliefs are established in a tradition such that the rejection of them constitutes the rejection of the tradition itself. As D'Andrea puts it, "A tradition is a tradition because it contains within itself some principle of continued existence through time. Therefore, some core beliefs must survive every modification of its belief set."<sup>29</sup> Within the context of certain shared, core beliefs, the members of a tradition can establish other defining elements of the tradition. That is, in fact, the point and purpose of the type of argument that MacIntyre finds helpful and necessary within a tradition. As members of a tradition respond to internal conflict and to conflict that arises on account of challenges issued by other traditions, a tradition will either grow or falter. MacIntyre writes:

A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted. Such internal debates may on occasion destroy what had been the basis of common fundamental agreement, so that either a tradition divides into two or more warring components, whose adherents are transformed into external critics of each other's positions, or else the tradition loses all coherence and fails to survive.<sup>30</sup>

Conflict between traditions will be discussed in the following chapter. What is important at the moment in the above quotation is that a vital tradition, as MacIntyre understands it, involves both arguments and fundamental agreements. The type of

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas D. D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 330.

<sup>30</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 12.

argument crucial to a vital tradition is that whereby fundamental agreements are defined and redefined. While it is true that the contents of a tradition cannot be fixed, especially at the outset of a tradition, that does not, in response to Colby, mean that traditions cannot be defined and demarcated in meaningful ways. Within traditions fundamental agreements—core beliefs—are held even in the midst of debate, and it is in terms of them that traditions can be defined and demarcated.

The fifth major element that constitutes what MacIntyre means by a tradition is its narrative structure. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre mentions the narrative structure of traditions in conjunction with the way in which a tradition maintains and advances its core beliefs by means of argument. He writes, “An adequate sense of tradition manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present. Living traditions, just because they continue a not-yet-complete narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past.”<sup>31</sup>

MacIntyre’s account of the narrative structure of traditions is analogous to his account of the narrative structure of the self. In Chapter One, Section Two—“Narrative and the Unity of a Human Life”—we saw how, on MacIntyre’s account, the identity of the self is in an important way informed by the story into which it is born. That story partially determines the identity of the self, but it does not wholly define it. We also saw, however, “that the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its

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<sup>31</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 223.

membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community.”<sup>32</sup> The identity of the self is significantly informed by the particularity of the story into which it is born, and while that particularity sets the stage for its future, the self’s future is not predetermined. Within the constraints of any given person’s particular life-situation, that person may carry out her story in a variety of ways. Similarly, a tradition is importantly grounded in its past. At every moment a tradition is the inheritor of those fundamental agreements that have been defined and redefined through the members’ argumentative engagements with conflict. (A tradition is also the constant heir of its unresolved arguments.) Yet, while a tradition is always inextricably tied to its past, its future is not predetermined. Its future trajectories *are* constrained to some degree by its past—it cannot, for instance, eschew all of its core beliefs while remaining the same tradition—but within those constraints there are still countless directions it can take. A tradition moves from past to future in the mode of a not-yet-complete narrative.

Not only does a tradition take a narrative structure, but according to MacIntyre it is also the case that a tradition is only truly known or appropriated or “owned” by its members and is only made available to others through a retelling of the narrative by which the tradition is constituted. He maintains that the disclosure of a tradition “by its very nature has to take, initially at least, a narrative form. What a tradition of enquiry has

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 221. Emphasis in the original.

to say, both to those within and to those outside it, cannot be disclosed in any other way.”<sup>33</sup> Some of MacIntyre’s earliest and most influential thoughts on narrative and tradition are found in his seminal article of 1977, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science.” There he writes, “A tradition then not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only to be recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative.”<sup>34</sup> MacIntyre takes the work of Galileo as an illustration of this point. Confronted with conflicts internal to and between Ptolemaic and Copernican astronomies, Galileo provided a coherent narrative that both identified the limitations of those astronomies as the limitations that they were and overcame those limitations. That is, he was not only able to solve the problems encountered by his predecessors’ theories, but he was able to show how, on their account, those problems had to arise. He was able to tell a story about the scientific tradition that made sense of both the successes and the problems that had constituted the scientific tradition up to his day. Of Galileo MacIntyre writes:

He, for the first time, enables the work of all his predecessors to be evaluated by a common set of standards. The contributions of Plato, Aristotle, the scholars at Merton College, Oxford, and at Padua, the work of Copernicus himself at last all fall into place. Or, to put matters in another and equivalent way: the history of late medieval science can finally be cast into a coherent narrative. Galileo’s work implies a rewriting of the narrative which constitutes the scientific tradition.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 461.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 460. MacIntyre refers to the achievement of Galileo in a number of works. See, for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre, “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues,” in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*,

Such narrating of traditions is a crucial feature of MacIntyre's approach to moral philosophy. As we shall see in the remaining sections of this chapter, MacIntyre thinks that it is by means of the narrative retelling of a tradition that a tradition either progresses by successfully meeting the internal and external challenges it faces or else lapses into incoherence. Likewise, as we shall see in Chapter Three, it is only by "out-narrating" external traditions that one tradition can defeat another or resist being defeated by another. Bernstein notes the crucial role that the narrating of traditions assumes in MacIntyre's project:

MacIntyre sought to reclaim what it means to participate in a living argumentative tradition that is rooted in concrete historical practices. A rational tradition can only be properly understood when we discover its origins, the way in which it develops, the conflicts it engenders, and the way in which subsequent thinkers succeed or fail in addressing and resolving these conflicts. The only way to understand a living, ongoing tradition is by telling the story of its development. Dramatic narrative is what is required to understand a tradition and this is *the* way to develop a viable moral philosophy.<sup>36</sup>

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*Volume 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 163–64. First published as *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1990). The version in *The Tasks of Philosophy* is revised and expanded. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 118–20. For a very good discussion of MacIntyre's treatment of Galileo and the philosophy of science in general, see Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 47–52. For criticism of MacIntyre's discussion of scientific traditions, see Jean Porter, "Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre," in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 53–54.

<sup>36</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, "Philosophy & Virtue for Society's Sake," review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *Commonweal*, May 20, 1988, 306. Emphasis in the original.

What allows MacIntyre to claim such importance for traditions is his understanding of how traditions are the bearers of rationality, how there is no access to truth save by way of tradition. The next section is devoted to these important but controversial claims.

### **Tradition as Bearer of Rationality<sup>37</sup>**

As early in his career as 1965 MacIntyre begins to consider moral philosophy as being in a state of crisis.<sup>38</sup> In his 1979 article “Why Is the Search for the Foundations of Ethics So Frustrating?,” he provides his first robust account of that crisis. He cites as evidence of the crisis what he considers to be the shrill, interminable, unresolved, and seemingly irresolvable character of modern moral debate. He writes, “It is a central feature of contemporary moral debates that they are unsetttable and interminable. . . . Because no argument can be carried through to a victorious conclusion, argument

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<sup>37</sup> In Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 9, Lutz distinguishes two types of rationality in MacIntyre’s thought: formal rationality and substantive rationality. He writes, “For MacIntyre, rationality is the criteria one uses to judge truth and falsity. MacIntyre distinguishes two kinds of rationality: formal and substantive. Formal rationality includes the sorts of bare logical rules on which philosophers generally agree. . . . Substantive rationality, however, includes all those determinations and judgments about good reasons and acceptable evidence that arise through tradition and convention.” Throughout this dissertation the type of rationality being discussed is substantive rationality, which is the much more controversial type and the type with which MacIntyre is almost exclusively concerned.

<sup>38</sup> For his early formulations of the possibility that moral philosophy is in a state of crisis, see Alasdair MacIntyre, “Imperatives, Reasons for Action, and Morals,” *Journal of Philosophy* 62, no. 9 (October 1965): 523–24 and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Secularization and Moral Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 52.

characteristically gives way to the mere and increasingly shrill battle of assertion with counterassertion.”<sup>39</sup> He points to contemporary arguments about war and abortion as examples of debates that seem to rage on endlessly with opponents on either side of such issues abandoning the possibility of rational discussion for the rhetoric of protest, persuasion, and shrill assertion of their point of view. As V. Bradley Lewis points out, MacIntyre is not presenting an *argument*, per se, for the existence of a crisis in moral philosophy. Rather, he is displaying certain phenomena the consideration of which, he thinks, will lead his readers to conclude as he has that there is in fact a crisis in moral philosophy of which the phenomena he displays are symptomatic. Lewis observes, “What MacIntyre has done, then, is suggest an empirical thesis about the character of contemporary ethical discourse, one that can be accepted or rejected on the basis of observation.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Why Is the Search for the Foundations of Ethics So Frustrating?,” *The Hastings Center Report* 9, no. 4 (August 1979): 16–17. See also *After Virtue*, 6–8 and 71–72.

<sup>40</sup> V. Bradley Lewis, “Modernity, Morality, and the Social Sciences: A Look at MacIntyre’s Critique in Light of *Fides et Ratio*,” *Communio* 26 (Spring 1999): 112. As a matter of fact, while some scholars agree in large part with MacIntyre’s empirical thesis about the crisis in moral philosophy, a number of critics reject some or most aspects of it. Some critics argue that moral disagreement cannot be as wholesale as MacIntyre alleges because all disagreement presupposes a background of agreement against which the disagreement occurs. See, for instance, Jeffrey Stout, “Virtue among the Ruins: An Essay on MacIntyre,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 26, no. 3 (1984): 271; Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 212–17; J. B. Schneewind, “MacIntyre and the Indispensability of Tradition,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 1 (March 1991): 167; and Colby, “Moral Traditions, MacIntyre and Historicist Practical Reason,” 53. A second point that critics make against MacIntyre’s empirical thesis is that just because debate (e.g., debate over war or abortion)

MacIntyre's portrayal of the state of moral philosophy in *After Virtue* is, if possible, even bleaker. He likens it to a catastrophe<sup>41</sup> and says that "our moral condition" is now lived "through the new dark ages which are already upon us."<sup>42</sup> Reiterating his observations about the intractable and shrill nature of modern moral debate, MacIntyre claims that what accounts for such characteristics are incommensurable premises from which opponents argue their moral positions. He writes, "The interminable and unsetttable character of so much contemporary moral debate arises from the variety of heterogeneous and incommensurable concepts which inform the major premises from which the protagonists in such debates argue."<sup>43</sup> In debates about war, arguments from premises of peace clash with those of justice or of security. In debates about abortion, arguments from premises of rights clash with those involving what it means to safeguard

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is ongoing that does not necessarily mean it is unsetttable or interminable. See, for instance, Charles Larmore, Review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 8 (August 1989): 442; W. David Solomon, "Comment on MacIntyre," *The Review of Politics* 52, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 372; and Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 123. For more general disagreements with MacIntyre's thesis that a decline leading to a crisis in moral philosophy has occurred, see Richard J. Bernstein, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," *Soundings* 67, no. 1 (1984): 15; Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents*, 219; Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr., *Afterwords: Hellenism, Modernism, and the Myth of Decadence* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 203–05; Gordon Graham, "MacIntyre on History and Philosophy," in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16; and Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 122–23.

<sup>41</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1–5.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

life. In all cases valid arguments can be constructed from the premises assumed, but the premises are incommensurable, by which MacIntyre means that “there is and can be no independent standard or measure by appeal to which their rival claims can be adjudicated, since each has internal to itself its own fundamental standard of judgment.”<sup>44</sup> Because the premises from which the rival arguments are constructed are at bottom incommensurable, reason-based resolution is not possible. Debates therefore remain rationally intractable, and those engaged in argument resort to shouting or rhetoric in an attempt to force or persuade their opponents to believe that which it is impossible to convince them of rationally. About such arguments MacIntyre writes:

Every one of the arguments is logically valid or can be easily expanded so as to be made so; the conclusions do indeed follow from the premises. But the rival premises are such that we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one as against another. For each premise employs some quite different normative or evaluative concept from the others, so that claims made upon us are of quite different kinds. . . . It is precisely because there is in our society no established way of deciding between these claims that moral argument appears to be necessarily interminable. From our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion. Hence perhaps the slightly shrill tone of so much moral debate.<sup>45</sup>

As mentioned, MacIntyre regards this state of affairs—wherein “disputed questions concerning justice and practical rationality are thus treated in the public realm, not as a matter for rational enquiry, but rather for the assertion and counterassertion of

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<sup>44</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

alternative and incompatible sets of premises”<sup>46</sup>—as a crisis or catastrophe. The chief cause of this crisis is the failure of what MacIntyre calls “the Enlightenment project.”

The Enlightenment project arose in an attempt to give ethics a new grounding after the rejection of Aristotelian politics, teleology, and ethics in the late Middle Ages.

MacIntyre writes, “It was a failure in the later European middle Ages to sustain the ongoing tradition of the virtues, understood in both an Aristotelian and a Christian way, that led to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century rejection of Aristotelian ethics and politics and so opened up the possibility of the Enlightenment project.”<sup>47</sup>

The Enlightenment project involved the attempt to justify moral principles without, as D’Andrea puts it, “sufficient recourse to natural teleology and history.”<sup>48</sup> What was rejected was Aristotle’s teleological and ethical scheme according to which, writes MacIntyre, “There is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature. Ethics is the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from the former state to the latter.”<sup>49</sup> In place of traditional morality, Enlightenment thinkers sought to advance “a kind of secular morality that would be entitled to secure the assent of any rational

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<sup>46</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> MacIntyre, “The Claims of *After Virtue*,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 72. First published in *Analyse und Kritik* 6, no. 1 (1984): 3–7.

<sup>48</sup> D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 399.

<sup>49</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 52.

person.”<sup>50</sup> Some philosophers tried to ground morality in the passions, others in reason, but always in such a way that “no adequately reflective rational person could refuse allegiance.”<sup>51</sup> In MacIntyre’s estimation, that attempt failed. Lewis summarizes MacIntyre’s position, writing:

One group of philosophers attempted a reconstruction by finding the basis of morality in untutored human nature, that is, in the passions and desires on their own (Hume, Smith, Diderot). This project founders on the inability to specify the priority some passions ought to have over others (some external criterion would be necessary). Another group attempts to reground morality on the basis of reason itself (Kant). This latter project founders on the inability of philosophers to adequately determine a firm basis for the conventional rules.<sup>52</sup>

As evidence of what he regards as the failure of the Enlightenment project, MacIntyre points to the way in which the various attempts to ground morality, each while claiming universal allegiance, conflict with each other. What the Enlightenment project issued in, writes MacIntyre, was “a set of mutually antagonistic moral stances, each claiming to have achieved this kind of [universal] rational justification, but each also disputing this claim on the part of its rivals.”<sup>53</sup> One sign of the Enlightenment project’s failure is seen in Kierkegaard’s advocacy of radical choice in ethical matters since from his post-Enlightenment vantage point reason seems inept at grounding ethics. MacIntyre also sees the failure of the Enlightenment projected reflected in modern-day emotivism in

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<sup>50</sup> MacIntyre, “The Claims of *After Virtue*,” 70.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Lewis, “Modernity, Morality, and the Social Sciences: A Look at MacIntyre’s Critique in Light of *Fides et Ratio*,” 116.

<sup>53</sup> MacIntyre, “The Claims of *After Virtue*,” 70.

which moral judgments are seen as devoid of rational warrant and are, rather, “*nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling.”<sup>54</sup>

Central to the Enlightenment project and implicit in the foregoing discussion of how Enlightenment philosophers sought to ground morality is what MacIntyre calls the “encyclopaedist” view of reason, so-called because it is notably embodied in the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.<sup>55</sup> On this view rational enquiry is understood to be impersonal, universal, and disinterested, appealing to standards of agreement which all people, as rational beings, would acknowledge. MacIntyre writes:

It was the shared belief of the protagonists of the Enlightenment . . . that one and the same set of standards of truth and rationality—and indeed of right conduct and adequate aesthetic judgment—were not only available to all human beings *qua* rational persons, but were such that no human being *qua* rational person could deny their authority. The central project of the Enlightenment was to formulate and to apply those standards.<sup>56</sup>

The “encyclopaedist” view of rational enquiry is ahistorical, as Gordon Graham observes: “This conception of rational inquiry understands the pursuit of truth and the acquisition of knowledge according to the model of compiling an encyclopedia. It is the conception . . . that the pursuit of understanding consists in the timeless, yet progressive accumulation

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<sup>54</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 12. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>55</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 2.

<sup>56</sup> MacIntyre, “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions,” 20. For complementary characterizations of the Enlightenment’s encyclopaedist view of reason, see Alasdair MacIntyre, “Some Enlightenment Projects Reconsidered,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999), 245 and MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 42.

of information. . . . The encyclopaedist's conception is ahistorical."<sup>57</sup> In addition to being detached from history, the encyclopaedist view of reason strives to be detached from all cultural particularities which, writes MacIntyre, "the Enlightenment thinkers took to be the mere accidental clothing of reason in particular times and places."<sup>58</sup> As D'Andrea observes, "For the Encyclopaedist, reason is by nature impersonal, impartial, disinterested, universal, and uniting: to succeed, rational inquiry requires freedom from allegiance to any community, religious or moral, with that partiality of standpoint that any such allegiance brings."<sup>59</sup>

In MacIntyre's estimation Nietzsche is the thinker who most clearly recognized the failure of the Enlightenment project. MacIntyre writes, "The philosopher who understood best that the Enlightenment project had failed decisively and that contemporary moral assertions had characteristically become a set of masks for unavowed purposes was Nietzsche."<sup>60</sup> In place of the false pretensions of encyclopaedists to universally binding moral rules, Nietzsche offers his genealogy of morals. In place of the vain aspirations of encyclopaedists to universal reason, Nietzsche asserts perspectivism. MacIntyre writes, "Nietzsche, as a genealogist, takes there to be a multiplicity of perspectives within each of which truth-from-a-point-of-view may be

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<sup>57</sup> Graham, "MacIntyre on History and Philosophy," 27.

<sup>58</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 349.

<sup>60</sup> MacIntyre, "The Claims of *After Virtue*," 71.

asserted, but no truth-as-such, an empty notion. . . . There are no rules of rationality as such to be appealed to, there are rather strategies of insight and strategies of subversion.”<sup>61</sup> Whereas the encyclopaedist view of enquiry strives to be ahistorical and detached from all cultural particularities, Nietzsche views all claims to truth as mired in the historical and the particular so that all such claims are the unwitting representative of particular interests. Graham summarizes MacIntyre’s characterization of genealogy:

The genealogical conception (MacIntyre takes Nietzsche as its representative protagonist) is acutely aware of historical context, and sees the timeless accumulation of truth as an impossible ideal. Truth and understanding are relative to historical period and social purpose. . . . Because he sees, rightly, that total historical detachment, or radical universalism, is impossible, he swings violently in the opposite direction and concludes that every thought and idea is the creature, and hence the instrument, of its time, to be used or abused in the power struggles of social and political history.<sup>62</sup>

On the one hand, MacIntyre finds the Enlightenment project intelligible: “It was because a moral tradition of which Aristotle’s thought was the intellectual core was repudiated during the transitions of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries that the Enlightenment project of discovering new rational secular foundations for morality had to be undertaken.”<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, MacIntyre thinks that the Enlightenment project failed, and he finds Nietzsche’s critique of that project decisive: “That [Enlightenment] project failed, because the views advanced by its most intellectually powerful protagonists . . . could not be sustained in the face of rational criticism that Nietzsche and

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<sup>61</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 42.

<sup>62</sup> Graham, “MacIntyre on History and Philosophy,” 27.

<sup>63</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 117.

all his existentialist and emotivist successors were able to mount.”<sup>64</sup> MacIntyre does not, however, think that Nietzsche’s successful critique of the Enlightenment project entails the rejection of the Aristotelian conception of morality or rational enquiry which the Enlightenment philosophers sought to replace. For in MacIntyre’s view the rejection of Aristotle was, in the first place, a mistake. He writes:

Although the rejection of Aristotelian ethics and politics in the historical circumstances engendered in and after the later Middle Ages is intelligible, it has never yet been shown to be warranted. And I conclude that when moral Aristotelianism is rightly understood, it cannot be undermined by the kind of critique that Nietzsche successfully directed against both Kant and the utilitarians. I therefore conclude that Aristotle is vindicated against Nietzsche and moreover that only a history of ethical theory and practice written from an Aristotelian rather than a Nietzschean standpoint enables us to comprehend the nature of the moral condition of modernity.<sup>65</sup>

The project of attempting to vindicate Aristotelian conceptions of ethics and reason over those of Enlightenment and genealogic thinkers is the subject of MacIntyre’s work in *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* not to mention numerous other articles and chapters of books. As such, MacIntyre’s extensive arguments for the superiority of Aristotelian conceptions cannot be rehearsed in any length here. The aspect of his position that does, however, deserve close attention here is the form of rational enquiry that MacIntyre advocates in place of the encyclopaedist and genealogist conceptions: namely, the rational inquiry of tradition. Once again, MacIntyre alludes to but does not provide a detailed description of this

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> MacIntyre, “The Claims of *After Virtue*,” 72.

aspect of tradition in *After Virtue*. There he writes, “All reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic.”<sup>66</sup>

As we have seen, MacIntyre thinks that the Enlightenment project of attempting to justify morality by appeal to impersonal, universal, and disinterested reason is intelligible in the wake of the rejection of Aristotelian morality and teleology. At the same time, however, he thinks that that project failed (and “had to fail”<sup>67</sup>). MacIntyre sees as signs of that failure the disagreements between the Enlightenment philosophers, the rejection of reason by Kierkegaard, the critique by Nietzsche, and the outgrowth of emotivism. In place of the Enlightenment’s conception of universal rational enquiry, MacIntyre argues that rational enquiry must be regarded as bound to a tradition in such a way that its standards of rational justification are constituted from within the tradition over time. He writes, “What the Enlightenment made us for the most part blind to and what we now need to recover is, so I shall argue, a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 51–61.

<sup>68</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 7.

To be clear, despite the fact that MacIntyre sees the Enlightenment project as a failure, he does not completely reject all aspects of the Enlightenment.<sup>69</sup> With respect to the Enlightenment conception of reason, rational enquiry, and rational justification, for instance, MacIntyre admires the aspiration to truth. What he rejects is the eschewal of all particularity in its hope of specifying *the* universal method of rational justification to which all people must give their assent by virtue of their being rational individuals. With respect to the genealogic critique of the Enlightenment project, he admires that critique for exposing the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment conception of rational enquiry. What he rejects in the genealogical critique, however, is the relativism which its perspectivism entails. His notion of tradition-constituted rational enquiry is meant to chart a course between these two unsatisfactory alternatives by allowing for the pursuit of truth (pace genealogy) in a way that gives history and particularity its full due (pace the Enlightenment project). Graham summarizes the “middle way” that tradition-constituted rational enquiry holds for MacIntyre:

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<sup>69</sup> In Alasdair MacIntyre, “Bernstein’s Distorting Mirrors: A Rejoinder,” *Soundings* 67 (Spring 1984): 40, MacIntyre clarifies, “The thesis of *After Virtue* is not at all that the thinkers of the Enlightenment have nothing to teach us. It is that in order to learn from them what they genuinely have to teach us their insights have to be integrated into a quite different kind of intellectual framework and understood in terms of a quite different kind of intellectual perspective from those offered by what I called the Enlightenment project.” For aspects of the Enlightenment project that MacIntyre accepts, see Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 29; Bernstein, “Nietzsche or Aristotle?: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*,” 24–28; Stout, “Virtue among the Ruins: An Essay on MacIntyre,” 265; and Alasdair MacIntyre, “Preface,” in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), x.

Whereas the encyclopaedist is unrealistically ahistorical, the genealogist is an historical relativist. In contrast to both positions there is a third possibility to be described—that of the traditionalist. Traditionalists—those who self-consciously work within an historical tradition of inquiry—see the pursuit of understanding as a matter not merely of acquiring items of knowledge but of pursuing intellectual questions and problems that they have not invented but inherited. This notion of intellectual inheritance raises the individual inquirer above the peculiarities of his or her own time, but without removing the whole enterprise into the impossible realm of the timeless. It thus implies that “science,” broadly conceived, requires membership in a tradition—a movement of thought from and through history.<sup>70</sup>

To properly conceptualize MacIntyre’s notion of tradition-constituted rationality, it is helpful once again to contrast his meaning of tradition with the kind of Burkean understanding with which it might carelessly be confused. Here the contrast could not, to MacIntyre’s mind, be more pronounced. He writes:

It will now be obvious why I introduced the notion of tradition by alluding negatively to the viewpoint of conservative theorists. For they, from Burke onwards, have wanted to counterpose tradition and reason and tradition and revolution. Not reason, but prejudice; not revolution, but inherited precedent; these are Burke’s key oppositions. Yet if the present arguments are correct it is traditions which are the bearers of reason, and traditions at certain periods actually require and need revolutions.<sup>71</sup>

Much of MacIntyre’s conception of tradition as the bearer of reason hinges on what he means by holding that “the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history.”<sup>72</sup> It is MacIntyre’s contention that standards of rational justification emerge within a tradition and are refined within that tradition to the extent

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<sup>70</sup> Graham, “MacIntyre on History and Philosophy,” 28.

<sup>71</sup> MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 461.

<sup>72</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 7.

that the tradition adequately explains and resolves the problems which it encounters, thereby testing and strengthening its rational powers. Those problems characteristically manifest themselves through what MacIntyre calls an epistemological crisis, “a systematic breakdown of enquiry in the face of a certain set of intractable problems within a particular scheme of belief.”<sup>73</sup> An epistemological crisis occurs when a tradition encounters serious theoretical difficulties that (at least for a time) prevent it from making rational progress by its own standards. A tradition can be seen to be in epistemological crisis when that tradition’s “hitherto trusted methods of enquiry have become sterile. Conflicts over rival answers to key questions can no longer be settled rationally. . . . This kind of dissolution of historically founded certitudes is the mark of an epistemological crisis.”<sup>74</sup>

To overcome an epistemological crisis, a tradition must extend its rational powers by successfully explaining why the problem had to arise and by providing a solution to the problem, all the while maintaining fundamental continuity between the pre- and post-epistemological crisis theories. MacIntyre writes:

The solution to a genuine epistemological crisis requires the invention or discovery of new concepts and the framing of some new type or types of theory which meet three highly exacting requirements. First, this in some ways radically new and conceptually enriched scheme, if it is to put an end to epistemological crisis, must furnish a solution to the problems which

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<sup>73</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 120.

<sup>74</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 362. See D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 213 where, noting the important role that epistemological crises serve in MacIntyre’s theory, D’Andrea describes epistemological crises as “MacIntyre’s term of art meant to denote the discovery of a significant inadequacy in one’s scheme of belief and interpretation.”

had previously proved intractable in a systematic and coherent way. Second, it must also provide an explanation of just what it was which rendered the tradition, before it had acquired these new resources, sterile or incoherent or both. And third, these first two tasks must be carried out in a way which exhibits some fundamental continuity of the new conceptual and theoretical structures with the shared beliefs in terms of which the tradition of enquiry had been defined up to this point.<sup>75</sup>

If a tradition fails to provide a solution to the problems which give rise to the epistemological crisis, it will lapse into incoherence. If it fails to account for how and why the problem arose, its so-called solution might be more a circumventing of the problem than a true solution. (An example of such a pseudo-solution would be the Ptolemaic theory of epicycles used to explain the problem of what appeared on a geocentric model of the universe to be retrograde motion.) And if the conceptually enriched theory fails to maintain fundamental continuity with the previous theory, then it cannot be an advancement within the same tradition, for traditions presuppose the continuity of core beliefs, as we saw in the previous section.<sup>76</sup> But when a tradition *succeeds* in overcoming an epistemological crisis, it extends and enriches its own standards of rational justification. Lutz notes that “the only way a person or community can resolve an epistemological crisis lies in the establishment of new standards of rationality that can overcome the challenges that brought their old standards into question.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> The case where an epistemological crisis is solved by an external tradition in such a way that the tradition experiencing the crisis suffers defeat will be treated in Chapter Three.

<sup>77</sup> Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 87.

The way in which standards of rational justification emerge through the successful overcoming of an epistemological crisis can be seen in the aforementioned example involving Galileo. Recognizing the serious problems that had arisen within the scientific tradition that had come down to him, Galileo solved that epistemological crisis not by appealing to universal scientific standards (as the Enlightenment philosophers would presumably have him do), for there are no such universal standards. Rather, he solved the epistemological crisis by “telling the story” of the scientific tradition in a revolutionary way, by providing a narrative that both made sense of its limitations and provided a way beyond those limitations. MacIntyre writes, “Galileo not only provided a better explanation of natural phenomena than did the impetus theorists, but he was also able to explain precisely why, given that nature is at it is, impetus theory could not but fail—by its own standards—at just the points at which it did fail.”<sup>78</sup>

Although there are certain disanalogies between scientific enquiry (narrow meaning of “science”) and moral enquiry (which might be included in “scientific enquiry,” taken rather broadly), MacIntyre judges that those forms of enquiry are analogous in regard to the way in which standards of justification emerge from and are refined within the tradition, whether scientific or moral.<sup>79</sup> In both cases commitment to a tradition is required for rational progress. He writes:

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<sup>78</sup> MacIntyre, “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues,” 163.

<sup>79</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past,” in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984),

What is true of physical enquiry holds also for theological and moral enquiry. What are taken to be the relevant data and how they are identified, characterized, and classified will depend upon who is performing these tasks and what his or her theological and moral standpoint and perspective is. . . . Commitment to some particular theoretical or doctrinal standpoint may be a prerequisite for—rather than a barrier to—an ability to characterize data in a way which will enable enquiry to proceed.<sup>80</sup>

Put dogmatically, MacIntyre's position is that there is no reasoning outside of a tradition.<sup>81</sup> Terry Pinkard observes that on MacIntyre's account, "Reasoning is always carried out in terms of shared, socially established standards and in light of what he calls a 'tradition.'"<sup>82</sup> The difference between those working in the Aristotelian/Thomistic tradition, on the one hand, and Enlightenment or genealogical philosophers, on the other, is not that the former work from within a tradition while the latter do not, for on MacIntyre's account they *all* work within one tradition or another. The difference, rather, is that the former occupy what D'Andrea calls "a state of self-consciously partisan

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44–47. For a discussion of *disanalogies* between scientific traditions and moral traditions see Porter, "Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre," 53–54.

<sup>80</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 17. Note that from the context of this quotation, let alone from the argument of *Three Rival Versions* as a whole, it is clear that according to MacIntyre commitment to some particular theoretical or doctrinal standpoint *is* (not "may be") a prerequisite for the ability to characterize data in a way which will enable progress in enquiry.

<sup>81</sup> See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 350: "There is no other way to engage in the formulation, elaboration, rational justification, and criticism of accounts of practical rationality and justice except from within some one particular tradition in conversation, cooperation, and conflict with those who inhabit the same tradition."

<sup>82</sup> Terry Pinkard, "MacIntyre's Critique of Modernity," in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 185.

commitment to a community-of-inquiry-with-a-history”<sup>83</sup> whereas the latter do not, the latter characteristically even viewing such partisan commitment as a grave problem rather than as an ideal. Lutz points out that “tradition, as exemplified in this work [i.e., *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*] is also exemplified in all of the other moral traditions on earth, and is the true model of human rational moral enquiry. Therefore, both encyclopaedia and genealogy, which explicitly reject tradition, must also be understood as traditions.”<sup>84</sup>

Within a tradition of enquiry, what its adherents are justified in holding rationally is that which accords with the best theory so far advanced by the tradition. The best theory so far is the one that provides the best narrative account so far of previous limitations and offers the best way so far discovered for moving beyond the epistemological crises to which such limitations gave rise. MacIntyre writes, “The best theory so far is that which transcends the limitations of the previous best theory by providing the best explanation of that previous theory’s failures and incoherences (as judged by the standards of that previous theory) and showing how to escape them.”<sup>85</sup> Not only can a tradition’s best theory so far evolve as it successfully identifies and surmounts successive limitations, but even a tradition’s conception of what counts as a “best theory so far” can evolve: “The most that we can claim is that this is the best account which

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<sup>83</sup> D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 349.

<sup>84</sup> Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 54.

<sup>85</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Moral Arguments and Social Contexts,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 80, no. 10 (October 1983): 591.

anyone has been able to give so far, and that our beliefs about what the marks of ‘a best account so far’ are will themselves change in what are at present unpredictable ways.”<sup>86</sup>

To the extent that a tradition has successfully identified and overcome theoretical limitations over time, the members of that tradition owe it their rational allegiance.

MacIntyre writes:

It is insofar as it transcends the limitations and corrects the mistakes of those predecessors, and insofar as it opens up new possibilities for those successors, that it achieves rational justification. It is insofar as it fails in these tasks that it fails as a philosophical theory. So the best theory, that to which we owe our rational allegiance, in moral philosophy as elsewhere, is always the best theory to be developed so far within the particular tradition in which we find ourselves at work.<sup>87</sup>

Not only do the members of such a successful moral tradition owe it their rational allegiance, but they are entitled to a significant degree of confidence in its rational power.

In the Postscript to the Second Edition of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre writes that when

a particular moral tradition has succeeded in reconstituting itself . . . the adherents of that tradition are rationally entitled to a large measure of confidence that the tradition which they inhabit and to which they owe the substance of their moral lives will find the resources to meet future challenges successfully. For the theory of moral reality embodied in their modes of thinking and acting has shown itself to be, in the sense that I gave to that expressions, *the best theory so far*.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 455.

<sup>87</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Nietzsche or Aristotle?” Interview by Giovanna Borradori in *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, trans. Rosanna Crocitto (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 147.

<sup>88</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 277. Emphasis in the original. In MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 11, MacIntyre makes a similar claim about the kind of confidence to which philosophers are at best entitled by their arguments: “In philosophy the most that we are all of us entitled to claim for any conclusion or argument is that it is

While the adherents of such a hitherto successful moral tradition are entitled to a good measure of confidence in their moral theory, their tradition cannot now be seen as expressing *the* truth of morality. MacIntyre writes, “We are never in a position to claim that now we possess the truth or now we are fully rational.”<sup>89</sup> A theory can merit the descriptor “best so far” to the extent that it has succeeded in overcoming limitations, in solving epistemological crises. But unforeseen challenges could arise in the future, challenges that would once again put the theory to the test. In acknowledgment of the possibility of future challenges arising that the theory must then overcome if it is still to demonstrate rational prowess, a theory cannot now claim for itself final truth. Thomas Hibbs summarizes this implication of MacIntyre’s theory: “The link between tradition and rationality is of course a leitmotif of MacIntyre’s writings. A consequence of the link is that, although truth may be the goal of philosophy, the most any tradition can assert is that it is the ‘best so far.’”<sup>90</sup>

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the best supported conclusion so far or the best argument so far. There are of course some conclusions that we are all of us entitled to hold with justifiable certainty. But even with these we have to be aware of and prepared to listen to arguments in favor of alternative and rival conclusions.”

<sup>89</sup> MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 455. As will be discussed in the following section, MacIntyre holds that traditions characteristically *do* in fact claim truth for their tenets. The point he is making here is that those truth-claims are always fundamentally open to revision. This point will be also be discussed below.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas S. Hibbs, “MacIntyre’s Postmodern Thomism: Reflections on *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*,” *Thomist* 57 (1993): 282.

Along with the implication that a tradition can never be seen as expressing final truth in its theories, it is similarly the case that its conception of *the* human good can never be known to be fully adequate; it must always be seen as open to future refinement. MacIntyre writes, “The succession of such institutionalized theories in the life of a community constitute a rational tradition whose successive specifications of human good point forward to a never finally specifiable human *telos*.”<sup>91</sup> In Chapter One, Section Three on narrative and the good we saw Bernstein, Schneewind, and Colby allege that MacIntyre’s notion of the good is too indeterminate to limit the range of practices and the types of unity of life that can comprise a good life. It was argued there, however, that on MacIntyre’s account a tradition can provide a determinate enough conception of the human good to do the work he assigns to it. Now we see that such a conception is determinate in the sense of having defined limits but not in the sense of being conclusive or final. That is, a tradition can provide a robust conception of the good, and that conception can meaningfully limit the practices and types of unity that can constitute the good life for man. At the same time, however, that conception can never be known to be completely perfected. It can only be known to be the best conception so far. That being said—and this is an important point in MacIntyre’s philosophy—nothing in his theory rules out there being a supremely best, fully adequate conception of the good life to which particularized conceptions can aspire. “What is required,” writes Kent Reames, “Is a distinction between metaphysics and epistemology: the metaphysical good as such

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<sup>91</sup> MacIntyre, “Moral Arguments and Social Contexts,” 591.

norms all traditions (and indeed all thought and action), but we can only think about the good and come to know it in and through traditions.”<sup>92</sup> It is toward the *telos* of the metaphysical good that moral theories move as they successfully overcome the limitations made known to them through epistemological crises. Terry Pinkard notes the delicate balance that MacIntyre tries to strike between allowing for the existence of universal moral realities, on the one hand, and emphasizing, on the other, the always-particularized ways in which traditions strive to approximate those realities: “Leaving open the possibility that that [*sic.*] there is a ‘best’ moral reality that can emerge out of competing moral traditions leaves MacIntyre open also to endorse a historicized form of moral realism.”<sup>93</sup>

Some critics claim that MacIntyre’s position that what we are justified in holding rationally is that which accords with the best theory so far advanced by the tradition amounts to relativism. Specifically, they claim that his philosophy neither aspires to nor allows for objective moral truth. This “perspectivist challenge” and MacIntyre’s response to it will be the subject of the last section of this chapter. The issue of whether MacIntyre’s moral philosophy involves relativism is important because MacIntyre

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<sup>92</sup> Kent Reames, “Metaphysics, History, and Moral Philosophy: The Centrality of the 1990 Aquinas Lecture to MacIntyre’s Argument for Thomism,” *The Thomist* 62 (1998): 433.

<sup>93</sup> Pinkard, “MacIntyre’s Critique of Modernity,” 184. See also Reames, “Metaphysics, History, and Moral Philosophy: The Centrality of the 1990 Aquinas Lecture to MacIntyre’s Argument for Thomism,” 434: “I have argued that MacIntyre is committed to a strong understanding of the nature of truth, and that his historicism underwrites rather than undercuts that commitment. . . . Historicism properly pursued can lead to metaphysics.”

proposes his narrative approach as the way to overcome, on the one hand, the relativism of genealogists and emotivists and, on the other hand, the unsuccessful universalism of encyclopaedists. If MacIntyre's moral philosophy involves relativism, then his approach might be subject to the same criticisms he brings against the emotivists and genealogists, and it might fail to provide a serviceable alternative to the universalism of the encyclopaedists which he rejects.

## **The Perspectivist Challenge and Truth**

The perspectivist challenge arises in response to MacIntyre's contentions that rationality is tradition-constituted and tradition-dependent and that all reasoning takes place within traditions. If rationality is internal to traditions, if the most a tradition can hope to offer is "the best theory so far," then it seems that MacIntyre cannot allow for the possibility of traditions making real truth-claims. Describing the perspectivist change that is urged against his work, MacIntyre writes, "The perspectivist challenge puts in question the possibility of making truth-claims from within any one tradition."<sup>94</sup> In the face of incompatible positions held by rival traditions, the perspectivist explains away the tensions between those positions by maintaining that rival traditions are not each claiming truth for their positions but are rather "providing very different, complementary perspectives for envisaging the realities about which they speak to us."<sup>95</sup> In other words,

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<sup>94</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 352.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

the perspectivist withdraws from the claims made by traditions the ascriptions of truth and falsity. Lutz writes, “Perspectivism arises when the experience of conflicting moral claims leads theorists to deny that any moral truth exists.”<sup>96</sup> In claiming that MacIntyre’s philosophy neither aspires to nor allows for objective moral truth, critics bring the perspectivist challenge against it.

In this section I will consider the perspectivist challenge as urged against MacIntyre’s work by three critics: Hans Oberdiek, Norman Dahl, and Joan Franks. While expressing many of the same underlying concerns, the versions of the perspectivist challenge articulated by each of these three critics differ in nuanced ways. In response to each of their criticisms I will present aspects of MacIntyre’s understanding of the relationship between the situatedness of all enquiry, rationality, rational justification, success, and truth in order to show how his theory overcomes the objections of these critics.

The criticisms of Hans Oberdiek are expressed in a review of MacIntyre’s 1966 book *A Short History of Ethics*.<sup>97</sup> They constitute perhaps the earliest form of the perspectivist challenge brought against MacIntyre’s work. The occasion for Oberdiek’s criticism is provided by passages such as the following one with which MacIntyre opens *A Short History of Ethics*:

Moral philosophy is often written as though the history of the subject were only of secondary and incidental importance. This attitude seems to be the

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<sup>96</sup> Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 71.

<sup>97</sup> Hans Oberdiek, Review of *A Short History of Ethics*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 9 (May 1969): 269–70.

outcome of a belief that moral concepts can be examined and understood apart from their history. Some philosophers have even written as if moral concepts were a timeless, limited, unchanging, determinate species of concept, necessarily having the same features throughout their history, so that there is a part of language waiting to be philosophically investigated which deserves the title “*the* language of morals” (with a definite article and a singular noun). . . . In fact, of course, moral concepts change as social life changes.<sup>98</sup>

In Oberdiek’s estimation, MacIntyre’s denial that moral concepts are timeless and his affirmation that they change as social life changes is tantamount to his maintaining that variously held conceptual schemes are equally valid. Oberdiek writes:

The twin theses that moral concepts change as social life changes and that normative issues and decisions are limited by one’s conceptual system support MacIntyre’s social-historical relativism. Negatively, the existence of norms that hold for all times and places is denied; positively, the existence of several socially conditioned, equally valid conceptual systems is asserted.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 1. Emphasis in the original. In Alasdair MacIntyre, “Ought,” in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 136, MacIntyre advances a similar line of thinking, a line of thinking which one can easily imagine informed the title of MacIntyre’s book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*. In “Ought” he writes, “Not only the suggestion that different societies have had widely different moral beliefs, but also the more radical suggestion that the conceptual schemes embodied in their moralities have differed widely, would appear as a banal truism to any anthropologist. From Vico to Karl Marx, moral philosophers too appear willing to entertain this prosaic suggestion. But the notion of a single, unvarying conceptual structure for morality dies hard; and from the eighteenth century to this day, the English utilitarians and idealists, logical empiricists and analytical philosophers, have all been willing to discuss moral philosophy on the assumption that there was something to be called ‘*the* moral consciousness’ or, in a later idiom, ‘*the* language of morals.’ The questions ‘*Whose* moral consciousness?’ or ‘*Which* language?’ have rarely, if ever, been raised.” Emphasis in the original.

<sup>99</sup> Oberdiek, Review of *A Short History of Ethics*, 269–70.

Oberdiek thinks that MacIntyre positively defends a perspectivist version of relativism, whereby MacIntyre either holds that moral concepts are “true” for those who hold them but not true as such or else denies altogether that truth may be predicated of systems of moral thought. Oberdiek writes:

By defending relativism, MacIntyre fails to distinguish between the epistemological and the ontological status of conceptual systems. Two mutually incompatible systems may be equally reasonable, equally worthy of acceptance; it does not follow that they are equally *true*. Of course, MacIntyre may wish to deny that truth may be predicated of entire systems, but this is surely an open question.<sup>100</sup>

Oberdiek’s suspicions of perspectivism in *A Short History of Ethics* are understandable given MacIntyre’s denial that moral concepts are timeless and his affirmation that they change as social life changes. Oberdiek’s conclusion that MacIntyre’s position, therefore, is that variously held conceptual schemes are equally valid is, however, not warranted. Nor is Oberdiek’s conclusion warranted that MacIntyre must either think that mutually incompatible systems are equally true or else that truth cannot be predicated of entire systems.

In his 1997 Preface to the Second Edition of *A Short History of Ethics*, MacIntyre responds directly to Oberdiek’s charge of relativism.<sup>101</sup> He acknowledges that certain shortcomings and ambiguities in the book help explain why Oberdiek would think that

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original. For a similar line of criticism, see Robert Wachbroit, “Relativism and Virtue,” *The Yale Law Journal* 94 (1985): 1562–63: “The claim that the truth of such judgments depends upon culture or tradition is paradigmatically a claim of moral relativism, because morality is thought to transcend, and so be independent of, facts about culture or tradition.”

<sup>101</sup> MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, xiv-xvi.

MacIntyre holds a form of relativism, but he denies that the arguments in the book commit him to relativism, which he wishes to reject. By asserting that “each fundamental standpoint in moral philosophy . . . has its own mode of conceptualization and understanding the moral life, which gives expression to the claims of some actual or possible type of social order,”<sup>102</sup> MacIntyre sees how Oberdiek might think that he is affirming the equal validity of those moral standpoints. That conclusion, however, is unwarranted, and MacIntyre clarifies that he did not mean to lend support to it. What MacIntyre failed to emphasize is that what opposing standpoints are claiming is universal truth and that there is a method by which the rational superiority of those truth-claims can be evaluated. He writes:

It seemed to Oberdiek that on my account there could be no way in which the claims of any one set of moral beliefs, articulating the norms and values of one particular mode of social life, could be evaluated as rationally superior to those of another. Each would have to be judged in its own terms. . . . What I had failed to stress adequately was that it was indeed a claim to universality and to rational superiority—indeed a claim to possess *the* truth about the nature of morality—that had been advanced from the standpoint of each particular culture and each major moral philosophy.<sup>103</sup>

*How*, precisely, MacIntyre thinks that the claims of one moral tradition can be evaluated as rationally superior to those of another moral tradition will be the focus of Chapter Three of this dissertation. What is important here is that Oberdiek’s accusations of perspectivism are not warranted because MacIntyre affirms that what traditions are claiming is nonperspectival, objective truth (not just the truth of how matters appear from

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., xv-xvi. Emphasis in the original.

their perspective) and that the rational superiority of one set of claims over another can be evaluated.

A second version of the perspectivist challenge is urged against MacIntyre's work by Norman Dahl who accuses MacIntyre of reducing truth to dialectical success. His objection arises in regard to MacIntyre's contention (discussed in the previous section of this chapter) that within a tradition of enquiry what its adherents are justified in holding rationally is that which accords with the best theory so far advanced by the tradition. This recurring theme in MacIntyre's oeuvre is exemplified in passages such as the following ones to which Dahl's concern applies. MacIntyre writes:

The argument which I have deployed against the very concept of applied ethics does indeed entail the rejection of any conception of moral principles or rules as timeless and ahistorical. What it does not rule out is the possibility of there being enduring moral principles or rules. An enduring moral principle or rule is one which remains rationally undefeated through time, surviving a wide range of challenges and objections, perhaps undergoing limited reformulations or changes in how it is understood, but retaining its basic identity through the history of its applications. In so surviving and enduring it meets the highest rational standard that can be imposed.<sup>104</sup>

And:

The rational warrant for any particular thesis or theory from the standpoint of a tradition is, then, not a matter of whether it conforms successfully to timeless principles; it is instead a question of whether it is or is not the best theory so far.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Does Applied Ethics Rest on a Mistake?," *The Monist* 67, no. 4 (October 1984): 508.

<sup>105</sup> MacIntyre, "The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions," 22.

Like Oberdiek, Dahl thinks that MacIntyre does not hold a realist version of truth but rather a perspectival version whereby “truths” are internal to traditions, amounting in fact to no more than different vantage points. Unlike Oberdiek, Dahl’s objection is based on his (mis)understanding of how, according to him, MacIntyre holds that the truth about any given matter is that which accords with the dialectical success of a tradition in having refined it’s “best theory so far.” Dahl summarizes what he takes to be MacIntyre’s position and the relativism to which it commits him in this way:

The truth about justice is what accords with a successful tradition. . . . What he [i.e., MacIntyre] does not take seriously enough is the possibility of more than one successful tradition. If this were possible, there would be two sets of claims about justice that exclude one another, both of which would be true. It is hard to see how this could occur without truth being relative to a tradition.<sup>106</sup>

There are two problems with Dahl’s criticism. First, MacIntyre’s position is not that the truth about justice (or anything else) is that which accords with a successful tradition, but rather that the success which a tradition is able to enjoy in its dialectical advancements of its increasingly refined best theory so far about justice is that which accords with and expresses ever more completely the truth about justice. For MacIntyre truth is not measured by success; rather, success is measured by truth, which MacIntyre holds to be the adequation of the mind to its object. MacIntyre’s Thomistic understanding of truth will be considered in detail below. In a word, it entails a realist account of truth in which truth, as the adequacy of the intellect to its objects, provides the

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<sup>106</sup> Norman O. Dahl, “Justice and Aristotelian Practical Reason,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 1 (March 1991): 157.

*telos* of enquiry. As such, the success of an enquiring individual or tradition is measured by the extent to which the mind or minds engaged in enquiry become formally identical with the objects of knowledge.

As was the case with Oberdiek's criticism, Dahl's criticism, too, is unwarranted and yet, at the same time, understandable on account of some ambiguities in MacIntyre's works. Dahl's criticisms are expressed in a review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, which contains passages such as the following one, the unclarity of which might well contribute to Dahl's misunderstanding. MacIntyre writes, "It is true of a true thesis that it is one which is able to withstand any objection whatsoever—and to call a thesis true is to be committed to holding that it will never be refuted. Hence 'is true,' if truly predicated, is true for all times and places: 'is true' is a timeless predicate."<sup>107</sup> In saying that a true thesis is one which is able to withstand objections, MacIntyre seems to hold what Dahl takes him to hold: namely, that truth is that which accords with a successful tradition. That characterization of MacIntyre's position, however, does not mesh with MacIntyre's immediately writing that "'is true,' if truly predicated, is true for all times and places: 'is true' is a timeless predicate."<sup>108</sup> MacIntyre's position is nuanced in such a way that Oberdiek's and Dahl's characterizations of it appear at first hasty and ultimately unwarranted when the nuances are adequately understood. A clearer example of how, for MacIntyre, truth norms success rather than the other way around is found in an article published after Dahl's review, wherein MacIntyre writes, "The mind's

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<sup>107</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 71.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

characteristic activity is enquiry and at the core of any enquiry is the task of distinguishing between the true and the false in order to arrive at ‘the truth’ about some particular subject-matter. To have arrived at the truth about some subject-matter is to have achieved understanding, the terminus of enquiry.”<sup>109</sup>

The second problem with Dahl’s criticism follows from the first. Pace Dahl, MacIntyre *does* take seriously the possibility of more than one tradition meeting with (provisional) success. But since for MacIntyre truth does not accord with success, but rather success accords with truth, it is not the case, as Dahl assumes, that more than one hitherto successful tradition would necessitate multiple accounts of justice (or whatever) that would each be true. Each tradition *claims* truth for its position, but ultimately there is only one account of justice that could be fully adequate to the truth about justice. So long as particular traditions provide accounts of justice that overcome difficulties and objections, those “best so far” accounts can rightly be deemed successful, they are moving toward the *telos* of “the truth.” But just because those accounts have met with success so far and are claiming to express *the* truth, that doesn’t mean they all are or could be, when contradictory, true.

Replying directly to Dahl, MacIntyre first points out that from the standpoint of each contending tradition relativism is impossible because what the tradition is claiming for its position is truth—*the* truth—about the matter in question:

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<sup>109</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Truth as a Good: A Reflection on *Fides et Ratio*,” in *Thomas Aquinas: Approaches to Truth*, ed. James McEvoy and Michael Dunne (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 148.

What *is* possible is that two traditions might over a long period of time coexist, each successful by its own standards in elaborating a conception of justice and each claiming truth for its own conclusions in the best light afforded by its own conception of and standards of truth. But to hold the positions of either of such traditions would be incompatible with relativism; for each contending party insofar as it was claiming truth and not, say, merely warranted assertibility for its theses would be committed to holding that its opponents' positions could somehow or other be decisively shown to be inadequate, even if it was not yet in fact possible to do this.<sup>110</sup>

Not only is relativism incompatible with the position of any particular tradition since traditions are making truth-claims, but on MacIntyre's account an observer of two or more rival traditions is not even entitled to a relativistic conclusion just because those rival traditions each claim truth for their positions. He writes:

Of course some observer external to both traditions and committed as yet to the central positions of neither might well find no good reason for preferring one of the rival alternative conceptions of justice and of truth so presented to the other. But this would not by itself be sufficient to justify that observer in arriving at relativist conclusions. He or she would also have to have sufficient reason to believe both that there was no third alternative and that he or she could not simply conclude that there was no good reason to embrace either point of view.<sup>111</sup>

MacIntyre's response to Dahl's criticisms can be summarized in this way. First, by overcoming obstacles traditions attain by their own standards a degree of success. Truth norms success, however, in such a way that it is towards the truth of the matter at hand that a tradition is moving in its successful overcoming of obstacles. It is *not* the case that truth accords with a successful tradition, as Dahl claims. Secondly,

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<sup>110</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Reply to Dahl, Baier and Schneewind," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 1 (March 1991): 177–78. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

perspectivism is incompatible with the point of view of any given tradition since what each tradition claims for its position is *the* truth. As MacIntyre puts the matter elsewhere, “There is from the standpoint of every major moral tradition a need to resist any relativist characterization of that standpoint as no more than a local standpoint. What the claim to *truth* denies is, as Nietzsche understood, any version of perspectivism.”<sup>112</sup> Thirdly, just because rival traditions each *claim* to express *the* truth, that doesn’t mean that their positions are in fact true. While a tradition may have been successful *so far*, it is possible that the trajectory of its positions is such that it will ultimately encounter internal obstacles which it cannot overcome, and it will fail. Or—and this possibility will be addressed in the next chapter—one tradition may later prove able to defeat its rival. And finally, an external observer is not entitled to the perspectivist conclusion that there is no truth merely on account of the fact that more than one rival tradition claims truth for its positions. Not only does MacIntyre’s theory not justify a perspectivist conclusion; when properly understood, his theory does not even allow for it.

Along with Oberdiek and Dahl, Joan Franks finds a form of perspectivism in MacIntyre’s theory. She offers two critiques. First, she claims that according to MacIntyre what a successful tradition has so far achieved is a “truth” that is only true for that tradition and for a time. She writes, “Since every tradition, no matter how sophisticated, is vulnerable to new crises, the ‘truths’ it has achieved are merely true for

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<sup>112</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification,” in *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. Luke Gormally (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), 12. Emphasis in the original.

that tradition at that time.”<sup>113</sup> Franks’ criticisms are based on MacIntyre’s theory as expressed in *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice Which Rationality?*. Consider this passage from the latter which may be thought to support Franks’ critique. MacIntyre writes:

Implicit in the rationality of such [tradition-constituted] enquiry there is indeed a conception of a final truth, that is to say, a relationship of the mind to its objects which would be wholly adequate in respect of the capacities of that mind. But any conception of that state as one in which the mind could by its own powers know itself as thus adequately informed is ruled out. . . . No one at any stage can ever rule out the future possibility of their present beliefs and judgments being shown to be inadequate in a variety of ways.<sup>114</sup>

As the last line of this quotation indicates, Franks is right to characterize MacIntyre’s position as including the notion that traditions are always vulnerable to new crises. But MacIntyre would neither call what traditions have so far achieved “truths,” nor would he claim that a truth is only true for a particular tradition at a particular time. As we saw above, traditions *claim* truth for their positions. They claim precisely that relationship of the mind to its objects which would be wholly adequate to those objects. Such adequacy of mind to its objects is for MacIntyre the *telos* of enquiry, but even if a mind achieved such complete adequacy, it could never know that it had. D’Andrea summarizes this aspect of MacIntyre’s theory: “The human mind does not measure, but is measured by, external reality; therefore, even when it is fully adequate to that reality it can never be certain of its full adequacy. It may warrantably claim apodictic status for

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<sup>113</sup> Joan M. Franks, O.P., “Aristotle or Nietzsche?,” *Listening* 26, no. 2 (1991): 159.

<sup>114</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 360–61.

various of its beliefs, but it can never *know* that any of them enjoy such.”<sup>115</sup> Franks seems to conflate MacIntyre’s notion of a “best theory so far” with his understanding of truth, but he carefully distinguishes these notions. MacIntyre would not say that traditions are expressing different “truths” but rather different “best theories so far.” Franks’ statement would correctly express MacIntyre’s position if it were modified to say, “Since every tradition, no matter how sophisticated, is vulnerable to new crises, the *best theories so far* (not ‘*truths*’) it has achieved are merely *best* (not *true*) for that tradition at that time.”

On MacIntyre’s account the truth is, pace Franks, not merely true for a particular tradition at a particular time. As indicated above, even just in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (let alone in other works which will be considered below) MacIntyre clearly opposes Franks’ characterization of his position: “To call a thesis true is to be committed to holding that it will never be refuted. Hence ‘is true,’ if truly predicated, is true for all times and places: ‘is true’ is a timeless predicate.”<sup>116</sup> MacIntyre understands truth as true for all places and all times, and it is such universal truth that traditions claim for their positions. It is also the case on his account that traditions always advance their claims from one highly particularized standpoint or another. But the fact that enquiry is highly particularized does not belie either truth being timeless or traditions making real truth-claims. MacIntyre expresses this nuanced position, writing:

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<sup>115</sup> D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 358. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>116</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 71.

From the standpoint of tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive enquiry, what a particular doctrine claims is always a matter of how precisely it was in fact advanced. . . . Doctrines, theses, and arguments all have to be understood in terms of historical context. It does not, of course, follow that the same doctrine or the same arguments may not reappear in different contexts. Nor does it follow that claims to timeless truth are not being made. It is rather that such claims are being made for doctrines whose formulation is itself time-bound.<sup>117</sup>

In his 1991 “Précis of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*,” he adds, “There is no inconsistency in making universal claims from the standpoint of a tradition.”<sup>118</sup>

A chief source of Franks’ error—and quite possibly a source of Dahl’s error as well—involves her reading of what MacIntyre means by “truth” and what he means by “rationality.” Franks appears to think that MacIntyre uses those terms interchangeably, which is in fact very far from the case. She writes, for instance, “To imagine a truth independent of our traditions is something he will not allow: ‘it is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions.’”<sup>119</sup> While it is the case on MacIntyre’s accounts that there are no *truth-claims* independent of traditions, there *is* truth about the way things are that is independent of traditions and that stands to those traditions as the *telos* of their enquiry. What cannot on MacIntyre’s account exist independently of our traditions is *rationality*, the criteria used to judge truth and falsity. Much of MacIntyre’s effort in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is spent

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>118</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Précis of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 1 (March 1991): 152.

<sup>119</sup> Franks, “Aristotle or Nietzsche?,” 160.

countering precisely such a notion of universal rationality. Describing the notion of rationality which he thoroughly rejects, MacIntyre writes:

Rationality requires, so it has been argued by a number of academic philosophers, that we first divest ourselves of allegiance to any one of the contending theories and also abstract ourselves from all those particularities of social relationship in terms of which we have been accustomed to understand our responsibilities and our interests. Only by so doing, it has been suggested, shall we arrive at a genuinely neutral, impartial, and, in this way, universal point of view, freed from the partisanship and the partiality and onesidedness that otherwise affect us.<sup>120</sup>

By mistakenly conflating “rationality” and “truth” in MacIntyre’s thought, it is understandable how Franks and other scholars could see his theory as a form of perspectivism.<sup>121</sup> For in that case it would seem that he holds there to be no *truth* freed from the partisanship and partiality and onesidedness of traditions. In fact, however, MacIntyre means something very different by “truth” than he does by “rationality.” On MacIntyre’s account truth is, as we have seen and will investigate more below, the adequation of a mind to its object which serves as the *telos* of enquiry. Rationality, by contrast, is, as Lutz puts it, “MacIntyre’s name for the resources by which a person or community estimates the truth and falsity of philosophical claims. . . . Since we learn to

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<sup>120</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 3.

<sup>121</sup> In Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 104, Lutz argues that it is precisely this mistake which Dahl makes that leads to Dahl’s claim that MacIntyre reduces truth to dialectical success. Lutz writes, “MacIntyre does not reduce *truth* to dialectical success. This kind of dialectical success can justify a form of rationality; it can justify our claims that one way of looking at the world provides the best theory so far. But truth and rationality are not the same thing, and MacIntyre carefully distinguishes them. According to MacIntyre, truth is constituted by correspondence of mind and judgment to reality, but no objective criterion for the assessment of this correspondence is available to natural human reason.” Emphasis in the original.

judge truth and falsity through the resources of the tradition in which we are formed, MacIntyre says that rationality is tradition-constituted.”<sup>122</sup> Truth and rationality are distinct concepts in MacIntyre’s thought, and there are many examples in his oeuvre in which he clearly distinguishes them. For example, in “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions,” he writes:

The Enlightenment understood truth as something that we could in an important way possess at the beginning of our enquiry and indeed, did we not initially lay hold of it, we should have no starting-point for our further construction of a set of true beliefs. . . . By contrast, from the standpoint of a tradition the truth is that towards which one is moving. To assert the truth of some particular thesis or theory is to claim that it will form part of a finally adequate account of those realities about which the tradition speaks to us, if such is ever achieved. This conception of the truth as a *telos*, a goal not yet attained, enforces a contrast between truth and rational justification. The rational justification for any particular thesis or theory which we possess at any particular point in time can be no more, from this point of view, than the best rational justification so far, always to some degree provisional, always such that we can never rule out the possibility of discovering its limitations and having to attempt to transcend them. It is, indeed, part of what makes a tradition a tradition that its adherents recognize a movement toward truth and a set of partial achievements of truth in that progress by which the limitations of each particular form of rational justification are transcended.<sup>123</sup>

In his teleological understanding of truth as that toward which successful traditions move, MacIntyre’s theory clearly avoids Franks’ characterization of it as not allowing for a truth independent of traditions. It is rather rational justification, with which Franks confuses

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>123</sup> MacIntyre, “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions,” 24. For other noteworthy instances of MacIntyre clearly distinguishing truth from rationality, see Alasdair MacIntyre, “How Can We Learn what *Veritatis Splendor* has to Teach,” *The Thomist* 58 (1994): 187–88; MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification,” 9–11; MacIntyre, “Truth as a Good: A Reflection on *Fides et Ratio*,” 150.

truth, that is always tradition-bound. MacIntyre writes, “Actual rational justifications are characteristically advanced by particular persons at particular stages of particular enquiries, while truth is timeless.”<sup>124</sup>

While in the above excerpt from “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions” (published in 1986) MacIntyre clearly distinguishes truth from rationality, that distinction and, in general, what MacIntyre means by truth eludes many scholars, especially those who exclusively or primarily read his “trilogy” of *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. In 1994, for instance, John Haldane—who is sympathetic to MacIntyre’s project but worries it may involve relativism—expressed his hope “that we will see a future volume by MacIntyre setting out the truth in Thomism—in ways which make clear why such worries [of relativism] as I have presented here are unfounded.”<sup>125</sup> Haldane suggested that such a volume develop “certain metaphysical claims—perhaps under the title *The Truth in Thomism*, or more generally, *The Requirements of Truth*.”<sup>126</sup> The call for a clear expression of what MacIntyre means by truth is understandable in light of the fact (which

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<sup>124</sup> MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification,” 10.

<sup>125</sup> John Haldane, “MacIntyre’s Thomist Revival: What Next?,” in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 105.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

MacIntyre himself readily acknowledges<sup>127</sup>) that the bulk of what he has written, especially in the “trilogy,” concerns his thoughts not on *truth* but on *rational justification*.

While Haldane’s call for a clear expression of truth is understandable, MacIntyre in fact provided just such an account four years *prior* to Haldane’s request. It is striking, in fact, how well the account MacIntyre provided anticipates Haldane’s wish. The volume in which MacIntyre very clearly expresses his Thomistic understanding of truth is his 1990 Aquinas Lecture entitled “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues” (hereafter “First Principles”).<sup>128</sup> Writing in 1998, Kent Reames points out how in the first eight years following its publication, “First Principles” has been “almost completely ignored” by scholars.<sup>129</sup> He notes, “A check of the citation index since 1990 turns up precisely three references to [“First Principles”], none of which shows engagement with MacIntyre’s major philosophical theses.”<sup>130</sup>

Being the primary work in which MacIntyre focuses on truth (rather than on rational justification), “First Principles” is immensely important. It rounds out

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<sup>127</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to My Critics,” in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 300.

<sup>128</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues,” in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 143–78. First published as *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1990). The version in *The Tasks of Philosophy* is revised and expanded.

<sup>129</sup> Reames, “Metaphysics, History, and Moral Philosophy: The Centrality of the 1990 Aquinas Lecture to MacIntyre’s Argument for Thomism,” 420.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

MacIntyre's thought and dispels many mistaken conclusions which one might errantly draw from his focused treatment of rational justification in the "trilogy." In light of the importance of "First Principles," Reames is surely correct to suppose that "much misinterpretation of [MacIntyre's] work" is owed to "the almost complete neglect of his 1990 Aquinas Lecture" which "forwards arguments that take MacIntyre's thought in a very different direction from the way most commentators understand it, and contains implicit responses to some of the most important criticism that has been directed at it."<sup>131</sup>

In "Metaphysics, History, and Moral Philosophy: The Centrality of the 1990 Aquinas Lecture to MacIntyre's Argument for Thomism,"<sup>132</sup> Reames provides a thoroughgoing commentary on "First Principles," and it is unnecessary to retrace his steps at great length here. I do, however, wish to present a brief summary of MacIntyre's account of truth. The question of whether that account is authentically Thomistic is beyond the scope of this dissertation and is, at any rate, already adequately addressed by Reames in the aforementioned article and also by Christopher Lutz in a chapter of *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* entitled "Is MacIntyre's Philosophy Thomism?"<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 419.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 419–43.

<sup>133</sup> Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 113–60. Whereas Haldane isn't sure whether MacIntyre's philosophy is authentically Thomistic, Reames and Lutz each make the case that it *is*. Janet Coleman makes the opposite case in Janet Coleman, "MacIntyre and Aquinas," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 65–90. It is worth noting that whereas Reames and Lutz draw heavily from "First Principles," Coleman, like Haldane, seems entirely unaware of the piece. In MacIntyre, "A Partial Response to My Critics," 300, MacIntyre responds

In “First Principles” MacIntyre argues for a conception of enquiry—be it the enquiry of a single mind or of an entire tradition—wherein the *telos* of that enquiry is the adequation of the mind to its objects. Of an individual engaged in enquiry he writes, “Insofar as a given soul moves successfully towards its successive intellectual goals in a teleologically ordered way, it moves towards completing itself by becoming formally identical with the objects of its knowledge, so that it is adequate to those objects.”<sup>134</sup> He describes such intellectual achievements as successive because each achievement adumbrates a still greater possible fulfillment. “All knowledge even in the initial stages of enquiry is a partial achievement and completion of the mind, but it nonetheless points beyond itself to a more final achievement.”<sup>135</sup> While such successive fulfillments are characteristic of enquiry, it is theoretically possible for enquiry to achieve complete adequacy to its objects. But even in that case the enquiring individual or tradition would not be in a position to *know* that complete adequacy had been achieved. “We can know without as yet knowing that we know.”<sup>136</sup> Enquiry always points forward in such a way that present truth-claims involve the expectation that they will be vindicated by future

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directly to Coleman’s critique. He points out that she “supplies answers, with most of which I am in agreement,” to questions about truth. Those are not, however, the questions with which MacIntyre is engaged in the works on which Coleman’s critique is based: namely, *After Virtue* and *Three Rival Versions*. As such, Coleman is not providing a critique of MacIntyre’s position so much as a supplement to it, a supplement that agrees in large part with the supplement he himself provides in “First Principles.”

<sup>134</sup> MacIntyre, “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues,” 149.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

intellectual achievements. That is, future intellectual achievements are expected to show how and why present truth-claims are in fact true. “For the Thomist our present knowledge involves reference forward to that knowledge of the *arche/principium* which will, if we achieve it, give us subsequent knowledge of the knowledge that we now have.”<sup>137</sup>

Most types of enquiry, and certainly most types with which MacIntyre has been concerned throughout his career, are very much still *in via*, still on their way toward complete understanding. As Reames puts it, they are “not perfected; they contain errors, problems, even self-contradictions yet to be resolved.”<sup>138</sup> Perfected understanding, in which “every movement of a mind within the structures of that type of understanding gives expression to the adequacy of that mind to its objects,”<sup>139</sup> is the goal of enquiry. MacIntyre calls this goal a perfected science, which he further describes as “one which enables us to understand the phenomena of which it treats as necessarily being what they are, will be, and have been.”<sup>140</sup> In every area which the mind seeks to comprehend, the goal is to achieve such a perfected science, “for enquiry aspires to and is intelligible only

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Reames, “Metaphysics, History, and Moral Philosophy: The Centrality of the 1990 Aquinas Lecture to MacIntyre’s Argument for Thomism,” 423.

<sup>139</sup> MacIntyre, “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues,” 155.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 157.

in terms of its aspiration to finality, comprehensiveness, and unity of explanation and understanding.”<sup>141</sup>

While argument *from* a perfected science would be deductive, argument *toward* a perfected science is never deductive; it is always dialectical. It is such dialectical argument that MacIntyre has spent the bulk of his career seeking to understand and to describe. Dialectical argument arises in the particularized, in the historicized, in the situatedness given by culture, place, time, etc. It receives, refines, tries to build upon, and sometimes partially rejects the line of argument so far. He writes, “We can begin, just as Aristotle did, only with a type of dialectical argument in which we set out for criticism, and then criticize in turn, each of the established and best reputed beliefs held amongst us as to the fundamental nature of whatever it is about which we are enquiring.”<sup>142</sup> It is on the path of such dialectical progress that a tradition (or even just an individual) can meet with one or more epistemological crises. Progress is achieved only when traditions are able to respond successfully to such crises by overcoming limitations in their theories, successively advancing their “best theories so far.”

From the perspective of a perfected science, understanding is perfected when, as Reames puts it, it “understands things in the world as a perfected science would explain them. Such an understanding truly corresponds to—is adequate to—reality.”<sup>143</sup> From the

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>143</sup> Reames, “Metaphysics, History, and Moral Philosophy: The Centrality of the 1990 Aquinas Lecture to MacIntyre’s Argument for Thomism,” 426.

perspective of the kind of dialectical understanding that traditions are characteristically involved in, however, a perfected science is regarded as that which has successfully overcome all challenges brought against it. According to Reames, “A perfected science, then, is just a science that has gone on long enough, and been tested enough, and been successful enough at surviving these tests, to be fairly certain in its claim to have reached the correct understanding of the nature of the relevant aspects of the world.”<sup>144</sup>

MacIntyre points out that rational justification is really of two sorts. Within a perfected science, rational justification is deductive from first principles. MacIntyre writes, “Within the demonstrations of a perfected science, afforded by finally adequate formulations of first principles, justification proceeds by way of showing of any judgment either that it itself states such a first principles or that it is deducible from such a first principle.”<sup>145</sup> Within a science that is as yet imperfect, however, rational justification involves showing how a claim would in fact be constitutive of the science when perfected. MacIntyre writes:

But when we are engaged in an enquiry which has not yet achieved this perfected end state . . . rational justification is of another kind. For in such

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 425. Compare favorably MacIntyre’s discussions of truth-claims in MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 358 and Alasdair MacIntyre, “Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism,” *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 1 (1999): 4–5.

<sup>145</sup> MacIntyre, “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues,” 165. See D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 292, where he observes, “What is interestingly different about this view, [MacIntyre] will argue, is that unlike the Enlightenment view of reason . . . this view maintains that universal, rational justification by means of non-gainsayable first principles can only be had *at the end* of a long effort of dialectical inquiry and dialectical testing.” Emphasis in the original.

justification what we are arguing to is a conclusion that such and such a judgment does in fact have a place in what will be the final deductive structure. We are engaged in the dialectical construction of such a structure.<sup>146</sup>

As the form of rational justification appropriate to as-of-yet unperfected sciences, MacIntyre says this second type of rational justification is at home in “the activities of almost every, perhaps of every science with which we are in fact acquainted.”<sup>147</sup> Almost all of what MacIntyre has ever written about rational justification relates to this second type of justification. It is, then, in the context of the movement *toward* rather than *from* a perfected science that scholars must judge MacIntyre’s thoughts on rational justification.

In the movement toward a perfected science, truth as the adequacy of mind to its objects stands as the *telos* of enquiry.<sup>148</sup> MacIntyre writes, “That truth which is the adequacy of the intellect to its objects thus provides the *telos/finis* of the activities involved in this second type of rational justification.”<sup>149</sup> Once again, the distinction

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> See Kelvin Knight, “MacIntyre’s Progress,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6 (2009): 115, where Knight rightly observes that on MacIntyre’s account “truth should itself be understood teleologically, as the goal and good internal to practices and traditions of enquiry.”

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 166. For more on the characterization of truth as the *telos* of enquiry, see MacIntyre, “The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions,” 24; MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification,” 11–20; and MacIntyre, “Truth as a Good: A Reflection on *Fides et Ratio*,” 152. For more on the characterization of truth as the adequacy of mind to its objects, see MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification,” 18; Kelvin Knight, ed., *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 19; and MacIntyre, “Truth as a Good: A Reflection on *Fides et Ratio*,” 149.

between truth and rationality in MacIntyre's thought is clear. As Lutz puts it, "MacIntyre defines truth as *adequatio mentis ad rem*, that is, as the adequation of the mind's judgment of a thing to the reality of that thing. For MacIntyre, rationality is the criteria one uses to judge truth and falsity."<sup>150</sup>

To the objection that "no one could ever finally know whether the *telos/finis* of some particular natural science had been achieved or not," MacIntyre's response is "not to deny its central claim, but rather to agree with it and to deny that it is an objection."<sup>151</sup> He points out that at certain points in history both geometry and physics were thought to be perfected sciences, which at later stages they were shown not to be. Just because some (important) claims in geometry and physics were later shown to be wrong, that does not mean either that those claims were not truth-claims or that there is no such thing as objective truth. On the contrary, it is only when and because what is being claimed is truth—understood as the complete adequation of mind to its objects—that claims can at times be proved false by being shown *not* to be adequate to their objects.<sup>152</sup> D'Andrea summarizes how for MacIntyre this realist conception of truth carries with it a rejection of perspectivism:

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<sup>150</sup> Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 9.

<sup>151</sup> MacIntyre, "First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues," 166.

<sup>152</sup> For discussions in which MacIntyre argues that traditions characteristically possess such a realist conception of truth, see MacIntyre, "The Humanities and the Conflicts of and with Traditions," 24–29; MacIntyre, "A Partial Response to My Critics," 294–95; MacIntyre, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?," 149; and MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," 8–12.

By *their own* standards of argument and justification, particular traditions of moral inquiry undergo rational change and emendation: earlier tenets are contested and may be, often enough are, rejected in light of later findings. This MacIntyre thinks is enough to show that in moral and in other matters, the human mind, including in its social consolidation in a community of enquiry or an intellectual tradition, is governed by objects external to itself. And *that*, he thinks, is enough to show why a thoroughgoing relativism with respect to moral (or metaphysical) truth—that is, a perspectival denial of moral objectivity *tout court*—is entirely implausible.<sup>153</sup>

In “Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification,” written four years after “First Principles,” MacIntyre provides a succinct summary of the nuanced relationship that exists in his thought between enquiry, rational justification, truth, perfected understanding, limitations, progress, and success. He writes:

Aristotle said that ‘Truth is the *telos* of a theoretical enquiry’ (*Metaphysics* II 993b20–1) and the activities which afford rational justification are incomplete until truth is attained. What is it to attain truth? The perfected understanding in which enquiry terminates, when some mind is finally adequate to that subject matter about which it has been enquiring, consists in key part in being able to say how things are, rather than how they seem to be from the particular, partial and limited standpoint of some particular set of perceivers or observers or enquirers. Progress in enquiry consists in transcending the limitations of such particular and partial standpoints in a movement towards truth, so that when we have acquired the ability of judging how in fact it seems or seemed from each limited and partial standpoint, our judgments are no longer distorted by the limitation of those standpoints. And where there is no possibility of thus transcending such

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<sup>153</sup> D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 403–04. Emphasis in the original. For other discussions of how on MacIntyre’s account progress refutes perspectivism, see MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 256–57 and George R. Lucas, Jr., “Refutation, Narrative, and Engagement: Three Conceptions of the History of Philosophy,” in *Philosophical Imagination and Cultural Memory: Appropriating Historical Traditions*, ed. Patricia Cook (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 105.

limitations, there is no application for the notion of truth. Successful enquiry terminates then in truth.<sup>154</sup>

The perspectivist challenge as urged against MacIntyre's thought alleges that MacIntyre denies truth altogether or else that he at least cannot allow for the possibility of traditions making real truth-claims. In fact, however, he provides a robust, realist account of truth, and he holds that it is precisely truth that traditions characteristically claim for their positions. For these reasons MacIntyre's philosophy does not involve the relativism of perspectivism.

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<sup>154</sup> MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," 11.

# Chapter Three

## The Relativist Challenge

In the previous chapter I argued that MacIntyre's moral philosophy does not succumb to the perspectivist challenge that some critics bring against it. In this chapter I will consider whether his moral philosophy is susceptible to the type of relativism urged against it in a second challenge—the relativist challenge.

According to the perspectivist challenge, MacIntyre's theory is charged with containing a form of relativism that could be described as *intra*-traditional inasmuch as no tradition is regarded as making claims to truth. The “internal” nature of this type of relativism is alluded to in MacIntyre's writing that the perspectivist challenge “puts in question the possibility of making truth-claims from *within* any one tradition.”<sup>1</sup>

The relativist challenge, by contrast, involves what could be described as an *inter*-traditional form of relativism. According to this challenge, even if MacIntyre's theory *does* allow for traditions to be making truth-claims, his theory would still involve relativism to the extent that he fails to provide a rational means of adjudicating *between*

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 352. Emphasis added.

the truth-claims of rival traditions. In other words, if multiple traditions are each claiming truth for their own theories, but if there is no way to evaluate rationally the merits of those claims, then MacIntyre's theory involves a form of relativism by which there would seem merely to be "the truth as claimed by Tradition A," "the truth as claimed by Tradition B," etc., but no truth *as such*.

In the first section of this chapter I will consider the relativist challenge as urged by critics against MacIntyre's thought. In the second section I will present MacIntyre's response and proposed solution to the challenge. As we shall see, MacIntyre contends that when a tradition is experiencing an epistemological crisis that it cannot solve, it is possible for the resources of another tradition to solve the crisis on the terms set by the tradition experiencing it. Such "defeat" or "out-narration" with respect to the truth-claims of traditions does not require appeal to universal standards that govern both traditions, and according to MacIntyre there are no such standards. Rather, the two traditions can be brought into meaningful dialog by those enculturated into both traditions who speak the language of each tradition as a first language. I argue that by means of his theory of "defeat" or "out-narration" MacIntyre successfully overcomes the relativist challenge.

## **The Relativist Challenge: Critical Suspicions and Allegations**

The earliest critic to attribute the type of relativism expressed in the relativist challenge to MacIntyre's thought is Hans Oberdiek in his review of *A Short History of*

*Ethics*. In an excerpt of that review already considered in the previous chapter Oberdiek writes, “By defending relativism, MacIntyre fails to distinguish between the epistemological and the ontological status of conceptual systems. Two mutually incompatible systems may be equally reasonable, equally worthy of acceptance; it does not follow that they are equally *true*.”<sup>2</sup> Oberdiek implies that MacIntyre’s theory allows for the equal validity or “truth” of mutually incompatible systems or, at the very least, that his theory does not provide a way to judge between the truth-claims of those mutually incompatible systems. In the Preface to the Second Edition of *A Short History of Ethics* MacIntyre summarizes the relativist challenge that Oberdiek urges against his ethical theory: “It seemed to Oberdiek that on my account there could be no way in which the claims of any one set of moral beliefs, articulating the norms and values of one particular mode of social life, could be evaluated as rationally superior to those of another.”<sup>3</sup>

As MacIntyre himself acknowledges, some passages in *A Short History of Ethics* certainly lend themselves to Oberdiek’s interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Consider, for instance, the following two passages:

If the kind of evaluative question we can raise about ourselves and our actions depends upon the kind of social structure of which we are part and the consequent range of possibilities for the descriptions of ourselves and

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Oberdiek, review of *A Short History of Ethics*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 9 (May 1969): 270. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), xv; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1966.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

others, does this not entail that there are no evaluative truths about ‘men,’ about human life as such? Are we not doomed to historical and social relativism? The answer to this is complex.<sup>5</sup>

And:

We cannot expect to find in our society a single set of moral concepts, a shared interpretation of the vocabulary. Conceptual conflict is endemic in our situation, because of the depth of our moral conflicts. Each of us therefore has to choose both with whom we wish to be morally bound and by what ends, rules, and virtues we wish to be guided.<sup>6</sup>

In *A Short History of Ethics* MacIntyre does not provide a *rational* means for making a choice between conflicting moral standpoints. Consequently, the choice he calls for seems to be an *arbitrary* choice. He seems to be asking us to choose—without good reason—between mutually incompatible moral systems and to bind ourselves to one system or another. In response to MacIntyre’s above question about whether we are doomed to historical and social relativism, it seems, in fact, that on his account we are.<sup>7</sup> That is certainly the conclusion that Oberdiek draws, referring to MacIntyre’s theory as “MacIntyre’s social-historical relativism.”<sup>8</sup>

Some two decades after the publication of *A Short History of Ethics* a number of critics again level the relativist challenge against MacIntyre’s thought, this time chiefly in

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>7</sup> In Kelvin Knight, ed., *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 4, Knight rightly observes that in *A Short History of Ethics* MacIntyre “appeared far from escaping the fundamental arbitrariness of individual choice and moral relativism to which, nevertheless, he remained profoundly opposed.”

<sup>8</sup> Oberdiek, review of *A Short History of Ethics*: 268.

response to that thought's expression in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* At the time of his writing *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre is fully aware of the relativist challenge, which he summarizes in this way:

Argument . . . has been adduced in support of a conclusion that if the only available standards of rationality are those made available by and within traditions, then no issue between contending traditions is rationally decidable. To assert or to conclude this rather than that can be rational relative to the standards of some particular tradition, but not rational as such. There can be no rationality as such. Every set of standards, every tradition incorporating a set of standards, has as much and as little claim to our allegiance as any other. Let us call this the relativist challenge. . . . The relativist challenge rests upon a denial that rational debate between and rational choice among rival traditions is possible.<sup>9</sup>

In a review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Richard Bernstein worries precisely that on MacIntyre's account rational debate between and rational choice among rival traditions is impossible. He writes, "How can we rationally resolve serious clashes about fundamental truth claims among rival traditions? It is simply not clear how we can escape a situation where rival traditions confront each other and do not share any rational standards for resolving their conflicting truth claims."<sup>10</sup> In another, extended review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Julia Annas voices similar concerns: "Many may in fact feel a recurrent doubt as to whether MacIntyre succeeds in avoiding relativism, as he claims to do. He clearly avoids various extreme forms of relativism. . . . But, given that

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<sup>9</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 352.

<sup>10</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, "Philosophy & Virtue for Society's Sake," review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *Commonweal*, May 20, 1988, 307.

he also insists that rationality itself is tradition-dependent, is he not committed to a more subtle form of relativism about rationality?”<sup>11</sup>

Before considering other cases of critics brining the relativist challenge against MacIntyre’s theory and before considering his response to the challenge, it is worth pausing to notice what MacIntyre would agree with in the criticisms of Oberdiek, Bernstein, and Annas. All three critics observe correctly that on MacIntyre’s account rationality is tradition-dependent in such a way that rival traditions do not share any rational standards for resolving their conflicting truth-claims; such rivals embody, as Oberdiek puts it, mutually incompatible systems.<sup>12</sup> In Chapter Two, Section Two—“Tradition as Bearer of Rationality—we saw that MacIntyre’s position is that there is no reasoning outside of traditions: “There is no other way to engage in the formulation, elaboration, rational justification, and criticism of accounts of practical rationality and justice except from within some one particular tradition in conversation, cooperation, and

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<sup>11</sup> Julia Annas, “MacIntyre on Traditions,” review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 394.

<sup>12</sup> To be more precise, while it is the case that on MacIntyre’s account traditions do not share “substantive rationality,” they can and often do share aspects of “formal rationality” (to use Lutz’s aforementioned terminology) such as logic, but that common stock is inadequate for resolving conflicts between their truth-claims. See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 351: “All the traditions with which we have been concerned agree in according a certain authority to logic. . . . Were it not so, their adherents would be unable to disagree in the way in which they do. But that upon which they agree is insufficient to resolve those disagreements.” See also Alasdair MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification,” in *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. Luke Gormally (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), 6–7.

conflict with those who inhabit the same tradition.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, there are no independent standards by which the conflicting claims made by traditions can be adjudicated: “There is no set of independent standards of rational justification by appeal to which the issues between contending traditions can be decided.”<sup>14</sup>

Given MacIntyre’s strong theses that rationality is tradition-dependent and that there is no independent standard by which rival traditions’ truth-claims can be judged, it seems to MacIntyre’s critics that there can be no rational grounds for accepting any one of the rivals rather than another. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre foresees this concern: “It may therefore seem to be the case that we are confronted with the rival and competing claims of a number of traditions to our allegiance in respect of our understanding of practical rationality and justice, among which we can have no good reason to decide in favor of any one rather than of the others.”<sup>15</sup> That this concern is central to Bernstein’s objection is clear in a later piece wherein Bernstein writes that MacIntyre “fails adequately to indicate how disputes about ‘standards of rationality’ (whether *within* a tradition or among rival traditions) are to be *rationally* resolved.”<sup>16</sup>

To the chorus of critics who bring the relativist challenge against MacIntyre’s thought can be added John Horton and Susan Mendus, John Haldane, Mark Colby, and

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<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 350.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity / Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 77. Emphasis in the original.

Peter Watson. Horton and Mendus observe, rather than allege, that “[MacIntyre’s] emphasis on the importance of tradition does give rise to the objection that he is unavoidably committed to a form of moral relativism which construes people as trapped within their own traditions and lacking the resources to engage with and adjudicate between different traditions.”<sup>17</sup> John Haldane, who in general is sympathetic to MacIntyre’s project, worries nevertheless that it is infected by the type of relativism that Horton and Mendus describe. He writes:

The situation of competing traditions seems precisely that which invites a relativist description. A rational enquirer finds himself confronted by rival accounts of *moral* reasoning between which it is said to be impossible for him to make a rational choice. This suggests either that the rival accounts lack any kind of rationality, or that their rationality is internal to them. Thus we arrive at either non-rationalism or relativism.<sup>18</sup>

While many critics *worry* or *suggest* that MacIntyre’s theory may involve the relativist challenge, Colby unambiguously asserts that it in fact does. He writes that MacIntyre’s argument “fails to provide criteria for adjudicating among rival normative content as a whole” and that “the criterial basis for choosing among them when they clash is unclear.”<sup>19</sup> Finally, even as late as 2001 Watson brings the relativist challenge against MacIntyre’s work, writing, “MacIntyre’s conclusion is that our concepts of reasoning

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<sup>17</sup> John Horton and Susan Mendus, “*After Virtue* and After,” in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 12.

<sup>18</sup> John Haldane, “MacIntyre’s Thomist Revival: What Next?,” in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 97. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Colby, “Narrativity and Ethical Relativism,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995): 152.

(and justice) are just one tradition among several. He offers no concept of evolution in these matters.”<sup>20</sup>

Central to all of these criticisms is the question of how truth-claims between rival traditions can be rationally evaluated if rationality itself is tradition-constituted as MacIntyre claims it is. Without an adequate answer to this question, MacIntyre’s theory remains vulnerable to, if not defeated by, the relativist challenge. But MacIntyre’s critics are not the only ones to struggle with this crucial question. Earlier in his career MacIntyre *himself* wrestled with it. Unable at that time to offer a solution to the problem, MacIntyre simply observed:

On all these matters where moral principles confront one another we have no recognized method for coming to a decision. We treat it as an ultimate of moral reasoning that such disagreements cannot be settled. Precisely because they are disagreements on matters of first principle, no more fundamental principles can be invoked as a court of appeal.<sup>21</sup>

And, five years later, in 1969, he writes:

Two beliefs have come to be the unexpressed assumptions of much moral debate. The first of these beliefs is that disagreements between rival moral views are essentially irreconcilable, that there are no shared criteria to which men may appeal in order to settle fundamental disputes.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Watson, *The Modern Mind: An Intellectual History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2001), 679.

<sup>21</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Against Utilitarianism,” in *Aims in Education: The Philosophic Approach*, ed. T. H. B. Hollins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Debate about God: Victorian Relevance and Contemporary Irrelevance,” in *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, ed. Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricœur (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 44.

As the previous chapter disclosed, MacIntyre is fundamentally committed to two seemingly irreconcilable positions. First, what traditions claim is objective truth, not truth-from-a-point-of-view. Secondly, rationality is internal to traditions; there is no external criterion or “objective rationality”—no “higher court of appeal,” so to speak—by which the various truth-claims made by rival traditions can be assessed. Is there, then, no way for the claims of one tradition to prevail over the claims of another? MacIntyre thinks that there is. But before considering the solution he proposes, it is worth noting the significance he attaches to the problem itself. He is so thoroughly convinced that (1) traditions make real truth-claims and (2) there is no higher court of appeal by which those claims can be evaluated that he finds any contemporary philosophy seriously defective if it does not find this problem central. In response to Haldane’s above-stated worries, MacIntyre writes:

How then can this anti-relativistic commitment to truth coexist with an awareness of those facts about different and rival standards of rational justification internal to different traditions which seem, as Haldane puts it, to invite a relativist description? I am strongly inclined to think that any contemporary philosophy which does not find this question inescapable and central must be gravely defective.<sup>23</sup>

If MacIntyre is right, if this problem is or should be of crucial concern to contemporary philosophy, then his proposed solution has important implications not only for the coherence of his own thought but for the landscape of contemporary philosophy as well. What, then, is the solution he offers to the relativist challenge?

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<sup>23</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to My Critics,” in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 295.

## MacIntyre's Response to the Relativist Challenge

In responding to the relativist challenge MacIntyre does not abandon or even weaken his contentions that (1) traditions make real truth-claims and (2) rationality is internal to traditions in such a way that there is no higher court of appeal—no neutral, higher ground of rationality—by which traditions' competing truth-claims can be evaluated. As the worries and accusations of the above critics reveal, affirming both of these contentions gives rise to a marked tension. Some thinkers circumvent the tension (rather than try to resolve it) simply by denying one of those two contentions. Perspectivists characteristically deny the first contention, maintaining that what traditions claim is not truth as such but rather "truth from a point of view," i.e., a perspective. As the previous chapter showed, MacIntyre is no perspectivist. Encyclopaedists (among others) characteristically deny the second contention, claiming that universal standards do exist by which rival truth-claims can be judged; but MacIntyre is no encyclopaedist either. Thirdly, there are also those—relativists—who affirm both of MacIntyre's contentions but cannot or do not attempt to reconcile them with each other. For them the two contentions just stand as surd facts: traditions make real truth claims but there is no way to evaluate those incompatible claims. Taken together, these surd facts entail relativism. MacIntyre is accused, as we have seen, of being just such a relativist, of being unable adequately to reconcile the two contentions to which he holds fast.<sup>24</sup> The position

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<sup>24</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xii; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1981. There MacIntyre acknowledges (but rejects) this accusation. In the Prologue to the Third Edition of *After*

of the relativist and MacIntyre's response to it can be expressed in his writing, "If and insofar as the concept of incommensurability has application to a choice between rival bodies of theory, then we can have no rational grounds for accepting any one of those rivals rather than any other. This entailment I wish to challenge."<sup>25</sup> In other words, while affirming both of the above contentions, like the relativist does, MacIntyre wishes, at the same time, to deny relativism. He wishes to show that while both contentions are in fact true it is still the case that the truth-claims of the rival traditions can somehow be rationally evaluated.<sup>26</sup>

The seeds of MacIntyre's response to the relativist challenge are contained in his theory of epistemological crises. He writes, "The answer to . . . relativism . . . has to

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*Virtue* he writes, "What historical enquiry discloses is the situatedness of all enquiry, the extent to which what are taken to be the standards of truth and of rational justification in the contexts of practice vary from one time and place to another. If one adds to that disclosure, as I have done, a denial that there are available to any rational agent whatsoever standards of truth and of rational justification such that appeal to them could be *sufficient* to resolve fundamental moral, scientific, or metaphysical disputes in a conclusive way, then it may seem that an accusation of relativism has been invited" (xii). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>25</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past," in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 41.

<sup>26</sup> See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 352–54 for a discussion of the four main positions that one can take in response to MacIntyre's two contentions: (1) perspectivism, (2) so-called Enlightenment encyclopaediaism, (3) relativism, or (4) "traditionalism" in MacIntyre's sense of the term. MacIntyre writes, "What was invisible to the thinkers of the Enlightenment should be equally invisible to those post-modernist relativists and perspectivists who take themselves to be the enemies of the Enlightenment, while in fact being to a large and unacknowledged degree its heirs. What neither was or is able to recognize is the kind of rationality possessed by traditions" (253).

begin from considering one particular kind of occurrence in the history of traditions . . . to which elsewhere I have given the name ‘epistemological crisis.’”<sup>27</sup> MacIntyre’s theory of epistemological crises was already considered to some extent in the previous chapter’s section “Tradition as Bearer of Rationality.” Recall that by “epistemological crisis” MacIntyre means “a systematic breakdown of enquiry in the face of a certain set of intractable problems within a particular scheme of belief.”<sup>28</sup> An epistemological crisis occurs when a tradition encounters serious theoretical difficulties that prevent it from making rational progress by its own standards. Sometimes epistemological crises can be overcome from “within,” i.e., by the tradition itself that is faced with the crisis. To overcome its own epistemological crisis, a tradition must extend its rational powers by successfully explaining why the problem had to arise and by providing a solution to the problem. If no solution is provided to the problems which give rise to the epistemological crisis, the tradition will, after perhaps languishing for a while, ultimately lapse into incoherence.

To these previously-considered aspects of MacIntyre’s theory of epistemological crises must be added the following, crucial point. A tradition’s epistemological crisis can

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<sup>27</sup> He first advances that theory in Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” *The Monist* 60, no. 4 (1977): 453–71. For the importance of that article for MacIntyre’s response to the relativist challenge see Thomas D. D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 213: “‘Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science’ . . . is one of the most powerful pieces [MacIntyre] has authored, and it contains the seeds of his solution to the problem of rationality and relativism which he will develop later to full effect in *Whose Justice?*”

<sup>28</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 120.

also, at times, be solved from “without,” i.e., by a tradition external to the tradition faced with the crisis. While MacIntyre does not make this possibility explicit in his earliest articulation of his theory of epistemological crises—wherein he focuses on a tradition solving its own crisis—nothing he says rules out that possibility. In expressing that early theory he writes, “I have suggested that epistemological progress consists in the construction and reconstruction of more adequate narratives and forms of narrative and that epistemological crises are occasions for such reconstruction.”<sup>29</sup> Later, he explicitly recognizes that a tradition external to the tradition undergoing the crisis may be able to provide a more adequate narrative that solves the tradition’s crisis:

What constitutes the rational superiority of one large-scale philosophical standpoint over another is its ability to transcend the limitations of that other by providing from its own point of view a better explanation and understanding of the failures, frustrations and incoherences of the other point of view (failure, frustrations and incoherences, that is, as judged by the standards internal to that other point of view) than that other point of view can give of itself, in such a way as to enable us to give a better historical account, a more adequate and intelligible true narrative of that other point of view and its successes and failures than it can provide for itself.<sup>30</sup>

Recall that for a tradition to solve its own epistemological crisis three criteria must be met. First, the conceptually enriched scheme—the more adequate narrative—that the tradition advances must solve the problems that led to the epistemological crisis. Second, the tradition must explain how and why it was incoherent or impotent prior to its advancement of the conceptually enriched scheme. And third, “these first two tasks must

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<sup>29</sup> MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 456.

<sup>30</sup> MacIntyre, “The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past,” 47.

be carried out in a way which exhibits some fundamental continuity of the new conceptual and theoretical structures with the shared beliefs in terms of which the tradition of enquiry had been defined up to this point.”<sup>31</sup> The third point is important with respect to a tradition solving its own crisis because if the conceptually enriched scheme fails to maintain fundamental continuity with the previous theory, then the post-crisis tradition is not truly an extension of the same tradition, for traditions presuppose the continuity of core beliefs as we saw in the previous chapter’s section entitled “Tradition: Community, Argument, Continuities, and Narrative.”

While the first two criteria are likewise required in order for one tradition to solve the crisis of another, the third criterion is no longer required. In other words, in the case of an external tradition (call it Tradition B) providing the solution to Tradition A’s crisis, it is no longer necessary that the crisis be solved in such a way that the solution maintains fundamental continuity with the shared beliefs in terms of which Tradition A had been defined up to that point. “Derived as it is from a genuinely alien tradition, the new explanation does not stand in any sort of substantive continuity with the preceding history of the tradition in crisis.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the case of one tradition solving the epistemological crisis of another tradition is appropriately described as a case of defeat. “In this kind of situation the rationality of tradition requires an acknowledgement by those who have hitherto inhabited and given their allegiance to the tradition in crisis that the alien

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<sup>31</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 362.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

tradition is superior in rationality and in respect of its claims to truth to their own. . . .

The claim to truth for what have hitherto been their own beliefs has been defeated.”<sup>33</sup>

MacIntyre hastens to add that the adherents Tradition A might not, as a matter of fact, acknowledge their theory’s defeat at the hands of Tradition B. But that doesn’t weaken MacIntyre’s argument. What is important for his argument and for his defense against the relativist challenge is simply that it is possible for the truth-claims of one tradition to be rationally vindicated against those of a rival tradition without there being any neutral vantage point from which the traditions’ rival claims are viewed and evaluated. Thus critics are quite wrong, in MacIntyre’s estimation, in claiming as Susan Feldman does that “only if there is some perspectiveless, absolute standpoint from which characters, lives, and traditions can be observed and judged, can MacIntyre move beyond this relativism.”<sup>34</sup> Against such criticisms as these and in defense of MacIntyre’s position Paul Nelson points out, “Nothing in this scenario requires that the conversation partners adopt . . . ‘the mid-air position.’ Neither party transcends the particularities of her tradition and narrative to attain some tradition-neutral vantage point.”<sup>35</sup>

The crucial question then becomes: how, precisely, can two traditions come into meaningful dialog with each other and how can their truth-claims be rationally evaluated

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Feldman, “Objectivity, Pluralism and Relativism: A Critique of MacIntyre’s Theory of Virtue,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (1986): 316.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Nelson, *Narrative and Morality: A Theological Inquiry* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), 59.

if rationality is *internal* to traditions and if there are no universal standards of rationality to which they can appeal? Recall the emphasis that MacIntyre places precisely on these points: “It is not just that the adherents of rival paradigms disagree, but that *every* relevant area of rationality is invaded by that disagreement.”<sup>36</sup> And:

Where two large-scale systems of thought and practice are in radical disagreement . . . there is and can be no independent standard or measure by appeal to which their rival claims can be adjudicated, since each has internal to itself its own fundamental standard of judgment. Such systems are incommensurable, and the terms in and by means of which judgment is delivered in each are so specific and idiosyncratic to each that they cannot be translated into the terms of the other without gross distortion.<sup>37</sup>

How, in light of such incommensurability and untranslatability, can MacIntyre hold that “an admission of significant incommensurability and untranslatability in the relations between two opposed systems of thought and practice can be a prologue not only to rational debate, but to that kind of debate from which one party can emerge as undoubtedly rationally superior?”<sup>38</sup>

According to MacIntyre, for one or more members of Tradition A to hear the arguments of Tradition B—let alone to recognize the resources that Tradition B might provide to solve Tradition A’s epistemological crisis—they must learn or already be able to speak Tradition B’s language as a “second first language.” MacIntyre writes:

The adherents of a tradition which is now in this state of fundamental and radical crisis may at this point encounter in a new way the claims of some

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<sup>36</sup> MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 466. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>37</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

particular rival tradition, perhaps one with which they have for some time coexisted, perhaps one which they are now encountering for the first time. They now come or had already come to understand the beliefs and way of life of this other alien tradition, and to do so they have or have had to learn . . . the language of the alien tradition as a new and second first language.<sup>39</sup>

Acquiring an alien tradition's language as one's second first language is best understood as not merely a linguistic exercise. More broadly, it involves acquiring the cultural, moral, and intellectual worldview of the alien tradition so as to be able to conceptualize the world as a native of the tradition does.

In "Relativism, Power and Philosophy" MacIntyre presents an extended argument for why learning a second first language is necessary for such understanding. He argues that to understand an alien tradition—to "speak its language"—it is not enough to rely on those aspects of the two traditions that might be able to be translated, say, in a phrase book for foreign travelers.<sup>40</sup> We need not examine that argument in detail because we already know the key reason why, on MacIntyre's account, nothing short of learning a second first language could adequately enable someone in one tradition to understand the perspective of another tradition. The reason is that rationality is internal to traditions. There is, on MacIntyre's account, no reasoning outside of traditions. Rival traditions embody "to some substantial degree alternative and incompatible sets of beliefs and ways of life. . . . Each of these sets of beliefs and ways of life will have internal to it its own specific modes of rational justification in key areas and its own correspondingly specific

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<sup>39</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 364.

<sup>40</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power and Philosophy," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59, no. 1 (September 1985): 5–22.

warrants for claims to truth.”<sup>41</sup> To understand another tradition—to grasp its standards of truth and justification, its rationality, its reasoning—one must intellectually inhabit that tradition as a member of that tradition does. MacIntyre writes, “Understanding requires knowing the culture, so far as possible, as a native inhabitant knows it.”<sup>42</sup>

Before examining why knowing Tradition B’s language as a second first language can help members of Tradition A to solve their tradition’s epistemological crisis, it is worth pausing to consider two objections that Alicia Roque raises to MacIntyre’s theory of the acquisition of second first languages. Roque’s first objection is this: MacIntyre is proposing the ability to learn second first languages as an innate, universal human capacity. Such a universal capacity, however, would contradict his overriding claim that rationality is not universal but rather particularized and internal to traditions. Roque writes:

MacIntyre’s questionable appeal to the intuition that an adult can become a child again and learn a second first language contradicts the claim it is supposed to support, that rationality is tradition-constituted, by postulating a cognitive faculty common to all human beings. . . . And this is nothing other than a variation of the Enlightenment view which MacIntyre rejects, that there is in humans a faculty of “common sense” which provides a universal and therefore neutral, context- and tradition-free, court to which we can appeal and which can provide the justification for claims of rationality. . . . Although such a view would explain why understanding an alien culture and learning its language as a second first language is possible, it is a position in direct contradiction to his avowed thesis that traditions are historical particularities.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>42</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 374.

<sup>43</sup> Alicia Juarrero Roque, “Language Competence and Tradition-constituted Rationality,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 3 (September 1991): 617.

The main response to Roque's objection is simply that MacIntyre does not propose his theory of the learning of second first languages as a universal capacity. On the contrary, he claims that such a capacity is unusual. Roque's comments arise in her review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*. But in that work MacIntyre describes the ability of protagonists of one tradition to be able "to understand the theses, arguments, and concepts of their rival in such a way that they are able to view themselves from such an alien standpoint" as requiring "a *rare* gift of empathy as well as of intellectual insight."<sup>44</sup> In a direct reply to Roque, MacIntyre clarifies that the ability to learn a second first language is rare. He writes:

It is true that I hold that some individuals on some occasions can and do learn . . . a 'second first language'. . . . It is crucial that the ability to acquire this kind of understanding is not only far from universal, but perhaps relatively rare. . . . It would have been absurd for me to have postulated, and I did not postulate and do not believe in the existence of, any universal capacity for either translation or intercultural understanding, let alone an innate capacity.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, not only is the ability to learn a second first language not universal but rare, but MacIntyre's *theory* about the ability to learn second first languages is, as he recognizes, not advanced from some universal standpoint. Rather, his theory itself is articulated from one particular standpoint. He writes, "My account of what is involved in

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<sup>44</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 167. Emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Reply to Roque," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 3 (September 1991): 619.

understanding other alien traditions is itself formulated and defended from the standpoint of a particular tradition.”<sup>46</sup>

Roque’s second criticism is that MacIntyre is not especially clear on how, practically speaking, the member of one tradition can come to learn a second first language. She writes, “It is unclear how an adult can come to understand a completely alien tradition as a ‘second first language.’”<sup>47</sup> It is true that MacIntyre could be clearer on this point, and it would be helpful if he were since on the surface it is hard to see how an adult—on MacIntyre’s account formed in the rationality of her own tradition—could come to adopt the worldview of an alien tradition. MacIntyre says that the adult “has, so to speak, to become a child all over again and to learn this language—and the corresponding parts of the culture—as a second first language.”<sup>48</sup> But it’s not immediately evident how an adult could really engage an alien tradition as a child engages his native tradition. From the start wouldn’t the adult conceptualize the alien tradition in terms provided by her own tradition? MacIntyre acknowledges the difficulty that this objection poses for his theory: “Roque is certainly right in at least this that there is a tension between my account of what it is to be rational and my account of the possibilities of understanding alien, rival traditions.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 619–20.

<sup>47</sup> Roque, “Language Competence and Tradition-constituted Rationality,” 613.

<sup>48</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 374.

<sup>49</sup> MacIntyre, “Reply to Roque,” 620.

In some of MacIntyre's writings he indicates that those who learn second first languages characteristically occupy frontier or boundary situations wherein they are simultaneously brought up in more than one culture. By way of providing examples of "those who inhabit a certain type of frontier or boundary situation" MacIntyre invites the reader to

consider the predicament of someone who lives in a time and place where he or she is a full member of two linguistic communities, speaking one language, Zuni, say, or Irish, exclusively to the older members of his or her family and village and Spanish or English, say, to those from the world outside, who seek to engage him or her in a way of life in the exclusively Spanish or English speaking world.<sup>50</sup>

The example MacIntyre provides is not a mere thought-experiment as he himself grew up in just such a boundary situation, having been reared simultaneously in an older Gaelic culture and in the English-speaking culture of modern liberalism. In an interview he notes:

Long before I was old enough to study philosophy I had the philosophical good fortune to be educated into two antagonistic systems of belief and attitude. On the one hand, my early imagination was engrossed by a Gaelic oral culture. . . . On the other hand, I was taught by other older people that learning to speak or read Gaelic was an idle, antiquarian pastime, a waste of time for someone whose education was designed to enable him to pass those examinations that are the threshold of bourgeois life in the modern world.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power and Philosophy," 7.

<sup>51</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Nietzsche or Aristotle?" Interview by Giovanna Borradori in *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, trans. Rosanna Crocitto (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 139–40. For more on MacIntyre's upbringing in a boundary situation see Alasdair MacIntyre, "Interview with Alasdair MacIntyre" by Thomas D. Pearson, *Kinesis* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 46 and Christopher Stephen Lutz,

The merit of such examples is that they make it easier to understand how one can simultaneously speak two languages as first languages. The shortcoming of such examples is that they seem to apply chiefly to the case of a person who from infancy was raised in both cultures. They don't shed much light on how an adult who has long inhabited just one tradition can come to learn the language of another tradition as a native raised in that tradition would.

What is required for an adult to understand a second culture as a native does are what MacIntyre calls acts of "philosophical imagination" whereby a person intellectually and empathetically inhabits an alien tradition. Such imaginative indwelling serves as a first step in the process of learning a second first language: "The acquisition of . . . a second first language . . . requires a work of the imagination whereby the individual is able to place him or herself imaginatively within the scheme of belief inhabited by those whose allegiance is to the rival tradition, so as to perceive and conceive the natural and social worlds as they perceive and conceive them."<sup>52</sup> Most people cannot or at least do

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*Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 11–13.

<sup>52</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 394. For a further description of "philosophical imagination" see Alasdair MacIntyre, "Are Philosophical Problems Insoluble? The Relevance of System and History," in *Philosophical Imagination and Cultural Memory: Appropriating Historical Traditions*, ed. Patricia Cook (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 78: "Philosophical imagination enables us to inhabit temporarily a diversity of systems other than our own, and thus to participate both in the criticism of rival systems and of our own as though we were external critics." See also Alasdair MacIntyre, "Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism," *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 1 (1999): 4–5, where MacIntyre writes that exposing one's own views to the views of a rival tradition "involves an act of the

not engage in such acts of philosophical imagination. In disagreements with those holding rival views, such people adhere rather myopically to their own premises, premises incommensurable with those held by their rivals. Unable to see the issue from the other's point of view, each party resorts to rhetoric, persuasion, and protest which issue in the shrillness that MacIntyre finds characteristic of so much modern moral debate.<sup>53</sup> Some few people, however, do engage in acts of philosophical imagination in an effort to see things from the point of view of a rival. Those whose sustained and powerful acts of philosophical imagination ultimately enable them fully to inhabit another tradition intellectually are rare. Again, MacIntyre maintains that "to understand the theses, arguments, and concepts of their rival in such a way that they are able to view themselves from such an alien standpoint" requires "a *rare* gift of empathy as well as of intellectual insight."<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, such individuals *are* possible: "I hold that some individuals on some occasions can and do learn . . . a 'second first language.'<sup>55</sup>

MacIntyre points to Thomas Aquinas as a preeminent example of a person who spoke the "languages" of two rival traditions as first-languages: viz., Augustinian

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philosophical imagination, an imagined shift in one's vantage-point, so that one understands how one's own positions appear from the point of view of the other at every level."

<sup>53</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Why Is the Search for the Foundations of Ethics So Frustrating?," *The Hastings Center Report* 9, no. 4 (August 1979): 16–17 and *After Virtue*, 6–8 and 71–72.

<sup>54</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 167. Emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Reply to Roque," 619.

theology and Aristotelianism.<sup>56</sup> MacIntyre writes that “when Aquinas was . . . confronted by the claims of two distinct and in important ways incompatible philosophical traditions, he had been trained to understand each from within.”<sup>57</sup> That MacIntyre thinks the ability Aquinas had to speak the languages of two rival traditions as first languages is rare and not at all a universal human capacity is evident in MacIntyre writing, “Perhaps no one else in the history of philosophy has ever been put into quite this situation.”<sup>58</sup> For MacIntyre, Aquinas’ ability to synthesize two rival traditions “from within,” as it were, proves that by means of the work of those who understand two traditions from within, it is in fact possible to adjudicate between their truth-claims without reference to supposed universal standards of justification. MacIntyre writes:

It is all too easy to conclude . . . that . . . when one large-scale theoretical and conceptual standpoint is systematically at odds with another, there can be no rational way of settling the differences between them. . . . But the Thomist has only to remind him or herself that it would have been quite as plausible in the thirteenth century to have concluded that, since Augustinianism and the Aristotelianism of the Islamic commentators were systematically at odds in just this way, each having internal to itself its own standards of rational evaluation, no rational way could be found to settle the differences between them. And since Aquinas decisively showed this conclusion to be false, those able to learn from him have every reason to resist it in the present instance.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> For MacIntyre’s account of Edith Stein as another such example, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue, 1913–1922* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

<sup>57</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 168.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 173.

The relativist challenge alleges that MacIntyre's theory fails to provide a rational means of adjudicating between the truth-claims of rival traditions. Critics argue that by rejecting a "common ground" of rationality or any neutral standards by means of which those claims can be evaluated, MacIntyre's theory involves a form of relativism by which there would seem merely to be "the truth as claimed by Tradition A," "the truth as claimed by Tradition B," etc., but no truth *as such*. MacIntyre's solution is to affirm that the truth-claims of rival traditions *can* be heard and evaluated—not, however, by some higher "court of appeal," but by those capable of speaking the languages of each of the rival traditions as first languages. Given that it is possible—even if rare—for a person to learn a second first language, MacIntyre can provide a solution to the relativist challenge by showing how the truth-claims of one tradition can prevail over those of another even when nothing is shared by way of substantive rationality.

The opportunity for those-able-to-speak-the-languages-of-rival-traditions-as-first-languages to evaluate the truth-claims of those rival traditions characteristically arises in conjunction with an epistemological crisis. Recall that the discussion of epistemological crises earlier in this section of Chapter Three was put on hold until an answer could be provided to the question of how, precisely, two traditions can come into meaningful dialog with each other if rationality is internal to traditions. MacIntyre's theory of how individuals can at times inhabit two rival traditions as a native to both answers that question. Such individuals, being able to speak the language of both traditions, can hear the arguments of both traditions. With that answer in hand we can now examine more

precisely how the truth-claims of one tradition can prevail over those of a rival tradition even though there are no neutral standards by which their claims can be evaluated.

A tradition's epistemological crisis may signal the demise of a tradition if that crisis proves unsolvable. Or, as discussed in the previous chapter's section "Tradition as Bearer of Rationality," a tradition may be able to solve its own epistemological crisis by the innovative extension of its central theses in hitherto unimagined ways. Or, finally, an epistemological crisis that cannot be solved by the tradition experiencing the crisis may function as an invitation to members of that tradition who can speak the language of a rival tradition as a second first language to entertain whether the resources of that rival tradition are able to solve their tradition's crisis on the terms that their own tradition sets.<sup>60</sup> MacIntyre writes that such members of a tradition in crisis

may encounter in a new way the claims of some particular tradition" and may even "find themselves compelled to recognize that within this other tradition it is possible to construct from the concepts and theories particular to it what they were unable to provide from their own conceptual and theoretical resources, a cogent and illuminating explanation—cogent and illuminating, that is, by their own standards—of why their own intellectual tradition had been unable to solve its problems or restore its coherence."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> For an excellent, concise summary of the solution to a tradition's epistemological crisis either by the tradition itself or else by a rival tradition, see D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 365–66.

<sup>61</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 364.

In this case the solution of Tradition A's crisis by Tradition B constitutes a defeat of Tradition A and a victory for Tradition B.<sup>62</sup>

In the eighth and ninth chapters of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre provides examples of the tradition from which he speaks, Thomistic-Aristotelian (there called Tradition), offering solutions to the epistemological crisis of two other traditions, Encyclopaedia (i.e., liberalism) and Genealogy. Take the encounter between Tradition and Encyclopaedia, for instance. By the encyclopaedic tradition's own standards, its moral philosophy gives rise to an epistemological crisis. MacIntyre describes that crisis and what precipitates it in detail. In a word, the encyclopaedic tradition faces the problem of reconciling two ideas to which it is committed: man's self interest, on the one hand, and man's duty, on the other. For the encyclopaedic tradition, self-interest and duty are in tension, and there is no way to bring them into a harmonious moral account.

With the encyclopaedic tradition unable to solve the crisis itself, MacIntyre shows how the resources of the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition offer a solution. Specifically, MacIntyre contends that the epistemological crisis arises for the encyclopaedic tradition

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<sup>62</sup> For complementary discussions of such defeat, see Alasdair MacIntyre, "Moral Rationality, Tradition, and Aristotle: A Reply to Onora O'Neill, Raimond Gaita, and Stephen R. L. Clark," *Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (1983): 451; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Bernstein's Distorting Mirrors: A Rejoinder," *Soundings* 67 (Spring 1984): 32; MacIntyre, "The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past," 42–47; MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 5; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues," in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 109–18; MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," 20–24; and MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, xiii–xiv.

on account of an inadequate view of the self. The Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition is able to identify and describe the encyclopaedic tradition's inadequate view of the self and to show why that view issues in the epistemological crisis. Finally, the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition is, on MacIntyre's account, able to solve the epistemological crisis by replacing the encyclopaedic tradition's faulty view of the self with its own correct view. MacIntyre writes:

The conception of the self underlying this [encyclopaedic] formulation is, from the standpoint of Thomism, of a self already misleadingly and distortingly abstracted—both in philosophical theory and in institutional practice—from its place as a member of a set of hierarchically ordered communities within which goods are so ordered and understood that the self cannot achieve its own good except in and through achieving the good of others and vice versa. Within such communities the moral rules are or were apprehended as the laws constitutive of community as such, constitutive and enabling in their function rather than the negative taboos which they later became when divorced from that function. So from the standpoint of such communities we do not have to find it problematic that the self should have the kind of regard for others enjoined by the natural law; the self for which such regard is problematic could only be a self which had become isolated from and deprived of any community within which it could systematically enquire what its good was and achieve that good.<sup>63</sup>

To the extent that MacIntyre's Thomistic solution to the epistemological crisis be understood and accepted by those members of the encyclopaedic tradition who "speak Thomism" as a second-first language, the solution would constitute a defeat of the encyclopaedic tradition's moral truth-claims by those of the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition.

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<sup>63</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 192–93.

While the defeat of one tradition constitutes a victory for another tradition, what is no less important is that any such defeat also constitutes a victory from the standpoint of truth. MacIntyre writes, “In this kind of situation the rationality of tradition requires an acknowledgment by those who have hitherto inhabited and given their allegiance to the tradition in crisis that the alien tradition is superior in rationality and in respect of its claims to truth to their own.”<sup>64</sup> The occurrence of such defeat supports MacIntyre’s overall theory in two ways. First, it supports MacIntyre’s understanding of truth as adequation of mind to its object. In this case the theory of Tradition B has proven adequate to its object in a way that Tradition A’s theory has not. Such defeat tells against the perspectivist challenge by showing that traditions *are* making real truth-claims.

Secondly, such defeat shows that even though rival traditions share nothing in the way of substantive rationality, it is still possible for their truth-claims to be evaluated even to the extent that one tradition’s claims can be judged superior to those of another.<sup>65</sup> This possibility refutes the relativist challenge urged against MacIntyre by the above-mentioned critics who, like Colby, think that “if traditions cannot be judged by any common criteria according to their respective abilities to solve the same problems, there is no longer any basis for determining whether one tradition can characterize and explain

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<sup>64</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 365.

<sup>65</sup> See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, xiii, where he expresses this position very clearly in the Prologue to the Third Edition: “It is possible for one such tradition to defeat another in respect of the adequacy of its claims to truth and to rational justification, even though there are no neutral standards available by appeal to which *any* rational agent whatsoever could determine which tradition is superior to which.” Emphasis in the original.

the failings and defects of a rival tradition more adequately than the rival can.”<sup>66</sup>

MacIntyre succinctly summarizes the relativist challenge and the reason why his theory overcomes it:

That [relativist] challenge relied upon the argument that if each tradition carries within it its own standards of rational justification, then, insofar as traditions of enquiry are genuinely distinct and different from each other, there is no way in which each tradition can enter into rational debate with any other, and no such tradition can therefore vindicate its rational superiority over its rivals. . . . This argument can now be seen to be unsound. It is first of all untrue . . . that traditions, understood as each possessing its own account of and practices of rational justification, therefore cannot defeat or be defeated by other traditions. It is in respect of their adequacy or inadequacy in their responses to epistemological crises that traditions are vindicated or fail to be vindicated.<sup>67</sup>

Despite providing a solution to the relativist challenge, MacIntyre does concede certain ground to the relativist, and it is perhaps this concession that continues to ensnare critics into thinking that he has not adequately answered the relativist challenge.

MacIntyre writes:

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<sup>66</sup> Mark Colby, “Moral Traditions, MacIntyre and Historicist Practical Reason,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21, no. 3 (1995): 59.

<sup>67</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 366. See also MacIntyre “Are Philosophical Problems Insoluble? The Relevance of System and History,” 78: “We have therefore moved to the point at which it is possible to understand how two theses often thought to be incompatible can both be true. The first is that there are indeed no standards or criteria of rational evaluation in any area, no matter how fundamental, that are theory-independent and inquiry-independent, neutral between rival theoretical standpoints, whether philosophical, natural scientific, moral, or whatever, and available therefore to intelligent persons of any point of view. The second is that it is nonetheless possible on occasion to decide rationally between the claims of two rival competing schemes of thought and/or practice in a way that is equally rationally compelling to the adherents of both the rival standpoints. And this is possible because some particular scheme of thought and/or practice can be rationally defeated both by its own standards *and* by the standards of one of those competing rivals.” Emphasis in the original.

The relativist may reply that I have at least conceded that over long periods of time two or more rival traditions may develop and flourish without encountering more than minor epistemological crises, or at least such as they are well able to cope with out of their own resources. And where this is the case, during such extended periods of time no one of these traditions will be able to encounter its rivals in such a way as to defeat them, nor will it be the case that any one of them will discredit itself by its inability to resolve its own crises. This is clearly true.<sup>68</sup>

In other words, MacIntyre acknowledges that over extended periods of time the truth-claims of rival traditions may *not* be able to be rationally evaluated at all.

Those critics who fixate on this facet of MacIntyre's theory think that MacIntyre's thought contains the type of relativism specified by the relativist challenge. What such critics miss is the crucial point that while, as a matter of fact, it is often the case that the truth claims of rival traditions cannot at present be adjudicated rationally, it is always *possible* for them to be rationally evaluated in the future.<sup>69</sup> A certain confluence of an epistemological crisis and those able to understand both traditions from within is prerequisite for the rational evaluation of contending truth-claims, and such a confluence is rare. But it is always *possible*, and that possibility is enough to refute the relativist challenge. MacIntyre stresses the importance that this possibility holds for his refutation of relativism:

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<sup>68</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 366.

<sup>69</sup> MacIntyre concludes "Relativism, Power and Philosophy" by emphasizing the ever-present possibility of a tradition's future defeat: "Rationality requires a readiness on our part to accept, and indeed to welcome, a possible future defeat of the forms of theory and practice in which it has up till now been taken to be embodied within our own tradition, at the hands of some alien and perhaps even as yet largely unintelligible tradition of thought and practice" (19–20).

For very, very long periods of time rival traditions of moral enquiry may coexist . . . without any one of them having had occasion to take the claims of its rivals seriously, let alone having conducted the kind of enquiry that might issue in one of these traditions suffering rational defeat at the hands of another. . . . Yet what matters most is that such issues can on occasion be decided, and this in a way that makes it evident that the claims of such rival traditions from the outset presuppose the falsity of relativism.<sup>70</sup>

MacIntyre's response to the relativist challenge is thus nuanced. On the one hand he rejects relativism as a conclusion because it is always possible for one tradition meaningfully to encounter another in such a way that the truth-claims of one can be rationally vindicated over those of another. At the same time, however, in the absence of such an encounter, there is, in fact, no way to judge rationally between the truth-claims of rival traditions. Because such meaningful encounters are rare, more often than not it is the case that, for the time being, there is no way to adjudicate between the truth-claims of rival traditions. Acknowledging this latter point but missing the former, most critics think that his theory succumbs to the relativist challenge.

Other critics are aware that his response to relativism is nuanced, but they don't adequately grasp or express his position. Robert Wachbroit, for instance, writes, "MacIntyre's reply is not to deny the charge of relativism, but rather to argue that the

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<sup>70</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, xiv. See D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 331: "MacIntyre is willing to concede, indeed he thinks we must concede, that the relativistic explanation of theory incommensurability is the correct explanation *at the outset* of the encounter between traditions. . . . The warrant for a relativistic theory of rationality, though, can only finally be provisional, MacIntyre thinks, since all conflicts between rival and as yet incommensurable standpoints are *in principle* surmountable." Emphasis in the original.

relativism he is committed to is not much of a problem.”<sup>71</sup> The trouble with this formulation is that MacIntyre would not characterize himself as being committed to any type of relativism. Susan Feldman also recognizes the nuance to MacIntyre’s position, but she incorrectly suggests that MacIntyre does not reject or even attempt to reject relativism: “MacIntyre’s project is not to ignore relativism, nor to surrender to it, but to see whether there is a way of simultaneously acknowledging it and moving beyond it.”<sup>72</sup> Finally, J. L. A. Garcia likewise inaccurately expresses the nuance in MacIntyre’s reply to relativism. He recognizes that MacIntyre rejects the relativist challenge, but he suggests that MacIntyre’s very rejection of relativism somehow includes an embrace of it: “MacIntyre’s rebuttal is as radical as it is ingenious. It is, in effect, to outrelativize the relativist. Rather than recoiling from relativism, as I understand his strategy, MacIntyre plunges so deeply into it as, we might say, to fall out the other side.”<sup>73</sup>

Paul Nelson comes closer to adequately capturing the nuance in MacIntyre’s reply to the relativist challenge, writing, “MacIntyre admits that relativism has not been defeated. . . . Although not defeated, relativism is defused and rendered innocuous.”<sup>74</sup> It is true that MacIntyre does not hold that his theory has defeated relativism, *per se*.

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Wachbroit, “Relativism and Virtue,” *The Yale Law Journal* 94 (1985): 1560.

<sup>72</sup> Feldman, “Objectivity, Pluralism and Relativism: A Critique of MacIntyre’s Theory of Virtue,” 308.

<sup>73</sup> J. L. A. Garcia, “Modern(ist) Moral Philosophy and MacIntyrean Critique,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 94.

<sup>74</sup> Nelson, *Narrative and Morality: A Theological Inquiry*, 59.

Rather, he holds (1) that his theory is immune to the charges contained in the relativist challenge and (2) that his theory specifies how relativism can be and is defeated in the encounters between rival traditions when it so happens that the truth-claims of one tradition are abandoned for the truth-claims of the other. Kelvin Knight makes this point nicely: “All that MacIntyre’s second-order theory can establish is that what may be called the problem of relativism or of perspectivism is in principle soluble, a claim already implicit in his first-order theory. Only a substantive theory might, according to MacIntyre’s metatheory of traditions, solve the problem by demonstrating its superiority over its rivals.”<sup>75</sup>

The critic who best understands and articulates the nuance in MacIntyre’s reply to the relativist challenge is Christopher Lutz. He writes that MacIntyre

begins by granting the claims of cultural relativists that the contents of differing moral traditions may be essentially untranslatable and incommensurable because of differences in their underlying forms of substantive rationality. Taking relativism of this kind as given, MacIntyre seeks to provide an account of the manner in which an interested adherent of a particular moral tradition may transcend the limits of his or her own tradition in order to arrive closer to the objective truth in both rationality and ethics. MacIntyre is looking for objective, metaphysical truth.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Knight, ed., *The MacIntyre Reader*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 9. See also D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 331: “MacIntyre is willing to concede, indeed he thinks we must concede, that the relativistic explanation of theory incommensurability is the correct explanation *at the outset* of the encounter between traditions. . . . The warrant for a relativistic theory of rationality, though, can only finally be provisional, MacIntyre thinks, since all conflicts between rival and as yet incommensurable standpoints are *in principle* surmountable.” Emphasis in the original.

MacIntyre accepts relativism as a *condition* of moral enquiry inasmuch as it is his position that the truth-claims of rival traditions cannot be evaluated (or even mutually understood by the traditions in question) in the early stages of enquiry and even during much of the time in which the rival traditions coexist. But he rejects relativism as a *conclusion* to moral enquiry because of the inescapable possibility that one tradition may defeat the other in respect to their claims to truth.

In the end what enables MacIntyre to overcome the relativist challenge is a particular use he makes of narrative. The ability of one tradition to defeat another in respect to their truth-claims amounts to the ability of one tradition to “out-narrate” the other. For Tradition B to solve the epistemological crisis of Tradition A is for Tradition B to tell the story of how and why Tradition A fell into and had to fall into the crisis and of how Tradition B’s resources solve, to the satisfaction of the standards imposed by Tradition A, Tradition A’s crisis. From MacIntyre’s earliest formulations of the solution to an epistemological crisis it can be inferred that such defeat is achieved by one tradition out-narrating the other, for “when an epistemological crisis is resolved, it is by the construction of a new narrative. . . . Epistemological progress consists in the construction and reconstruction of more adequate narratives.”<sup>77</sup> Later, MacIntyre more explicitly describes defeat as a process of out-narration: “What constitutes the rational superiority of one large-scale philosophical standpoint over another is its ability . . . to give a better

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<sup>77</sup> MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 455–56.

historical account, a more adequate and intelligible true narrative of that other point of view and its successes and failures than it can provide for itself.”<sup>78</sup>

In Chapter One of this dissertation some of the less controversial uses MacIntyre makes of narrative were discussed. In Chapter Two a more controversial use of narrative was considered in terms of MacIntyre’s understanding of the narrative structure of traditions. Having seen his defense against the perspectivist challenge in Chapter Two, we see here, in Chapter Three, that it is by means of another controversial use of narrative—“out-narrating”—that MacIntyre defends his philosophy from the relativist challenge.

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<sup>78</sup> MacIntyre, “The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past,” 47. See also MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 81: “The narrative prevails over its rivals which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes.” For interesting reflections on this aspect of MacIntyre’s thought see George R. Lucas, Jr., “Refutation, Narrative, and Engagement: Three Conceptions of the History of Philosophy,” in *Philosophical Imagination and Cultural Memory: Appropriating Historical Traditions*, ed. Patricia Cook (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 4–21. While some of Lucas’ reflections on MacIntyre’s thought are perhaps too Hegelian in their emphasis on an all-encompassing master narrative, he makes some insightful observations about how it is by means of one tradition out-narrating another that the truth-claims of one tradition are vindicated vis-à-vis the truth-claims of the other: “The ‘true’ narrative engages all of its rivals and historically prior accounts, demonstrating thoroughly what each rival account entails, why its adherents would have come to hold it, and what problems or issues it addresses successfully—together with the salient issues or problems that the rival narrative is *unable* to account for, and why. . . . The ‘true’ narrative account is always a ‘master narrative’—a totalizing or summarizing account that reveals its rivals and its predecessors as constituting a nested set of partial narrative converging toward the master narrative itself” (110). Emphasis in the original.

# Chapter Four

## Particularism

The previous chapter ended with the acknowledgment that while MacIntyre rejects relativism as a *conclusion* to moral enquiry, he accepts it as a *condition* of moral enquiry. This position is the natural consequence of MacIntyre's holding that rationality is tradition-constituted, as discussed in Chapter Two. For MacIntyre there is no reasoning outside of a tradition, and there are no universal standards of substantive rationality. All enquiry begins in local, cultural, and historical situatedness. This aspect of MacIntyre's thought can be described as "particularism," and it involves the claim, which he expresses in *After Virtue*, "that all morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular and that aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all particularity is an illusion."<sup>1</sup>

Critics of MacIntyre's particularism allege that it entails relativism in one of two ways. Some charge that his particularism means that truth is not universal but is, rather, internal to traditions. I will argue that while MacIntyre's particularism involves the claim

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 126–27; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1981.

that *rationality* is internal to traditions, his theory escapes relativism by in fact being universalist in regard to truth.

Others argue that by holding that rationality is internal to traditions, MacIntyre cannot account for how those he regards as outside all traditions can choose in a rationally meaningful way which tradition to belong to. I refer to this latter claim as the particularist challenge. It holds that MacIntyre's theory is relativistic in the sense that those outside all traditions—who according to MacIntyre's particularism are intellectually destitute—lack a rationally meaningful way to choose a tradition as MacIntyre's traditionalism requires that they do if they are to progress in rational enquiry and in the moral life. I will argue that MacIntyre can—and on the strength of arguments he makes elsewhere *should*—abandon his claims regarding those outside all traditions. So doing would both render his thought more consistent and enable him to overcome the particularist challenge to which, to date, he has not yet offered a response.

## **Particularism and Universal Truth**

Some critics claim that MacIntyre's particularism involves relativism because it implies that truth is internal to traditions, that there is no universal truth. This claim was discussed to some extent in the third section of Chapter Two, "The Perspectivist Challenge and Truth." It is, nevertheless, useful to consider this criticism briefly from the perspective of the relationship between particularism and universalism in MacIntyre's thought. So doing will help clarify the type of commitments MacIntyre makes to

particularism, and it will provide the background against which a more serious criticism of his position can be assessed.

MacIntyre's particularism includes strong claims for the local, cultural, and historical situatedness of those who engage in moral enquiry—from the level of individuals to that of entire traditions—and of moral philosophy and morality itself. The important ways in which individuals are situated within histories and communities were discussed in the section "Narrative and the Unity of a Human Life" of Chapter One. As we saw there, MacIntyre holds that "what I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition."<sup>2</sup> Not only individuals, but also whole traditions of enquiry, as discussed in Chapter Two, are tied to cultural and temporal situatedness: "Tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive enquiry . . . begins in and from some condition of pure historical contingency, from the beliefs, institutions, and practices of some particular community which constitute a given."<sup>3</sup> According to MacIntyre, enquiry does not

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 221. For more on MacIntyre's particularism as it relates to individual enquirers, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Is Patriotism a Virtue?* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1984), 8–9; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 401; Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 96; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism," *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 1 (1999): 1; and Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 10, 58, and 84.

<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 354. For more on MacIntyre's particularism as it relates to traditions of enquiry, see MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which*

proceed by means of universal principles, and enquiry is not undertaken by disinterested enquirers. Those are the ideals of the Enlightenment which MacIntyre rejects.

His particularism extends also to his view of moral philosophy and of morality itself. With respect to the essential situatedness of moral philosophy he writes, “Moral philosophies, however they may aspire to achieve more than this, always do articulate the morality of some particular social and cultural standpoint.”<sup>4</sup> His understanding of what moral philosophies express follows from his particularistic view of morality itself: “Every morality . . . however universal its claims, is the morality of some particular social group, embodied and lived out in the life and history of that group. Indeed, a morality has no existence except in its actual and possible social embodiments.”<sup>5</sup>

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*Rationality?*, 361; Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Form of the Good, Tradition and Enquiry,” in *Value and Understanding: Essays for Peter Winch*, ed. Raimond Gaita (London: Routledge, 1990), 260; Alasdair MacIntyre, “Précis of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 1 (March 1991): 152; Alasdair MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Knight, Kelvin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 251; MacIntyre, “Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism,” 7; Terry Pinkard, “MacIntyre’s Critique of Modernity,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 193–97; Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 152; and MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, xii.

<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 268. For more on MacIntyre’s particularist view of moral philosophy, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 1; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1966; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), ix; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1971; Alasdair MacIntyre, “Ought,” in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 136; and Alasdair MacIntyre, “Some More about ‘Ought,’” in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 167.

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Nietzsche or Aristotle?” Interview by Giovanna Borradori in *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick*,

Some critics allege or suspect that MacIntyre's particularism commits him to relativism. Robert George, for instance, writes, "His particularism . . . mires him in an ultimately relativistic position."<sup>6</sup> John Haldane, who refers to MacIntyre's particularism as "immanentism," writes, "What is actually needed is a demonstration that immanentism neither is nor implies relativism."<sup>7</sup> Such critics tend to argue that MacIntyre's particularism entails relativism because his theory does not allow either for universal means of rational justification or for truths about morality that apply universally to all people. Noting such criticisms, others such as Christopher Lutz and Thomas D'Andrea defend MacIntyre's particularism from the charge of relativism.<sup>8</sup> D'Andrea, for instance, writes:

That, despite his intent, MacIntyre cannot, or at least does not in his stated views, escape relativism is a frequent criticism, particularly by those sympathetic to his general project. . . . Some, such as John Haldane and Robert George, have been led in this direction of thought by MacIntyre's so-described particularism, his denial that a rationally justifiable moral theory can speak to, and be persuasive for, any rational person beyond the bounds of the moral community of whose practice it is the theory.

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*Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, trans. Rosanna Crocitto (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 143. For more on MacIntyre's particularist view morality, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 126–27.

<sup>6</sup> Robert P. George, "Moral Particularism, Thomism, and Traditions," *The Review of Metaphysics* 42 (March 1989): 601.

<sup>7</sup> John Haldane, "MacIntyre's Thomist Revival: What Next?," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 99.

<sup>8</sup> See Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 120–32 and 141–55 and Thomas D. D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 403–14.

However, MacIntyre's moral theory contains a particularism of procedure, not of outcome.<sup>9</sup>

In stating that MacIntyre's theory contains a particularism of procedure but not of outcome, D'Andrea expresses the crux of why MacIntyre's particularism does not commit him to relativism. MacIntyre's particularism can be described as one "of procedure" in that it involves the claim that the rationality of traditions is inextricably tied to the particulars of the location, culture, and history that inform it. In other words, traditions always carry out enquiry and make truth-claims in accord with their own particularized standards of rational justification.<sup>10</sup> Drawing from terminology Michael Krausz discusses,<sup>11</sup> Lutz calls MacIntyre's particularism of procedure "relativity," which is to be distinguished from "relativism."<sup>12</sup> Whereas relativism holds that *truth* is relative to a conceptual framework, relativity holds that *truth-claims*, but not truth itself, are relative to a conceptual framework. Relativity, as Krausz uses the term, means that "cultural entities are to be understood or made intelligible in the cultural settings in which

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<sup>9</sup> D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 403.

<sup>10</sup> See Pinkard, "MacIntyre's Critique of Modernity," 196–97: "Moral and political action and reflection always begins in a particular, historical situation, and what is always 'given' to us is not some set of nondefeasible norms or fixed standards of rationality but only the inherited social and historical situation in which we find ourselves. We always begin, that is, within a contingently formed point of view."

<sup>11</sup> Michael Krausz, "Relativism and Foundationalism: Some Distinctions and Strategies," *The Monist* 67 (1984): 395–404.

<sup>12</sup> See Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 66–69.

they appear.”<sup>13</sup> Lutz observes, “Using Krausz’s terms, we may say that MacIntyre embraces relativity while rejecting relativism.”<sup>14</sup> Using D’Andrea’s terms, we may say that MacIntyre embraces particularism of procedure, but not particularism of outcome.

To understand why MacIntyre’s position does not commit him to relativism, it is essential to grasp the distinction between relativity or particularism of procedure, on the one hand, and relativism as a conclusion regarding truth, on the other. Take, for instance, Susan Feldman’s remark, “Obviously in one sense MacIntyre’s account is relativistic. By tying evaluations to traditions, these evaluations are made relative to traditions.”<sup>15</sup> The second of those two sentences is an accurate description of the relativity or particularism of procedure inherent in MacIntyre’s position. It is true, on MacIntyre’s account, that *evaluations* are made relative to traditions. This is just what his particularism of procedure or relativity entails. Feldman use of the word “relativistic” in the first sentence, however, without further clarification is misleading because it suggests that MacIntyre’s account involves *relativism*, generally understood as a conclusion regarding truth. But it is unwarranted to conclude or to imply that MacIntyre’s position leads to *relativism* with respect to final truth just because he holds that traditions enquire and make evaluations in *relativity*, in situatedness. MacIntyre’s position would only rightly

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<sup>13</sup> Krausz, “Relativism and Foundationalism: Some Distinctions and Strategies,” 397.

<sup>14</sup> Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Feldman, “Objectivity, Pluralism and Relativism: A Critique of MacIntyre’s Theory of Virtue,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (1986): 310.

be described as relativistic—as leading to relativism—if his particularism forecloses the possibility of universal truth.

That MacIntyre's position entails relativism precisely because his particularism forecloses the possibility of universal truth is a claim made by several critics. Wachbroit, for instance, reads MacIntyre as rejecting the possibility of universal truth. He writes, "The natural way to avoid relativism is to argue for a universality as an essential part of morality. . . . MacIntyre apparently has no sympathy for the aspirations of a morality to universality."<sup>16</sup> Gamwell expresses a similar criticism, writing, "He [MacIntyre] denies to moral theory any ground for asserting that there is a universal telos toward which one may move. Hence, one is left with the moral limitations of some particular community, and the relativity of the good to historical setting is indeed relativistic."<sup>17</sup> But as we saw in the discussion of perspectivism and truth in Chapter Two, MacIntyre holds that traditions do in fact make universal truth-claims, and he thinks that objective truth—which he understands as the adequacy of mind to its objects—norms the judgments that traditions make in such a way that traditions can suffer epistemological crises and even lapse when their theories fail to express the world as it really is. MacIntyre simultaneously affirms that all enquiry is particularistic in procedure but universalistic in terms of its end: "Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Wachbroit, "A Genealogy of Virtues," review of *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Yale Law Journal* 92 (1983): 576.

<sup>17</sup> Franklin I. Gamwell, *The Divine Good: Modern Moral Theory and the Necessity of God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 77.

the good, for the universal, consists.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, traditions aspire to and claim to express universal truth, but they do so in accord with their own particularized methods of reasoning and of rational justification. Bernstein succinctly expresses this important nuance in MacIntyre’s position: “Although each of these traditions is formed by historically contingent beliefs, nevertheless *within* each of these traditions universal claims are made.”<sup>19</sup>

Even if it be allowed that traditions are making *claims* to universal truth, Gary Gutting thinks that it is impossible for MacIntyre’s particularized traditions ever actually to reach universal truths. Gutting writes, “The Aristotelian view is universalistic. But, given MacIntyre’s starting point in specific practices, it is impossible for him to achieve such universalism. . . . The result [is] that his ethical traditions can never reach anything more than a conception of what is good for the communities associated with them.”<sup>20</sup> Pace Gutting, MacIntyre thinks that traditions *can* reach universal truths even though their modes of enquiry and truth-claims are highly particularized. He writes, “It does not follow, as we might suppose if we did concede the last word to relativism, that we are

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<sup>18</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.

<sup>19</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, “Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited,” in *Culture and Modernity*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 90. Emphasis in the original. For more on the way in which, according to MacIntyre, particularized traditions make universal truth-claims see Gamwell, *The Divine Good: Modern Moral Theory and the Necessity of God*, 70; David Solomon, “MacIntyre and Contemporary Moral Philosophy,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 147; Thomas S. Hibbs, “MacIntyre, Aquinas, and Politics,” *The Review of Politics* 66, no. 3 (2004): 362; and D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 404.

<sup>20</sup> Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, 98–99.

thereby condemned to or imprisoned within our own particular standpoint.”<sup>21</sup> And: “I don’t think that cultural difference has the last word, for I am, after all, an Aristotelian. But I do think that cultural difference ought to have the first word.”<sup>22</sup> As we saw in Chapter Three, MacIntyre thinks that universal truths can be reached by traditions by means of the overcoming of epistemological crises (whether by the tradition itself that is in crisis or by a rival tradition). Because a tradition can never rule out the possibility of future epistemological crises, it cannot know for sure that its theory expresses the truth about the objects with which it is concerned. But, according to MacIntyre, there *is* an ultimate truth about objects, and it is possible for a tradition’s theory to express that truth. Nagel correctly observes that MacIntyre “believes in the truth, but he thinks it will be reached only through a particular local path, as one of the many rival traditions proves itself superior to the others in dealing with the problems of life.”<sup>23</sup>

With the proper qualifications, MacIntyre can justly be described, without contradiction, either as a universalist or as a particularist. D’Andrea, for instance, mentions “MacIntyre’s *intent*, at least, to be an ethical universalist” as well as his “particularistically framed, universalist moral conception.”<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre is a universalist

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<sup>21</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Relativism, Power and Philosophy,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59, no. 1 (September 1985): 17.

<sup>22</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Interview with Alasdair MacIntyre” by Thomas D. Pearson, *Kinesis* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 46.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Nagel, “Agreeing in Principle,” review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, by MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Times Literary Supplement*, July 8–14, 1988, 747.

<sup>24</sup> D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 38 and 408. Emphasis in the original.

in that he thinks there is an ultimate truth about morality, a way of understanding morality in which the mind is fully adequate to its object. The truth about morality is not, however, known at the outset of moral enquiry; it is the *telos* of moral enquiry. Objective reality norms moral enquiry in such a way that sometimes moral philosophies that are inadequate to moral reality experience an epistemological crisis. That epistemological crises do in fact occur supports MacIntyre's understanding of truth as the adequacy of mind to its objects, for what a tradition undergoing an epistemological crisis sees is that its theory is not adequate to how things really are.<sup>25</sup> Yet while MacIntyre is a universalist in regard to truth, he is a particularist in regard to rational justification. Traditions are the bearers of reason, and traditions are bound up in local, cultural, and historical particularity. As such, the reasons traditions have for holding this or that theory, the rational justification traditions provide for this or that thesis, is tied to the particularities

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<sup>25</sup> See Kent Reames, "Metaphysics, History, and Moral Philosophy: The Centrality of the 1990 Aquinas Lecture to MacIntyre's Argument for Thomism," *The Thomist* 62 (1998): 431, where Reames points out, "It is *because* one stands in a tradition that has passed through particular, historical epistemic crises that one can understand truth as correspondence to reality." Emphasis in the original. See also D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 331: "What MacIntyre thinks provides a decisive falsification of a relativist theory of rationality is precisely the experience *internal to a tradition* of the tradition's own weakness—its impotence before problems thrown up by its own scheme of belief, and so forth. These common experiences of epistemological weakness within traditions . . . demonstrate quite clearly, MacIntyre thinks, that the human mind is measured by objects external to it." Emphasis in the original.

which inform the tradition. There are no reasons *as such*, and there are no neutral standards of rational justification.<sup>26</sup>

Failure to grasp the relationship between particularism and universalism in MacIntyre's thought has led many critics to accuse MacIntyre of inconsistency or of relativism. But as Kent Reams points out, a correct understanding of that relationship both reveals the consistency in MacIntyre's project and shows why his theory escapes the charge of relativism with regard to truth as a conclusion of enquiry. Reams writes:

One way of stating the continuity among MacIntyre's works is that throughout he has been trying to be clear about the relationship of universality to particularity: the universality of the claim to truth, and the particularity of the person making the claim. All moral philosophers . . . raise at least some moral claims that purport to be universal in the sense that they are true, and applicable to all people whether those people know it or not. Nothing in MacIntyre has ever committed him to denying this. But some philosophers have made the further claim that their moral claims are universal in the sense that anyone or almost anyone can come to know them, regardless of intellectual starting point or moral training. This claim MacIntyre has consistently denied, since before *After Virtue*. . . . MacIntyre is not on the side of those who would see truth as *only* relative to schemes of thought. Rationality is tradition-constituted, but this does not mean that it cannot make claims that are true in a very strong sense. The universal is not sacrificed to the particular. Indeed, it is important to see that for MacIntyre there is not strictly speaking even a *tension* between the particular and the universal. On the contrary, it is precisely the particularity and especially the historical particularity of the claimant that makes possible the universality of the claim.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Nagel, "Agreeing in Principle," 747: "In MacIntyre's view there are no universal reasons, only reasons for this or that group. While a tradition makes claims to truth, and may have to admit defeat in the face of the greater success of a rival tradition in dealing with the same problems, it does not even attempt to defend itself by arguments which any rational individual should be able to accept: it is essentially particular."

<sup>27</sup> Reames, "Metaphysics, History, and Moral Philosophy: The Centrality of the 1990 Aquinas Lecture to MacIntyre's Argument for Thomism," 430–31. Emphasis in the original.

## **The Particularist Challenge**

In Chapters Two and Three I argued that MacIntyre's theory does not contain the types of relativism urged against it by the perspectivist and relativist challenges, respectively. In the previous section of this chapter the relationship between particularism and universalism in MacIntyre's thought was examined. That examination both confirmed the conclusions of Chapters Two and Three and provided a clearer picture of how particularism functions in MacIntyre's theory. In particular, it was shown that while MacIntyre supports universalism as a conclusion to enquiry, he is committed to a "particularism of procedure" whereby all enquiry is conducted within traditions that are tied to local, cultural, and historical contexts. By understanding how, precisely, particularism informs MacIntyre's theory, we are now in a position to consider the most significant accusation of relativism that critics bring against his thought: the "particularist challenge."

I call this accusation the "particularist challenge" since it arises on account of the particularism to which he is committed. I consider it the most significant accusation simply because MacIntyre has not to date provided an adequate response to it as he has to the perspectivist and relativist challenges. To defend his theory against the particularist challenge MacIntyre needs, in my opinion, to clear up some inconsistencies in his writings. To those inconsistencies and the particularist challenge to which they give rise I now turn.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre invites the reader to consider

the situation of the person to whom, after all, this book is primarily addressed, someone who, not as yet having given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry, is besieged by disputes over what is just and about how it is reasonable to act. . . . Such a person is confronted by the claims of each of the traditions which we have considered as well as by those of other traditions. How is it rational to respond to them?<sup>28</sup>

Before answering how it is rational for such a person to respond to the claims of rival traditions, MacIntyre does two things. First, he reiterates his particularism of procedure, denying “that there are standards of rationality, adequate for the evaluation of rival answers to such questions, equally available, at least in principle, to all persons, whatever tradition they may happen to find themselves in and whether or not they inhabit any tradition.”<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, he distinguishes two senses in which one might not as yet have given his allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry. On the one hand, such a person might belong to a tradition but in an unreflective or unacknowledged sort of way. That person “will characteristically have learned to speak and write some particular language-in-use, the presuppositions of whose use tie that language to a set of beliefs which that person may never have explicitly formulated for him or herself except in partial and occasional ways.”<sup>30</sup> Upon encountering a coherent presentation of the tradition to which he implicitly belongs, such a person “will often experience a shock of recognition: *this* is not only, so such a person may say, what I now take to be true but in some measure what

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<sup>28</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 393.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 394.

I have always taken to be true.”<sup>31</sup> While such a person has not explicitly given his allegiance to the tradition in which he has implicitly been formed, he can call upon the intellectual resources of that tradition to test his relationship to that tradition and to others. By means of such probation he may then be able to give his allegiance to that tradition in an explicit way. Even if he does not end up giving his allegiance to the tradition in which he has implicitly been formed, what is important is that it is by virtue of the intellectual resources of that tradition that he rationally responds to the claims of that tradition and rival traditions. The possibility of such individuals poses no threat to MacIntyre’s particularist commitments.

On the other hand, however, MacIntyre presents the possibility of someone who has not yet given his allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry because he is in fact not a member—not even *implicitly* a member—of any tradition whatsoever.

Distinguishing between the two types of people who have not given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry, MacIntyre writes, “This capacity for recognition of the self as being already to some degree at home in some tradition sharply differentiates this kind of person and this kind of encounter with a tradition of enquiry from the person who finds him or herself an alien to every tradition of enquiry which he or she encounters.”<sup>32</sup> MacIntyre points out that this latter type of person is rare, and that most people who have not given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry do, in fact, implicitly and unreflectively belong to some such tradition: “Most of our

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 395.

contemporaries do not live at or even near that point of extremity, but neither are they for the most part able to recognize in themselves in their encounters with traditions that they have already implicitly to some significant degree given their allegiance to some one particular tradition.”<sup>33</sup> In the very act of indicating that those outside all traditions are rare, however, MacIntyre acknowledges that he does take seriously the existence of at least *some* such people.

If MacIntyre affirms that at least some such people exist who find themselves alien to every tradition of enquiry, then the crucial question becomes: how can they respond rationally to the claims made by traditions? How can *they* give their allegiance in a rationally meaningful way to one tradition rather than another or, indeed, to any tradition at all? This question, which is important in and of itself, is all the more pressing because, again, MacIntyre states that *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is primarily addressed to those not as yet having given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry. Those who have not yet given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry but who are nevertheless *implicitly* a member of a tradition can perhaps benefit from the book by recognizing that it articulates a coherent presentation of the tradition to which they implicitly already belong. But how can those outside all traditions benefit from the book? How can they even rationally assess its arguments?

MacIntyre’s particularism of procedure precisely denies that there are any standards of substantive rationality available outside of traditions. Just thirty pages

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 397.

earlier in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre provides one of the strongest statements of his commitment to particularism and his rejection of the notion that any substantive reasoning whatsoever can take place outside of traditions. There he writes:

It is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions. . . . The person outside all traditions lacks sufficient rational resources for enquiry and *a fortiori* for enquiry into what tradition is to be rationally preferred. He or she has no adequate relevant means of rational evaluation. . . . To be outside all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution. . . . So we are still confronted by the claims to our rational allegiance of the rival traditions whose histories I have narrated. . . . We have learned that we cannot ask and answer those questions from a standpoint external to all tradition, that the resources of adequate rationality are made available to us only in and through traditions.<sup>34</sup>

If those outside all traditions are in a state of intellectual and moral destitution, lacking sufficient rational resources for enquiry, including enquiry into what tradition is to be rationally preferred—and MacIntyre’s particularism does commit him to holding that—then two unhappy consequences seem to follow. First, some of those to whom MacIntyre says *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is principally addressed seem entirely unable to hear, let alone to be benefited by, the arguments it contains. Secondly, and much more importantly, MacIntyre’s theory seems to involve a certain type of inescapable relativism. This relativism—the relativism alleged by the particularist

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 367 and 369. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, “Practical Rationalities as Forms of Social Structure,” *Irish Philosophical Journal* 4 (1987): 18–19, especially: “Each of us can only engage in practical rationality itself and in enquiry into practical rationality from some one particular point of view developed within the kind of tradition which has been able to embody itself to the necessary degree in the kind of social relationships, in the forms of community which are necessary for its exemplification” (19).

challenge—results from MacIntyre’s holding three theses: (1) There are in fact people outside all traditions. (2) All people, including those outside of all traditions, can—and if they want to progress rationally, *must*—choose to give their allegiance to some tradition or other. (3) In the case of those outside of all traditions, that choice can in no way be rationally informed since, according to MacIntyre’s particularism, those outside all traditions lack sufficient rational resources for enquiry into what tradition is to be rationally preferred. Combining these three theses, the particularist challenge could be expressed as follows: MacIntyre’s theory is relativistic in the sense that those outside all traditions—who according to MacIntyre’s particularism are intellectually destitute—lack a rationally meaningful way to choose a tradition as MacIntyre’s traditionalism requires that they do if they are to progress in rational enquiry and in the moral life.

The first critic to bring the particularist challenge against MacIntyre’s work is Robert George. First, he identifies that to which MacIntyre’s particularism commits him in thesis (3) above: “MacIntyre declares: ‘it is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions.’”<sup>35</sup> Next, he observes what thesis (2) specifies: “Still, one must, it seems, choose among traditions.”<sup>36</sup> Finally, he sees MacIntyre affirm thesis (1)—the existence of those outside all traditions—in his stating that *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is primarily addressed to those not yet having given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry. The conjunction of

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<sup>35</sup> George, “Moral Particularism, Thomism, and Traditions,” 597.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

these three theses gives rise to the particularist challenge, which George expresses in this way:

Must such a person's choice be arbitrary? Or may such a person appeal to standards or criteria of rationality by which his choice among traditions may be rationally guided? Here MacIntyre faces a dilemma. On his own particularist terms, such standards or criteria are available only from within traditions. So someone who has not yet given his allegiance (at least tentatively) to a tradition apparently lacks standards or criteria of rationality without which his choice *must* be merely arbitrary. If, however, such choices *are* necessarily arbitrary, then there seems to be no way of avoiding a fundamental and decisive relativism in practical reasoning and, therefore, in moral and political theory. . . . The burden for MacIntyre is to hold on to his particularism while demonstrating that, appearances aside, ultimate choices among traditions need not be arbitrary. This is a burden MacIntyre is unable to support.<sup>37</sup>

The problem of how the choice of a tradition (or, earlier in his works, a moral standpoint and community) can be made in a nonarbitrary way, so central to the particularist challenge, is a problem MacIntyre can be seen wrestling with throughout his career from his earliest writings. In "Notes from the Moral Wilderness" (1958–59), for instance, MacIntyre disagrees with the position, which he attributes to liberal moral theory of that time, that "on ultimate questions of morality we cannot argue, we can only choose. And our choice is necessarily arbitrary in the sense that we cannot give reasons for choosing one way rather than another; for to do this we should have to have a criterion in moral matters more ultimate than our ultimate criterion. And this is

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 598–99. Emphasis in the original.

nonsensical.”<sup>38</sup> Although MacIntyre disagrees in principle with the notion of such arbitrary choice, eight years later in *A Short History of Ethics* his own moral philosophy seems to require just such a choice: “Each of us therefore has to choose both with whom we wish to be morally bound and by what ends, rules, and virtues we wish to be guided.”<sup>39</sup>

The notion of participation in a tradition which MacIntyre first presents at length in *After Virtue* greatly helps to explain how one does not in fact choose a tradition arbitrarily: one rather receives a tradition through the intellectual community in which one is born, raised, educated. MacIntyre writes, “What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition.”<sup>40</sup> Following D’Andrea, Kelvin Knight sees *After Virtue* as the turning point in MacIntyre’s struggle with the question of how one comes to adopt a tradition. Knight writes, “As D’Andrea suggests, *After Virtue* was pivotal in MacIntyre’s intellectual progress. Previously, he had agonized over the

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<sup>38</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness: Part 1,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 33. First published in *New Reasoner* 7 (Winter 1958–59): 90–100.

<sup>39</sup> MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 259. See Jeffrey Stout, “Virtue among the Ruins: An Essay on MacIntyre,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 26, no. 3 (1984): 260, where Stout highlights the arbitrary nature of such a choice: “Each of us, MacIntyre wrote, must ‘choose both with whom we wish to be morally bound and by what ends, rules, and virtues we wish to be guided.’ But on what grounds?”

<sup>40</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.

apparent arbitrariness with which he felt obliged to choose some perspective from which to view reality. Sometimes, he attempted, with Kierkegaard and Barth, or with Sartre and Ayer, to make a virtue of such choice.”<sup>41</sup>

The problem with this appraisal of MacIntyre’s progress, however, is that subsequent to *After Virtue*, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre resurrects the notion of “the person who finds him or herself an alien to every tradition of enquiry.”<sup>42</sup> I say “resurrects” because the notion of such a chooser, too, is found in early writings of MacIntyre. In *A Short History of Ethics*, for instance, he writes, “We are liable to find two kinds of people in our society: those who speak from within one of these surviving moralities, and those who stand outside all of them.”<sup>43</sup> The important issue of arbitrary choice which George mentions four times in his brief presentation of the particularist challenge arises precisely on account of those whom MacIntyre mentions as being outside all traditions. Given MacIntyre’s particularistic commitments, George observes, “If someone standing apart from any tradition cannot, as MacIntyre supposes he cannot, grasp any sound principles of practical rationality and justice, neither, it would

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<sup>41</sup> Kelvin Knight, “MacIntyre’s Progress,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6 (2009): 1126.

<sup>42</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 395.

<sup>43</sup> MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 257. For other such examples of a chooser outside all traditions see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Secularization and Moral Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 50–51 and MacIntyre, “Relativism, Power and Philosophy,” 18.

seem, could such an individual be capable of sufficient self-understanding to render his choice among the range of traditions confronting him anything other than arbitrary.”<sup>44</sup>

One reply to George that perhaps at first seems available to MacIntyre is to argue that the choice made among traditions by those outside all traditions need not be completely arbitrary. While the choice could not, in accord with MacIntyre’s particularism, be supported *rationally*, it could be supported in other ways, say by one’s aesthetic attraction to one tradition or another. MacIntyre could be understood to have some such response to the problem of arbitrary choice in mind when he writes, “How, if at all, could such a person [outside all traditions] as a result of an encounter with some particular tradition of enquiry come instead to inhabit that tradition as a rational agent. . . ? Only, it seems, by a change amounting to a conversion.”<sup>45</sup> According to this proposal, perhaps one could adopt a tradition by means of a conversion (for aesthetic or other considerations) that can be described as arational but not as entirely arbitrary.

There are, however, two problems with this reply. First, throughout his career (and characteristically when commenting on the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard), MacIntyre has consistently opposed this type of choice, choice that might be made, say, on aesthetic grounds but that would, nonetheless, be fundamentally arational. In a discussion of choice not “guided by reasons,” for instance, MacIntyre writes, “I take this

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<sup>44</sup> George, “Moral Particularism, Thomism, and Traditions,” 600.

<sup>45</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 396. For more on conversion to a tradition see Reames, “Metaphysics, History, and Moral Philosophy: The Centrality of the 1990 Aquinas Lecture to MacIntyre’s Argument for Thomism,” 434–35.

notion of fundamental uncaused and unreasoned choice to be a vastly influential piece of philosophical mythology.”<sup>46</sup>

The second, and more important, problem with the notion of an arational conversion to a tradition is that it still invites the charge of relativism. If those outside all traditions cannot choose in an explicitly *rational* way, then whether their choice is, strictly speaking, arbitrary or not, it is *rationally* arbitrary, and the accusation of decisive relativism that George advances applies. Like George, Mark Colby accuses MacIntyre’s theory of leading to just such relativism: “Each tradition is best understood, on MacIntyre’s account, as a heterogeneous totality unique unto itself, and the choice among them is a matter, not of epistemology, but of ultimate value-judgments regarding which criteria of rationality one affirms. *This choice is criterionless and therefore relativistic.*”<sup>47</sup>

The other major formulation of the particularist challenge is offered by John Haldane. Similar in many respects to George’s formulation, Haldane’s has the merit of clarifying that unless the choice of a tradition can be made specifically in a *rationally* meaningful way, MacIntyre’s position seems to entail relativism. Haldane writes:

We are to imagine someone who has not yet subscribed to “a coherent tradition of enquiry.” That immediately raises the question of how such a person can choose between rival suitors for his or her mind and conscience. It would seem that his or her choice must either be rooted in reason or else be non-rational. But the former is excluded if rational

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<sup>46</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “How Moral Agents became Ghosts Or Why the History of Ethics Diverged from that of the Philosophy of Mind,” *Synthese* 53 (1982): 308. For more criticism of non-reason-informed choice, see MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 208–11; MacIntyre, “Ought,” 151–52; and MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 40–50.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Colby, “Moral Traditions, MacIntyre and Historicist Practical Reason,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21, no. 3 (1995): 70. Emphasis in the original.

norms are only available to a participant within a coherent tradition, for, *ex hypothesi*, the addressee is a complete outsider. If the latter, however, then one may be hesitant to speak of a “choice” as having been made, and certainly it could not be seen as other than arbitrary viewed from *all* rational perspectives. . . . It is doubtful that the envisaged situation is even intelligible. But if it is, then it seems to imply that MacIntyre’s position on the present case is either contradictory or else lends support to a relativist conclusion. We are prohibited from saying that the rootless addressee can choose on the basis of transcendent norms of practical reason, so that excludes a realist resolution. This returns us to the thought that all choosing is from within a tradition, but if so there is after all nothing to be said by or to such a person, and *a fortiori* he cannot make a rational choice.<sup>48</sup>

Haldane’s articulation of the particularist challenge very nicely frames the issue facing MacIntyre. As it stands, MacIntyre’s position either entails relativism, or it is contradictory. But which is in fact the case? While this important question is one which MacIntyre himself must chiefly answer, I contend that his position is contradictory and can and should be amended in such a way that the concern of relativism specified by the particularist challenge is removed. To see how MacIntyre’s position should, on the strength of arguments he makes elsewhere, be amended to avoid the particularist challenge, we must return to the core elements of that challenge.

MacIntyre’s position entails relativism if all three of the following claims are insisted upon. But if one or more of the claims are withdrawn, the threat of relativism disappears. Those claims are:

- 1) There are in fact people outside all traditions.

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<sup>48</sup> Haldane, “MacIntyre’s Thomist Revival: What Next?,” 96–97. Emphasis in the original.

- 2) Those (and all) people can—and to progress rationally, *must*—choose to give their allegiance to some tradition or other.
- 3) Those outside of all traditions are intellectually destitute, lacking any means whatsoever for substantive rational enquiry.

Claims (2) and (3) are central to MacIntyre's particularism and, indeed, to his moral philosophy as a whole. As such, they cannot be removed from his theory without compromising it. Those two claims represent, in fact, opposite sides of the same coin, so to speak: namely, his often-argued-for position that all substantive reasoning takes place within one tradition or another. It is because traditions are the bearers of reason that one must adopt a tradition to progress rationally, as claimed in (2); if one does not adopt a tradition, then one is unable to reason about substantive issues, as claimed in (3). I considered at length the arguments MacIntyre makes for that position in the section "Tradition as Bearer of Rationality" in Chapter Two above. That position is highlighted in the following excerpts taken from three of the works most central to MacIntyre's project: "It is traditions which are the bearers of reason"<sup>49</sup>; "All reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought"<sup>50</sup>; and "There is no other way to engage in the formulation, elaboration, rational justification, and criticism of accounts of practical rationality and justice except from within some one particular tradition in conversation, cooperation, and conflict with those who inhabit the same tradition."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *The Monist* 60, no. 4 (1977): 461.

<sup>50</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

<sup>51</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 350.

Claim (1), however,—that there are in fact people outside all traditions—is a claim that I think MacIntyre need not, and on account of arguments he makes elsewhere, *cannot* maintain. In the section “Narrative and the Unity of a Human Life” of Chapter One, we saw MacIntyre argue, against Sartre and Goffman, for a narrative understanding of the self. According to that conception, the self enters the world not as a new character in a new story but as a new character in an ongoing story. “The characters of course never start literally *ab initio*; they plunge *in medias res*, the beginnings of their story already made for them by what and who has gone before.”<sup>52</sup> The self finds itself taken up at first into roles not of its choosing, roles that provide its moral life with context: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted.”<sup>53</sup>

MacIntyre’s discussion of the self immediately precedes, and is the foundation on which he erects, the third stage in his account of the virtues: namely, their location in traditions. Although MacIntyre had discussed traditions with some focus in his 1977 piece “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” it is really with the 1981 publication of *After Virtue* that he makes his understanding of traditions known to the world. As such, I think some importance should be attributed to the connection between the narrative view of the self and traditions which he discusses in *After Virtue*.

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<sup>52</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 215.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

Toward advancing his notion of traditions, MacIntyre points out that one never pursues the good nor exercises the virtues by oneself. This point follows naturally from his narrative understanding of the self, according to which one plunges *in medias res*, finding oneself as a character in an ongoing story. He writes:

We all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles. As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity.<sup>54</sup>

In writing, "we *all* [emphasis added] approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity," MacIntyre seems to rule out the possibility of their being complete outsiders who are free to choose a social identity. The allowance of such a possibility is a mistake, rather, that MacIntyre attributes to individualism. That each life has its own moral particularity is "likely to appear alien and even surprising from the standpoint of modern individualism. From the standpoint of individualism I am what I myself choose to be."<sup>55</sup> MacIntyre rejects that notion, writing:

The contrast with the narrative view of the self is clear. For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 221.

One's historical identity and social identity is not a matter of individual choice. Rather, "The self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe."<sup>57</sup> In those cultural, political, and familial communities, the self finds its (at least provisional) identity through participation in their beliefs, customs, teachings, practices, ways of thinking, etc. Put succinctly, what the self receives through those communities in which it finds its identity is, according to MacIntyre, a tradition. He writes, "What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition."<sup>58</sup>

The particularist challenge arises in response to MacIntyre's remarks in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* regarding those outside all traditions. But on the strength of MacIntyre's seminal account of traditions advanced in *After Virtue*, it seems clear that his position does not allow for the possibility of there being those outside all traditions. Consider again the following excerpts. Entering life as characters in an ongoing story, people "*never start literally ab initio*; they plunge *in medias res*, the beginnings of their story already made for them by what and who has gone before."<sup>59</sup> We "*all approach our*

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 215. Emphasis added.

own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity.”<sup>60</sup> The story of my life “is *always* embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity.”<sup>61</sup> The self “*has to* find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities.”<sup>62</sup> And each of us inherits a tradition “whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not.”<sup>63</sup> These excerpts, which tie MacIntyre’s narrative view of the self to his account of traditions, strongly suggest that it is not possible, on MacIntyre’s own account, for there to be the sort of people he mentions in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, people supposedly outside all traditions.

The claim that MacIntyre’s own theory does not allow for there to be people outside all traditions is a claim which can perhaps be validated or rejected only by MacIntyre himself since the claim carries with it the charge of an inconsistency in his writings. The plausibility of the claim, however, is buttressed by the fact that I am not alone in recommending it. Others—even others sympathetic to MacIntyre’s project as a whole—take issue with the possibility MacIntyre raises of there being those outside all traditions. In the above-quoted passage in which Haldane expresses his version of the particularist challenge, he questions whether the possibility of those alien to every tradition even makes sense on MacIntyre’s own terms. Haldane writes, “It is doubtful

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 220. Emphasis added.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 221. Emphasis added.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

that the envisaged situation is even intelligible.”<sup>64</sup> Alicia Roque voices the same doubt: “[MacIntyre] states that the book is addressed to those who have not yet given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry. On MacIntyre’s own assumption that all conceptual frameworks are tradition-informed, is such a reader possible?”<sup>65</sup>

While Haldane and Roque *doubt* that MacIntyre’s account allows for the possibility of those outside all traditions, Knight and D’Andrea—two of the foremost MacIntyre commentators—more strongly reject that possibility. On his reading of MacIntyre’s progress, Knight writes, “MacIntyre no longer conceives rival perspectives as being the kind of things that he suggested they are in *A Short History of Ethics*, things to which one might freely choose to adhere or not. Rather, individuals’ reasoning is necessarily practised within some tradition of reasoning and upon some set of presuppositions.”<sup>66</sup> D’Andrea offers a similar critique in a discussion specifically about those who have not yet given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry. He writes, “Though MacIntyre does not make the point explicitly here, his arguments commit him to holding that anyone who lives and works in an established social order and has received a certain minimum amount of education is in a certain minimum sense

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<sup>64</sup> Haldane, “MacIntyre’s Thomist Revival: What Next?,” 96.

<sup>65</sup> Alicia Juarrero Roque, “Language Competence and Tradition-constituted Rationality,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51, no. 3 (September 1991): 616.

<sup>66</sup> Kelvin Knight, ed., *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 17.

the member of some tradition of inquiry or other.”<sup>67</sup> But surely the readers of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* live and work in an established social order and have received a minimum amount of education. If so, then they are in at least some minimal sense the member of a tradition, and if *that* is the case, then it doesn’t make sense for MacIntyre to claim that those outside all traditions constitute a portion of the audience to whom *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is principally addressed.

It seems clear to me that Haldane, Roque, Knight, and D’Andrea have identified an important contradiction in MacIntyre’s thought. It appears to be a contradiction of which MacIntyre is unaware. In “A Partial Response to My Critics” MacIntyre replies to some of the concerns that Haldane voices, but he doesn’t reply to, or even acknowledge, the particularist challenge. In a paragraph in which MacIntyre could naturally respond to the particularist challenge, he writes:

Anyone who has accepted the thesis that all enquiry is carried on from the standpoint of some particular tradition must, as John Haldane says, understand “the situation of competing traditions” as one “which invites a relativist description.” One does not have to be outside any tradition, as I wrongly supposed in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*—and I am grateful to John Haldane for making my mistake clear to me—but only to be able to place oneself in imagination in the situation of those inhabiting rival traditions, in order to understand how this is so.<sup>68</sup>

Although in this passage MacIntyre acknowledges that he made a mistake regarding what he wrote about those outside all traditions, he does *not* identify that mistake as his

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<sup>67</sup> D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 338.

<sup>68</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to My Critics,” in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 294.

allowing for the possibility of their being those outside all traditions. His response to Haldane does not, in fact, regard the particularist challenge but rather the relativist challenge. MacIntyre says that the mistake he made was to think that one had to be outside all traditions in order to formulate the relativist challenge, whereas Haldane has helped him to see that such is not the case. But MacIntyre says nothing of the inconsistency that Haldane pointed out when he suggested that the situation of those outside all traditions is unintelligible on MacIntyre's account.

While I am confident that this important inconsistency exists in MacIntyre's thought, and while I think that only he can adequately resolve it, I offer the following suggestion for how he might do so. It seems to me that the individuals he describes in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* as being outside all traditions could easily be regarded, rather, as belonging to one of the following two post-Enlightenment traditions: either the liberal tradition that he describes especially in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* or the genealogic tradition that he discusses more thoroughly in *After Virtue* and in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. That MacIntyre thinks those outside all traditions are to be regarded as products of the Enlightenment is clear. MacIntyre writes, "The person who finds him or herself an alien to every tradition . . . is the kind of post-Enlightenment person who responds to the failure of the Enlightenment to provide neutral, impersonal tradition-independent standards of rational judgment by concluding that no set of beliefs proposed for acceptance is therefore justifiable."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 395.

On the one hand, the description MacIntyre goes on to provide of this post-Enlightenment alien to all traditions sounds very much like the description he provides earlier in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* of those who in fact inhabit the liberal tradition. For instance, MacIntyre says that the person alien to all traditions is such an outsider because “he or she brings to the encounter with such tradition standards of rational justification which the beliefs of no tradition could satisfy.”<sup>70</sup> Earlier in the book, however, he said that this (unrealistic) demand for universal standards of rational justification is a mark of the liberal tradition. In the chapter “Liberalism Transformed into a Tradition” he writes:

The project of founding a form of social order in which individuals could emancipate themselves from the contingency and particularity of tradition by appealing to genuinely universal, tradition-independent norms was and is not only, and not principally, a project of philosophers. It was and is the project of modern liberal, individualistic society, and the most cogent reasons that we have for believing that the hope of a tradition-independent rational universality is an illusion derive from the history of that project. For in the course of that history liberalism, which began as an appeal to alleged principles of shared rationality against what was felt to be the tyranny of tradition, has itself been transformed into a tradition.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, MacIntyre says that the alien to all traditions thinks that “the everyday world is to be treated as one of pragmatic necessities. Every scheme of overall belief which extends beyond the realm of pragmatic necessity is equally unjustified.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 395.

But earlier he identified this pragmatic attitude as one held by members of the liberal tradition:

The liberal is committed to there being no one overriding good. . . . The claims of any one sphere to attention or to resources are once again to be determined by the summing of individual preferences and by bargaining. . . . And what each individual and each group has to hope for from these rules is that they should be such as to enable that individual or that group to be as effective as possible in implementing his, her, or their preferences. This kind of effectiveness thus becomes a central value of liberal modernity.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, the tradition of liberalism, as MacIntyre understands it, involves the claim that “every individual is to be equally free to propose and to live by whatever conception of the good he or she pleases, derived from whatever theory or tradition he or she may adhere to.”<sup>74</sup> This account of a person seemingly radically free to choose among conceptions of the good and even among theories and traditions is supposed to describe a member of the liberal tradition, but it also serves well as a description of those who appear to be outside all traditions. I submit that those MacIntyre describes as alien to all traditions might, in fact, more accurately be considered members of the liberal tradition.<sup>75</sup> In that case their apparent lack of commitment to a tradition can be explained by the fact that although they actually belong to a tradition, they just happen to belong to a tradition that, according to MacIntyre, places a very high value on (radically free) choice.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>75</sup> See Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, 82: “The very idea of the liberal atomistic individual seems to be an idea of someone without any moral tradition. However, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre explicitly recognizes that liberalism is a tradition.”

Alternatively, to some extent those post-Enlightenment individuals whom MacIntyre describes as outside all traditions sound rather like those he describes elsewhere as members of the genealogic tradition.<sup>76</sup> He writes that one alien to all traditions “views the social and cultural order, the order of traditions, as a series of falsifying masquerades.”<sup>77</sup> In *After Virtue*, however, MacIntyre describes Nietzsche, the emblematic figure of what became the genealogic tradition, as just such a person. MacIntyre writes, “The form of moral utterance provides a possible mask for almost any face. . . . It was indeed Nietzsche’s perception of this vulgarized facility of modern moral utterance which partly informed his disgust with it.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, MacIntyre describes those outside all traditions as viewing the claims of traditions and the adoption of a tradition as expressions of arbitrary acts of will: “Such persons who take themselves to have escaped the deception and self-deception of such masquerades cannot understand the action of entering into any scheme of belief except as an act of arbitrary will.”<sup>79</sup> In *After Virtue*, once again, MacIntyre describes Nietzsche as just such an individual. Nietzsche sees “that what purported to be appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions

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<sup>76</sup> In addition to the below passages from *After Virtue*, see the following for a fuller account of how MacIntyre understands the genealogic tradition: Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 32–57 and 196–215.

<sup>77</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 396.

<sup>78</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 110.

<sup>79</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 396.

of subjective will.”<sup>80</sup> Finally, in “The Claims of *After Virtue*” MacIntyre describes Nietzsche’s achievement in this way: “The philosopher who understood best that the Enlightenment project had failed decisively and that contemporary moral assertions had characteristically become a set of masks for unavowed purposes was Nietzsche.”<sup>81</sup> Consider how well that description of Nietzsche corresponds to MacIntyre’s description of one alien to every tradition as “the kind of post-Enlightenment person who responds to the failure of the Enlightenment to provide neutral, impersonal tradition-independent standards of rational judgment by concluding that no set of beliefs proposed for acceptance is therefore justifiable.”<sup>82</sup>

Once again, I suggest that those supposedly outside all traditions might better be understood, on MacIntyre’s own terms, as members in fact of one of the two post-Enlightenment traditions that he discusses: liberalism, on the one hand, or genealogy, on the other. Being in fact opposed to tradition, members of liberalism and genealogy may very likely regard *themselves* as outside all traditions, but from MacIntyre’s perspective they in fact occupy traditions, even if they are unable or unwilling to recognize that.

In summary, I do not think that MacIntyre can consistently allow for there being those “alien to every tradition” given his particularism in general and the way in which his narrative view of the self, specifically, locates all individuals in some tradition or

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<sup>80</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 113.

<sup>81</sup> MacIntyre, “The Claims of *After Virtue*,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 69. First published in *Analyse und Kritik* 6, no. 1 (1984): 3–7.

<sup>82</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 395.

other. I think that MacIntyre can—and really must—resolve this contradiction in his thought by abandoning the possibility of there being those outside all traditions. While he alone can perhaps provide the definitive resolution of the contradiction, I have suggested that he do so by maintaining that such supposed post-Enlightenment outsiders be understood, rather, as occupying either the liberal tradition or the genealogic tradition which he discusses. In this way all people would be seen as belonging to a tradition, whether by explicit commitment or merely by birth. While one's involvement in a tradition merely by birth could be considered arbitrary in the sense that it is accidental, it would not involve the type of rational arbitrariness required by one supposedly outside all traditions who is supposed to choose what tradition to commit to. Rather, having received a tradition even arbitrarily through birth, a person would be outfitted with the intellectual resources by which she could proceed to work through her tradition's solved and unsolved problems and probe other traditions from her own received tradition's vantage point. If she were then to choose to commit to another tradition other than the one in which she was raised, that choice could be rationally informed and meaningful rather than rationally arbitrary.

By abandoning his claims regarding those outside all traditions, MacIntyre would clear up the inconsistency I've highlighted. Just as importantly, however, by doing so he would successfully defend his position from the relativism alleged by the particularist challenge. The particularist challenge holds that MacIntyre's position entails relativism because, if rationality is tradition-constituted, if there is no reasoning outside traditions—and MacIntyre is firmly committed to that position—then the choice of traditions that one

alien to all traditions would make would have to be a rationally arbitrary choice. If, however, MacIntyre disclaims the possibility of there in fact being individuals alien to every tradition—and I think his narrative view of the self in fact requires him to disclaim that possibility—then the particularist challenge dissolves, and the threat of relativism it entails disappears.

# Conclusion

In this dissertation I considered the relationship between narrative, truth, and relativism in the ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre. Christopher Lutz excellently summarizes that relationship, writing, “This is what [MacIntyre’s] theory is really about: It is an account of the subjective condition of the narrative quest for objective truth.”<sup>1</sup> Following is a précis of the conclusions reached in this dissertation regarding narrative, truth, and relativism in MacIntyre’s moral philosophy as well as a summary of the contributions I hope to have made to MacIntyrean scholarship and to philosophy in general.

The most important role that narrative plays in MacIntyre’s ethics involves his claim that the truth in moral enquiry is sought by means of narrating the stories of contending moral traditions. Before examining that most controversial use of narrative and the charges of relativism to which it has given rise, MacIntyre’s comparatively less controversial uses of narrative were considered in Chapter One. In the first section of Chapter One (“Narrative and Human Action”) we saw that, for MacIntyre, actions can only be made intelligible by narrating a story that situates them in relation to the socially

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 58.

recognizable, primary intention of their author. In opposition to those atomistic philosophies of action which seek to understand complex actions by analyzing them into simpler components, actions ultimately derive their intelligibility, in MacIntyre's view, from narrative continuities in the agent's life.

Agents' lives themselves, on MacIntyre's account, are best understood in terms of what he calls their narrative unity. This use that MacIntyre makes of narrative was the subject of the second section of Chapter One ("Narrative and the Unity of a Human Life"). In an expression of his particularism, MacIntyre argues that the self is partially defined by, though not limited to, the roles and relationships into which it is born. The self enters the world as a character in an ongoing story. The story of one's life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which the individual derives her identity. MacIntyre opposes his narrative understanding of the self to tendencies at home in existentialism and in modern social theory either to draw a sharp distinction between the individual and the roles she plays or else to liquidate the self into the various roles an individual plays.

In one sense human lives necessarily possess narrative unity. A person is born into an ongoing story; a person's actions can only be understood as expressions of a narrative being lived out; and the phenomena of holding people accountable for their actions and experiences presupposes a narrative structure, as does the identity of the self. As the third section of Chapter One ("Narrative and the Good") reveals, however, there is another sense in which, according to MacIntyre, narrative unity is a goal for human lives. This type of narrative unity MacIntyre describes as a quest for an as-of-yet unspecified

good. His characterization of the pursuit of the good as a quest for a partly determinate *telos* gives rise to criticisms that his notion of the good is too indeterminate. While his notion of the good, which limits the range of virtues and of practices that can constitute the moral life, does provide meaningful constraints on what any adequate conception of the good must involve, it is not part of MacIntyre's project to provide a determinate conception of the good. According to him such substantive determinacy with respect to the good can only be given, ultimately, through the progress made within and between traditions as arguments through time refine and advance that conception.

Chapter Two begins with a treatment of what MacIntyre means by tradition. Having already seen in Chapter One the role of traditions in ordering the goods of practices and of the unity of one's life, the first section of Chapter Two ("Tradition: Community, Argument, Continuities, and Narrative") considers four other constituents of traditions. First, a tradition requires embodiment in the shared social life of a community. Secondly, a tradition involves ongoing argument about the goods which constitute it. Thirdly, in the midst of such argument, however, a tradition must always maintain continuity with respect to its core beliefs if it is to remain the same tradition. Fourthly, traditions as MacIntyre understands them take a narrative structure. Like individual selves, traditions are importantly informed by, but not entirely determined by, the particularity of their past and present. A living tradition is a not-yet-complete narrative in the sense that it can be developed in hitherto unforeseen ways by means of an argumentative retelling of its present and its history, a retelling whose narrative must

maintain the core beliefs of the tradition even while extending the tradition into one future trajectory or another.

To these important defining elements of a tradition MacIntyre adds an even more important one: traditions are the bearers of rationality. By virtue of this element, MacIntyre's understanding of traditions should easily be distinguishable from a Burkean understanding with which it might carelessly be confused. In the second section of Chapter Two ("Tradition as Bearer of Rationality"), MacIntyre's particularism comes to the fore in his arguments for the position that all reasoning takes place within traditions. He opposes his conception of rational enquiry as tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive to the Enlightenment notion of rational enquiry as impersonal, universal, and disinterested (the encyclopaedist view) or else the unwitting representative of particular interests (the genealogist view). MacIntyre proposes his narrative and tradition-based approach to moral philosophy as the way to overcome, on the one hand, the relativism of genealogists and emotivists (whom MacIntyre sees as the product of the Enlightenment) and, on the other hand, the unsuccessful universalism of encyclopaedists. The issue of whether MacIntyre's moral philosophy involves relativism is important because if it does, then his approach might be subject to the same criticisms he brings against the emotivists and genealogists, and it might fail to provide a serviceable alternative to the universalism of the encyclopaedists which he rejects.

The allegations by critics that MacIntyre's own view involves relativism can be grouped into three challenges: the perspectivist challenge, the relativist challenge, and the

particularist challenge. Those challenges, and MacIntyre's responses to them, are considered in Chapters Two, Three, and Four, respectively.

The perspectivist challenge arises in response to MacIntyre's contention that rationality is tradition-constituted and tradition-dependent. Standards of rational justification emerge through a tradition's successful overcoming of epistemological crises, theoretical difficulties that (at least for a time) prevent a tradition from making rational progress by its own standards. To overcome an epistemological crisis, a tradition must extend its rational powers by successfully explaining why the problem had to arise and by providing a solution to the problem, all the while maintaining fundamental continuity between the pre- and post-epistemological crisis theories. The successful overcoming of epistemological crises results in the best theory so far advanced by the tradition. The best theory so far is the one that provides the best narrative account so far of previous limitations and offers the best way so far discovered for moving beyond the epistemological crises to which such limitations gave rise. The members of such a hitherto successful moral tradition are entitled to a good measure of confidence in their moral theory. Because unforeseen epistemological crises could arise in the future, however, a tradition cannot be taken to express in its theories the final truth about those objects with which the theories are concerned. This consideration gives rise to the perspectivist challenge.

The perspectivist challenge is addressed in the third section of Chapter Two ("The Perspectivist Challenge and Truth"). It involves two claims. First, if rationality is internal to traditions, if the most a tradition can offer is its "best theory so far," then it

seems MacIntyre cannot allow for the possibility of traditions making real truth-claims.

As MacIntyre puts it, the perspectivist challenge “puts in question the possibility of making truth-claims from *within* any one tradition.”<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the perspectivist challenge alleges that MacIntyre’s moral philosophy involves relativism because it neither aspires to nor allows for objective moral truth.

MacIntyre responds to the perspectivist challenge first by clarifying that he does *not* hold that what traditions claim for their theories is truth-from-a-point-of-view, i.e., a perspective. Rather, he emphasizes that what all traditions characteristically claim for their theories (even when those theories happen to contradict the theories of other traditions) is universal truth. That is, by their theories traditions characteristically claim that such-and-such is how things always are for all people (or “X’s”) everywhere. Secondly, MacIntyre defends himself from the accusation that the truth about any given matter is that which accords with the dialectical success of a tradition in having refined it’s “best theory so far.” According to MacIntyre, the truth is not that which accords with a successful tradition; rather, the success which a tradition is able to enjoy in its dialectical advancements of its increasingly refined best theory so far is that which accords with and expresses ever more completely the truth about that which the theory treats. Thirdly, MacIntyre overcomes the perspectivist challenge by advancing a robust, realist account of truth as the adequation of the mind to its objects. Such adequacy of mind to its objects is the *telos* of enquiry. Traditions claim universal truth for their

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<sup>2</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 352. Emphasis added.

theories, but the onset of an epistemological crisis reveals that a tradition's theory is not yet adequate to its object. By overcoming such crises, however, the theory of a tradition can progress toward the perfection of understanding that would be fully adequate to its object, that would be universally true.

Chapter Three deals with the second way in which MacIntyre's thought is accused of involving relativism. That accusation is expressed in the relativist challenge.

According to this challenge, critics argue that even if MacIntyre's theory does allow that traditions are making real truth-claims, his theory still involves relativism because he fails to provide a rational means of adjudicating *between* the truth-claims of rival traditions. The relativist challenge arises on account of MacIntyre's theses that traditions claim objective truth, not truth-from-a-point-of-view, for their theories and that there are no independent standards by which rival traditions' truth-claims can be judged. On account of these theses it seems to MacIntyre's critics that there can be no rational grounds for accepting any one of the rival traditions' truth-claims over those of another.

MacIntyre responds to the relativist challenge by arguing that the truth-claims of one tradition can be shown superior to those of another when one tradition is able to solve another tradition's epistemological crisis on the terms set by the tradition undergoing the crisis. In such cases the successful tradition is said to defeat the tradition that proved unable to solve its own epistemological crisis. Because traditions do not share common standards of substantive rationality, the type of engagement in which one tradition could defeat another is rare. Though rare, such engagement is, however, possible by virtue of those who can speak the languages of both traditions as first languages. Such individuals

are in the position of being able to understand the claims of each tradition from within. As a member of a tradition that is unable to solve the epistemological crisis it is experiencing, such individuals may be able to see how the resources of the rival tradition whose language they also speak as a first language are able to solve the crisis of the faltering tradition on that tradition's own terms. The ability of one tradition to defeat another in respect to their truth-claims amounts to the ability of one tradition to "out-narrate" the other, i.e. to tell a more accurate story than the faltering tradition itself can tell of why the epistemological crisis had to arise, of why the faltering tradition cannot overcome it, and of how it can in fact be overcome with the resources provided by the external tradition. The possibility of such defeat or out-narration overcomes the relativist challenge by showing that even though rival traditions share nothing in the way of substantive rationality, it is still possible for their truth-claims to be rationally evaluated even to the extent that one tradition's claims can be judged superior to those of another.

MacIntyre's particularism, which is mentioned occasionally throughout Chapters 1–3 and which is implicit in much of the discussions of those chapters, is treated thematically in Chapter Four. In the first section of Chapter Four ("Particularism and Universal Truth") MacIntyre's particularism is presented and defended against the charge that it involves relativism because it implies that truth is internal to traditions, that there is no universal truth. MacIntyre's particularism includes strong claims for the local, cultural, and historical situatedness of those who engage in moral enquiry—from the level of individuals to that of entire traditions—and of moral philosophy and morality itself. His particularism, however, is best described as a particularism of procedure, not

of result. It is a particularism of procedure in that traditions always carry out enquiry and make truth-claims in accord with their own particularized standards of rational justification. His particularism of procedure does not, however, commit him to holding that truth as a conclusion of enquiry is mired in the particular. On the contrary, MacIntyre thinks that the end toward which enquiry is directed is universal truth. Traditions characteristically progress toward a theory that expresses universal truth by means of overcoming epistemological crises.

MacIntyre is a universalist in regard to truth, but he is a particularist in regard to rational justification. He holds that there is no substantive reasoning, no rational justification, outside traditions. Rational progress is only made from within traditions. While maintaining these positions, MacIntyre problematically indicates that *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is principally written for an audience comprised, in part, of those alien to every tradition who are faced with a decision as to what tradition to commit to. The second section of Chapter Four (“The Particularist Challenge”) considers a final allegation of relativism to which MacIntyre’s thought is susceptible. According to the particularist challenge, those who MacIntyre describes as alien to every tradition must, on MacIntyre’s account, choose to commit to a tradition in order to progress rationally. But MacIntyre’s particularism commits him to holding that such outsiders are devoid of reason since traditions are the bearers of reason. If the choice that such outsiders must make cannot be informed by reason, then their choice appears to be relativistic in the sense that it must be made in a rationally arbitrary way.

MacIntyre has not provided a response to the particularist challenge. It is possible he is unaware of the challenge and the allegation of relativism it entails. In my opinion, however, his philosophy has the resources that enable him to defend it against the particularist challenge. His position seems to involve an inconsistency. By resolving the inconsistency, MacIntyre can diffuse the accusation of relativism. One expression of MacIntyre's commitment to particularism is found in his discussion of the narrative unity of human life, in which he holds that every person enters the world as a character in an ongoing story. That ongoing story, characterized by a host of cultural, familial, and historical particularities, includes membership in a tradition. It therefore does not make sense for MacIntyre to entertain the possibility of there being individuals alien to all traditions. In fact, elsewhere MacIntyre seems to describe such supposed outsiders as members of either the liberal tradition or the genealogic tradition. The particularism that MacIntyre discusses in conjunction with the narrative unity of human life enables and, indeed, requires him to reject the possibility of there being those alien to all traditions. The accusation of relativism specified by the particularist challenge depends on there being those outside all traditions whose choice of a tradition is rationally arbitrary. If MacIntyre were to rescind his remarks regarding those outside all traditions, the particularist challenge would collapse, and his thought would be acquitted of the charge of relativism.

MacIntyre's narrative approach to ethics is controversial, and it gives rise to a number of scholarly criticisms. Foremost among those criticisms is the accusation that his moral philosophy entails relativism. Thomas D'Andrea notes, "That, despite his

intent, MacIntyre cannot, or at least does not in his stated views, escape relativism is a frequent criticism, particularly by those sympathetic to his general project.”<sup>3</sup> The question of relativism in the ethics of MacIntyre is important because, at bottom, if his moral philosophy does lead to relativism, then his project fails. In that case his thought would not provide a serviceable alternative to the universalism of the encyclopaedists, which he rejects, and it might be subject to the same criticisms that he brings against the relativism of the emotivists and genealogists.

To this important discussion I have offered arguments throughout the dissertation that defend MacIntyre’s moral philosophy from the charges of relativism. By virtue of his realist conception of truth, I argue that MacIntyre overcomes the perspectivist challenge. By virtue of his theory of how one tradition can defeat another in respect to their truth-claims, I contend that he overcomes the relativist challenge. And while he has not yet published a response to the particularist challenge, I argue that his particularism compels him to reject the notion of those outside all traditions. By rejecting that notion, he can successfully overcome the particularist challenge as well.

If my arguments defending MacIntyre’s moral philosophy from the charges of relativism are sound, then it is possible that MacIntyre has in fact advanced a conception of moral philosophy that avoids the mistakes that he thinks encyclopaedists, emotivists, and genealogists make. If scholars can put aside the worry of relativism in MacIntyre’s ethics, then they can investigate more directly the merits that MacIntyre claims for his

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas D. D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 403.

conception of moral philosophy. His conception might successfully express real features of morality in hitherto uncharted ways, and it might provide a way beyond the deadlock of so much contemporary moral debate.

These last considerations suggest ways in which this dissertation sought to contribute not only to MacIntyrean scholarship in particular but to broader questions in philosophy as well. MacIntyre advances his moral philosophy as a way to affirm moral particularism while simultaneously denying moral relativism. Many philosophers would contend that such a position is untenable. If the conclusions of this dissertation are correct, however, then such a position is tenable, for MacIntyre would be seen to have successfully articulated a standpoint in moral philosophy that occupies just such a position. If so, then certain philosophical stances that previously seemed contradictory can now be occupied in good faith. Those who, having embraced moral particularism, previously thought that they therefore had to accept moral relativism can learn from MacIntyre how and why moral particularism need not and should not lead to ethical relativism. Those who affirm the truth of moral particularism are now also able to affirm objective truth in morality. Alternatively, those who, having embraced objective truth in morality, previously thought that they therefore had to accept the encyclopaedist conception of reason as impersonal, universal, and disinterested can learn from MacIntyre how and why the affirmation of objective truth in morality need not and should not lead to the conclusion that all moral reasoning and judgments are universal. Those who affirm objective truth in morality are now also able to affirm moral particularism with respect to moral reasoning and judgment.

Furthermore, in this dissertation—especially in the second section of Chapter Two (“Tradition as Bearer of Rationality”)—I discussed MacIntyre’s claims that contemporary moral philosophy is in a state of crisis. He cites as evidence of the crisis what he considers to be the shrill, interminable, unresolved, and seemingly irresolvable character of modern moral debate.<sup>4</sup> In *After Virtue* in particular (but also in other works including *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*), MacIntyre tells the story of how he thinks morality fell into this state of crisis, a state which he likens to a catastrophe<sup>5</sup> in which “our moral condition” is now lived “through the new dark ages which are already upon us.”<sup>6</sup> If MacIntyre’s narrative is to be taken seriously, then the philosophical obstacles that stand in the way of its hearing must be removed. Foremost among those obstacles is the accusation that MacIntyre’s own theory entails relativism, for if it does, then he has failed to provide an authentic Aristotelian-Thomistic account of and alternative to the unhappy state of morality and of moral philosophy which he narrates. If, however, his philosophy does not entail relativism as I have argued that it does not, then the way is clear—or at least clearer—for the story of decline which MacIntyre narrates to be heard and perhaps learned from. On a theoretical level with political implications, for instance, it becomes possible to accept

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<sup>4</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, “Why Is the Search for the Foundations of Ethics So Frustrating?,” *The Hastings Center Report* 9, no. 4 (August 1979): 16–17 and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 6–8 and 71–72; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1981.

<sup>5</sup> See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1–5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

MacIntyre's arguments for why debates about such things as war, abortion, and justice, since argued from incommensurable premises, degenerate into shouting and rhetoric meant to persuade one's opponents of that of which they cannot be convinced rationally.<sup>7</sup> Finally, and no less importantly, it becomes possible to take to heart MacIntyre's practical advice for how to move beyond the moral decline which he narrates: "What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6–22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 263.

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