Human Flourishing: The Grounds of Moral Judgment

ALLYN JOHN FIVES
*Department of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway,
Ireland; e-mail: allyn.fives@nuigalway.ie*

1. Introduction

For relativists, moral claims can be rational relative to some contexts or
parameters, but not rational as such. Alasdair MacIntyre has been
charged with relativism, although he himself has rejected that charac-
terization of his work.[1] This critique arises as MacIntyre is a particularist,
and claims "there are no rules for generating … [a] practically effective
understanding of particulars," and also a contextualist and argues
that "standards of rational justification emerge from and are part of"
traditions with their own distinctive histories.[2] There could be good
reason to defend MacIntyre against this charge of relativism. As an
Aristotelian-Thomist, MacIntyre believes that theoretical inquiry has a
purpose or *telos*, to elaborate the first principles of moral deliberation,
which is also an adequate account of the good and the best.[3] Recently,
also, he has become "committed to giving what is in some sense a
naturalistic account of good."[4] Whether an individual's life is or is not
good is a matter of what it is for members of the human species to
flourish. As with Aristotle, an account of human good provides the
grounds of moral judgment. The human good, flourishing, happiness or
eudaimonia, is a life led exercising the virtues.[5]

However, there is a crucial and unresolved tension in MacIntyre's
work. He insists the *telos* of inquiry is present in the practice of the
virtues, and so adherents of each tradition may rightly persist in the
"affirmations and commitments" that are "bound up with their
conception of the truth of what they assert."[6] However, he also argues
that traditional points of view are partial and must be overcome. We
move toward the *telos* of inquiry only through inter-traditional dialogue,
the outcome of which cannot be known in advance.[7] "In order to have
disagreements about moral issues," as Pedro Tabensky argues, "there
must first be a large degree of agreement that allows us to identify the

subject matter of morality as such."[8] MacIntyre seems wedded to the relativist view that agreement can only be secured as the "moral consensus" of a community.[9] We will see that the required degree of agreement concerning the subject matter of morality can be provided by a non-relativistic account of human flourishing.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre's Aristotelian-Thomism

MacIntyre distinguishes his approach from contemporary moral theory for the following two reasons. First, he gives great importance to virtue. In contrast, contemporary philosophers defend rule-based accounts of justice and rationality, he claims. For instance, John Rawls believes that justice, first and foremost, refers not to an individual virtue but the rules of society's "basic structure" and that a life is good if it is planned in accordance with certain rules of rationality that are themselves value-neutral.[10] MacIntyre acknowledges that we should adhere to rules of justice forbidding "the taking of innocent life, theft and perjury and betrayal."[11] However, justice is a praiseworthy character trait, a virtue, as well. Exercising virtue also cannot be reduced to rule-following. "For in exercising *phronesis* we understand why this particular situation makes the application of some particular moral virtue or the application of some particular rule of justice in acting in some particular way the right thing to do. And there are no rules for generating this kind of practically effective understanding of particulars."[12] This is the particularist view that "moral judgment involves a sensitivity to context which outruns anything moral rules can establish."[13] Furthermore, if rules were required for the application of rules, this would involve an infinite regress. At some stage the wise person must apply a rule without acting in accordance with some other rule.[14]

Virtues, MacIntyre goes on to argue, are exercised while pursuing the so-called internal goods of practices. A practice is an activity "through which goods internal to that 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."[15] Someone can exercise virtues while striving to become good as a chess player, farmer, or architect. Virtues are required as well when someone participates as a citizen. Citizens must exercise virtues to ensure that the community integrates the diverse ways in which people pursue goods in different practices.[16] MacIntyre also emphasizes the historical nature of practices. What "a practice is depends on a mode of understanding it which

has been transmitted through many generations."[17] In addition, "the traditions through which particular practices are transmitted and reshaped never exist in isolation for [sic] larger social traditions."[18]

The second distinctive characteristic of MacIntyre's approach is the importance he gives tradition. Standards of rational justification "emerge from" a tradition and "are vindicated by the way they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition."[19] In contrast, mainstream theory insists on a "neutral, impartial, and, in this way, universal point of view."[20] But mainstream theory itself exhibits the point of view of one tradition, liberal individualism. Impartiality is merely a liberal prejudice. For MacIntyre, rational inquiry is tradition-constituted, and MacIntyre is working within the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition. This is an historicist or contextualist position, which would have us assume "that the nature and influence of moral reasons cannot be understood unless agents are seen as situated in traditions of moral thought and practice, traditions that contribute to the character of moral reality and empower agents to discern its nature."[21] Traditions not only empower agents to discern the nature of morality, they contribute to the character of what is to be discerned.

As we saw, for MacIntyre, deliberation is non-rule-governed. There are no rules for generating the requisite understanding of particulars. Perhaps this particularist approach can be charged with circularity, however. It seems that particularists assume the following circular logic. Because John is wise, his deliberation cannot be reduced to rule following, and John is wise because his deliberation cannot be reduced to rule following. If we may not appeal to some independent general rule or consideration, how can we know that John really is wise and does have a practically effective understanding of particulars? In attempting to dispel the appearance of a dilemma arising from particularism, MacIntyre turns our attention to his form of contextualism. However, contextualism appears problematic as well. He contends, on the one hand, that only a life directed by the practice of the moral and intellectual virtues "will provide the kind of experience from which and about which reliable practical inferences and sound theoretical arguments about practice can be derived," but also, on the other, that the practice of those virtues "already presupposes just those truths about the good and the best for human beings."[22] It seems that at one and the same time our context is to be the springboard from which to begin a theoretical enquiry into the human good, but also we, as participants in that context, are already directed to the pursuit of what truly is the human good.

MacIntyre proposes the following solution to this apparent paradox. "Retrospectively surveyed the judgments and actions of the *phronimos* [or the wise person] … will turn out to be such as would be required by an adequate conception of the good and the best."[23] For Aristotle, the *telos* of theoretical inquiry is to elaborate the first principles of practical deliberation, which is also an adequate conception of the good and the best.[24] MacIntyre also believes all theoretical inquiry is tradition-constituted and that Thomas Aquinas continued the Aristotelian tradition. It follows that the cogency of MacIntyre's form of particularism hangs on the plausibility of his account of tradition-constituted inquiry and its *telos*.

All inquiry is tradition-constituted, he contends, and all traditions are incommensurable. There "is no neutral way of characterizing either the subject matter about which they give rival accounts or the standards by which their claims are to be evaluated."[25] MacIntyre is aware that he may be charged with relativism. For the relativist, a claim "can be rational relative to the standards of some particular tradition, but not rational as such."[26] In attempting to rebut this charge, MacIntyre defends what he calls the rationality of traditions. The "only rational way for the adherents of any tradition to approach intellectually, culturally, and linguistically alien rivals" allows that the rival tradition "may be rationally superior to it in respect precisely of that in the alien tradition which it cannot as yet comprehend."[27] We can engage in inter-traditional dialogue and seek a rational resolution to the genuine controversies between different tradition-constituted forms of inquiry, and, in this way, we make progress toward the *telos* of theoretical inquiry. His supporters claim that MacIntyre sufficiently attends to the historical specificity of rationality, and yet provides a way to account for a tradition that "offers the possibility of a more adequate grasp of reality."[28]

In the words of his defenders, membership of a tradition is necessary not only to "become fully conscious of" the principles or conclusions presupposed by enquiry at its outset, but also to be "fully justified in holding" those principles and conclusions.[29] Why is it that progress toward the *telos* of inquiry can only be made from within traditions? Perhaps MacIntyre is, in fact, guilty of relativism, as he must, it seems, assume "that the tradition determines whether the argument is good," not just whether we can be fully conscious of its being good.[30] However, MacIntyre has recently concluded that the proper subject matter of moral theory is human nature and our *telos* as human beings. If that is the case, would it not be possible to provide an account of human nature that, *contra* MacIntyre's contextualism, is independent of any context?

We could say then that, if arguments are good, "their goodness consists not in their counting within a tradition, but in their adequacy to the subject matter."[31]

3. Objectivism, Virtue, and Naturalism

MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals*, in some ways, offers a response to these questions. MacIntyre had already defended Aristotelian teleology. In this work he reconnects teleology with human nature.

MacIntyre is an objectivist concerning practical rationality and value judgment. Judgments of what is good or better for a person or family or city "are susceptible of objective truth and falsity."[32] He adds: "The presupposition of this objectivity is of course that we can understand some notion of 'good for X' … in terms of some conception of the unity of X's life."[33] Modern philosophers do not acknowledge that such objectivity can be attained, MacIntyre argues. This is the case, since they reject a teleological understanding of human beings and, in turn, believe judgments about whether a life is or is not good do not derive their validity from factual statements about the life and its *telos*. In contrast, Aristotelian ethics teaches us what our *telos* is and also how to achieve it: "human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and needs to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*."[34] However, although accepting the Aristotelian approach to ethics, MacIntyre wanted to divest Aristotle's teleology of "his metaphysical biology."[35] MacIntyre instead conceptualised teleology in terms of a person's life narrative.

"What is better or worse for X depends upon the character of that intelligible narrative which provides X's life with unity."[36] A person seeks his or her narrative unity while participating within, and pursuing the goods of, practices and traditions. In subsequent work, MacIntyre addressed the question of "what makes it rational to act in one way rather than another and … to advance and defend one conception of practical rationality rather than another."[37] He answered these questions by his account of the rationality of traditions. The justificatory basis of rationality is provided by not Aristotle's account of human nature but tradition-constituted enquiry. What MacIntyre's more recent work does is reopen this very question. "Although there is indeed good reason to repudiate important elements of Aristotle's biology, I now

judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible."[38] He acknowledges that a plant or an animal only flourishes "in virtue of possessing some relevant set of natural characteristics."[39] As he takes "it to be a question of fact … what it is for members of this or that particular species to flourish," he is "committed to giving what is in some sense a naturalistic account of good."[40]

In contrast, subjectivists follow David Hume's argument that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions."[41] They contend that value judgments do no more than express feelings and guide action. Each person's given desires or preferences provide the only standards of evaluation to determine what is and is not good. However, if objectivism can be defended, then such subjective considerations are not final and do not determine what is and is not good. If naturalism can be defended, then objective standards of goodness in human life are derived from an account of our good as human beings. According to Philippa Foot, there is a difference between what some person should do relative to a certain consideration and what he or she should do "all things considered."[42] Perhaps it is rational to do such and such relative to a desire, or an interest. However, what a person should do all things considered is that which he or she should do because human good hangs on it. Foot's argument is that human good provides the grounds of rational deliberation. It is not irrational for someone to strive after his or her interests or pursue his or her desires, but it is irrational to do so in ways that take away from the human good. Like MacIntyre, she concludes that virtues are necessary for the human good, and so it is irrational to act from vice.[43] For instance, it is rational to pursue bodily pleasure and material success; and it is irrational to do so in a way that is immoderate or grasping.

4. Intelligent Non-Human Animals

MacIntyre tries to show how objectivism and naturalism account for the reasoning and flourishing of intelligent non-human animals as well as human beings. However, he also claims that human beings act for reasons, and exercise virtues and flourish, as only language-users can do, both as independent practical reasoners and as dependent rational animals.

To begin with, MacIntyre defends objectivism and naturalism with reference to the good of intelligent non-human animals. He believes it is possible to make objective judgments about what is good for, for instance, a dolphin or an ape. The truth of such a judgment does not rest

wholly on the articulated or unarticulated desires of that agent. To put the same point another way, he wants to show that even a dolphin can be said to "act for reasons," and also that acting for reasons cannot be equated with acting from subjective desires and preferences.[44] What does it mean to say that an agent acts for reasons? It is "only a matter of the directedness of my actions by my judgment – often enough unarticulated – about my good."[45] A person can supply a reason for his or her action by identifying the good he or she is pursuing. "What makes my statement true or false is whether my action was or was not in fact directed towards the realization of that particular good."[46] The fact that a dolphin, for instance, cannot articulate what good he or she is pursuing does not prevent us from concluding that he or she is acting for objective reasons. Furthermore, MacIntyre hopes to show there is a "close and observable connection between the successful identification and achievement of particular goods by particular dolphins and those same dolphins flourishing in the specific dolphin mode."[47] There is a naturalistic basis for a dolphin's objective reasons for action.

MacIntyre's argument is that dolphins have reasons for action in so far as such actions are directed toward their good as members of their species. He needs to be able to identify the following: "a set of goods at the achievement of which the members of that species aim," "a set of judgments about which actions are or are likely to be effective in achieving those goods," and "a set of counterfactual conditionals that enable us to connect the goal-directedness and the judgments about effectiveness."[48] All these have been identified, MacIntyre contends, by behavioral studies of dolphins.[49] When hunting, dolphin scouts search for fish, the goods of prey and food, on behalf of the herd, and when they detect fish the rest of the herd will change course so as to join the scouts, the most effective means to attain these goods. To determine whether the dolphins are acting for reasons, we need only consider the counterfactual of dolphins not changing course in response to the scouts. This would happen, given the dolphins were engaged in a hunt, only if they had "some other reason of comparable importance for not changing course" or they "would have had to be physically prevented from changing course."[50]

Can dolphins act for reasons and pursue goods? Behavioral studies seem to provide "adequate grounds" to ascribe to dolphins the "perceptual and communicative capacities" necessary for them to treat a given thing as prey, food, a plaything, or a sexual partner.[51] Dolphins are capable of "perceptual recognition, ... perceptual retention, ... [and] a range of different responses to what is perceived and recognized as the same individual ."[52] As a result, we can ascribe to dolphins the powers of

"making judgments, of intending this and that, of directing their action towards ends that constitute their specific goods and so having reasons for acting as they do."[53] If we can justifiably ascribe all this to dolphins, then, most controversially, we can ascribe to them thoughts, beliefs, and concepts as well.

The most serious objection to MacIntyre's position is that, only language-users can have beliefs, and only human beings can be language-users. According to Donald Davidson, without the concept of a belief we cannot have a belief, since to have a belief we must understand "the possibility of being mistaken," and we cannot have the concept of a belief without engaging in language-use with others and ascribing beliefs to others.[54] MacIntyre, in contrast, argues that many non-human animals seem capable of a pre-linguistic recognition of the distinction between truth and falsity. If that is the case, then animals that are not language-users nonetheless may be capable of acting for reasons. For instance, a dog chases a cat up a tree and stays at the bottom of the tree barking, and then stops barking up the tree and moves to the neighbor's yard. This can be explained by saying that, because he has seen the cat move, the dog no longer believes the cat is up the tree but in the neighbor's yard. This "elementary recognition of the distinction between truth and falsity is embodied in the way in which the animal's belief tracks the changes in the objects of the animal's perception."[55]

5. Human Flourishing

MacIntyre has tried to show that naturalism and objectivism account for judgments of goodness when it comes to intelligent non-human animals. It is in these terms that we can justify the claim that they act for reasons, he has argued. MacIntyre must now apply that approach to human beings.

Intelligent non-human animals are capable of a pre-linguistic recognition of the distinction between truth and falsity. Moreover, adult "human activity and belief" develop out of, and are "still in part dependent upon, modes of belief and activity that we share with some other species of intelligent animals," but also, the activities and beliefs of the other species are "in important respects approaching the condition of language-users."[56] Philippa Foot does not agree that intelligent non-human animals act for reasons. Like MacIntyre, she defends naturalism, and so she is "likening the basis of moral evaluation to that of the evaluation of behavior in animals," but nonetheless she concludes that "human communication and reasoning change the

scene.''[57] However, their two positions are not so different. MacIntyre acknowledges that language-use adds something to rationality. In fact, intelligent non-human animal activity is only "rational by analogy'' with human practical rationality.[58] While the perceptions of dolphins are "reason-affording,'' human beings using language can become reflective about reasons.[59] A human being can pass from a condition of "initial directedness'' toward things that are desired in an unreflective way, a stage of "felt wants,'' to a condition where he or she is able to step back from and assess whether or not there are good reasons to desire such things.[60] Nonetheless, despite this difference between intelligent non-human beings and human beings, MacIntyre believes that he is right to employ objectivism and naturalism when he accounts for the moral evaluation of human beings.

An adult human being can become an independent practical reasoner, a practical reasoner about goods. We can look at two different ways in which we use the term "good.'' Someone is "good in some role,'' "insofar as there are goods internal to that activity that are genuine goods, goods that are to be valued as ends worth pursuing for their own sake.''[61] Therefore, the goods of a practice are objectively good. However, second, we can "judge unconditionally about what it is best for individuals or groups to be or to do or have not only *qua* agents engaged in this or that form of activity …, but also *qua* human beings,'' and these are "judgments about human flourishing.''[62] Our goods include the inherent goods of an activity and the good of flourishing. However, MacIntyre believes that human beings do not flourish simply or solely as independent practical reasoners. We are, and remain, dependent rational animals as well.

As human beings retain an animal identity, we experience periods of vulnerability, suffering, and extreme dependence on others. This is not Aristotle's view of human nature. Aristotle assumed that "great-souled'' people are "unwilling to have others saddened by their grief,'' and dislike any recognition of their "need for aid and consolation.''[63] In contrast, Aquinas accepted human dependence. It follows, MacIntyre argues, that if we acknowledge our dependence, we should adhere to what MacIntyre calls the virtue of just-generosity. We should give "to another in significant need ungrudgingly, from a regard for the other as a human being in need, because it is the minimum owed to that other, and because in relieving the other's distress I relieve my distress at her distress.''[64] Such a response is elicited by the needs of the disabled, for instance, and the receipt of such care is an objective, natural good. MacIntyre also states that "a capacity for *miscercordia* [or compassion] that extends beyond communal obligations is itself crucial for communal life;'' and "what each

of us needs to know in our communal relations is that the attention given to *our* urgent and extreme needs … will be proportional to the need and not to the relationship."[65] There are two possible interpretations of this final statement. It could mean that, as members of an Aristotelian-Thomist community, our basic principles and ends call for just-generosity. This would seem to be MacIntyre's position. An alternative argument, which will be defended here, is that, as human beings, we need to live in communities where just-generosity is a pervasive virtue and a widely accepted principle. This second position could be called universalist, or non-relative, communitarianism.[66]

6. Questions for Particularism and Generalism

The interpretation here differs from the interpretations of commentators who believe that MacIntyre's work is based upon both universalism and generalism. It has been argued that MacIntyre understands practical deliberation as a rule-governed activity.[67] MacIntyre's Thomism provides some evidence for this interpretation. An action is judged good or bad, he argues, based on its consequences and the character of the individual, but also, whether the action conforms to the primary precepts of the natural law, in particular, "not to take what belongs to another," and finally, the *inclinatio*, or directedness, of this practical human activity.[68] Each person has directedness toward "self-preservation," and "the bearing and education of children," and also "the pursuit of … rational goods."[69] The grounds of judgment include the ends or *telos* of a practically rational animal, but also the general precepts of natural law. Practical deliberation "refers us in the end to what is the first premise of all chains of sound practical reasoning, a premise of the form 'Since the good and the best is such and such.'"[70]

There is some evidence to suggest that MacIntyre also wants to give an account of flourishing that is not simply context-specific. "What it is for human beings to flourish does of course vary from context to context, but in every context it is as someone exercises in a relevant way the capacities of an independent practical reasoner that her or his potentialities for flourishing in a specifically human way are developed."[71] It has been argued that MacIntyre amends his previous claim "that the capacity to reason originates chiefly within historically unfolding practices," as he "now endorses a universalist notion of reason in which the *natural* ability to think and reflect remains constant at its most basic level, while taking culturally specific form."[72]

A different interpretation of *Dependent Rational Animals* is offered here. First, MacIntyre in fact explicitly rejects generalism. "Rule following will often be involved in knowing how to respond rightly, but no rule or set of rules by itself ever determines how to respond rightly."[73] In earlier work, MacIntyre also offered such a particularist reading of natural law: "there are no universal rules" with which "to identify the kind of relevance which those precepts have to … [a] situation."[74] Secondly, MacIntyre still employs a contextualist view of rationality. "For we cannot have a practically adequate understanding of our own good, of our own flourishing, apart from and independently of the flourishing of that whole set of social relationships in which we have found our place."[75] As before, MacIntyre places contextualism within a teleological framework. He is happy to concede that he has presupposed Aristotelian views about flourishing. There "is no presuppositionless point of departure," but an "adequate understanding … explains retrospectively why enquiry well-designed to achieve it could have begun from some types of starting point, but not from others."[76]

Let us take a closer look at both contextualism and particularism. For the particularist, grounding reasons can make a difference in one place and not in another. One supposed example is that "my having borrowed a book from you" is a reason for my returning it to you, but also, it is not a reason for my returning it to you "since it turns out that you have stolen it from the library."[77] However, particularism involves an unappealing, abject view of rationality. It is based on the assumption that when we try to explain ourselves the giving of reasons, at some point, comes to a halt and we can do no more than "shrug our shoulders."[78] In any case, the above example does not support particularism. While "my having borrowed a book from you" is indeed a grounding reason, what morality requires provides us with the "ultimate reason."[79] The principle of justice satisfies the generalist insistence that "a property cannot make a difference in one place without making the same difference everywhere else."[80] It does not follow that justice must require the same actions in all situations. Judgment is needed in order to appreciate what justice requires given the particulars of the case. In the above example, the person should depart from what he or she normally ought to do and return borrowed goods. However, justice has a compelling power in our deliberations because it applies generally. It is its generality that justifies the decision not to return the book.

Why are moral and ethical considerations general? Rawls, in discussing principles of justice, explains the importance of generality. It must be possible to formulate such principles without the use of "rigged definite

descriptions."[81] This is necessary in order to ensure that no one can "know how to tailor principles to his advantage."[82] It is the case that a normative consideration cannot have the force it should have if it is no more than the expression of particular interests or inclinations. However, Rawls's Kantian approach "is a certain attitude to justification, which is not to be derived … from determinate ideals of human flourishing."[83] Rawls's consideration of liberal impartiality is problematic to the extent that he cannot identify immoral but general principles. It is the case that moral considerations have generality, but many general considerations are immoral. For instance, Nietzsche praised the qualities of vitality and hardness; and also he saw pity as a "debilitating form of sickness."[84] This statement is objectionable not only as it is in itself a mere "will to power."[85] Nietzsche is also claiming that, generally speaking, pity is antithetical to the human good: it is a type of sickness.[86] The Nietzschean conception of human flourishing must be challenged. In contrast to Kantianism, the Aristotelian approach is perfectionist. It begins from a commitment to a controversial conception of human flourishing, but one that is itself generally applicable. It is from this perfectionist conception of the human good that we can arrive at general principles of moral judgment.

MacIntyre wants to reject generalism. With all general rules "what always has to be determined is whether in this particular case they are relevant and, if so, how they are to be applied," and what is more, "there is no higher order rule by reference to which these questions can be universally answered."[87] However, MacIntyre, in fact, cannot do without such higher order rules. Parenting is "bad," he judges, if the "established rules defining parental authority are at odds with the rules of giving and receiving."[88] Rules of giving and receiving are rules derived from the virtue of just-generosity. In effect, therefore, MacIntyre does employ higher order rules. However, he does not accept grounds of judgment that are independent of, or more fundamental than, traditions and tradition-based teleological enquiry. This leads us back to MacIntyre's contextualism.

Behavioral studies of animals need not support contextualism. It seems that practical rationality is present in a rudimentary form in the intelligent non-human animal, as Mary Midgley shows. Dogs, apes, dolphins, and other animals can be aware of the passing of time. They can dissimilate and deceive so as to attain their goals, and they can learn sign language and even teach it to other members of their species.[89] What they do seem to lack is the further capacity for abstraction, as MacIntyre also notes. It need not follow, however, that human practical wisdom cannot be independent of the flourishing of social relations. Instead, as Peter Geach has argued, "Men need virtues as bees need stings."[90] Similarly, for Foot,

"human defects and excellences are … related to what human beings are and what they do."[91] Human flourishing involves goodness of the will, exercise of the virtues. In order to flourish, dolphins do not need to be just, generous, and wise. Nonetheless, flourishing in human beings is analogous to flourishing in intelligent non-human animals. Hunting and playing are goods for dolphins because they enable them to flourish as dolphins, and virtues are goods for human beings because they enable us to flourish as human beings.

But how can we come to know this good? This is where the approach of Foot is less promising than that of MacIntyre. She is concerned with making "distinctions of logical grammar" in order to identify the "category to which moral evaluation belongs."[92] This is "the task of bringing back words 'from their metaphysical to their everyday use,'" as Wittgenstein described his own later work.[93] For instance, she agrees with Geach that while "red" operates in "independence of any noun to which it is attached," "whether a particular F is a good F depends radically on what we substitute for 'F.'"[94] MacIntyre, in contrast, goes beyond the analysis of concepts. His approach is based on the observation of human beings and intelligent non-human animals, and, in particular, their pursuit of goods. His approach rests on a realist conception of truth, although one informed by pragmatism. He aspires to make observations on our pursuit of something real, human flourishing, and also our attempts to exercise virtues in such ways as are required to solve the problems of human existence.

7. Moral-Cultural Relativism

Is MacIntyre guilty of relativism?[95] MacIntyre does not deny the importance and authority of moral considerations. However, a relativist could agree and yet go on to argue that "different people could, quite reasonably, attach this kind of importance to different forms of conduct."[96] This is the case if judgments such as "being true" or "being justified" "cannot be assigned absolutely, but only relative to certain conditions or parameters," and so, for this reason, "conflicting judgments can be equally correct or equally justified."[97] A non-relativist, by contrast, can accept that different cultures generate different norms, but also try to establish "'definitional criteria' which limit the content of anything that could be called morality."[98] Perhaps such definitional criteria could include what MacIntyre calls just-generosity. Then, an account of what individuals require in order to flourish as human beings

would be the justificatory grounds for an exacting ethic, according to which we must respond to the needy in proportion to their needs.[99] However, MacIntyre himself does not defend just-generosity as part of morality as such. Nonetheless, he also explicitly rejects relativism.

MacIntyre does not believe that relativism is entailed by the importance he gives to practice. Exercise of the virtues is necessary to achieve internal goods, "the excellences specific to" a certain type of practice.[100] While technical skills are relative to the established goals of a technical activity, in contrast, the exercise of moral virtues is necessary for the generation of new ends to pursue. In any case, this is only an "initial account" of the virtues.[101] We must judge the internal goods of practices with reference to an individual's life narrative, and a life narrative is written in pursuing the goods of a tradition. Concerning traditions, MacIntyre could be said to accept "descriptive relativism," and therefore assume "that there is no non-question-begging way of settling cross-cultural moral disputes."[102] At the same time, MacIntyre does not accept the view "that there is no such thing as absolute truth in ethics."[103] He rejects meta-ethical relativism. However, he contends that adherents of traditional "standpoints" may rightly "persist in those affirmations and commitments which are bound up with their conception of the truth of what they assert."[104] This is the case, in part, as philosophers have failed to show that claims to truth are no more than assertions of points of view, or that "the rational justification of their own positions is merely relative to some local scheme of justification."[105]

What is truth, according to MacIntyre? He notes with approval that Aquinas "conceived of enquiry in terms of a directedness toward a truth independent of the enquiring mind."[106] This is an endorsement of realism. However, there are traces of pragmatism in his approach as well. It is "intelligent thought which is or is not adequate in its dealings with its objects, the realities of the social and natural world."[107] To return to his example: the dog's belief about the cat is judged true based on some notion of what is needed to make the dog adequate in its dealings with these realities. Some commentators have noted that, while MacIntyre had rejected the Enlightenment ideal of context-independent standards of rational justification, in *Dependent Rational Animals* he seems to promise just that with an account of human rationality and the rationality, by analogy, of non-human animals.[108] However, MacIntyre does not see tradition-constituted enquiry as the antithesis of realism. Truth is the *telos* of theoretical enquiry, a "perfected science," a deductive system of statements based on first principles.[109] But we can only develop toward such a perfected science, and

therefore truth, from within a tradition of thought. However, MacIntyre's conceptualization of teleology is problematic.

On the one hand, MacIntyre claims that the *telos* of inquiry is already present in the unperfected science. Therefore, we can equate the *telos* of inquiry with what the wise person takes it to be in a given community. On the other hand, he states that a "Thomistic realist" is concerned with "an actual or possible progress from a condition in which the mind has not yet freed itself from the limitations of one-sidedness and partiality, towards or to adequacy of understanding."[110] Progress toward the *telos* of inquiry "consists in transcending the limitations of such particular and partial standpoints in a movement towards truth, so that … our judgments are no longer distorted by the limitations of those standpoints."[111] It follows that what a wise person takes to be the good and the best, which he or she derives from the practice of the virtues, will only be true relative to his or her partial, limited, distorted standpoint. This would seem to contradict MacIntyre's claim that adherents of a tradition may assume that the claims they make are true. This contradiction is not dispelled by what he calls the rationality of traditions. By empathizing with the perspective of a second, rival tradition, an adherent of the first tradition, may come to adopt elements of the rival tradition, perhaps develop a new position, and in that way solve problems that seemed ineradicable from the standpoint of the first tradition. However, such a new position is yet another tradition-constituted form of enquiry, which will be incommensurable with other tradition-constituted forms of inquiry.

Joseph Dunne and John Haldane have argued that MacIntyre's form of naturalism cannot justify or motivate the exacting demands entailed by just-generosity. Only the love of God for us soul-bearing human beings is sufficient "to keep fully among us … people who are severely and ineradicably afflicted."[112] However, MacIntyre can agree with Aristotle that "Human good turns out to be the activity of the soul exhibiting excellence."[113] He does not equate virtue with a physiological power or capacity, even though he argues that virtue is natural to human beings. Physical or mental disability does not place the afflicted person outside the boundary of moral concern generated by naturalism. The real problem is not MacIntyre's form of naturalism but the relativist implications of his historicism. He assumes "it is the quality of the politics of local communities that will be crucial in defining … needs adequately and in seeing to it that they are met."[114] His ethic is demanding, but he does not allow for context-independent standards and grounds with which to determine what can be considered a moral claim.

We have seen that the virtue of just-generosity can be thought of as a central part of morality as such. It should be an integral part of any system of norms. We have also seen that a specific type of community, which is structured by what MacIntyre calls relations of giving and receiving, is required so as to flourish as humans. To flourish as human beings, we need to live in communities where just-generosity is a pervasive virtue and a widely accepted principle. This is a universalist, or non-relative, justificatory basis for communitarianism. It is a position that we reach when we take seriously MacIntyre's own argument that "the limitations of one-sidedness and partiality" must be overcome in order to attain "adequacy of understanding."[115] The character traits, norms, and structures of any given community can be judged against higher order considerations, and a wise person must be able to see the force of these general considerations.[116]

Notes

1. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 352 ff. and MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," in Kelvin Knight ed., *The MacIntyre Reader*, (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 202–220. Also see Samuel Scheffler, *Philosophical Review*, 1983, vol. 92, no. 3; Stanley Hauerwas and Paul Wadell, *The Thomist*, 1982, Vol. 46, No. 2; and Robert Wachbroit, *Yale Law Journal*, 1983, vol. 92, no. 3.
2. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 116, p. 7.
3. See ibid. p. 17.
4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999), p. 78.
5. See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. trans. W.D. Ross, rev. J.L. Ackrill & J.O. Urmson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), bk. 1, 7, 1098a15.
6. MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," p. 216.
7. Ibid. p. 219.
8. Pedro Tabensky, "Objectivity and Difference in Moral Discourse," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 2004, vol. 38, no. 2, p. 191.
9. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985), p. 254.
10. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1971), pp. 7 & 410.
11. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 151.
12. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 116.
13. See David Bakhurst, "Ethical Particularism in Context," pp. 157–177, in Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little eds., *Moral Particularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 157 and David Wiggins, "Neo-Aristotelian Reflections on Justice," *Mind*, 2004, Vol. 113.
14. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 117.
15. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 187.
16. See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 44.

17. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 221.
18. Ibid.
19. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 7.
20. Ibid. p. 3.
21. Bakhurst, op. cit. p. 157; also see Marian Kuna, ''MacIntyre on Tradition, Rationality, and Relativism,'' *Res Publica*, 2005, Vol. 11.
22. Alasdair MacIntyre, ''First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues,'' in Knight op. cit., p. 177.
23. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 118.
24. Ibid. p. 17.
25. Ibid. p. 166.
26. Ibid. p. 352.
27. Ibid. p. 288.
28. Jean Porter, ''Openness and Constraint: Moral Reflection as Tradition-Guided Inquiry in Alasdair MacIntyre's Recent Works,'' *The Journal of Religion* 1993, vol. 73, No. 4, p. 521; see also Keith Breen, ''Alasdair MacIntyre and the Hope for a Politics of Virtuous Acknowledged Dependence,'' *Contemporary Political Theory*, 2002, vol. 1, p. 190; Jennifer A. Herdt, ''Alasdair MacIntyre's 'Rationality of Traditions' and Tradition-Transcendental Standards of Justification,'' *The Journal of Religion*, 1998, vol. 78, no. 4, p. 538; and Kuna, op. cit. p. 253.
29. Herdt, op. cit. p. 541.
30. Terence Irwin, ''Tradition and Reason in the History of Ethics,'' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 1989, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 53.
31. Ibid. p. 52.
32. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 224.
33. Ibid. p. 225.
34. Ibid. p. 53; Also see Paula Gottlieb, ''Are the Virtues Remedial?'', *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 2001, vol. 35, no. 3, p. 344.
35. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 162.
36. Ibid. p. 225.
37. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. ix.
38. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. x.
39. Ibid. pp. 78–79.
40. Ibid. p. 78. Also see David Solomon, ''MacIntyre and Contemporary Moral Philosophy,'' in Mark C. Murphy, ed., *Alasdair MacIntyre*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 127.
41. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. E.C. Mossner, (London: Penguin 1969), bk II, sec. III, iii.
42. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 93.
43. Ibid. p. 11.
44. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 79.
45. Ibid. p. 24.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid. p. 25.
49. See Louis Herman ed., *Cetacean Behavior: Mechanisms and Functions* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1980) and Karen Pryor and Kenneth S. Norris eds., *Dolphin Societies: Discoveries and Puzzles*, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991).

50. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 25.
51. Ibid. p. 26.
52. Ibid. p. 23.
53. Ibid. p. 27.
54. Donald Davidson, *Truth and Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 70 and in MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 34.
55. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 36.
56. Ibid. p. 41.
57. Foot, op. cit. p. 16.
58. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 64.
59. Ibid. p. 59.
60. Ibid. pp. 67–68.
61. Ibid. p. 66.
62. Ibid. p. 67.
63. Ibid. p. 7.
64. Ibid. p. 121.
65. Ibid. p. 124.
66. See Allyn Fives, 2005, ''Virtue, Justice, and the Human Good: Non-relative Communitarian Ethics and the Life of Religious Commitment,'' *Contemporary Politics* vol. 11, nos. 2–3.
67. Bakhurst, op. cit. p. 168.
68. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 194.
69. Ibid. pp. 173–244.
70. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 106.
71. Ibid. p. 77.
72. Breen, op. cit. p. 186.
73. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 93.
74. MacIntyre, Justice? Which Rationality?, p. 195.
75. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, pp. 107–108.
76. Ibid. pp. 77–78.
77. Roger Crisp, ''Particularizing Particularism,'' pp. 23–47, in Hooker and Little, op. cit., p. 36.
78. Ibid. p. 35.
79. Ibid. p. 37.
80. Ibid. p. 34.
81. Rawls, op. cit. p. 131.
82. Ibid.
83. Onora O'Neill, ''Justice, Capabilities, and Vulnerabilities'' in Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover, eds., *Women, Culture, and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 149.
84. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 163. Also see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin, 1954), pp. 572–573.
85. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 165.
86. See Foot, op. cit. p. 107.
87. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 93.
88. Ibid. pp. 104–105.
89. See Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 217–222.
90. Peter Geach, *The Virtues*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 17, and in Foot, op. cit. p. 35.

91. Foot, op. cit. p. 15.
92. Ibid. p. 3.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid. pp. 2–3.
95. See Bakhurst, op. cit. pp. 166 & 168.
96. See T.M. Scanlon, "Fear of Relativism," pp. 219–245, in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, Warren Quinn, eds., *Virtues and Reasons*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 233.
97. Ibid. pp. 219 & 220.
98. Ibid. p. 230; also see Foot, op. cit. pp. 86, 110 & 113.
99. See Allyn Fives, *Political and Philosophical Debates in Welfare*, (Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 155–158.
100. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 273 & 274.
101. Ibid. p. 275.
102. Neil Levy, "Descriptive Relativism: Assessing the Evidence," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 2003, vol. 37, no. 2, p. 165.
103. Ibid.; also see MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," p. 203.
104. MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," p. 216.
105. Ibid. p. 204.
106. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 170.
107. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 356. Also see John Haldane, "MacIntyre's Thomist Revival: What Next?", in John Horton & Susan Mendus, eds., *After MacIntyre* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 1994), p. 104.
108. See Kelvin Knight, "Review of MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals," *Ethics*, 2000, vol. 111, no. 1, p. 179.
109. MacIntyre, "First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues," p. 190.
110. MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," p. 215.
111. Ibid. p. 207.
112. Raymond Gaita, *A Common Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 19. See Joseph Dunne, "Ethics Revised: Flourishing as Vulnerable and Dependent," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2002, vol. 10, no. 3, p. 356; and John Haldane, "Review of Alasdair MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals," *Mind*, 2001, vol. 110.
113. Aristotle, op. cit., bk. I. 7, 1098a15.
114. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 142. See Mark C. Murphy, "MacIntyre's Political Philosophy," in Mark C. Murphy ed., *Alasdair MacIntyre* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 173
115 MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification," p. 215.
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