Chapter 1

Chapter on Practical Reason: Virtue as the Excellence of Practical Reason

I. Introduction

The centrality of practical rationality

Practical reason occupies a a place of importance in virtue ethics. Many of the recent neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists have thematized practical reason (or practical rationality, which I shall use synonymously).

So why is our faculty for thinking what to do and the quality that some people have of being excellent at knowing what to do so important for virtue ethicists?

The first reason, alluded to the prior chapter, is that rationality in part defines our nature. We are animals of a particular sort: rational animals. We identify ourselves (scientifically, philosophically, religiously, anthropologically, psychologically) as creatures normally capable of language, abstract thought, argumentation, mathematics, philosophy, natural science, and so on.

A second reason is that we are not merely rational but also practical: we *practice*. One can concieve of rational creatures (gods, martians, angelic intelligences, artificial intelligences) that are

not also "practical" creatures – that do not practice anything. Douglas Adams's computer character Deep Thought is a *knower* with nothing to do.

A third reason is, also alluded to, is that practical wisdom provides a needed corrective not only to folly but even to the possible excesses or misapplications of other virtues. The negative version of the same reason is the intuitive claim that (practical) folly has the potential to ruin otherwise admirable lives.

A fourth reason is that practical wisdom is – confusingly – both a "moral virtue" and an "intellectual virtue". As Foot points out, out of the four Greek cardinal virtues (moderation, courage, justice, practical wisdom) only justice is obviously "moral" in our usual sense of "other-regarding" traits. Moderation, courage, and practical wisdom more smoothly fit into the "self-regarding" category; practical wisdom fits most smoothly of all into the category of virtues of mind. While there is a growing branch of intellectual virtue ethics within the budding virtue ethics tree, practical wisdom seems to partake of both qualities. The dual nature of practical wisdom is likely to be even easier to misunderstand than other traditional virtues.

Problems for this chapter

1. Although it seems that reason cannot motivate, practical reasons are the *primary* meaning of "motive"; other psychological states *move* me to act but only reasons *motivate* me to act, since motivation is (I argue) a fundamentally rational state.
2. Although it seems reason is instrumental, rational motives are inherently related to *ends* seen as good; the first principle of practical reason is "pursue the good".
3. Although it seems that moral reasoning is the process of judging actions as right or wrong, or resolving moral dilemmas, or identifying a special property "goodness", moral reasoning is the business of pursuing what is worthwhile, appraising action decide what to do.
4. Although it seems "morality" is narrowly about how we treat others, it is about self- and other-regarding virtues.
5. Although it seems that there are no other virtues because all virtue is knowledge, there are other virtues related to other cognitive and affective features of human nature, each of which, nevertheless, depends on and enhances practical reason.
6. Although it seems that practical reason is universal and objective like logic; it is intersubjective like logic; nevertheless, it is objective; it can be universal across cultures and

traditions.

7. Although it seems practical reason is not natural, it is part of human nature (whether as endemic to human *nature*, not merely second nature, not necessarily supernatural, but primary nature because primary nature is logical or rational will be addressed later)

II. 1. Although it seems that reason cannot motivate, practical reasons are the *pr*

Other psychological states *move* me to act but only reasons *motivate* me to act, since motivation is (I argue) a fundamentally rational state.

Character Ethics

Edmund Pincoffs distinguishes two broad conceptions of philosophical ethics he calls "Quandary Ethics" and "Character Ethics." Quandary ethics is focused on the short-term resolution of immediate moral problems, either by dissolving moral perplexity or giving some (hopefully rational) basis for a particular decision or course of action; character ethics is focused on the long-term goal of living well by executing worthwhile goals in every day life. The Quandary ethicists are those Pincoffs quotes at the beginning of his article (such as Hare, Toulon, Brandt). They think that "the business of ethics is with" problems ", i.e. situations in which it is difficult to know what one should do; that the ultimate beneficiary of ethical analysis is the person who, in one of these situations, seeks rational ground for the decision he must make; that ethics is therefore primarily concerned to find such grounds, often conceived of as moral rules and the principles from which they can be derived; and that meta-ethics consists in the analysis of the terms, claims, and arguments which come into play in moral disputation, deliberation, and justification in problematic contexts."[1] By contrast, Aristotle is an example of a Character Ethicist. "[Aristotle] as is well known, thought of ethics as a branch of politics, which in turn he thought of as a very wide-ranging subject having to do generally with the planning of human life so that it could be lived as well as possible. Moral problems are given their due but are by no means stage-centre. The question is not so much how we should resolve

1. Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," *Mind*, 1971, 552.

perplexities as how we should live."[2] The chapters constituting this ethical inquiry partake more of character ethics. How do we live *well*? This is the first question of life that human beings, upon arriving at the age of reflection, ask. It is also the first question of ethical philosophers. The goal is broad, to understand virtue, wisdom, and happiness with an eye to becoming virtuous, wise, and happy in spite of the odds and in spite of the temptations to vice and the inevitable distractions and obstacles of chance.

Practical appraisal and action

MacIntyre puts a similar point in different terms. His earliest ethical work distinguished the significance of moral judgments compared to other kinds of judgments. In a careful critique of both intuitionists such as Moore and emotivists such as Stevenson, MacIntyre concluded that both (mistakenly) assume that moral judgments and moral terms have significance only in their referential meaning. The intuitionists, of course, concluded that moral terms refer to a non-natural property, while the emotivists concluded that moral terms do not refer to such a property and so do not refer at all. (Naturalists, later in the 20th century, argue that moral terms refer to natural properties.) MacIntyre's alternative denies the assumption entirely; moral judgments "have their own kind of logic" and their significance, like other kinds of judgments, comes from "exhibiting the logic of their usage."[3] The significance of moral judgments is that "they enable us to solve problems of appraisal and of action." That is their place in "a pattern of language and action…" He continues:

> Above all they arise out of the way in which we see the world and the way in which our language allows us to see the world. We cannot sufficiently emphasize the direction given to our appraisals by the language which happens to be available for our descriptions. It is as we see the facts that we judge the world.

MacIntyre's point is that moral judgments are not *simply* useful in moral dilemmas or quandaries. They appear, at the earliest stages of childhood development, in a pattern of usage that is inextricable

2. Ibid., 553–4.

3. @ Mark C. Murphy, in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 118, quoting p. 73 of MacIntyre's master's thesis *The Significance of Moral Judgments*.

from the human activities of reasoning, acting, and appraising. Evaluative judgments appear in the widest imaginable spread of human activities, from politics to playgrounds, from sociology to social life, from the practices of law and medicine to the professions of journalism and psychology, from the sciences to the arts.

Even if this point be granted, moral dilemmas are not *unreal*. Moral dilemmas are a special version of our general "problems of appraisal and action." They may be particularly vexing, but they are no different from the general problems of how to live, how to be happy, what kinds of public policies to pursue, what apparently meaningful types of life are really meaningful.

The word "ethical" is sometimes taken to have a broader connotation than the narrow "moral," but I think such distinctions etymologically suspect. As MacIntyre summarizes: " 'moral' is the etymological descendant of 'moralis'. But 'moralis', like its Greek predecessor ethikos — I invented 'moralis' to translate the Greek word in the De Fato — means 'pertaining to character' where a man's character is nothing other than his set dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead on particular kind of life."[4] The early uses of Moral did not contrast with " 'prudential' or 'self interested' " nor with " 'legal or 'religious' ". MacIntyre concludes: "The word to which it is closest in meaning is perhaps most simply 'practical'."

Practicality as a whole domain was sub-divided. The conventional distinction that "morality" is a special sub-division pertaining to right and wrong behavior toward others traces to the 1700s, where "immorality" meant sexual misbehavior. The conventional separation of "moral" from "non-moral" considerations traces to John Stuart Mill who divided the former domain as concerned with duties to benefit and to not harm others.

> Many if not most moral philosophers in modern times see their subject as having to do exclusively with relations between individuals or between an individual and society, and so with such things as obligations, duties, and charitable acts. It is for this reason that, of the four ancient cardinal virtues of justice, courage, temperance, and wisdom, only the first now seems to belong wholly to 'morality'. The other three virtues are recognized as necessary for the practice of 'morality' but are now

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 38.

> thought of as having part of their exercise 'outside morality' in 'self-regarding' pursuits, 'moral' and 'prudential' considerations being contrasted in a way that was alien to Plato or Aristotle.4 J. S. Mill, for instance, expresses this modern point of view quite explicitly, saying in his essay On Liberty that 'A person who shows rashness, obstinacy, self-conceit . . . who cannot restrain himself from harmful indulgences' shows faults (Mill calls them 'self-regarding faults') which 'are not properly immoralities' and while they 'may be proofs of any amount of folly . . . are only a subject of moral reprobation when they involve a breach of duty to others, for whose sake the individual is bound to have care for himself'.[foot2001natural68]

As one MacIntyre scholar puts it: 'The term practical rationality is derived from Aristotle's *phronesis*. It is to be distinguished from *sophia*, a more technical form of reasoning. Practical rationality leads to more approximate conclusions; it takes context and relative facts into account, and it usually leads to moral or political conclusions."[5] If we take philosophical ethics to be reflection on morality as a whole then, on this view, philosophical ethics is reflection on practical rationality. Practical rationality is simply the process of deciding what to do. It is the process of thinking through what to do. Or, in Gibbard's unforgettable phrasing, it is "thinking how to live."[6]

Rosalind Hursthouse likewise says that: "The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should. These are commonly accepted truisms."[7] These truisms encompass our everyday moral judgments about who is admirable much more broadly than our judgments about who is morally upstanding or who avoids being morally despicable. There is more to being an admirable person than *avoiding* transgressions. Nicholas Gier's memorable image of the "couch potato" illustrates this point. The Couch Potato works a mindless job which he is able adequately to perform while watching television (and today we can add, checking his Facebook and Twitter feeds); he rarely rises except to receive himself and microwave his dinners; he is even religious, watching his favorite preachers on Sunday morning television and tithing regularly. Yet

5. Jack Russell Weinstein, *On MacIntyre* (Wadsworth, 2003), 60–61.

6. Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

7. Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (`http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-virtue/`, 2013).

the couch potato is by my standards living a wasted life and pitiable life. (I am counting on your similar intuition.) We do not want to imprison him for being such a failure; but we certainly do not admire how he lives.

By contrast, admirable people command our respect for being morally upstanding, and so much more. We admire them for their brains, their guts, their strength, their rare talents, their outstanding achievements, their unimaginable creativity, their wit and eloquence. Some people are remarkable for *what they are given* (great beauty, great intelligence, and so on). But the admirable person is remarkable not just for good fortune. In fact, admirable people are often admirable for overcoming extraordinarily bad fortune. We truly admire *what they do* with *what they are given*. In a word, we admire how they live.

Julia Annas' presentation of virtue as as a skill illuminates this same point, I think, beautifully. She says, I should develop an account of virtue in which I show have central to the idea that the practical reasoning of the virtuous person is analogous in important ways… to the practical reasoning of someone who's exercising a practical skill."[8]. What she calls the "skill analogy" might be taken as problematic since it drains the peculiarly *moral* quality out of virtue; but we might reverse this worry. The skill analogy colors even living one's daily life with the moral quality of virtue. The virtuous person is *good at* and not just *good* — good at helping others, good at thinking ahead, good at human life. The vicious person, by contrast, is not just bad but *bad at* the essential elements of human life. Of course, being born with a paucity of natural talents is not a matter of immorality.

How did this broad sense of morality as living life excellently narrow?

How did the meaning of 'morality' narrow?

First, it meant any particular way of life — something like idiosyncrasy, habit, character. Second, any practical lesson — something like the "moral of the story", the point, that to be acted on, the rule, the maxim. Third, a domain of rules of conduct that are "neither theological nor legal nor

8. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

aesthetic"[9]

Anscombe notes:

> The terms "should" or "ought" or "needs" relate to good and bad: e.g. machinery needs oil, or should or ought to be oiled, in that running without oil is bad for it, or it runs badly without oil. According to this conception, of course, "should" and "ought" are not used in a special "moral" sense when one says that a man should not bilk. (In Aristotle's sense of the term "moral" [ήθικός], they are being used in connection with a moral subject-matter: namely that of human passions and [non-technical] actions.) But they have now acquired a special so-called "moral" sense--i.e. a sense in which they imply some absolute verdict (like one of guilty/not guilty on a man) on what is described in the "ought" sentences used in certain types of context: not merely the contexts that Aristotle would call "moral"--passions and actions--but also some of the contexts that he would call "intellectual."[10]

The equation between moral and intellectual excellence is not obvious for us. The notion that morality has to do with absolute verdicts is not obvious to Aristotle — nor to contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists.

Kant admits the apparent inconsistency in radically dividing speculative or theoretical reason from practical reason: >Here first is explained the enigma of the critical philosophy, viz. :how we deny objective reality to the supersensible use of the categories in speculation and yet admit this reality with respect to the objects of pure practical reason. This must at first seem inconsistent as long as this practical use is only nominally known.[11]

Three Dimensions of Practical Reason

Now, the domain of duties and obligations pertaining to others is a real domain and a legitimate division. But the division is not between morality and non-morality but between different types of morality or sub-domains. I shall call this domain "2nd-personal morality", that is, my duties to you or to you all. This domain is vast. But there are other domains for the 1st-person and 3rd-person.

9. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 39.

10. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19.

11. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S Pluhar (Hackett Publishing, 2002).

The entire set is the domain of practicality — what one ought to do or ought to think, say, etc. The three sub-domains are defined by the object with regard to which one ought to do and not do this or that.

The domain of 1st-person morality is proper respect and care for one's self — self-love or enlightened self-interest. This is what Mill called the domain of "prudence". It includes the virtues that benefit both oneself and others (moderation and courage) but especially practical wisdom, without which none of the other virtues do me much good.

The domain of 3rd-person morality is proper respect and care for everything that is not you or me — animals and plants, pets and work animals, our possessions, our earth and environment, and perhaps even our solar system. The primary virtue of this domain is justice, a respect for the whole and the proper arrangement of all the parts. If God exists, then 3rd-personal morality would require piety to him or her, since on most theisms God is not strictly speaking "one of us" but still demands our allegiance, sacrifice, or what have you.

The domain of 2nd-person morality, I said, is vast. It includes interpersonal moral obligations, values, and virtues as well as broader social or political ones. I suggest that the dominant virtue here is not only justice but love — I.e., a strong regard for the other, a charitable orientation to promoting the good of others, refusing to harm them, and committing to protect them from harm.

Foot argues, I think rightly, that qualities such as benevolence and generosity we tend to call human "moral goodness" are of a type with a broader category of goodness. She says: "I want to show that judgments usually considered to be the special subject of moral philosophy should really be seen as belonging to a wider class of evaluations of conduct with which they share a common conceptual structure."[12]

The argument is simple: We act on reasons. We pursue what is good, or what seems good. There are various types of good; hence there are various types of reasons. But we do not act *only*

12. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 66–67.

on one type of reason: moral reasons. Rather, we weigh and balance all the salient reasons we are aware of at the time when we deliberate and make decisions. In making a business transaction, the entrepreneur may allow considerations of justice to outweigh considerations of profit; or, he may allow considerations about loyalty to a friend outweighs considerations of justice. These two paths are not, respectively, "the moral" path and the immoral path. They are both moral and both practical; they both weigh and attempt to negotiate the best reasons to act in this way rather than that, all things considered.

So I conclude that the domain of morality is, if anything at all, the sub-domain of practical reason concerned with obligations, duties, rights, goods, and harms that might obtain between one member of society to another. This way of putting the classification clearly connects "morality" with politics, family life, education, and so on. However, it paints in bright and burning colors the distinction between morality as a part of practical reason and practice itself. We are, first, and foremost, practical creatures, not merely moral or moralizing ones.

We can add to these arguments a Moorean shift: why do we moderns *assume* that there is a special domain of the moral? The ancient and medieval philosophers in the west thought of the domain of practical reason as a natural unit: all that is voluntary or under our control may be done well or badly. Our goal in living well is to to identify what to think, what to do, and what to make. As a corollary, we must identify what not to think, what not to do, and what not to make. But shrinking the whole domain of practical reason down to the domain of a few absolute prohibitions on harming others is a modern innovation. If it is right, then it is a modern invention. If it is wrong, it is a modern ignorance. Either way, its proponent needs, I think, to offer some account of why such a shrinking amounts to progress rather than regress in moral theorizing.

III. 2. Is practical reason instrumental?

Although it seems reason is instrumental, rational motives are inherently related to *ends* seen as good; the first principle of practical reason is "pursue the good".

IV. 3. Is moral reasoning a special type of practical reasoning?

Although it seems that moral reasoning is the process of judging actions as right or wrong, or resolving moral dilemmas, or identifying a special property "goodness", moral reasoning is the business of pursuing what is worthwhile, appraising action decide what to do.

V. 5. Is morality about oneself or only others?

Although it seems "morality" is narrowly about how we treat others, it is about self- and other-regarding virtues.

VI. 6. Is there only one virtue?

Although it seems that there are no other virtues because all virtue is knowledge, there are other virtues related to other cognitive and affective features of human nature, each of which, nevertheless, depends on and enhances practical reason.

The virtue of practical reason is, not surprisingly, practical wisdom. *Yet practical wisdom is strange and likely to be misunderstand: it is both theoretical (aiming at knowing what's true) and practical (aiming at what to do). To co-opt a phrase from Alan Gibbard that I'm not sure he would appreciate: our activity of practical reasoning is "thinking what to do" and "thinking how to live."*[13] *So practical wisdom is knowing how to live, and really knowing it. Stated this way, it is easy to see why some have argued that practical wisdom is the* only* virtue. If one knows exactly how to live, in each circumstance, in each challenge, according to proper reasons, and for proper motives, what more to virtue could there be? Maggie Little[14] argues that virtue is a species

13. Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*. I take the activity of thinking what to do in a far more realist direction than Gibbard. However, I have noticed with pleasure that Gibbard himself has become more open to realism in the recent years.

14. Margaret Olivia Little, "Virtue as Knowledge: Objections from the Philosophy of Mind," in *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shaffer-Landeau and Terence Cuneo (Blackwell, 2007), 252–64.

of knowledge; John McDowell[15] argues something similar.*

VII. 7. Is practical reason objective like logic?

Although it seems that practical reason is universal and objective like logic; it is intersubjective like logic; nevertheless, it is objective; it can be universal across cultures and traditions.

Practical reason is supposed by some to resolve possible worries about cultural relativism with regard to virtue.

1. It seems that practical reason is not objective since people disagree.
2. It seems to not be objective because it arises only in community.
3. On the other hand, Shafer-Landau argues that ethics is a species of philosophy.
4. I argue that practical reason is as objective as theoretical reason (whether both are objective or not).
5. It seems that practical reason is not objective since people disagree.

The question of how to live, and of how to resolve pressing moral disputes and dramatic moral conundrums, is not easy. There are various answers. People disagree.

Anyone who has long engaged in dialectical disputes over the various answer to the normative question of how to live well eventually comes to ask a secondary question: is there even any truth to be found? Are there any 'right answers' in ethics? Is there anything to all this discussion besides gas? Some worry that ethics has no 'right answers' because it is all just intuition-pumping. Some people view ethics as too easy because it is only a discussion of one's opinion.

We must admit that normative ethical conclusions — whatever conclusions satisfy us at the end of a long philosophical discussion about what is good and right — are different from conclusions in paleontology, medicine, or calculus. What does the difference amount to? Why is ethics *as a discipline* so different from, say, natural sciences?

There are two sorts of interpretations of ethics as a discipline in light of the diversity of answers to the question about how to live well. The first is Hume's answer, that ethics is "easy" (while metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and philosophical anthropology are presumably difficult).

15. John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 331–50.

The second is Aristotle's, that ethics is *a different sort of science* because it has a *different subject matter* to which it must correspond. He says, "For a well schooled man is wanting searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits: is obviously just as foolish to accept arguments of probability from a mathematician has to demand strict demonstrations from an orator."[16]

By the traditional classification, ethics is a form of philosophy. Russ Shafer-Landau persuasively argues this simple equation in defense of moral realism[17] but the point has broader import. If ethics is *not* a species of philosophy, it is something else entirely. Perhaps it is a species of politics. Such a categorization assumes, at the outset, that power prevails over truth. But to concede that there are no right answers in ethics, that ethical philosophers have no hope of finding any ethical truth is to give up on ethics as a discipline.

So suppose ethics is a species of philosophy. The indirect answer is another question: Are there 'right answers' in philosophy? Isn't the relation of philosophy in general to ethics in particular the relation of genus to species? This is the relation Russ Shafer-Landau argues for.[18] So the fate of ethical claims or ethical theories hangs on the fate of philosophical claims and theories as a whole. If we are philosophical optimists at all — if we are not total skeptics or nihilists — then we can be ethical optimists.

So what species of philosophy is ethics? If philosophy is its genus, what is its differentia? As I have been arguing, ethics is the discipline of practical reason. There are 'right answers' in ethics since there are right ways to live one's life, there are wells to live well and ways to live poorly; things can go well or badly for us. One of the fundamental governing assumptions of this work is that there is no special domain of the moral. Value theory is a whole package. There is at bottom no intelligible distinction between morality and prudence.

16. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2014) Book I.3.

17. Russ Shafer-Landau, "Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism," in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, 2007, 210–21.

18. Russ Shafer-Landau, ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

2. It seems to not be objective because it arises only in community.

Tradition-constituted rationality was supposed to explain why practices can vary between people and traditions that both claim to be rational and believe the rival to be irrational; the process of switching between traditions explains, from within a tradition, one can rationally adjudicate these disagreements. This is why *practical rationality* is so important for MacIntyre's theory of *virtue*.

Nevertheless, worries about relativism may linger. For MacIntyre, virtues are relative to practices; practices are relative to traditions; traditions are relative to conceptions of rationality. His answer to this worry is, I believe, the crux of his whole theory of ethics. It appeals to two concepts that are, for him, intimately bound up with each other. The two concepts are practical reason and human nature. *Dependent Rational Animals* is the capstone to address lingering worries about relativism.

The project of *Dependent Rational Animals* is to insist that human beings are animals even if we are animals of a particular and unusual sort; and that our dependence and vulnerability are as morally significant as our independence, autonomy, or self-sufficiency. In other words, there are virtues of both autonomy *and* dependence. The book also contends that certain social arrangements are conducive to the transmission and sustenance of both kinds of virtue.

Let's consider a key quotation on each of these themes. Regarding the notion that we are unusual animals, MacIntyre argues at length that the human differentia (be it language, reason, practical reason, self-consciousness, or what have you) does not eradicate the commonalities between us and other animals. He says:

> I shall contend that although our differences from all other species are certainly of crucial importance, it is also important that both initially in our earliest childhood activities and to some extent thereafter we comport ourselves towards the world in much the same way as other intelligent animals. Indeed our ability to transcend those limitations depends in part upon certain of those animal characteristics among them the nature of our identity.[19]

19. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8.

The point, I take it, is that rational animals is *what we are*. If we cannot escape our identity as animals who are (potentially) practically rational, then we cannot escape our need for certain virtues. Furthermore, some activities will militate against our growing up to become fully practical rationality; these are vices. What kind of animal are we? We are by nature practical reasoners. Imagine any scenario of humans gathering and doing what comes naturally, and it will involve group deliberation about what to do: High school students debating about where to sit at lunch; couples arguing over the budget; political leaders proposing new laws; philosophy department meetings making hiring and admissions decisions. It is impossible (for fully functioning adults) to live life even for a full day without engaging in such reasoning. The pattern is the same. Groups of humans engage in practical reasoning — a community thinking what to do.

A second point is that human life is not one continuous phase of adulthood; it begins with youth and ends with old age. So MacIntyre breaks important new ground in explaining the relation between virtues of independence and "virtues of acknowledged dependence." He argues that the vulnerability, fragility, and affliction characteristic especially of early childhood and old age are highly morally significant. As he says:

> Virtues of independent rational agency need for their adequate exercise to be accompanied by what I shall call the virtues of acknowledge dependence and that a failure to understand this is apt to secure some features of rational agency. Moreover both sets of virtues are needed in order to actualize the distinctive potentialities that are specific to the human rational animal. Identifying how and why they are needed is a prerequisite for understanding their central place in the kind of human life through which human flourishing can be achieved.[20]

There is an obvious – and I think exciting – connection here with the ethics of care. Many others in the Aristotelian tradition have noticed the significance that we have the potential to be rational, and the potential to be independent reasoners. Fewer, until recently, have noticed the significance of dependence.[21] But the virtues of acknowledge dependence are not identical to the virtues (such

20. Ibid., 8.

21. Cf Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford University Press,

as the empathy or patience) *of a care-giver*. Rather, they are virtues that arise in *relation* between the dependent and the care-giver. Dependence is, after all, as close to any of use as sickness, injury, or misfortune. The dependent needs certain virtues (gratitude is perhaps a good example) that the care-giver does not need, or needs differently. Independent rationality is rather the exception than the rule. So it is simply wrong-headed to magnify the virtues of independence out of proportion of those that are needed, in individuals and in a community, at the beginning and end of life, and also any disabling portion of life.

To achieve the communal goal of producing independent reasoners requires a systemic web of virtues across the entire communal association. MacIntyre argues that "neither the modern state nor the modern family can supply that kind of political and social association that is needed."[22] Not only individual human beings, but entire communities, institutions, and nations need virtues to keep their integrity and to produce the next generation of independent, virtuous, rational animals. While *Dependent Rational Animals* is an exciting and fruitful book that deserves more attention, I must transition to explaining how it further helps protect against the charge of relativism.

Practical wisdom

Our human nature as dependent practical reasoners demonstrates why prudence or *phronesis* is the master virtue. For *Phronesis* complements every other moral virtue. MacIntyre defends Aristotle's conception of the practical syllogism. For example, *I ought to do (the courageous thing of) resisting a student's attempt to bribe me for a higher grade. This student is attempting to bribe me for a higher grade. Therefore, in this case, I ought to do (the courageous thing of) resisting this student's attempt to bribe me.* The major premise here is an evaluative judgment about a virtue or action-type; the minor premise is a factual judgment about a situation or action-token; the conclusion is a *maxim*. It is a judgment but not merely a judgment; it is *an action*. Each piece of the practical syllogism is needed for the whole to function in practice.

2005). There is an obvious overlap with some feminist ethics, and MacIntyre acknowledges his debt.

22. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 9.

For without moral virtues, prudence may be knowledge of what one ought to do but it does not entail that one is in the habit of actually doing it. And, more crucially, without prudence, the moral virtues are simply skills – skills that might be serviceable to bad ends. Without prudence, one might be skilled in achieving *what is not to be done*.

The mastery of prudence over other virtues also unifies the other virtues. *Dependent Rational Animals* supplies a necessary unifying base for MacIntyre's virtue theory in three ways: it unifies intellectual and moral virtues, unifies various moral virtues, and unifies the various stages of the narrative of *human* life.

Hursthouse on *Phronesis*

> Aristotle makes a number of specific remarks about phronesis that are the subject of much scholarly debate, but the (related) modern concept is best understood by thinking of what the virtuous morally mature adult has that nice children, including nice adolescents, lack. Both the virtuous adult and the nice child have good intentions, but the child is much more prone to mess things up because he is ignorant of what he needs to know in order to do what he intends. A virtuous adult is not, of course, infallible and may also, on occasion, fail to do what she intended to do through lack of knowledge, but only on those occasions on which the lack of knowledge is not culpable ignorance. So, for example, children and adolescents often harm those they intend to benefit either because they do not know how to set about securing the benefit or, more importantly, because their understanding of what is beneficial and harmful is limited and often mistaken. Such ignorance in small children is rarely, if ever culpable, and frequently not in adolescents, but it usually is in adults. Adults are culpable if they mess things up by being thoughtless, insensitive, reckless, impulsive, shortsighted, and by assuming that what suits them will suit everyone instead of taking a more objective viewpoint. They are also, importantly, culpable if their understanding of what is beneficial and harmful is mistaken. It is part of practical wisdom to know how to secure real benefits effectively; those who have practical wisdom will not make the mistake of concealing the hurtful truth from the person who really needs to know it in the belief that they are benefiting him. Quite generally, given that good intentions are intentions to act well or "do the right thing", we may say that practical wisdom is the knowledge or understanding that enables its possessor, unlike the nice adolescents, to do just that, in any given situation. The detailed specification of what is involved in such knowledge or understanding has not yet appeared in the literature, but some aspects of it are becoming well known. Even many

> deontologists now stress the point that their action-guiding rules cannot, reliably, be applied correctly without practical wisdom, because correct application requires situational appreciation—the capacity to recognize, in any particular situation, those features of it that are morally salient. This brings out two aspects of practical wisdom. One is that it characteristically comes only with experience of life. Amongst the morally relevant features of a situation may be the likely consequences, for the people involved, of a certain action, and this is something that adolescents are notoriously clueless about precisely because they are inexperienced. It is part of practical wisdom to be wise about human beings and human life. (It should go without saying that the virtuous are mindful of the consequences of possible actions. How could they fail to be reckless, thoughtless and short-sighted if they were not?) The aspect that is more usually stressed regarding situational appreciation is the practically wise agent's capacity to recognize some features of a situation as more important than others, or indeed, in that situation, as the only relevant ones. The wise do not see things in the same way as the nice adolescents who, with their imperfect virtues, still tend to see the personally disadvantageous nature of a certain action as competing in importance with its honesty or benevolence or justice. These aspects coalesce in the description of the practically wise as those who understand what is truly worthwhile, truly important, and thereby truly advantageous in life, who know, in short, how to live well. In the Aristotelian "eudaimonist" tradition, this is expressed in the claim that they have a true grasp of eudaimonia.

Tradition-constituted rationality objections

One family of objections pertain to the way MacIntyre's ethical theory appeals to tradition-constituted rationality. MacIntyre argues that we should return to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue and practical reason. We must beware one misunderstanding. Any talk of "returning" is liable to sound nostalgic. At the risk of sounding paradoxical, we might put it this way: MacIntyre's positive ethical positions are *traditional* but not *nostalgic*. In fact, his definition of tradition is *progressive*. Tradition is an ongoing, socially-embedded argument over time, which necessarily entails that moral enquiry is dynamic – even *modern*. To be traditional is not to be past-oriented; to be traditional is to be staunchly future-oriented, since the business of life is not only the pursuit of our *telos* but the transmission of everything valuable and precious to the next generation.

One critic who misunderstands MacIntyre along these lines is Martha Nussbaum.[23] She begins her review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* with an age-old dilemma between the social stability afforded by tradition (with its danger of hidebound error) and the social volatility endemic to critical reflection (with its opportunity of progress toward truth). She alludes to this dilemma as articulated by Aristotle:

> In the second book of the Politics, Aristotle asks whether it is a good thing to encourage changes in society. Should people be offered rewards for inventing some change in the traditional laws? No, he writes, because this would lead to instability and unnecessary tampering with what is working well. Should we, on the other hand, listen to those who wish to keep ancestral traditions fixed and immune from criticism? No again—for if we reason well we can make progress in lawmaking, just as we do in other arts and sciences.[24]

Aristotle's solution is that it should be hard but not impossible to change societal structures. Of course, we don't have to pick just one or the other. But, putting it starkly, of the two it is better to gamble for progress toward truth at the risk of instability than to gamble for stability at the risk hidebound error. Strangely, Nussbaum takes MacIntyre to be reversing Aristotle's balance. She thinks MacIntyre is urging for betting on social stability even if it means sticking closer to existing tradition (and hence surpassing or intentionally avoiding critical reflection) than is compatible with unfettered progress.

This is not an objection to MacIntyre — it is a misreading. He rejects fideism and this kind of conservative traditionalism. MacIntyre sides with Aristotle, in my view, that the risk of complacent error is greater than the risk of instability. For hidebound error is likely to perpetuate itself across generations, while the instability arising from a cacophony of disagreement is likely to be short-lived. Nussbaum does not see that MacIntyre's proposed solution is not a sort of *anti-progressive* longing for the past. It is radically progressive. His solution is not to reverse progress but to replace the Enlightenment's standard of progress with a more tenable alternative. Ironically, it appears to

23. Martha Nussbaum, "Recoiling from Reason," *The New York Review of Books* 36, no. 19 (1989): 36–41.

24. Ibid.

me that Nussbaum is too conservative in her defense of the Enlightenment's standard of progress; MacIntyre is the progressive here. Rather than accusing MacIntyre of being too conservative, Nussbaum should focus on his critique of the Enlightenment. MacIntyre's critique may be wrong, but it is with that critique that she should take issue. She should not accuse him of failing to "make progress… [in] arts and sciences" but of "tampering with what is working well."

MacIntyre's theory of rationality may be wrong, but it is not wrong along the lines that Nussbaum attacks. The other objections we must consider are that his concept of tradition-constituted rationality is incompatible with the very act of writing a book like *After Virtue*, or unhelpfully vague.

First, is MacIntyre's concept of tradition-constituted rationality even coherent? Suppose some traditions are truly incommensurable to each other, and that MacIntyre himself is truly situated within a tradition. It follows it is not possible to write a book (like *After Virtue*?) from a universal, objective, view-from-nowhere. But MacIntyre wrote such books and defending such theories. This amounts to a performative contradiction.

Even if his concept is coherent, is it *clear* enough to be an indispensable feature of an ethical theory? What constitutes a tradition? MacIntyre's examples sometimes lead us to believe that a tradition can be anything from a religion (Judaism) to a discipline (moral inquiry) to a philosophical school (Thomism).

Once the concept of tradition is clarified, how can MacIntyre avoid the charge of relativism at this level? According to MacIntyre's account, members of traditions can leave their primary tradition after undergoing an epistemological crisis. Remember that varying traditions can disagree about a proposition P. Perhaps tradition A finds P true and B finds it false, on best evidence and sufficient reflection. But incommensurable traditions disagree about the standards (say, S1 and S2) by which to judge the truth and even the rationality of other traditions. So A finds P true and rational (by S1) while B finds P false and irrational (by S2). They genuinely disagree. And A judges B to be irrational (since they deny that P) while B returns the favor (since A affirms that P).

Let's put these abstractions into an example. Consider Annabelle. Annabelle is a member of

tradition A. Suppose that by A's standards of rationality, S1 contradictory propositions cannot both be true in the same sense. And suppose that A teaches that P. Finally, suppose that P entails both (Q and ~Q). Annabelle discovers a problem with her tradition. She cannot deny P nor can she affirm the contradiction. After some searching about, she concludes she cannot solve the problem and cannot even discover the rational resources with which to solve them. Being passingly familiar with tradition B, she becomes curious why her friends who belong to that tradition deny P and exercises her philosophical imagination to begin to see B "from within." Tradition B is compelling, since it denies that P. She "converts" traditions. However, there is a problem with tradition B, and that is that the standard of rationality of B (S2) allows its adherents to affirm a contradiction. So now, even though Annabelle left A to avoid having to affirm a contradiction (by her standard of rationality S1) now that she has joined B she no longer sees it as irrational to affirm the contradiction (by her new standard of rationality S2). This is surely an odd conclusion.

A second variation on the same problem is this: how would a born-and-raised member of tradition B, affirming S2, ever come to epistemological crisis? Discontentment with contradictions is not available to B members *ex hypothesi*. They do not see affirming a contradiction as irrational. Their tradition can bear a hundred instances of (Q and ~Q).

The odd conclusion of this thought experiment is a dilemma: either such nonsense is possible, or embracing the law of non-contradiction is a universal standard of rationality in every tradition. The latter option seems to indicate that traditions A and B are *not* actually incommensurable, since they share one rather substantial presupposition. The flow of members from one to the other is intelligible. The former option allows A and B to be incommensurable, but seems to freeze members in their own tradition. Members of A would have no (rational) justification for joining B, while members of B would have no (rational) justification for leaving B. So either all traditions are the same (in which case MacIntyre's definition is unclear) or some people are in principle locked in their own tradition (in which case one kind of relativism is final).

While "tradition" and "tradition-constituted rationality" were supposed to solve the conun-

drums MacIntyre faced in his life and philosophical career, the cure may have been worse than the disease.

Discussion

MacIntyre's denial of relativism boils down to two claims: the first is that even enquirers situated within a tradition can achieve *truth*, because truth is distinct from *rationality*; the second claim, which is related, is that enquirers can overcome the rational limitations of their tradition.

MacIntyre accepts – indeed, argues for – a certain truth within relativism. That truth is that every enquirer seeks the conclusion of the enquiry at a particular time and place, within a particular social setting, within a language, and within a tradition. Following Lutz, we can say that MacIntyre accepts "relativity". Relativity (a term borrowed from Michael Krausz[25]) is a thesis about *the condition of enquiry*. It is not a thesis about the *conclusion of enquiry*. Lutz approves of Mark Colby's statement that "argumentative situatedness is inescapable."[26] However such relative situatedness is compatible with objective or absolute or mind-independent or tradition-independent *truth*.

Returning to Rorty's claim, we can say that MacIntyre agrees that "nothing can be said about… rationality" except what is taken as rational in a given society and tradition; where he disagrees is in equating rationality with *truth*. From the historically- and socially-situated position of enquiry, a philosopher (he argues) may indeed find truth. It is impossible to achieve objective or absolute or tradition-independent *rationality* but it is possible – indeed, it is the hope and *telos* of enquiry – to achieve objective *truth*. This may seem a paradox.

The primary kind of truth we seek in enquiry is "the adequation of the mind to reality."[27] This is the understanding of truth inherent in the Aristotelian tradition.[28] Aristotle says, "To say of

25. Michael Krausz, "Relativism and Foundationalism: Some Distinctions and Strategies," *The Monist*, 1984, 395–404.

26. Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Lexington Books, 2004), 89.

27. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, n.d. Q.16 and *De Veritate* Q.1, A.1-3. "Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus."

28. On the correspondence theory of truth, Marian David says: "The main positive argu-

what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true."[29] Aquinas calls this the adequation of the intellect to the object.

However, 'truth' is ambiguous across at least two senses: a metaphysical, substantive sense and an epistemological, logical sense. The metaphysical sense of truth is simply reality. "Truth" is being itself. The logical sense of truth (which MacIntyre alludes to here) is the adequation of the intellect to those beings. Logical "truth" is knowing the (metaphysical) truth.[30]

If we understand MacIntyre to be arguing or assuming that (logical) truth is adequation of mind to reality, we can make sense of his endorsement of "relativity". Rationality is something more pragmatic than truth, something more like "warranted assertability."[31] That is, the theories we rationally construct are, for us, the "best theory so far."[32] It is no contradiction or paradox to assert that our rationality is the best thus far but that others in the future (or the past, or in rival traditions) might be *closer* to the truth.

The second point is that enquirers from within various traditions can (and often do) come to realize that their tradition is incoherent by its own standards and from this epistemological crisis come to find the resources of a rival tradition superior to their own; Aristotelian (and specifically Thomist) moral enquiry is, he argues, more rationally justified than encyclopedic or genealogical

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ment given by advocates of the correspondence theory of truth is its obviousness. Descartes: 'I have never had any doubts about truth, because it seems a notion so transcendentally clear that nobody can be ignorant of it…the word "truth", in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object' (1639, AT II 597). Even philosophers whose overall views may well lead one to expect otherwise tend to agree. Kant: 'The nominal definition of truth, that it is the agreement of [a cognition] with its object, is assumed as granted' (1787, B82). William James: 'Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their "agreement", as falsity means their disagreement, with "reality" " (1907, p. 96). Indeed, The Oxford English Dictionary tells us:"Truth, n. Conformity with fact; agreement with reality'".

29. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics Metaphysics* 1011b25.

30. The third semantic sense of 'truth' would, naturally, be the accurate relation between the content of one's assertions and the beings about which one is making assertions. Semantic "truth" would be veridical statements about the metaphysical truth.

31. John Dewey, "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1941, 169.

32. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

enquiry *by their standards* and *by its own standards*.

In this way, MacIntyre escapes (one iteration) of the charge of relativism. The truth can be known from within the confines of our tradition and perspective. This answer, of course, puts pressure on his definition of "tradition." We shall return to this concern below.

Another worry about relativism was this: Are there evil practices? If so, it seemed that MacIntyre's theory would allow "virtues" to serve wicked ends. The rebuttal to this charge depends on the unity of virtue.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre explicitly retracts his earlier belief that virtues exist without a unity under prudence.[33] The consequences of this retraction, Lutz argues, are crucial to refuting the charge of relativism. If virtues are unified, then even though virtues exist only in the context of practices, "no genuine practice can be inherently evil."[34] Rather, practical reason can judge *apparent goods* as genuine goods. The qualities needed for achieving the spurious goods internal to that "practice" would not be virtues but only *apparent virtues*.

Now, such a definition certainly seems ad hoc. But Lutz provides a persuasive illustration: eugenics. Eugenics certainly seems to bear the markings of a genuine practice. Its apparent good is the purification of the gene pool for future generations. However, genuine virtues militate *against* the achievement of that goal. For example, Lutz cites a story of a doctor who had the virtue of compassion found himself unable to pursue the program of euthanizing mentally-disabled children.[35] We might also recall Huck Finn's internal struggle with his "conscience" in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck decides to turn Jim in to the slave owners. He writes a letter outing Jim, and says: "I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now." Yet for all that, after vividly confronting Jim's humanity and goodness, he feels the loyalty of their friendship and wavers:

33. Ibid. preface, p. x.

34. Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 102.

35. Léon Poliakov, *Harvest of Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe* (Schocken Books, 1979), 186–7.

> It was a difficult situation. I picked up the letter, and held it in my hand. I was trembling, because I knew had to make a choice between two things, and the outcome of my decision would last forever. I thought about it a minute while I held my breath. And then I said to myself: "All right, then, I'll GO to hell"—and tore it up.[36]

The humor of this passage arises, in large part, because of the tension between the *apparent good* of treating Jim as legal property and the *actual good* of treating Jim as an end in himself, as a free man just like any other. Huck's virtue (in this case, loyalty or friendship) *cannot* be put to use in the service of a corrupting practice like slave-trading. Just as vice subverts institutions and their worthy practices, virtue "subverts" vicious institutions and unworthy practices. Virtue marks the difference between the coward who disobeys his commanding officer's orders because the obedience would put him at risk of painful death and the courageous person who disobeys his commanding officer's order because obedience would require wrongdoing. Without prudence to discriminate between the two cases, we lack any resources by which to discriminate courage and cowardice, between a virtuous resistance and vicious resistance.

Some might worry that the distinction between apparent goods and actual goods brings with it more problems than it solves. It is certainly a distinction that leaves many questions unanswered. My first reply is that such a distinction is inevitable and necessary in our practical reasoning. Assume for a reductio that "there is no real distinction between apparent and real goods." Then either *nothing* is "actually good" (everything that appears good is just an apparent good) or that *nothing* is "actually bad though it appears good" (everything that appears good is a real good). But I take it as axiomatic and irrefutable that some things are actually good (life, pleasure, happiness, friendship). And some things that appear good are not good: obeying unjust laws, enjoying the misfortune of an enemy, etc. Therefore there is a real distinction between apparent and real goods.

A second reply, however, requires conceding that MacIntyre's theory leaves us unsatisfied. That is, it might be that the unsatisfying aspects of his theory track those aspects of morality that are unsatisfying. The admitted indeterminacy of MacIntyre's account reflects the real indeterminacy

36. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Lathifa, 2014),Chapter 31.

of our moral lives. Consider two phenomena: some individuals and cultures persist in behaviors (that I believe) are wicked and unjustifiable – slavery, child prostitution, ritual human sacrifice, or what have you. It needs to be explained, from within my tradition, how it could be that otherwise decent and normal human beings could persist in such vileness. The other phenomena is this: some individuals and cultures repent and change (what I believe are) their wicked ways. Some make moral progress. The paradox is that while we cannot expect magical linear moral progression from wicked to good everywhere, neither can we despair of any person or culture making moral progress. It just seems a brute datum of observation that some are stubbornly stuck in their wicked ways, and some are admirably firm in their benevolent resolve. How do we explain this paradoxical phenomenon?

MacIntyre's account offers an explanation of why vices sometimes persist within pseudo-practices, institutions, and traditions from generation to generation; on the other hand, it explains why practice-enabling virtues sometimes emerge to disrupt a pseudo-practice, a wicked institution, and a corrupt or at least incomplete tradition. The fact is that "many kinds of activities can be, and in fact are considered to be, practices. Some of these may conflict radically, owing to errors and insufficiencies in rationality."[37] Errors in rationality explain errors in traditions and hence false ascriptions of the title 'virtue.' Rationality answers to truth, to the world as it is, not merely to the pragmatic truth to "dialectical success."[38] Hence, virtues answer to *what is really good*. They do not merely answer to "what-counts-as-good-for-us", which property is relative to each tradition.

In this way, MacIntyre escapes this iteration of the charge of relativism, while still explaining why rival traditions differ – and sometimes radically differ – in their evaluations and opinions. Incomplete traditions can, and do, undergo crisis. Particular persons within that tradition discover and asseverate on inadequacies within the tradition, leading to an epistemological crisis. In response, others within the same tradition may become willing to examine the resources of rival traditions and either quit their primary tradition or re-fashion it, re-make it, update it, and make real moral

37. Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 103.
38. Ibid., 104.

and intellectual progress.

The consistency of tradition-constituted rationality

MacIntyre would have us believe that 'rationality' is not a disembodied set of timeless and universal procedures of thinking. My rationality includes whatever standards of reasoning I accept, and all the other resources (facts, authorities, memories) I use to judge true and false. I already responded to worries presented above about whether rationalities are ultimately incommensurable. The fact that people can, and do, identify inconsistencies with their own tradition, identify the resources of rival traditions, and switch traditions.

Even after clarifying MacIntyre's optimism about the possibility of ethical truth, his answer to relativism is sufficient but still somehow indeterminate. This indeterminacy is partly due, as I have suggested, to his appeal to practical rationality. While this appeal seems to me to solve some problems, there is one lingering problem it does not solve. From my perspective (or my tradition), *every legitimate tradition* affirms the law of non-contradiction. But that is just to say that if Walt Whitman or Nagarjuna denies the law of non contradiction, then I will necessarily judge them to be irrational.[39] But I wish to go further and say that this strand of Buddhism *really is irrational*. That is, I wish to affirm that they are irrational – full stop. I am not sure MacIntyre's theory allows me to affirm that. Unless I am missing something crucial here, this seems to me a limitation of the theory.

Perhaps a qualified acceptance of MacIntyre's claim about tradition-constituted rationality is that when a tradition does not *seem* share this standard of rationality (the value of logical consistency) I should not be too quick to judge that I have really understood their meaning. Perhaps when I ask them if they affirm (S is P and S is not P) they have a slightly different concept in mind

39. Laurence R. Horn, "Contradiction," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2014, 2014. "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then, I contradict myself. / (I am large, I contain multitudes.) (Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself');"Everything is real and not real. / Both real and not real. / Neither real nor not real. / That is Lord Buddha's teaching." (Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā 18:8), quoted in Garfield (1995: 102).

for "not" or for "and." Or perhaps they are speaking of an entity instantiating a property and not instantiating that same property at the same time but in ever so slightly different respects. Walt Whitman may be saying he contradicts himself in ever so slightly different respects in order to grasp apparently paradoxical truths that can be predicated of a transcendental modern man. Or perhaps they are denying both P and not P in favor of some other, different articulation of the predicates a given subject instantiates. In the case of any of these alternatives, the principle of charity recommends I extend my interlocutor the benefit of the doubt before concluding that the appearance of irrationality reflects real irrationality.

The clarity of tradition-constituted rationality

What exactly is a tradition? MacIntyre's account is not clear. John Haldane (among others) questions MacIntyre's ability coherently to identify what a tradition is. What is tradition A? How do we differentiate it from B? Are two traditions separate and hence identifiable only if they are *incommensurable*? How much difference constitutes separation? How much overlap is compatible with difference? Jewish and Christian traditions share a common origin and bear considerable overlap in authorities, scriptures, and doctrines.

MacIntyre's definition makes answering these questions difficult. He characterizes a tradition as "separate and unified when its members or texts have a core set of shared commitments to beliefs, when the tradition is situated in a particular context in a particular set of institutions and when the tradition has an identifiable linguistic difference when compared to other traditions."[40] But is there any universal procedure for identifying such linguistic and institutional differences?

The right response to this call for clarification, I think, comes from Weinstein. We should not expect, by MacIntyre's lights, that there is an automatically objective, view-from-nowhere by which we can define tradition itself. Rather, MacIntyre concludes that "the concept of a tradition, together with the criteria for its use and application, is itself one developed from within one particular

40. Weinstein, *On MacIntyre*, 83.

tradition-based standpoint. This does not preclude its application to the very tradition within which it was developed."[41] MacIntyre grants that his self-definition of his own tradition arises, in part, from his criteria of that tradition. Traditions change over time. They progress (according to their own unchanging standards) toward unchanging goals or else they abandon old standards. This is liable to frustrate some readers. But the alternative is worse. The alternative is a denial of pluralism that liberalism holds dear. For it is intellectual imperialism to assume that I have the *real* scoop on every other tradition. It assumes I have the right to define and critique all other traditions *in my own terms.* Even though MacIntyre thinks his own tradition correct, and others incorrect, this is not imperialistic. For he is willing to reflect on his own tradition, examine its resources and inadequacies, and engage through philosophical imagination with rivals.

In short, by MacIntyre's lights he does not need a definition of tradition that is any more cut and dry than it is. Forcefully to disagree with this conclusion requires his interlocutor to produce an alternative theory of practical rationality. But that alternative will either aim to be *not* tradition-constituted but universal (which is the encyclopedic tradition) or it will admit is tradition-constituted but the "best so far" (which is MacIntyre's own view).

We can think of this worry about MacIntyre's theory more generally as a problem of thinking about thinking. MacIntyre is a theorist of virtue and practical rationality. Hence rationally to assess his theory requires thinking through our own theory of rationality. The errors we make in *thinking things through* are not likely to be solved by *thinking them through*. The Greek proverb is: "If water chokes us, what shall we drink?" The Latin proverb (from a very different context) is "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" — who will guard the guards themselves? I believe the answer to the rhetorical question is *no one at all* can guard the guards; if water chokes us, there is *nothing at all we can drink to wash it down*. Likewise, if something is deeply wrong with the way we think, how can theorizing about rationality right the wrong?

41. John Horton and Susan Mendus, *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 295.

Some of the errors MacIntyre diagnoses in thinkers who belong to encyclopedic tradition will be invisible to those thinkers unless they themselves earnestly examine the problems of the tradition. Even if MacIntyre's diagnosis is *correct* – especially if it is correct – the readers who especially need to hear it will find the diagnosis unintelligible, even irrational. Insofar as the "patient" finds any parts of his theory intelligible, they will seem radical, disastrous in their social implications, and destructive of the very nature and purpose of education. The reason these appearances will be insuperable to MacIntyre's patient is because the patient is, by his lights, self-deceived. He or she simply denies being part of a tradition, and hence denies having a particular (rather than universal) tradition-bound conception of rationality, and hence denies having a particular, tradition-bound conception of the good (perhaps the good is unbounded freedom to follow the moral law, or to pursue happiness,, and justice unfettered equality). Modernity is the "tradition-less tradition" and hence *must* deny tradition to be consistent with itself.

The solution to this paradox is not to browbeat people into admitting that they inhabit a tradition. Rather, he directs the arguments (of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*) and others at interlocutors who are already undergoing epistemological crisis. This "patient" comes to MacIntyre with manifesting symptoms. MacIntyre offers one possible diagnosis, and the patient's job is to investigate further. The patient needs philosophical imagination to even *consider* the possibility of another truth. The patient needs patience, intellectual courage, and self-reflection. The patient needs to sit in front of the proverbial mirror and mouth the words, (a) "I am part of a tradition" and (b) "my tradition might be inadequate," and (c) "that other tradition might have the resources more adequately to address the intellectual and practical problems that I now see are insuperable to my tradition." The critic who would escape the battery is more likely to flee rather than engage; but the critic who would escape by engaging and overcoming is liable to meet her match.

The justification of morality by tradition-constituted rationality

A third reply is in order here. D'andrea[42] points out a critique Philippa Foot has leveled against MacIntyre: after all the informative and wide-ranging historical analysis, MacIntyre's account does not solve the "problem posed by Plato, and never solved … that of showing the rationality, for any man, of a thorough-going acceptance of the restraints of justice."[43] The challenge of a Nietzsche or Callicles or Thrasymachus lies in their acceptance that the good life for humans *requires* some virtues or requires virtue in some sense but their rejection of the "robust concept of justice with its corresponding constraints on action."[44]

One response is this: the question "why be moral?" is never asked in the abstract. For example, in describing the "self of the heroic age" MacIntyre says, "In heroic society there is no 'outside' except that of the stranger. A man who tried to withdraw himself from his given position in heroic society would be engaged in the enterprise of trying to make himself disappear."[45] Even though virtues in twenty-first century North America are not what the same as Homer's day, there is a parallel to be drawn.

Philosophers often ask "why be moral?" hypothetically. They ask it *as if* speaking on the skeptic's behalf, or as if *they* were skeptics. But hypothetical moral skeptics will not do. We must consider a concrete character, real or fictional. Once we look for a real or fictional skeptic, a problem arises. By MacIntyre's lights, sincere "why be moral?" skeptics are political or social outcasts. For millions of people who are full-fledged members of their tradition, the "why be moral?" question will not usually arise. Parents, teachers, religious leaders, politicians, businesses, and non-profit organizations all have a hand in giving each member of the community the tradition out of which

42. Thomas D D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2006).

43. Philippa Foot, "Review of After Virtue," *Times Literary Supplement*, 1981, 1 097. This is the "problem of immoralism" she tries to address in the final chapter of her *Natural Goodness*.

44. D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 430.

45. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 126.

the community arises and within which abstract philosophical or pseudo-philosophical worries such as "What does it all mean?" do not arise because they are satisfactorily answered.

By contrast, the emergence of the doubt as to whether one should be moral, and the crystallization of the doubt into an articulate challenge, is *a political failure*. The *polis* to which the moral skeptic belongs has failed him. The moral skeptic, likewise, has failed the *polis* which belongs to him or her. So MacIntyre's theory makes room for people who are not actually skeptical (to whom an answer to Foot's challenge is not required) and people who are actually skeptical but do not belong to their society (to whom an answer to Foot's challenge would be meaningless).

MacIntyre's theory makes room for one more group: moral skeptics *are* members of their own tradition but are seeing the problems within their own tradition and who are troubled by a "border tradition". This type of skeptic sees the resources of a rival tradition and compares such favorably with the resources of his own tradition. The skeptic is, in a word, entering epistemological crisis.

Specifically, it might be that the moral skeptic has been raised outside of the Aristotelian tradition and is noticing the inadequacies of his or her own tradition, and is entering epistemological crisis. MacIntyre's response is to invite him or her to do the hard work of resolving that crisis by examining, from within the context of a primary tradition *and* a "second first" tradition, the problems at hand and the available solutions, working toward an ever greater understanding of the truth.

In short, MacIntyre's theory gives an account of two contradictory phenomena. It explains how a moral skeptic might arise within a community and how that skeptic might be moved to a more adequate grasp of the truth; and it explains why, in healthy, unified, moral societies, *so few people become moral skeptics*.

VIII. 9. Is practical reason 'natural'?

Although it seems practical reason is not natural, it is part of human nature (whether as endemic to human *nature*, not merely second nature, not necessarily supernatural, but primary nature because primary nature is logical or rational will be addressed later)

IX. Conclusion

My view is that practical reason is the general human capacity for deciding, through reflection and sensitivity to practical principles, what to do, and for evaluating one's own actions and those of others. Although we can by verbal sleight of hand define practical reasons as 'desires', the judgment of what to do is a distinct mental state from desiring, wanting, wishing, or instinctual attraction. Hence, practical reasons can (and most often do) motivate, all by themselves, even in the absence of desires (etc.); however, desires can (and often do) function as reasons for action.

There are many reasons for action. But the concept of a reason for action is the concept of pursuing what is good or what is best, all things considered. Practical reason runs into quandaries because there are so many reasons for action, and they sometimes conflict. Some have to do with what is best for me, what is best for others, what is best for me and what is best for me later, what is permissable and what is required, etc. Although we may want to reserve the word 'moral' for other-regarding reasons, it is important to keep in mind that our goal of living well demands sensitivity to a whole range of reasons, regarding self, other, world, and (perhaps) God.