

# *REASONABLY TRADITIONAL*

## Self-Contradiction and Self-Reference in Alasdair MacIntyre's Account of Tradition-Based Rationality

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### ABSTRACT

Alasdair MacIntyre's account of tradition-based rationality has been the subject of much discussion, as well as the object of some recent charges of inconsistency. The author considers arguments by Jennifer Herdt, Peter Mehl, and John Haldane which attempt to show that MacIntyre's account of rationality is, in some way, inconsistent. It is argued that the various charges of inconsistency brought against MacIntyre by these critics can be understood as variations on two general types of criticism: (1) that MacIntyre's account of tradition-based rationality presents a picture of rationality with inconsistent internal elements, and (2) that MacIntyre, in the act of presenting his picture of rationality, makes the sort of claims to which his own account of rationality denies legitimacy, and thus MacIntyre's account is self-referentially incoherent. In response to criticisms of the first sort, it is argued that MacIntyre can further clarify or develop his position to take the current criticisms into account without altering the fundamental aspects of his picture of rationality. In response to the charge of self-referential incoherence, it is argued that the charge rests on a mistaken understanding of MacIntyre's position and of the nature of justification. In dealing with these arguments, the author hopes to not only vindicate MacIntyre's account of rationality against the charges of some of its recent critics, but also to shed some light on the nature of arguments both for and against relativism and historicism.

KEY WORDS: *tradition-based rationality, MacIntyre, relativism, self-reference, justification*

THIS PAPER EXAMINES ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S ACCOUNT of tradition-based rationality in light of several claims that his account is inconsistent. One of the primary goals of this paper is to clarify both MacIntyre's position and the claims of his critics. An additional goal is to consider how

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MacIntyre might respond to these criticisms and how, in some instances, he might clarify or further develop his own position in order to take these criticisms into account. In the process of doing this, I also hope to shed some light on the general nature of arguments both for and against historicism and relativism.

Although the chief focus of MacIntyre's work has been the area of ethics and practical rationality and his concerns with rationality in general seem to have arisen from his more specific interests in moral enquiry, the focus of this paper is on MacIntyre's account of rationality in general and not as limited to practical rationality. Throughout this paper I consider a number of MacIntyre's works, with the central text being *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (WJWR). At the risk of downplaying shifts in MacIntyre's views over the last two decades, I attempt to present as sympathetically as possible MacIntyre's views on reason and tradition as forming a consistent whole.

The order of the paper is as follows: I begin by briefly surveying MacIntyre's view of reason and tradition. I then outline a criticism of this view recently made by Jennifer Herdt. I begin with Herdt because I take her conclusion regarding MacIntyre—that his position is self-contradictory at its core—to be the most extreme of the charges of inconsistency brought against him. Upon examination, however, I find that the precise nature of Herdt's criticism is not clear, and that her argument to the effect that MacIntyre's position contradicts itself can be characterized in two different ways, which make for two distinct types of criticism of MacIntyre's position. With this distinction in hand, I next examine arguments against MacIntyre made by Peter Mehl and John Haldane and conclude that their arguments can be best understood as criticisms of the first type. After considering how MacIntyre might respond to these criticisms, I return to Herdt's argument and suggest it can in fact best be characterized as a criticism of the second type. I then show how Herdt's argument rests on confusion between the rational justification of tradition-based claims on the one hand, and the truth of those claims on the other.

## 1. MacIntyre on Reason and Tradition

### 1.1 *Rational enquiry as tradition-dependent*

The central contention of MacIntyre's account of rationality is that rational enquiry takes place only within a tradition of enquiry. Thus, all rational enquiry is tradition-dependent. As MacIntyre says in WJWR, "There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other" (MacIntyre 1988, 350). In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre explains

what he means by tradition: "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (MacIntyre 1984, 222). Such a tradition of rational enquiry provides its adherents with a set of background beliefs about the world, as well as with a set of problems or questions that members of the tradition attempt to resolve and the standards of rational justification that are to be used in solving those problems. Thus, on MacIntyre's view, the nature of rational justification is *internal* to traditions. This does not mean, of course, that various traditions will not share any background beliefs, problems, or standards of rational justification. On the contrary, what is shared between traditions will vary, and any two traditions may share a great deal or very little at all. For instance, MacIntyre acknowledges in WJWR that, "All the traditions with which we have been concerned [referring to the Aristotelian, Augustinian, Scottish Enlightenment, and Liberal traditions examined in that book] agree in according a certain authority to logic both in their theory and in their practice" (MacIntyre 1988, 351). What MacIntyre stresses, however, is that what is shared between rival traditions, including laws of logic, is not substantial enough to serve as a means of providing a rational resolution for the significant disagreements between traditions.

MacIntyre casts his view of reason as tradition-dependent as an alternative to the Enlightenment view of rationality. According to the latter, reason stands independent of and in contrast to tradition, rather than as something that operates only from within a given tradition. On the Enlightenment view reason is *external* to tradition, and it provides all rational persons with universal standards of reason which, in principle, enable them to settle disagreements between various traditions in a rational fashion. MacIntyre does not argue that such a tradition-independent view of reason is inherently contradictory, but he contends that it is a notion that should be abandoned on historical grounds: the repeated failure (in the period encompassing and following the Enlightenment) of anyone to find standards of rational justification that secure universal assent from all rational people provides overwhelming evidence that the project of doing so is essentially flawed.

### *1.2 Trouble lurking: Relativism and perspectivism*

MacIntyre recognizes, however, that his rejection of tradition-independent norms of rational justification and his insistence that all rationality is tradition-dependent raises the possibility of other problems, including relativism and perspectivism. If rational standards are tradition-dependent (as well as background beliefs and problems to be solved), then it might seem that it is impossible for any tradition to rationally evaluate or criticize a rival tradition. This is so because the rational

standards used by one tradition might not be accepted as rational by another tradition. Thus, we could say that certain claims of a tradition different from our own were irrational, but only in the sense that they were irrational according to the standards of *our* tradition. They might very well be perfectly rational according to the standards of *their* tradition. Since there is no tradition-independent standard of reason to appeal to, we would be left saying that our disagreement with a rival tradition was not resolvable by rational means: what emerges is either a sort of relativism or non-rational fideism. MacIntyre puts the problem this way:

It may therefore seem to be the case that we are confronted with the rival and competing claims of a number of traditions to our allegiance in respect of our understanding of practical rationality and justice, among which we can have no good reason to decide in favor of any one rather than of the others. Each has its own standards of reasoning; each provides its own background beliefs. To offer one kind of reason, to appeal to one set of background beliefs, will already be to have assumed the standpoint of one particular tradition. But if we make no such assumption, then we can have no good reason to give more weight to the contentions advanced by one particular tradition than to those advanced by its rivals. Argument along these lines has been adduced in support of a conclusion that if the only available standards of rationality are those made available by and within traditions, then no issue between contending traditions is rationally decidable. To assert or to conclude this rather than that can be rational relative to the standards of some particular tradition, but not rational as such. There can be no rationality as such (MacIntyre 1988, 351–352).

Thus, the problem is that whereas MacIntyre's goal was to provide a view of rationality as tradition-dependent, his view appears to collapse into what is not rationality at all, but relativism or fideism. MacIntyre calls this view—the view that “Every set of standards, every tradition incorporating a set of standards has as much and as little claim to our allegiance as any other”—the “relativist challenge” (MacIntyre 1988, 352).

MacIntyre also cites a related challenge to his view of tradition-dependent rationality, a challenge he refers to as the “perspectivist challenge.” Whereas the relativist argues that rational choice between traditions is impossible according to MacIntyre's account, the perspectivist argues that because no single tradition can show itself to be rationally superior to its rivals, no tradition can claim unique legitimacy or exalted status over a rival tradition. Thus, no tradition can claim that its theories are “true” in contrast to the incompatible theories of its rivals. “The solution, so the perspectivist argues, is to withdraw the ascription of truth and falsity, at least in the sense in which ‘true’ and ‘false’ have been understood so far within the practice of such traditions, both from individual theses and from the bodies of systematic belief of which such

theses are constitutive parts” (MacIntyre 1988, 352). According to this view, then, the implication of MacIntyre’s notion of rationality is that no tradition should be seen as offering us an account of what is “true”; each tradition is only offering its own perspective in contrast to the perspectives of the others.

### *1.3 Why tradition-dependent rationality does not lead to relativism or perspectivism*

To counter the contention that tradition-dependent rationality leads to either relativism or perspectivism, MacIntyre offers an account of how traditions of rational enquiry develop and how they can enter into rational competition with each other, even though this competition is not based on an Enlightenment-style appeal to tradition-independent standards of rationality. According to MacIntyre, traditions of enquiry pass through several well-defined stages. Beginning from a stage in which received authorities are accepted unquestionably, a tradition next moves into a stage in which inadequacies in the accepted beliefs are identified but not resolved, and from there into a third stage in which “response to those inadequacies has resulted in a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations” (MacIntyre 1988, 355). Once this third stage has been reached, participants in the tradition are in the position to recognize a discrepancy between the world as they now understand it and their previously held beliefs about the world. This lack of correspondence is what participants refer to when they call those previously held beliefs “false” (MacIntyre 1988, 356). As a tradition advances, its members formulate beliefs and theories and test them through a process of dialectical questioning. The goal of this process is to arrive at true beliefs—beliefs that do not suffer the same inadequacies that are now apparent in previous beliefs now seen to be false. “To claim truth for one’s present mindset and the judgments which are its expression is to claim that this kind of inadequacy, this kind of discrepancy, will never appear in any possible future situation, no matter how searching the enquiry, no matter how much evidence is provided, no matter what developments in rational enquiry may occur” (MacIntyre 1988, 358). The ability to survive dialectical questioning is the criterion according to which the claims of a tradition may be judged to be true.

As a tradition of enquiry moves forward historically, it is always characterized by a certain set of unsolved problems, and rational progress within a tradition is judged by the ability of the adherents of the tradition to deal with their set of problems, solving problems that were left unsolved by their predecessors and explaining why those problems had so far been left unsolved, as well as expanding the scope and explanatory

power of the tradition. A particular theory will be justified *within* a tradition according to its ability to contribute to this sort of progress. That is, it will be justified on the basis of its ability to both explain and overcome the inadequacies of its predecessors in the tradition up to the present time. An important corollary of this is that justification within a tradition will always be tied to the history of that tradition, because it is in relation to its predecessors in the tradition (and *not* in relation to generic, timeless rational standards) that a theory is justified. Thus, the justification of a theory is always inseparable from the writing of the history of the tradition up to that point. This is what MacIntyre refers to when he says: "To justify is to narrate how the argument has gone so far" (MacIntyre 1988, 8).

Such rational progress within a tradition, however, is not inevitable, and this is a key fact in MacIntyre's argument that tradition-dependent rationality does not entail relativism or perspectivism. At any given time, a tradition may confront what MacIntyre refers to as an "epistemological crisis" (MacIntyre 1988, 361–362).<sup>1</sup> This is a situation in which a tradition's "hitherto trusted methods of enquiry have become sterile" (MacIntyre 1988, 362). The tradition is no longer able to solve the problems that it has set for itself; new inadequacies and incoherencies are recognized within the tradition for which its practitioners have insufficient conceptual resources to resolve while maintaining the core beliefs and rational standards of the tradition. Such a crisis might be resolved and a tradition saved if new conceptual resources can be used to solve the irresolvable problems in such a way that also explains why they had been unsolvable before, as well as maintains a fundamental continuity between the new conceptual resources and the beliefs and standards of the tradition so far.

However, it is also possible that such a crisis may *not* be solved by its adherents. In this situation, the adherents of the tradition in crisis might turn to a rival tradition for help. In order to do this, the adherents of the tradition in crisis must first learn the second tradition as a "second first language"—they must come to understand it conceptually *on its own terms*, rather than simply from the perspective of their original tradition. Having come to "speak" the language of two traditions, adherents of a tradition in crisis might discover that the rival tradition provides the conceptual resources lacking in their own tradition to solve, by their own standards of rationality, the problems of their own tradition which had led to an epistemological crisis, and also to explain why those problems were unsolvable from the perspective of the original tradition. Recognizing the superiority of the rival tradition in this way, members of the tradition in crisis may choose to abandon their tradition in favor of one of its rivals. This process of abandoning one tradition in favor of

<sup>1</sup> See also MacIntyre 1977.

another constitutes the way in which there may be rationality across (and not only within) traditions, even though there can be no appeal to Enlightenment standards of tradition-independent rationality. Rational competition between traditions takes place on the basis of the ability of one tradition to solve both its own problems and the problems of rival traditions by the rivals' own standards.

How does this account of rationality between traditions via epistemological crisis and problem-solving show that MacIntyre's tradition-dependent rationality does not lead to relativism? The claim that tradition-dependent rationality leads to relativism depends on the claim that, given tradition-dependent rationality, we can have no way of deciding rationally between competing traditions, and each tradition will always judge its own claims to be rationally acceptable by its own standards of reason. MacIntyre's account of crisis and competition shows, however, how a tradition may fail by its own standards of rationality and how a tradition may rationally compete with another on the basis of its ability to solve its rival's problems better than the rival tradition can solve them itself. Thus, we have a criterion according to which we may make a rational choice of one tradition over another: "It is in respect of their adequacy or inadequacy in responses to epistemological crises that traditions are vindicated or fail to be vindicated" (MacIntyre 1988, 366).

Similarly, this account of rational competition between traditions is a rejoinder to perspectivism. Like the relativist, the perspectivist claims that we cannot decide rationally between traditions. The perspectivist then takes this claim, which is about the relativism of the justifications for our beliefs, and goes on to argue that in view of this relativism we should abstain from referring to our beliefs as "true" or "false." Thus, the perspectivist argument regarding truth claims depends on the premise that "no claim to truth made in the name of any one competing tradition could defeat the claims to truth made in the name of its rivals" (MacIntyre 1988, 367). But MacIntyre's account shows how, from the perspective of tradition-dependent rationality, the claims of one tradition can defeat, in a rational way, the truth claims of a rival tradition, and thus perspectivism is undermined.

## 2. Is MacIntyre's Account of Reason and Tradition Self-Contradictory?

A number of thinkers have questioned the coherence of MacIntyre's theory of tradition-based rationality and the rationality of competing traditions. Perhaps the most severe criticism of MacIntyre's understanding of rationality has been made by Jennifer A. Herdt, who argues that MacIntyre's account is self-contradictory. Herdt argues that MacIntyre, in his account of rational competition between traditions, has offered just the sort of tradition-independent means of rational justification that he

earlier claimed could not be attained: "It seems, then, that by offering what he claimed—on empirical grounds—could not be provided, that is, a tradition-independent mode of rational justification, MacIntyre has contradicted himself; he has proved himself a liberal at just that point where he is most specific in his indictments of liberalism" (Herdt 1998, 537).

Herdt seems to accept the line of reasoning that MacIntyre presents in WJWR which suggests that in the absence of some way to judge rationally between conflicting traditions, we are in a position of relativism with respect to rival traditions. The question, then, is whether or not MacIntyre's claims about the tradition-dependent nature of reason mean that we have no way to judge rationally between conflicting traditions. Of course, MacIntyre's account of traditions in epistemological crisis and the ability of some to better deal with those crises was meant to be a description of just such a way that a tradition can be rationally vindicated against rival traditions, and of how members of one tradition may make a rational decision to abandon their original tradition in favor of a rival tradition judged to be superior. The problem with this account, according to Herdt, is that in offering it MacIntyre has provided a *tradition-independent* standard of rational justification, which is precisely what he earlier claimed could not be done. Thus, MacIntyre is caught in a dilemma: "It would seem either that his theory of rational conflict-resolution is correct, thus disproving his empirical claim about tradition-dependence, or this theory fails, in which case he has not succeeded in showing a way to escape the road from historicism to relativism" (Herdt 1998, 527).

Herdt points out that MacIntyre's account of rational conflict between competing traditions can be formulated as a universal standard or principle of rationality, which she formulates thus: "When a tradition B can provide a cogent and illuminating explanation of an epistemological crisis faced by rival tradition A according to tradition A's own standards, and B does not face a similar crisis, then rationality requires members of A to acknowledge the superior rationality of B. I will call this principle Rt" (Herdt 1998, 535). It is this principle, Herdt argues, that makes a switch between traditions rational, and without it such a switch would be irrational. She acknowledges that this principle is tradition-dependent in several ways: it employs concepts that were developed within specific traditions,<sup>2</sup> its application requires evaluating particular issues in their context, and the person who evaluates particular issues in conjunction with Rt must begin with his or her own context (Herdt 1998, 537). However, she insists that Rt is tradition-independent insofar as:

<sup>2</sup> Herdt's chief example here is that Rt makes use of empathetic imagination, which she argues is, ironically, a virtue that grew out of the liberal tradition that MacIntyre intends to criticize.



“(1) the theory is not restricted to valid use within the tradition in which it arose; (2) it transcends and abstracts from concrete issues within a given tradition; and (3) it can be articulated apart from any particular issues” (Herdt 1998, 537).

Noting that MacIntyre’s account is thus tradition-independent in some ways and tradition-dependent in others, Herdt asks: “Is this a simple contradiction within MacIntyre’s thought, or is it possible to move beyond the impasse?” (Herdt 1998, 538). The solution she suggests is that MacIntyre provide an argument to show that *Rt* is a theory of rationality presupposed by all rational traditions as such. Such a transcendental argument would defeat relativism by showing that *Rt* is available to all traditions because it is an essential part of the developmental process of traditions as such, a process that is the result not merely of the contingent facts of human nature, but of logical necessity. At the same time, however, an account of *Rt* that showed it to be a tradition-transcendental standard of justification would satisfy the demand that our standards of rationality be understood as tradition-dependent, because *Rt* is something that emerges fully from within the historical development of traditions. Thus, MacIntyre could “continue to insist that all our conceptual resources come from within the historical and cultural matrix in which we are embedded” while still maintaining that “rational debate and choice among rival traditions is possible, because of the general standards presupposed by traditions of enquiry” (Herdt 1998, 541).

### 3. Two Sorts of Criticism, Two Kinds of Contradiction

What are we to make of Herdt’s assessment of the contradiction between MacIntyre’s account of tradition-dependent rationality and his formulation of a tradition-independent way of rationally evaluating rival traditions? We can begin by pinpointing the exact place where Herdt locates the contradiction in MacIntyre’s thought. As we have seen, she seems to suggest in several places that the problem is simply that MacIntyre’s account of competition between traditions (which she formulates into the rational principle *Rt*) is tradition-independent, which contradicts his claim that standards of rationality are tradition-dependent. But then Herdt herself goes on to note that MacIntyre’s *Rt* is tradition-independent in some ways and tradition-dependent in others. This move allows us to see how MacIntyre’s account may be understood as fully consistent without an appeal to transcendental standards of rationality necessarily present within all traditions of enquiry. We may simply say that MacIntyre’s account of *Rt* is tradition-dependent in all of the essential senses in which one is to understand the standards of rationality to be tradition-dependent. Most importantly, *Rt* has arisen out of a particular Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition in which MacIntyre locates

himself, and to understand Rt we must understand it in terms of its historical context within that particular tradition. Moreover, Rt will be rationally justified within its tradition by reference to the history of that tradition, and the support that someone outside of that tradition will have for believing Rt will depend on the status of the broader tradition of which Rt is a part. Though it might be possible to formulate Rt in such a way that “transcends and abstracts from concrete issues within a given tradition,” it nevertheless remains the case that Rt, even as formulated by Herdt, is related to specific questions about the nature of rational justification across traditions, questions that have arisen in particular historical contexts and must be understood in relation to the historical traditions in which they are present.

Given the fact that Herdt herself recognizes these different ways of understanding tradition-dependence and tradition-independence but still sees a contradiction in MacIntyre’s thought, we may well ask further about where exactly Herdt finds self-contradiction in MacIntyre’s account of rationality. What about her claim that part of the problematic tradition-independence of Rt is that Rt is “not restricted to valid use within the tradition in which it arose”? The trans-traditional application of Rt—in contrast to claims about theory-dependence—appears to be a key part of what Herdt finds contradictory in MacIntyre’s account. We might restate the problem that Herdt seems to be raising in this way: “You, Mr. MacIntyre, say that reason only works within traditions, but then you offer a theory of reason that works not only in your tradition but across traditions as well.” Now, it is possible to understand this criticism in two ways: either as (1) a criticism regarding the coherence of the theory of rationality (including his account of rationality both within and between traditions) that is presented in MacIntyre’s claims, or as (2) a criticism regarding the coherence of MacIntyre’s ability to make these claims. The first sort of criticism argues that in laying out his theory of rationality MacIntyre makes certain claims and employs certain concepts that are inconsistent with one another. The second sort of criticism argues that in the act of making his claims about rationality, MacIntyre contradicts (implicitly or explicitly) the content of his own claims.<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that Herdt’s argument can be best construed as an argument of the second sort. But before considering how Herdt’s position might be characterized in this way, let us consider two other arguments of the first sort against MacIntyre’s position.

<sup>3</sup> This second sort of criticism is a charge of self-referential incoherence, such as is exhibited if I say to you, “I have never uttered a word of English.” The first sort of criticism is the charge of plain-old incoherence, such as is exhibited if I say to you, “That figure has four sides and it has only three sides.”

### 3.1 *Rational standards across traditions: Weak and strong*

The first sort of criticism can be stated as follows: If people are really to go through the process of evaluating rival traditions in the manner that MacIntyre suggests, they must have a degree of tradition-independent rationality, but MacIntyre denies that they have access to this and thereby contradicts himself. Peter Mehl and John Haldane each offer a criticism of this type. In comparing MacIntyre to Basil Mitchell, Mehl argues that "MacIntyre tacitly assumes, as Mitchell explicitly does, that we have a degree of rationality independent of tradition" (Mehl 1991, 23). Mehl points out that on MacIntyre's account of progress within a given tradition, all traditions seem to possess some common rational standards, even if those are very general: "achieving consistency and comprehensiveness seem general marks of rationality, things to be achieved by all inquirers in any tradition" (Mehl 1991, 35). Likewise, in describing what would count as a solution to an epistemological crisis, MacIntyre offers general standards of rationality to judge the degree to which an epistemological crisis has been resolved (Mehl 1991, 35–36). Moreover, MacIntyre's description of an adherent of one tradition switching to another suggests that there are *some* standards of rationality that are shared. If not, then it would be impossible for an individual to see another tradition as resolving the difficulties in her own. As Mehl explains: "His claim that one tradition can see the new resources from another, resolving incoherencies, means that there are common characteristics at some level, even if very general. How else could they see the incoherence fade with the new explanation; how else could they speak about adequate or inadequate solutions?" (Mehl 1991, 36). Mehl suggests that MacIntyre is not clear about the existence of such general standards of rationality across traditions, and that the lack of clarity is related to MacIntyre's claim that substantive continuity with the old tradition is *not* retained when one switches traditions (unlike when the resolution of a crisis comes from within a tradition). The word "substantive," Mehl notes, is ambiguous. If we take it in a strong way so as to imply that there are no standards of rationality that are retained across traditions, then it seems that the decision to switch traditions was essentially non-rational, a leap of faith. This is so because if there were no standards of rationality across traditions, then the second tradition could in no way show itself superior to the first tradition except on its own terms as isolated from other traditions, and the first tradition could then do the same as well, in which case there would be no rational reason for choosing one over the other. But this is just the sort of relativism that MacIntyre's account was meant to avoid, of course. Thus, Mehl concludes, and I agree with him, that we should not understand MacIntyre's statements about the substantive break from one tradition to the next as denying that there

are certain very general standards of rationality—such as consistency and comprehensiveness—that hold across traditions. If this were not so, rationality across traditions truly would be impossible.

Were MacIntyre to concede this point, would that not lead to a contradiction with other aspects of his picture of rationality, especially his insistence that rationality is tradition-dependent? I do not think so. MacIntyre already suggests that such general, trans-traditional standards of rationality exist<sup>4</sup> and his insistence on the tradition-dependent nature of rationality does not mean that there can be no place for general standards of reason shared by all traditions. Rather, MacIntyre distinguishes between the most general, “weak” standards of rationality—such as consistency and comprehensiveness—which all rational traditions share, and the “stronger” rational standards, which vary from tradition to tradition. The more general standards are “weak” insofar as they are insufficient for deciding between incompatible views on issues of substance. The “strong” standards, on the other hand, do provide reasons for choosing between incompatible views. An example of the stronger type of rational standard that is not in the realm of practical rationality might be a principle stating that only ideas which are clear and distinct should be accepted as true. In *WJWR*, MacIntyre does not discuss this distinction at length. In that book much of MacIntyre’s historical discussion centers on divergent standards of rationality drawn from the area of practical rationality, and most of those examples of rational standards seem to involve more than the “weak” standards of consistency and comprehensiveness.<sup>5</sup> However, in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* MacIntyre states more explicitly this distinction between weak and strong standards of rationality, as when he says that, “The accepted standards of rationality, insofar as they are generally shared, provide contemporary academic practice with only a weakly conceived rationality, one compatible with the coexistence of widely divergent points of view, each unable, at least by those generally accepted standards, to provide conclusive refutations of its rivals” (MacIntyre 1990, 172).

With this distinction, we can see how MacIntyre is able to say that standards of rationality vary across traditions—these are the strong standards—while also assuming a minimum of general (trans-traditional<sup>6</sup>) rationality—the weak standards—which allows for rational

<sup>4</sup> See the previously noted quote from MacIntyre 1988, 351, as well as a related treatment of the Thomistic notion of first principles in MacIntyre 1990a, 9–11.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the account of Hume’s standards of practical rationality versus those of Aristotle, MacIntyre 1988, 300–310.

<sup>6</sup> I think that the phrase “trans-traditional” is perhaps a better way of characterizing the general or “weak” standards of rationality, because it does not lose sight of the way in which even these standards are always put to work within the context of a particular tradition, and it avoids the Enlightenment connotations of the phrase “tradition-independent” standards of rationality.

progress between competing traditions. MacIntyre's chief point is that, removed from the context of a tradition and its history (especially its history of epistemological crises and resolutions), the weak standards of rationality that are shared across traditions are insufficient to resolve serious disputes between rival traditions. Thus, an Enlightenment view of tradition-independent reason as the arbiter between the disputes of traditions is false. However, when considered in light of the history of the tradition and its previous epistemological crises, what is shared does provide enough common ground to allow the possibility that one tradition (including its strong standards of rationality) may rationally vindicate itself against its rivals. Thus, relativism too is false.

### 3.2 *Rebel without a tradition: The problem of the outsider*

Mehl briefly mentions a criticism regarding the internal coherence of MacIntyre's picture of rationality (another criticism of the first sort). This criticism has been elaborated more thoroughly by John Haldane (Haldane 1994, 96–97) and may be called the “problem of the outsider.” In WJWR MacIntyre says that he is writing primarily to “someone who, not as yet having given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry, is besieged by disputes over what is just and about how it is reasonable to act, both at the level of the particular immediate issues. . . and at the level at which rival systematic tradition-informed conceptions contend” (MacIntyre 1988, 393). Most contemporaries, MacIntyre notes, live “betwixt and between” a variety of traditions (MacIntyre 1988, 397). The problem arises, however, when we consider MacIntyre's claim that reason only operates *within* a tradition of enquiry: how is the outsider, the person not clearly committed to a particular rational or moral tradition of enquiry, to decide rationally between the options presented to her? It would seem that, as an outsider to a particular tradition, reason is not available to such an individual, because reason always operates within a given tradition. In fact, in criticizing the perspectivist challenge, MacIntyre says explicitly that:

The person outside all traditions lacks sufficient rational resources for enquiry and *a fortiori* for enquiry into what tradition is to be rationally preferred. He or she has no adequate relevant means of rational evaluation and hence can come to no well-grounded conclusion, including the conclusion that no tradition can vindicate itself against any other. To be outside all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution (MacIntyre 1988, 367).

The outsider to traditions, Haldane concludes, appears to be in a position of either non-rationalism or relativism, having no rational reason to adopt one tradition over the other (Haldane 1994, 97).

It would be highly ironic, of course, if it turned out that the sort of person to whom MacIntyre has addressed his work on deciding rationally between traditions is just the sort of person that cannot benefit from MacIntyre's work for the purpose of deciding rationally between traditions (presumably, not even for the purpose of rationally deciding to accept MacIntyre's tradition). But MacIntyre himself suggests how the outsider may begin the process of rationally evaluating the traditions which confront her: "What such an individual has to learn is how to test dialectically the theses proposed to him or her by each competing tradition, which also drawing upon these same theses in order to test dialectically those convictions and responses which he or she has brought to the encounter" (MacIntyre 1988, 398). Mehl points out, however, that for the outsider to begin this process of dialectical testing she must have some standards of rationality, even if very rough and general standards (Mehl 1991, 36). Thus, the "problem of the outsider" makes a similar point as the previous criticism regarding what is retained across a theory switch: just as there are some general standards of rationality that operate across traditions which make a switch of traditions rational, so there are general standards of rationality available to all people, even those outside of any particular tradition.

As in the case of the previous criticism, it seems that MacIntyre can recognize the existence of general standards without retreating from his significant claims about the tradition-dependent nature of reason. We can again invoke the distinction between weak and strong standards, and say that the standards of reason that aid the outsider at the beginning of her process of dialectical testing are only weak standards. However, though weak standards may be important to get dialectical questioning off the ground, we should not think of the outsider as possessing general rational standards and nothing else. Rather, MacIntyre explains that as the outsider to traditions goes through the process of dialectically testing the theses of the rival traditions before her, she will also use those theses to test "those convictions and responses which he or she has brought to the encounter." Thus, it is clear that such an outsider is not a "generic reasoner," devoid of background beliefs or free from any influence whatsoever of traditions. Rather, such an individual has a variety of beliefs drawn from a variety of different traditions, though these beliefs are not likely to form a coherent whole (MacIntyre 1988, 397–398). Nonetheless, those beliefs form the starting point for the outsider as she begins to evaluate rationally the traditions before her.

Moreover, though general standards of rationality play a part in allowing the dialectical testing to proceed, they are not in themselves sufficient for the outsider to rationally decide which tradition is superior. Rather, to make such a choice the outsider must go through the process of "stepping inside" the various traditions. She must "become involved

in the conversation between traditions, learning to use the idiom of each in order to describe and evaluate the other or others by means of it" (MacIntyre 1988, 398). It is only in this way that the outsider can come to understand the substantive content of each tradition and appreciate the relative successes and failure of each tradition with respect to its history. Thus, rather than judge all traditions from the outside using a tradition-independent rational standard, the outsider (who, we noted, was not really as thoroughgoing an outsider to tradition as we supposed at first) comes to evaluate the rival traditions from the various perspectives offered from within each tradition and so compares each to the other according to the strong standards of rationality they offer. In dealing with the problem of the outsider, then, MacIntyre can acknowledge a limited role for general standards of rationality, while still maintaining that these standards are not adequate, in themselves, to settle debates between rival traditions, and that the strong standards of rationality may differ between rival traditions.

Having said this, what are we to make of MacIntyre's description of the person outside all traditions in the above quotation from page 367 of *WJWR*? We can distinguish between the outsider to whom *WJWR* is written, who is "betwixt and between" traditions and has a mix of beliefs from various traditions, and the thoroughgoing outsider described there. The description of the thoroughgoing outsider applies not to the person "betwixt and between" traditions, but to the person in the position that the perspectivist attempts to adopt for the purposes of making a perspectivist argument. That this position of absolute tradition-free-ness cannot be held without reducing one to a state of "intellectual and moral destitution," MacIntyre takes to be a strong argument against the possibility of a rational formulation of perspectivism.

### *3.3 Stout's ironic twist and the hint of a second type of criticism*

In a related version of the "problem of the outsider," Jeffrey Stout argues that MacIntyre's own philosophical journey provides strong evidence against some of MacIntyre's claims about the tradition-dependent nature of rationality. Stout's point is that MacIntyre has himself proven to be just such an outsider to traditions, moving in and between a variety of positions over the years, yet he has been no less rational because of it, and thus his own career is evidence against his claim that reason operates best only within traditions as he describes them. "MacIntyre was not a less rational man at midcareer than he is today. He could by now write the modern analogue of Augustine's *Confessions*. The story of his reasoned movement betwixt and between the various traditions with which he has affiliated himself is itself strong evidence against a theory according to which rationality can be exercised at its best

only within highly coherent and 'well-integrated' traditions" (Stout 1989, 232).

Although Stout's argument is similar to those of Mehl and Haldane, there are important differences between Stout's line of reasoning and those we have considered so far. Stout's disagreement with MacIntyre is not over the question of whether or not rationality is tradition-dependent, but over what *type* of tradition is necessary to sustain rational enquiry. His argument is not designed to show that reason is tradition-independent, but that the traditions in which reason works effectively do not have to be as well-defined, tightly structured, and formalized as MacIntyre suggests. This is a point that Stout raises in his *Ethics after Babel*, where he suggests that in the absence of a tradition with a well-defined canon and unified cultural inheritance, we nevertheless "muddle through much of the time, quite reasonably" by relying on areas of agreement, immanent criticism, creative powers, and numerous other resources (Stout 2001, 217). Stout also develops his case against MacIntyre's understanding of tradition in his 1998 article "Commitments and Traditions" (Stout 1998, 23–56). There Stout argues that MacIntyre's account of liberal modernity relies on a misleading selection of examples which hides the presence of a particular democratic tradition in modern ethical discourse (Stout 1998, 43–48). This democratic tradition, with which Stout is highly sympathetic, is neither a highly-coherent tradition of the sort MacIntyre describes as essential to rational enquiry, nor is it the anti-traditional Cartesian tradition that MacIntyre equates with liberal modernity (Stout 1998, 49–51). Unfortunately, the questions surrounding the definition of "tradition" and the description of the modern ethical landscape are well beyond the scope of this paper.

Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider Stout's argument about MacIntyre's career progress because it sheds light on the nature of arguments regarding the coherence of MacIntyre's notion of tradition-based rationality. The form of Stout's argument is different from those of either Mehl or Haldane. The latter two arguments attempt to locate a contradiction in MacIntyre's thought on the basis of an examination of the coherence of the concepts within MacIntyre's theory, and thus they are what we called the first type of criticism. In contrast, Stout's argument is based on an appeal to evidence outside of the theory itself (MacIntyre's own career) in order to show that the theory cannot account for how rationality actually operates. In making a criticism that moves beyond an examination of the internal coherence of MacIntyre's theory and also makes reference to MacIntyre himself, Stout comes close to making a criticism of the second sort: a criticism regarding the coherence of MacIntyre's ability to make the claims that he does. However, Stout stops short of making a criticism of the second sort, which would argue that



MacIntyre contradicts himself in the process of making his claims. That is, Stout does *not* argue as follows: If MacIntyre's theory is true, then his own journey has been irrational, thus his own views are irrational and we have no reason to believe that his theory is true. Rather, Stout's argument takes MacIntyre's career more as a sort of third person piece of evidence against MacIntyre's theory. Thus, Stout's argument would work as a criticism of MacIntyre's account of rationality even if it were *not* MacIntyre's own career that Stout was appealing to as evidence. Stout might just as well have chosen some other philosopher as an example of someone who made a reasoned movement betwixt and between various traditions throughout his lifetime but was no less rational for it at any point in his career, and the argument would have retained its force. The fact that it is MacIntyre himself that Stout uses as his example gives his argument an ironic twist, but it is not essential to its form.

At times, however, Stout approaches a criticism about MacIntyre's ability to *make* the claims that he does in a consistent manner. Such a criticism involves reference to the self-referential nature of MacIntyre's claims. Criticisms of this second sort are often tied to arguments about the "ground" or "perspective" from which MacIntyre is speaking, and how his claims relate self-referentially to that ground. In *Ethics after Babel*, Stout raises just such a criticism when speaking about MacIntyre's early work, *A Short History of Ethics*. Stout suggests MacIntyre's book is "A historical deconstruction of unhistorical thought [which] concludes by leaving its own point of view unsituated in the history it describes, thus raising doubts about its own right to speak. . . MacIntyre seems to have been looking down on his age from above, while also telling us that this cannot be done" (Stout 2001, 206, 207). However, Stout goes on to explain that in *After Virtue* MacIntyre resolves this problem by identifying himself with Aristotle and the tradition of the virtues. For Stout, this seems to mean that MacIntyre's position "no longer self-destructs" (Stout 1988, 207). In his review article of WJWR, Stout makes similar comments about "the problem of the point of view" in regard to MacIntyre's early work in the history of ethics:

A narrative that explains in moral terms how morality has disintegrated and pronounces this outcome disastrous, leaves one wondering from what point of view the verdict could have been reached and how that point of view is itself to escape the implied condemnation. If MacIntyre did not already occupy an identifiable and defensible normative point of view, the tragic tone of his historical narrative and the various evaluations expressed in it would be groundless. Yet in this period he was prepared to take his stand only *against* the self images of the age. The ground on which he had taken that stand—the vantage point of the narrative—remained invisible (Stout 1989, 221).

However, Stout goes on to note that MacIntyre, later in his career, explicitly adopted the vantage point of Thomism, and Stout seems to suggest this resolves the “problem of the point of view” for MacIntyre: “This confession does indeed clarify the position MacIntyre intends to occupy while criticizing liberal society and reworking his account of Western culture’s downward slide” (Stout 1989, 224). After commenting thus, Stout’s review article never returns to the problem of the point of view for MacIntyre. Likewise, in his more recent writings on MacIntyre’s work Stout does not raise this problem (Stout 2001, 341–355). He appears to believe that MacIntyre is no longer susceptible to the charges of self-referential incoherence and that he no longer undercuts his own position in the process of making his claims.

It is just this sort of criticism, however, that Herdt appears to be leveling against MacIntyre: not just that there are internal inadequacies or inconsistencies in MacIntyre’s picture of rationality, but that the picture of rationality as a whole is such that in claiming it to be true MacIntyre commits self-contradiction and removes the ground on which his own claim is being made. With this in mind, we can now return to Herdt’s arguments to see how they might be best formulated as criticisms of this second sort. Having done this, we can then consider possible responses in defense of MacIntyre.

#### 4. Self-Contradiction, Self-Reference, and Rational Justification

Herdt concludes her article by re-stating her claims about the self-contradictory nature of MacIntyre’s position, and she here provides the clearest indication that her real criticism of MacIntyre is of the second sort we have described:

the significance of the moment of tradition transcendentalism in MacIntyre’s thought should not be underestimated. Even to articulate a general claim of tradition dependence or historical dependence is to make what is, logically, a tradition-transcendental move. Similarly, the logic of the rationality of traditions is presupposed by traditions of enquiry. That even as historicist a thinker as MacIntyre makes a transcendental move in articulating the rationality of traditions is compelling testimony to the inevitability of transcendental considerations. We are already standing on not tradition-independent but tradition-transcendental ground, and the impossibility of consistently articulating a tradition-dependent position bears witness to this (Herdt 1998, 546).

The contradiction in MacIntyre, according to Herdt, is not primarily that aspects of MacIntyre’s picture of the rationality of traditions seem to require more tradition-independent rationality than he suggests are available at other places when giving that picture. Rather, there is

the deeper problem of the “impossibility of consistently articulating a tradition-dependent position.” For Herdt, the inevitable inconsistency of articulating a tradition-dependent position seems to come from the way in which any articulation of even a general claim about tradition dependence is to “make what is, logically, a tradition-transcendental move.” Herdt appears to think that such a “tradition-transcendental move” is made as a result of the fact that even general claims about tradition dependence claim validity not only within their own traditions but across traditions. This aspect of trans-traditional validity is the first way in which Herdt characterized MacIntyre’s Rt as tradition independent: “(1) the theory is not restricted to valid use within the tradition in which it arose” (Herdt 1998, 537). And it is the key feature of Herdt’s proposed tradition-transcendental standard of rationality that it is not restricted in validity to a particular tradition: “Such a theory of rationality would be ‘tradition transcendental.’ It would not be linked in its validity to any one particular tradition (even if particular elements, such as empathetic imagination, have been conceptualized by particular traditions)” (Herdt 1998, 538).

How exactly does this issue of the scope of validity of standards of rationality relate to the charge of self-contradiction? It seems that Herdt intends it to relate in this way: MacIntyre claims that standards of rationality are tradition-dependent and internal to traditions. This means that theories will have rational validity only within a particular tradition. However, MacIntyre’s theory of Rt has validity outside of the tradition in which it arose, and thus is a violation of MacIntyre’s own claims about tradition-dependence. Moreover (and this is the criticism of the second sort, about MacIntyre’s ability to make such a claim), even MacIntyre’s claims about tradition-dependent rationality are meant to be valid for all traditions, describing all traditions as they really are. Thus, MacIntyre’s claims about tradition-dependence are self-defeating because they themselves are *not* tradition-dependent in the way that they say that all substantive claims must be. How then would a “tradition-transcendental” restatement of MacIntyre’s position solve this problem? It would show that MacIntyre’s claims about tradition dependence and about Rt are not self-defeating because they are themselves tradition dependent. At the same time, this dependence is not a problem for their claims to trans-traditional validity because these claims are justified by arguments which show that the rationality of traditions is applicable to *all* traditions of *necessity*.

#### 4.1 *Truth, justification, and differences between the two*

The central problem with Herdt’s argument is that it confuses two different senses in which a claim may be said to be “valid.” When speaking of

the tradition-dependent nature of certain claims, we can say that those claims are valid only within a given tradition, in the sense that they are supported by the particular background beliefs and rational standards of that tradition, while they are not rationally supported by a rival tradition with contrasting background beliefs and rational standards. In this sense, validity has to do with the conditions for rational justification of a claim. This appears to be the sense of validity that Herdt has in mind when dealing with MacIntyre's claims about tradition-dependence. However, we can also think of validity not as a matter of rational justification but as a matter of the appropriate range of application of particular claims. In this second sense, to say that something is universally valid is to say that its truth is not restricted to a particular sphere. It is this second sense of validity as range of application that is relevant when discussing the way in which MacIntyre's theory of *Rt* as well as his statements about tradition-dependence are not meant to be statements whose appropriate range of application is only within MacIntyre's tradition.

It is important to note that, for MacIntyre, it is possible that the claims of a tradition may be valid in the first sense only within that tradition, while at the same time those claims might be valid in the second sense across all traditions. That is, a theory might be rationally justified only given certain assumptions and standards of reason particular to a certain tradition, yet that theory might be a theory about how things are for *all* people, regardless of their tradition. This is the case because of the difference between rational justification and warranted assertability on the one hand, and truth on the other. Whether or not a claim is rationally justified and someone is warranted in asserting that claim will depend on the particular historical location of the person making the claim. Yet, truth is something that is *not* dependent on historical location. MacIntyre stresses this distinction in a number of places, as when he says that "The concept of warranted assertability always has application only at some particular time and place in respect of standards then prevailing at some particular stage in the development of a tradition of enquiry. . . The concept of truth, however, is timeless. To claim that some thesis is true is not only to claim for all possible times and places that it cannot be shown to fail to correspond to reality in the sense of 'correspond' elucidated earlier but also that the mind which expresses its thought in that thesis is in fact adequate to its object" (MacIntyre 1988, 363).<sup>7</sup> When we use the term "validity" in the first sense, we are referring to the degree to which a claim is rationally justified or warranted as an assertion. When we use the term "validity" in the second sense, however, we are referring

<sup>7</sup> See also MacIntyre 1998, 205–210.

to the scope of the truth claims that are being made from within a given tradition.

Despite these differences Herdt seems to conflate these two senses of validity when she develops her argument regarding “the impossibility of consistently articulating a tradition-dependent position.” Her argument depends on the premise that the sort of universal validity that MacIntyre claims for his own position regarding tradition-dependence is precisely the sort of universal validity that that very position denies to any position. But in fact, although MacIntyre’s position does claim for itself universal validity in the second sense (that is, MacIntyre asserts that his account of rationality and tradition is the *true* one), MacIntyre does *not* claim that his position has universal validity in the first sense. On the contrary, MacIntyre repeatedly points out that, if his claims are true, they will likely not appear to adherents of the rival tradition of liberalism as being rationally justified. He insists that “if the central theses in favor of which I have been arguing for nearly twenty years are true, then we should expect them to be rejected by the most articulate and able representatives of the dominant culture of modernity” (MacIntyre 1994, 283).

Herdt, then, conflates a claim about the truth (universally valid application) of MacIntyre’s theory of tradition-dependent rationality—a claim that MacIntyre does in fact make—with a separate claim about the justification of that first claim—a claim about a claim (namely, that the first claim is rationally justifiable in a universal sense) that MacIntyre does *not* actually make. This leads Herdt to think that MacIntyre is contradicting himself, because the second claim (the claim about the claim) would indeed be in conflict with the first claim. Were MacIntyre in fact to be making a claim of the second sort, he would be committing just the sort of “point of view” error that Stout describes earlier. Why? Because such a claim about the universal rational justifiability of the first claim (that is, the claim about tradition-dependence) would involve an appeal to standards of rationality that the initial claim itself said were not present, and in so doing would be assuming a tradition-independent point of view *about* the claim that the claim itself insists cannot be assumed.

Recognizing that Herdt fails to distinguish between these two epistemological levels<sup>8</sup>—the claims about rationality and tradition on one level and the claims about those claims on another—we can see why she sees a need for *transcendental* standards of rationality which can be shown to exist *necessarily* as a feature of any tradition of enquiry. The second sort of claim (claim on the second level) is a claim to knowledge *about* our

<sup>8</sup> I first came across the language of “epistemological levels” in Alston 1989.

knowledge: it is a claim to know that one knows. In contrast, the first sort of claim can be seen simply as a claim *to* knowledge: it is a claim that one knows. Confusing these two levels, Herdt fails to adequately distinguish between claims to know and claims to know that one knows,<sup>9</sup> and thus she sees a need for arguments which would prove the latter to support MacIntyre's claims, when in fact his claims are only claims to the former. Thus, she argues that what is necessary to support MacIntyre's claims are arguments which show that Rt is a standard of reason of *necessity*: "As a necessary condition, it cannot be denied without falling into self-contradiction" (Herdt 1998, 545). Assuming the laws of logic, it is not even a possibility that it is false. Hence, we would be in a position to say not only that we know that such a standard is true, but also that we know that we know. Because this is actually the sort of claim that Herdt is looking to support, it is not surprising that she seeks arguments which establish their conclusions with the force of necessity.

#### 4.2 *Justifying our justifying: The self-referential element in MacIntyre*

If MacIntyre does assert the truth of his claims about rationality and tradition, but does not assert that those claims are rationally justifiable according to universal standards of reason, then it seems he has avoided the contradiction which Herdt charged him with, because he is not appealing to standards of reason or a rational perspective that he denies. However, at this point, Herdt (or someone sympathetic with her line of reasoning) might protest: Then what rational reason do we have for accepting MacIntyre's account as rationally justified? MacIntyre's answer to this question is that his theory of tradition-based rationality, including his account of how traditions vindicate themselves with respect to rival traditions, is itself justified in the same way that the account describes. This means that within its tradition MacIntyre's account, like all other accounts, will be justified by its ability to account for and overcome the limitations of its predecessors. Likewise, MacIntyre's account will be vindicated against standpoints of rival traditions insofar as the tradition in which MacIntyre's account is situated is able to vindicate itself against rival traditions by its ability to overcome its own epistemological crises and account for the crises of its competitor traditions better than they themselves can account for those crises. In both cases, a key aspect of the rational justification of MacIntyre's theory will be his ability to write a history that accounts for the problems and solutions of MacIntyre's

<sup>9</sup> Herdt does, in fact, note this distinction. It is my contention, however, that in formulating her arguments against MacIntyre she does not adequately take this distinction into account.

own tradition as well as rival traditions. This is so because, as we noted earlier, rational justification for MacIntyre is always given in reference to one's predecessors, and thus rational justification is inseparable from the writing of the history of those predecessors. Therefore, MacIntyre explains, "It is indeed precisely because and in so far as Thomist Aristotelianism enables us to achieve an adequate understanding both of our own history and of that of others in this way that it vindicates its claim to have identified the standards of appeal to which all practices and traditions are to be evaluated" (MacIntyre 1994, 300).

It is clear, then, that there is a self-referential aspect to MacIntyre's account of how his theory of rationality is to be justified. This self-referential aspect results precisely from MacIntyre's refusal to make the sort of claims about his claims that Herdt seems to accuse him of making, and from his refusal to assume a tradition-independent standpoint that would "allow" him to make such claims for his claims. As he says: "But I am irremediably anti-Hegelian in rejecting the notion of an absolute standpoint, independent of the particularity of all traditions. I have therefore to assert that the concept of a tradition, together with the criteria for its use and application, is itself one developed from within one particular tradition-based standpoint. This does not preclude its application to the very tradition within which it was developed" (MacIntyre 1994, 295). Thus, MacIntyre's position is not susceptible to inconsistency involved in the "point of view problem." And what Herdt calls *Rt*, then, is a theory about the rational vindication of a tradition against its rivals that is itself vindicated against its rivals according to the process spelled out in the theory itself.

In addition to saving MacIntyre's theory from self-contradiction, this self-referential sort of justification has at least one important additional consequence for MacIntyre's theory of rationality. It means that we are not in a position to speak definitively, once and for all, regarding the rational justification of the theory itself. We cannot claim that we know with the certainty of logical necessity that *Rt* or any other aspect of MacIntyre's views on rationality and tradition is true. This provisionality regarding the justifiability of truth claims of MacIntyre's theory contrasts with the sort of knowledge that Herdt wanted to provide regarding the truth of MacIntyre's claims: certain knowledge that our claims about tradition-based rationality are true because they are true necessarily. But a measure of provisionality and uncertainty regarding the justification of his own theory of rationality must remain for MacIntyre, because the justification of his own theory about the justification of theories is itself justified as the theory says, in terms of the history of tradition thus far, and therefore it is possible that at some future point MacIntyre's theories will be shown to be inadequate, or the tradition in which they are imbedded will suffer

irremediable epistemological crisis, in which case MacIntyre's theories would cease to be rationally justifiable. There is a dual provisionality, then, in MacIntyre's account of rationality: (1) the justification of any theory within a tradition and the vindication of that tradition will be provisional, because of the necessarily historical nature of justification, and (2) that claim itself (claim 1) is provisional, because it is itself justified in a necessarily historical way, as it says that all claims are. However, for all this provisionality and self-referentiality there is not, so far as I can tell, a self-contradiction in MacIntyre's account.

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