

## **Practical Reason and Teleology: MacIntyre's Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy**

Kenneth McIntyre

Most of the thinkers examined in this volume focus their criticism on the various ways in which modern conceptions of rationality, especially those connected with the methods of the natural sciences, distort or undermine other, often modern, conceptions of rationality that are not based on the methods of the natural sciences. Alasdair MacIntyre presents a more encompassing critique of Enlightenment rationalism which condemns almost all conceptions of modern rationality or reasonableness. Indeed, almost half of the subjects in this volume are specific objects of MacIntyre's critique of modern rationalism.<sup>1</sup> However, unlike many of the other thinkers in this volume, the source of MacIntyre's dissatisfaction with modern rationalism lies not in his skepticism about its 'scientism,' but in what he understands to be the incoherence of modern moral philosophy and practice. He was not the first contemporary philosopher to make this claim, however.

In 1958, G.E.M. Anscombe published an essay titled "Modern Moral Philosophy" in the journal *Philosophy*. Anscombe's brief essay presented a case for rejecting the whole of modern moral philosophy, in part, because the terms of modern moral philosophy (e.g. moral obligation, moral duty, etc.) "are survivals, or derivatives of survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it."<sup>2</sup> Anscombe suggested that the moral language which informs and is characteristic of modern moral philosophy (and by this, she means moral philosophy after Aquinas) only really makes sense within a philosophical anthropology which is defined by a teleological conception of human beings. The teleology

---

<sup>1</sup> Of the thinkers discussed in this volume, MacIntyre offers critical remarks on Pascal, Burke, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Hayek, Gadamer (to a lesser extent than the others), Oakeshott, and Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Ethics, Religion, and Politics: Collected Papers Volume III* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981) 26.

provides the background for judgments concerning virtuous and vicious actions, and it is within such a philosophical system that ‘virtue ethics’ arose as a contemporary alternative to deontology and various forms of utilitarian consequentialism.<sup>3</sup>

It is also within this re-vivified tradition that Alasdair MacIntyre developed his own version of virtue ethics, which he first expounded in *After Virtue*, one of the most influential treatises on moral philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. MacIntyre has developed his version of virtue ethics in a series of books subsequent to *After Virtue*, including *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, *Dependent Rational Animals*, and *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.<sup>4</sup> What is striking about all of these works is their consistent claim that, not only is modern moral philosophy corrupted by a desiccated language, but that modern conceptions of practical reason/epistemology are also gravely inadequate. According to MacIntyre, without a coherent conception of the human telos, moral judgments cannot be defended in a convincing way, and, thus, no adequate account of practical reason can be offered. MacIntyre associates the attempt to offer an account of morality while jettisoning any monistic account of the human good with moral philosophers like Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard, and, thus, represents an impeccable example of a critic of Enlightenment rationalism. MacIntyre’s critique of the two most prominent modern moral theories (deontology and utilitarianism) is often penetrating, and his insistence that a more adequate way of making judgments about human actions can be found in his neo-Aristotelian account of morality, which is based upon a

---

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of virtue ethics, see Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd Edition (Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN, 2007) henceforth *AV*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) henceforth *WJ/WR*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1998) henceforth *MR*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Open Court Publishing: Peru, IL, 1999) henceforth *DRP*; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) henceforth *ECM*.

cognitivist conception of practical knowledge, is partially successful. However, his positive project ultimately founders on his insistence that moral judgments are impossible if not ultimately justified by appeal to a single telos which is the same for all human beings. The failure characterizes both his early work, *After Virtue*, in which the telos is identified in a nebulous way with a quest for the telos, and in his later works in which he introduces an element of biological naturalism as the foundation of the telos. MacIntyre never offers a satisfactory account of the single human telos, and that is probably the case because, as various moral pluralists have argued, there is no single human telos that is the same for everyone, everywhere, and every when.

## **I. The Critique—Modern Moral Philosophy and Emotivism**

MacIntyre's critique of modern moral philosophy has remained consistent throughout his later writings, and he connects this critique to a series of observations about the current state of moral discussion.<sup>5</sup> His most important claim about contemporary moral life is that it is uniquely characterized by irresolvable moral disagreements. MacIntyre points to disagreements about abortion, the death penalty, just war theory, etc., to suggest that modern moral philosophy and modern moral practice are irremediably fragmented. He writes that:

the most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character...[because] the rival premises [of such disagreements] are such that we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one...against another.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Though his earlier work is interesting in its own way, MacIntyre's critique of Enlightenment rationalism only emerges fully with his publication of *After Virtue* in 1981. His rather careering career as a philosopher had already led him through a long dalliance with Marxism and a series of detailed critiques of contemporary social science. MacIntyre has described his career as consisting of three parts: a first part consisting of "heterogeneous, badly organized, sometimes fragmented and often frustrating and messy enquiries;" a second part, which "was an interim period of sometimes painfully self-critical reflection;" and a third (final?) part in which he has "been engaged in a single project...described by one of my colleagues as that of writing *An Interminably Long History of Ethics*." MR, 268-269. I will focus on his works from this third part of his career.

<sup>6</sup> *AV*, 6, 8.

According to MacIntyre, participants in contemporary moral debates begin from vastly different sets of presuppositions, and there is seemingly no way of determining which starting point is correct. Some begin with an assumption that human beings are endowed with natural rights, some assume that there is a natural order in the universe expressed in human rationality, while others believe that human reason is naturally corrupt. The arguments proceeding from each presupposition can then be logical, so that disagreements occurring between those operating with the same set of presuppositions can be resolved, but any type of resolution between those beginning from different presuppositions is impossible. The result, according to MacIntyre, is that moral positions appear to be somewhat arbitrary, and moral arguments to be mere statements of preference. MacIntyre suggests that this emotivist position has become, by default, the common way that modern individuals use moral language. He writes that “emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments...are nothing but expressions of preference.”<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, he also correctly observes that individuals usually do not characterize their own moral beliefs as mere preferences, but instead insist upon the objective rightness of these opinions. So, modern moral practice is characterized by a conception of the use of moral language which diverges significantly from its conception of the meaning of moral language. This divergence, according to MacIntyre, is a sign of the decadence of modern moral philosophy and practice, a decadence characterized by the existence of a desiccated moral vocabulary which no longer appears to describe objectively the moral world in which we live. The stages of this decline are as follows:

stage one—“moral theory and practice embody genuine objective and impersonal standards which provide rational justification for...actions;”

---

<sup>7</sup> *AV*, 12. In later works, MacIntyre uses the term expressivism instead of emotivism. *ECM*, 17-24

stage two—“there are unsuccessful attempts to maintain the objectivity and impersonality of moral judgments, but during which the project of providing rational justifications...continuously breaks down;”  
stage three—“theories of an emotivist kind secure wide implicit acceptance because of a general implicit recognition in practice...that claims to objectivity and impersonality cannot be made good.”<sup>8</sup>

According to MacIntyre, we have reached stage three, and the task that he sets himself in *After Virtue* and his other subsequent works is to explain how exactly we went from stage one, in which there was seemingly a common and relatively settled moral vocabulary, to stage three, in which our moral vocabulary has become as fragmented as the vocabulary of those in the immediate post-Babelian world.

MacIntyre’s methods of investigation and explanation of the decline and fall of Western moral philosophy and practice consist of a not always coherent mélange of history, sociology, and philosophy.<sup>9</sup> His treatment of the writings of past philosophers alternates between a traditional philosophical approach to their arguments, an historicized examination of the questions that informed those arguments, and an unfortunate tendency toward sociological reductionism, especially of the works of those of whom he is critical.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, MacIntyre’s claim that, around 400 years ago, a profound change took place in the way in which philosophers in the Western world approach moral questions is certainly reasonable and is

---

<sup>8</sup> *AV*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> MacIntyre mentions the centrality of the influence of R.G. Collingwood’s later historicized philosophy on his own work in several places. See, e.g., *MR*, 261, where he recounts “what I learned from R.G. Collingwood: that morality is an essentially historical subject matter and that philosophical inquiry, in ethics as elsewhere, is defective insofar as it is not historical.”

<sup>10</sup> I will not concern myself with the historical or philosophical accuracy or adequacy of MacIntyre’s account of other thinkers, though his treatment of the history of philosophy has been the subject of severe criticism both by intellectual historians and by experts in the particular subjects of his work (e.g. Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, Kant, Kierkegaard, et al.). For example, Thomas Nagel writes that “accuracy in reporting what others say has never been MacIntyre’s strong point. On the principle that it is easier to shoot a sitting duck, he tends to be most inaccurate when he is on the attack: the representation of Kant’s ethical theory in *After Virtue* makes it unwise ever to trust what he says about a philosophical text again, and the treatment of Hume [in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*] is not much better.” The emphasis that MacIntyre places on historicizing philosophy generally and moral philosophy specifically makes such criticism quite damning, when the criticism is convincing. Thomas Nagel, “MacIntyre versus the Enlightenment,” *Other Minds: Critical Essays, 1969-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 208.

widely accepted by historians of moral philosophy. What makes MacIntyre's arguments worthy of attention then? First, he insists that there was not merely a change, but a radical diremption that has made the moral philosophy and practice of the pre-modern world almost completely unintelligible to us, and which has left us in a state of almost complete moral chaos. Second, he places this diremption during the European Enlightenment, commonly understood to be one of the high water marks of human intellectual achievement. Finally, he maintains that the solution to our contemporary moral confusion lies in a resuscitation of pre-modern classical ideas about what it means to be human.

The radical disruption occurred, according to MacIntyre, when moral philosophers rejected functionalist conceptions of human flourishing, and attempted to replace such notions with highly abstract and universal prescriptions about human behavior. This transformation of moral philosophy took place within the context of the secularization associated first with the Renaissance and the breakdown of the unity of the Catholic Church associated with the Protestant Reformation. For MacIntyre, the period between 1630 and 1850 gave rise to what he calls the Enlightenment project, and he asserts that "the Enlightenment's central project ha[s] been to identify a set of moral rules, equally compelling to all rational persons."<sup>11</sup> This project aimed to produce a morality based upon reason alone, excluding authority or tradition, and the failure of this project has led to the current crisis.

For MacIntyre, the failure is exemplified in the works of three authors, Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard. For all three thinkers, morality consists solely of a set of rules, according to MacIntyre's exposition. For Hume, the rules of morality are expression of human desires or feelings, especially commendations of useful desires and condemnations of harmful desires.

---

<sup>11</sup> *MR*, 261.

However, according to MacIntyre, Hume had no theoretically sound justifications for what counted as useful or harmful. Instead, MacIntyre writes that “what on Hume’s view makes reasoning about justice sound reasoning is...that it is reasoning shared by at least the vast majority of members of the community to which one belongs.”<sup>12</sup> For MacIntyre, Hume’s moral philosophy represents a non-cognitivist dependence on subjective desires, and Hume’s dependence on purely conventional judgments about what counts as useful or harmful renders his moral philosophy a failure, at least in terms of the Enlightenment project.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Kant’s moral philosophy rests on the elucidation of a set of rules discoverable by reason alone and, like the reason which discovers these rules, common to all human beings. Kant’s categorical imperative, which commands that we engage only in actions which we can coherently will universally, offers one such rule. However, MacIntyre rejects this sort of abstract rationalism as both irrelevant and impossible, as there are all sort of things that we can will universally that are not moral (e.g. ‘always eat pheasant on Friday’), and because rules are, by themselves, not guides to specific actions but must be interpreted by individual agents. Finally, according to MacIntyre, Kierkegaard admits that the choice between living an ethical life and living the life of an aesthete or any other non-ethical life is the result of arbitrary choice, and is not the result of rational consideration at all. Far from being universal, the moral life is the result of mere contingency. Thus, MacIntyre claims that none of these attempts to find an objective,

---

<sup>12</sup> *WJ/WR*, 320. MacIntyre’s distaste for Hume because of his supposed Anglophilia is quite palpable and he refers to his philosophy as an “Anglicizing subversion” of the Scottish tradition. Indeed, MacIntyre uses the terms ‘England’ and ‘English’ much as certain folks from the American South used to use the term ‘Yankee’, and for similar reasons.

<sup>13</sup> Baier notes that Hume’s moral philosophy is based upon a traditionalist moral epistemology and is dependent on the kind of virtues that MacIntyre extols. It does not rely on a single telos, however, and is connected with a nascent version of modern classical liberalism. MacIntyre’s disdain for modern liberalism also involves a disdain for the virtues associated with such a culture. Annette Baier, “Civilizing Practices,” *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) 246-262.

authoritatively rational set of rules succeeds, and the failure of these various Enlightenment projects is manifest in modern moral practice.

Modern moral philosophy itself is still concerned with discovering the proper set of rules to guide human conduct, whether these be rules derived from a consideration of the concept of practical reason or rules designed to maximize the satisfaction of desires. Modern moral conduct, however, has been increasingly marked by the disjunction between the meaning of moral utterances and their usage. According to MacIntyre, this disjunction manifests itself most clearly in the contradiction between the commonplace appeals in moral discourse, on the one hand, to natural/human rights, and, on the other, to both utilitarianism and scientific expertise. He avers that the chaos of contemporary moral practice “results in...political debates being between an individualism which makes its claims in terms of rights and forms of bureaucratic organization which make their claims in terms of utility.”<sup>14</sup> MacIntyre dismisses arguments based upon references to rights as manifestations of the already abstract character of understanding morality as merely as a set of rules. Rights do exist, of course, but only within settled authoritative political communities, and to consider them as free-floating claims is to make the same mistake as those who would abstract certain rules from a current moral situation and universalize them as the rules of morality.

MacIntyre’s critique of the notion of rights, while insightful, is sketchy, but his treatment of the modern understanding managerial expertise is closely connected with the critique of scientism common to many of the other critics of Enlightenment rationalism found in this volume. He is not concerned to offer a critique of the methods of modern science, but, instead notes that the claims of modern social science to be scientific are quite misleading and easily

---

<sup>14</sup> *AV*, 71.



refuted. The modern natural sciences are characterized by their production or discovery of a great variety of law-like generalizations which reliably predict future occurrences under certain definable circumstances. These sciences presuppose a mechanical universe in which “every mechanical causal sequence exemplifies some universal generalization and that generalization has a precisely specifiable scope” (e.g. water/H<sub>2</sub>O not containing impurities boils at 100 degrees Celsius at 1 atmosphere of pressure), and the various modern natural sciences have been extraordinarily successful at discovering and refining such laws over the past several centuries.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, as MacIntyre observes, while the modern social sciences have attempted to mimic the natural sciences methodologically, they have been completely unsuccessful in producing almost any of these law-like generalizations. This ought to have severely undermined the claims of bureaucratic managerialism, but it has not done so. As MacIntyre writes, “what managerial expertise requires for its vindication is a justified conception of social science as providing a stock of law-like generalizations with strong predictive power” like that of the natural sciences.<sup>16</sup> However, the law-like generalizations produced by social scientists have almost none of the characteristics of those of the natural sciences. As MacIntyre notes, unlike the laws of natural science, the ‘laws’ of social science co-exist with counter-examples which would falsify any natural law (e.g. predictions of party affiliations based upon ascriptive characteristics always exist alongside thousands of counter-examples). The ‘laws’ of social science also lack universal quantifiers and scope modifiers (part of this a problem of underdetermined definition, e.g. what counts as a ‘revolution’ in politics v what counts as ‘revolution’ in astronomy). That is, these ‘laws’ are much more like the maxims that any

---

<sup>15</sup> *AV*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> *AV*, 88.

competent practitioner of politics, economics, urban planning, etc. might pick up from experience than like the laws of natural science.

MacIntyre explains the failure of the social sciences to succeed as modern sciences as a consequence of the intrusion of an irrelevant set of naturalistic and mechanistic assumptions into the study of human actions and human judgments. The natural sciences preclude the consideration that their objects are capable of practical reason and action. This preclusion is perfectly rational when examining the tides or the planets or amoebic movement, but does present problems when attempting to explain human action. MacIntyre suggests that there are four general reasons why human action is unpredictable, but they are all directly connected to the fact the human beings can make decisions based upon their own reasonable, or not so reasonable, judgments. First, humans are capable of radical conceptual innovation, and the creation of something radically new cannot be predicted. Second, human are not completely capable of predicting their own actions, and, since the actions of each individual affect others, the actions of others cannot be predicted either. Third, since knowledge of the intentions and actions of others is limited, the capacity of the individual to plan his or her own action is complicated by a kind of infinite reflexivity. And, finally, MacIntyre claims that there are pure contingencies in life, like the intrusion of eccentric influences which occur completely outside of any person's capacity to know. All of these factors point to the exceptional character of human reason, but they do not offer a complete answer as to how to properly understand practical reason and they don't provide the solution to what MacIntyre deems to be the modern moral crisis.

## **II. MacIntyre's Neo-Aristotelian Alternative**

I have offered a skeletal account of MacIntyre's diagnosis of what he takes to be the current crisis. However, MacIntyre's interpretation of Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard and his

analysis of emotivism are merely the overture to his examination of a possible alternative to Enlightenment rationalism based upon a return to Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>17</sup>

MacIntyre asserts that “the predicaments of contemporary philosophy...are best understood as arising as a long-term consequence of the rejection of Aristotelian and Thomistic teleology at the threshold of the modern world.”<sup>18</sup> What went wrong during the Enlightenment was that philosophers jettisoned the anchor that tied moral rules to substantive human results, leaving practical reasoning and moral judgments unmoored to any conception of human flourishing. Thus, according to MacIntyre, two of the primary weaknesses of modern philosophy, its conflation of practical and theoretical/scientific reasoning and its vacuity concerning the character of human goodness, are the direct result of its dismissal of the Aristotelian conception of human life as inherently teleological.

MacIntyre argues that the classical thinkers relied on a functional conception of human nature which posited three things: human nature as given, a telos for that human nature, and a set of ways in which that given nature could be transformed into a fully developed nature. As MacIntyre notes:

since the whole point of ethics...is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true end, the elimination of any notion of essential human nature and with it the abandonment of any notion of a telos leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two remaining elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> MacIntyre’s account of moral action and practical rationality is interesting on its own account, so I will not consider how genuinely Aristotelian or Thomistic it is. One obvious area in which MacIntyre is not presenting an Aristotelian or Thomistic argument is precisely in his commitment to historicize philosophy, which is largely derived from Hegel and R.G. Collingwood (neither of which would have approved in any way of his notion that the whole of modern moral philosophy rests on an error). For a critique of MacIntyre’s interpretation of Aristotle and Aquinas, see, among others, Janet Coleman, “MacIntyre and Aquinas,” *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, John Horton and Susan Mendus, eds. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994) 65-90.

<sup>18</sup> *MR*, 197

<sup>19</sup> *AV*, 54.

Without the telos or purpose, the rules or precepts directing the transformation of given nature to achieved nature become a bridge to nowhere. The knowledge and understanding of such rules and precepts become a matter of technical/scientific knowledge (a ‘knowing that’) rather than a matter of practical knowledge (a ‘knowing how’), and the character of human flourishing or happiness becomes a matter of mere preference instead of a matter of objective fact. Non-cognitivist moral philosophy replaces cognitivism because moral questions deal with preferences and not objective reality.

MacIntyre observes correctly that human beings still make judgments based upon teleological or functional considerations in many areas of their lives, especially in areas in which they are specifically experienced or knowledgeable. He notes that “plain persons are in fact generally and to a significant degree proto-Aristotelians.”<sup>20</sup> We all make relatively objective determinations about the goodness or badness of watches, knives, computers, automobiles, etc. These are all functional objects and it makes perfect sense to say, for example, that, since the function of a watch is tell time accurately, a watch that tells time accurately is a good watch, and that a watch ought to tell the time accurately. The fact/value distinction which arises with the rejection of teleology dissolves when dealing with functional matters.

But how do we know what function human beings have? MacIntyre answers that the various functions that humans perform are learned through participation in the great variety of practices that human beings have created. According to MacIntyre, practices are “cooperative forms of activity whose participants jointly pursue the goods internal to those forms of activity and jointly value excellence in achieving those goods.”<sup>21</sup> Practices, therefore, are inherently

---

<sup>20</sup> *MR*, 138. This sentiment represents a softening of his sometimes sociologically deterministic account of the emotivism of modern practical life.

<sup>21</sup> *MR*, 140.

teleological. Practices include activities such as farming, fishing, and fowling, playing football, playing chess, and playing the mandolin, riding a horse, riding a bicycle, and (perhaps) riding a bus.<sup>22</sup> Engaging in a practice involves learning the nature of the rules, the character of the activity, and the nature of excellence embodied in that particular practice. According to MacIntyre, participation in practices teaches human beings both about the character of goods internal to the practices themselves and about the virtues needed to be successful in these practices.<sup>23</sup> Internal goods are those connected intrinsically with the practice itself. For example, those learning to play baseball will need to learn how to hit, to catch, and to throw the baseball, but also will learn when to hit the cut-off man, when to steal a base, when to take a pitch, etc. Those learning to play the mandolin will learn how to play scales and arpeggios, how to crosspick, how to play tremolo, but also will learn when to improvise, when to use double-stops, and when to turn it up and down. That is, those engaged in learning practices will acquire both technical skills and a style of their own, and both will be internal to the practice itself (though some skills, like reading music or developing hand-eye coordination, will be internal to many practices).

So, how do humans become accomplished in such practices? MacIntyre uses the term ‘virtue’ to refer to the human qualities which enable us to achieve the goods that are internal to practices. These virtues, especially courage, honesty, and justice, are necessary to achieve fully the excellences inherent in any practice. These virtues define the relationship between the apprentice and the teacher, between the competitor and other competitors, and between

---

<sup>22</sup> Having grown up in suburban Texas in the 1970s, I had never encountered public transportation before moving to the Northeast, where I had to learn how to ride the bus and the subway. I also learned that some people were and are exceptionally good at using public transportation and other, like myself, are especially bad at it.

<sup>23</sup> There are also external goods, often of a material variety, associated with excellence in certain practices, but these are not intrinsically related to the specific practice, and, in fact, often have a corrupting influence on the practice.

teammates or bandmates, and, ultimately, the character of the practitioner herself. In order to learn how to read Latin, one must have the honesty and courage to admit that one does not know it and the justice to submit to the instruction of one who does. In order to compete in a marathon, one must have the courage to train, the honesty to know one's strengths and weaknesses, and the justice to recognize excellence in one's self and others. In order to be a good teammate, one must be honest with others about one's own competence, have the courage to strive for excellence for the team first, and the justice to accept one's position on the team.

What this means, according to MacIntyre, is that questions about whether a person is a good baseball player or mandolin player, a good Latin scholar, marathon runner, or teammate are objective questions with objective answers, and not merely questions concerning the preferences of participants in these activities or spectators to these activities. However, as MacIntyre avers, "those who lack the relevant experience [in the practice] are incompetent...as judges of internal goods."<sup>24</sup> The reason that those ignorant of practices cannot make rational judgments about the internal goods of the practice is that they are ignorant of the *telo*i or purposes of the practices, which can only be learned by learning the practice itself. Thus, MacIntyre offers an account of human practical knowledge which rejects the modern scientific account of human reason as primarily instrumental and technical. Instead, MacIntyre insists that practical human knowledge consists of connoisseurship, not technical expertise, and it is acquired only by an engagement in the variety of specific human practices themselves and not in the accumulation of factual knowledge or in the promulgation of rules.

Of course, practices have histories, and are, therefore, inherently traditional activities. Thus, for MacIntyre, human rationality, as it embodied in practices, is inherently traditional, as

---

<sup>24</sup> *AV*, 20.

well. He writes that “all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought.”<sup>25</sup> For example, the argument between those in favor of changing the penalty for pass interference in the National Football League from a spot foul to a 15 yard penalty appeal to the character and traditions of American football in their argument (e.g. the spot foul is eccentric in football and therefore the penalty should be 15 yards, like other egregious penalties in the sport), and do not attempt to formulate a universal rule on deontological principles (e.g. a penalty of 15 yards for pass interference would maximize total utility). This notion that rationality is traditional has led some critics to accuse him of relativism, which he rejects, but what is more important for the purposes of this essay is his move from the multiplicity of human practices/traditions to what he takes to be the unity of traditions and, more importantly, the necessary singularity of the human telos. He observes that “the conception of a single, albeit perhaps complex, supreme good is central to Aristotle’s account of practical rationality,” and MacIntyre posits that it is necessary for his as well.<sup>26</sup> For MacIntyre, the teleological character of practices leads to a notion that there must be a single teleological character to human life, a practice of practices, which he tends to identify as morality. Thus, if morality is a practice, then it is obviously teleological, like other practices, and what is central to achieving the telos is perfecting human virtues.

So what is the telos of human beings, or in what does human flourishing consist?

MacIntyre offers two different answers, but neither of them necessarily support his contention that there must be a single human telos or purpose in order make any sense of morality.

Actually, it is rarely the case that either traditional practices or functional objects manifest a single purpose (e.g. watches should keep time accurately, but also need to be light, portable,

---

<sup>25</sup> *AV*, 222.

<sup>26</sup> *WJ/WR*, 133.

durable, etc., so a grandfather clock would be a bad watch despite keeping accurate time), so MacIntyre's claim that there is some sort of necessary logical move from the teleological character of practices and functional objects to a unified and single telos for human beings is an inappropriate generalization. Nonetheless, his initial account of the human telos is that it involves an attempt to unify and order the various practices of an individual's life under the category of a narrative quest story. He avers that "the good life for man is spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is."<sup>27</sup> However, there is a profound difference between an individual discovering *her* telos and an individual discovering the telos for all human beings. The notion that the telos involves merely the quest for a telos offers a procedural not a substantive purpose to human lives, and it affords support for a pluralist conception of human activity as consisting of multiple purposes not reducible to a single telos.

In MacIntyre's more recent work, he offers a more substantive account of the human telos based on both a biological account of human flourishing and a notion of morality as the *sensus communis* of a homogeneous community. On the one hand, MacIntyre claims that there are common elements to all forms of human flourishing which can be identified in terms of certain biological needs that all humans share. These are "a set of goods at the achievement of which the members of the species aim, a set of judgments about which actions are or are likely to be effective in achieving those goods and a set of true counterfactual conditions that enable us to connect the goal-directedness and the judgments about effectiveness."<sup>28</sup> Humans need food, water, shelter, a stable living environment, friendship, love, intellectual stimulation, and need to avoid starvation, poverty, pollution, nuclear war, etc. Once again, however, this minimal and

---

<sup>27</sup> *AV*, 219.

<sup>28</sup> *DPR*, 25. Philippa Foot offers a similarly naturalistic account of morality in *Natural Goodness*.



general outline of the human good can support all sorts of different human purposes and a pluralist account of morality and virtue.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, MacIntyre presents morality or the ethical life as consisting in the traditional practice of a homogeneous community which orders all other practices and, in this kind of community, according to MacIntyre, the question of what is the good life “is not a question that [a person] can ask and answer for her or himself, apart from those others together with whom she or he is engaged in the activities of practices.”<sup>30</sup> Instead, it is the moral community as a whole that orders the practices of the community “so that individuals may direct themselves towards what is best for them and for the community.”<sup>31</sup> The model here seems to be the Greek polis or the medieval monastery, and the importance of moral connoisseurship in both cultures was central. Of course, such inequalities in moral capacity as the notion of moral connoisseurship implies were used to justify slavery and sex role differentiation in the polis, and similar sorts of hierarchies in the monastery, and it is perfectly reasonable to make such distinctions, if the moral life is as MacIntyre suggests.<sup>32</sup>

The problem which MacIntyre does not adequately address, though he certainly recognizes it, is that, in the current Western world, there is no agreement on a single telos, and it seems highly unlikely that one will be forthcoming, absent the advent of totalitarian governments.<sup>33</sup> The moral life of the modern world is going to continue to be fragmented, in

---

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*

<sup>30</sup> *MR*, 240.

<sup>31</sup> *MR*, 241.

<sup>32</sup> MacIntyre admits of this possibility when he writes that “there are kinds of teaching—the teaching of piano or violin, for example—in which the ruthless exclusion of the talentless from further teaching (a mercy to the student as well as to the teacher and to any innocent bystander) is one of the marks of a good teacher and in which the abilities to identify the talentless and to exclude them are among her or his virtues.” *DRA*, 89. This certainly suggests that there might be those who are just not capable of learning the practice of morality, and, thus, should be excluded from the moral community.

<sup>33</sup> Of course, the conflicts which arise because of the diversity of the moral world do not necessarily have to be viewed as aberrant or inherently destructive. As Stuart Hampshire notes, “neither in the social order, nor in the experience of an individual, is a state of conflict the sign of vice, or defect, or a malfunctioning. It is not a deviation from the normal state of a city or a nation, and it is not a deviation from the normal course of a person’s experience.” Stuart Hampshire, *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 33-34.

MacIntyre's sense of the term, and one aspect of modern moral philosophy that MacIntyre doesn't address is that both Kantian and Humean (deontology and consequentialism) moral philosophy have been means of dealing with a morally plural community, though MacIntyre is correct in noting that both are erroneous when considered as monistic accounts of human morality.

## **Conclusion**

MacIntyre's critique of Enlightenment rationalism, what he calls 'the Enlightenment Project', emerged, not out of a critique of scientism, but from MacIntyre's dissatisfaction with modern moral philosophy. He does offer a critique of scientism, which he associates with the emergence of the modern bureaucratic/administrative state, and he connects it with one aspect of emotivist moral philosophy. However, his real concern is modern moral fragmentation. He claims that modern disagreements about moral and political questions are irresolvable in a way that moral disagreements during medieval Christendom or classical Greece were. However, it is not at all clear that the moral and epistemological pluralism that MacIntyre finds so troubling about the modern Western world is at all unique. What is of great value in MacIntyre's work is not his potted history of the decline and fall of Western moral philosophy and practice, but, instead, his insightful critique of the conflation of scientific and practical reason. His conception of reason as embedded in social practices has a great deal in common with others in this volume, including Gadamer, Oakeshott, and Polanyi, and, despite himself, offers support for pluralist conceptions of both epistemology and morality.