**Between Rationalism and Relativism: Gadamer and MacIntyre on Truth and Finitude**

Nathanael Blake

What is truth?

This question echoes down to us from the ancient roots of our civilization, closely followed by its corollary: “and how are we to know it?” These questions are asked earnestly, by eager philosophers, priests and mystics, as well as by ordinary persons seeking certainty and assurance in this life (and perhaps that to come). They are asked wearily, by cynics despairing of finding any permanent truths in the flux of this world and its principalities and powers.

And these questions have been answered—repeatedly. But none of the answers have proven so universally rationally compelling as to vanquish all foes. Thus, the logomachy continues, with its very persistence at times strengthening the case of those who have come to see these questions as futile. This philosophical combat has continued to our day, exemplified in the battles between modern and postmodern philosophies. And these combatants must also contend with adherents of the ancient and medieval approaches, who still hold scholarly redoubts of their own.

Many philosophers in the nineteenth century sought to establish scientific models and methodology for the humanities and social sciences, hoping thereby to ensure that knowledge in these fields could be verified in the same apparently objective manner as scientific knowledge. Many of their twentieth century heirs argued that scientific knowledge of human affairs was impossible, and that truth was therefore relative. On the one side is a faith in the perfection of an objective method, which will produce unassailable true knowledge. On the other is skepticism of all claims to truth.

But each side assumes an either/or that may not be necessary. Alasdair MacIntyre has observed that modern philosophies have tended to presume the truth either of relativism or of universally accessible and applicable first principles that are independent of culture and creed. He writes that they assert that “*Either* reason is thus impersonal, universal, and disinterested *or* it is the unwitting representative of particular interests, masking their drive to power by its false pretensions to neutrality and disinterestedness.”[[1]](#endnote-1) He argues that both sides of this dichotomy obscure the truth about reason, which should be understood in neither rationalist nor relativist terms. Human reason operates within the limits of human finitude and historicity, but MacIntyre insists that this does not necessitate relativism, for some claims may still be shown to be rationally superior to others.

Much of the philosophic groundwork for MacIntyre’s project was laid by Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose philosophical hermeneutics sought to provide an account of non-scientific truth that was neither rationalist nor relativist. MacIntyre learned much from Gadamer, whose work is a constant background presence in his efforts. Their distinct, but complementary, philosophical projects offer important responses to the challenges posed by the dichotomy of rationalism and relativism. They aver that the quest for truth is not futile, yet neither can it culminate in universal propositional truths demonstrated by an objective rational methodology. Rather, we, as finite, contingent creatures, must understand truth as it appears to us within the limits of our historical existence. Truth is real, and we apprehend it according to our finite nature, rather than with an objective, universal God’s-eye view.

Realizing the historicity of truth—but without falling into relativism—will then shape our practice of moral inquiry, as we recognize the failures of rationalistic methodology in the field of ethics. And this, as MacIntyre in particular has noted, will have important implications for natural law theory, which has tended to embrace abstract rationalism and propositional casuistry. A historical understanding of the apprehension of moral truth may help renew natural law theorizing.

**Gadamer: Truth and Method**

Among recent philosophers who have attempted to chart a path between rationalism and relativism, Hans-Georg Gadamer is perhaps the greatest. Gadamer’s life spanned the 20th century; he was born in 1900 and died in 2002. He was an early student of Heidegger’s, and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics were both a continuation and correction of Heidegger. While he came to prominence relatively late in life, publishing his masterpiece *Truth and Method* in 1960, his longevity permitted extensive philosophical engagement for decades more, with interlocutors ranging from Derrida to Habermas to Leo Straus. Throughout his project, he sought to defend a human conception of truth against both relativism and rationalism. Truth, he claimed, is encountered by man within his historical existence, not through objective methodology.

Gadamer opened *Truth and Method* by declaring that the “logical self-reflection that accompanied the development of the human sciences in the nineteenth century is wholly governed by the model of the natural sciences.”[[2]](#endnote-2) This development’s intellectual effort sought to set the human sciences upon a foundation as seemingly solid as that attributed to natural science—objective, impersonal and demonstrable to all rational persons. But as 19th century rationalism gave way to 20th century postmodernism, this dream was punctured by the crisis of relativism. If the goal of objectivity was illusory, then it seemed that relativism must triumph.

Gadamer denied this relativist conclusion. The mistake, he observed, was precisely in attempting to develop the humanities as if they were susceptible to the same methods as the natural sciences. To insist that the humanities be modeled on the natural sciences was to misunderstand both disciplines. He wrote that “the specific problem that the human sciences present to thought is that one has not rightly grasped their nature if one measures them by the yardstick of a progressive knowledge of regularity. The experience of the sociohistorical world cannot be raised to a science by the inductive procedure of the natural sciences.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Yet the temptation to do just that is pervasive, given the unquestionable success of the natural sciences in recent centuries, and their apparent impersonality, which seems to offer knowledge that is not contingent or particular, but is universalizable.

Gadamer rejected the Enlightenment dream of ahistorical rationality, for “the idea of an absolute reason is not a possibility for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms.”[[4]](#endnote-4) We cannot step outside of our existence to attain an absolute perspective from which we could objectively evaluate any and everything. Such projects, the progeny of the Enlightenment, are dangerous delusions that are likely to impede our ability to reason and act rightly within the limitations and contingencies of our existence.

Against this tendency to import scientific rationalism into the humanities, Gadamer argued that the Enlightenment goal of knowledge that is free from prejudice is a fantasy (and one that smuggles in prejudices of its own). We cannot step outside of our existence, shedding the contingencies that have constituted us. Prejudice and tradition are inescapable aspects of human knowledge and reason, and while we can interrogate a particular prejudice, we can only do so while still accepting other prejudices as part of the framework of our investigation. As finite, historical creatures, we cannot attain a universal perspective that would allow us to judge without prejudice, and attempting to do so will distort, rather than purify, our reasoning. As Gadamer put it, “the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Inquiry never begins with a blank slate, and even sensory perceptions are filtered through the prejudices of experience and interpretation.

This might seem to vindicate the relativist position, but only if we have accepted the model of objective scientific knowledge as that which all human truth must adhere to. And it is precisely this model that Gadamer puts into question. Tradition, he argues, is neither irrational nor enslaving. For Gadamer, tradition is not a dead inertia, but is living and responsive as it is modified and continued by the living. It is creative and incorporates both our freedom and our finitude. Through tradition we enter conversations and practices that have begun before us and will continue after us, and which contain within themselves the seeds of their own improvement and expansion.

This is why Gadamer thought that tradition always has “an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated…” and the preservation of a tradition “is as much a freely chosen action as are revolution and renewal.”[[6]](#endnote-6) While tradition and prejudice initially must be accepted by those raised within them, the choice to continue them is a genuine decision with as much legitimacy as the alternatives of reform or revolution.

Our knowledge, like our existence, is limited and circumscribed, but still free. We can never begin inquiry with a blank slate or from a position of absolute reason, but we can nonetheless know truths. Gadamer therefore sets hermeneutics in the place of ostensible scientific objectivity and method. Knowledge in the humanities is characterized by the hermeneutic process, which, though circular, is not viciously so. Rather, the hermeneutic circle offers deepening insight, and is not closed to the outside, but constantly incorporates new encounters. Instead of the dream of a God’s-eye view, Gadamer offers the image a horizon, within which we move and may sometimes expand our view, but which remains finite. In moments of understanding there is a fusion of horizons, as we come to apprehend something we did not before. But we never obtain the perspective of an infinite mind.

Consequently, Gadamer expanded the realm of hermeneutics to encompass all human knowing, while simultaneously disabusing it of claims to possess an objective methodology. There is no absolutely objective standpoint or method available, for we are always already engaged in interpretation. Understanding is not repetition of or assent to a timeless proposition but an event that occurs within the particularities of human experience. It is a persistent process, for as Gadamer explains, illumination “can never be completely achieved; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. *To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete*.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

As historical, finite beings, our knowledge, including our self-knowledge, is necessarily partial. But this does not preclude it being true. However, our limitations preclude understanding from resting upon laurels of timeless propositional truths. Part of why intellectual inquiry can never be complete is that the formulation that is clear and brings understanding now may be opaque in the future. And yet this does not negate the truths that are attained in moments of understanding.

If Gadamer is right, we must look for the truths of philosophy, art, ethics and suchlike not through a method yielding objective results, or through derivations from universal first principles, but in the encounters of concrete existence, for “understanding is not a method which the inquiring consciousness applies to an object it chooses and so turns it into objective knowledge; rather, being situated within an event of tradition, a process of handing down, is a prior condition of understanding. *Understanding proves to be an event*.”[[8]](#endnote-8) And thus understanding will always need to be renewed, for human temporality prevents it from resting, once and for all, upon the realization of a timeless truth. Each instance of understanding becomes, not obsolete but incomplete once the moment that brought it forth has passed. And so there is a need for new instances of understanding as one encounters new situations.

A significant corollary of this is the realization that understanding, while an event for the individual, is never an individual achievement but is always part of a communal context. Our existence is neither objective nor subjective, but rather inter-subjective. And the medium of inter-subjective understanding is language, and recognizing this reinforces that understanding is not just an individual achievement. Language is necessarily communal and something that is given to us. It allows for creativity, but it is not entirely subject to our control. Language is given to us and shapes our very thoughts, yet it is not imprisoning, unless existence itself is a prison.

Because of the inextricability of language and thought, Gadamer emphasized the importance of dialogue, both with texts and with interlocutors. Dialogue requires a willingness to entertain the possibility that the other might be right while also attempting to persuade our dialogic partners of what we believe to be true. Dialogue and hermeneutics accept our finitude and contingency, but remain open to the possibility of truth, and welcomes the shared burden of inquiry with others. This path of shared inquiry and understanding is Gadamer’s way between rationalism and relativism.

**MacIntyre: Tradition and Reason**

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has provided important insights into the rationality of communities and traditions of inquiry, and has developed the case for them as an alternative to the rationalist/relativist either/or. He argues that despite our inability to reach a plane of universal rationality, cultures and traditions may nonetheless be rationally compared and critiqued, both internally and vis-à-vis each other. This project complements and owes much to Gadamer’s efforts, but it has been developed upon its own lines in accord with MacIntyre’s philosophical trajectory. Over the course of his distinguished philosophical career, MacIntyre has travelled from Marxism to Thomistic-Aristotelianism, producing many excellent works along the way. Starting with the acclaimed *After Virtue* in 1981, a coherent project began to emerge and was further developed in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, along with other works.

Throughout this endeavor, MacIntyre argues that reason develops historically within traditions, and cannot be treated as an independent capacity isolated from history and culture. “Reason” divorced from the particularities of reasoners is an abstraction. In particular, MacIntyre has drawn attention to the prerequisites for mature reasoners—we are not born free and rational, as Locke would have it, but only attain degrees of freedom and rationality within a culture and tradition of intellectual inquiry. MacIntyre is therefore critical of philosophical approaches that blithely presume “the existence of mature independent practical reasoners whose social relationships are the relationships of the adult world.”[[9]](#endnote-9) He notes that we only become competent reasoners able to engage in intellectual inquiry through an apprenticeship in a tradition of intellectual inquiry, one in which we shall have to accede to the authority of our instructors. Only at the end of this training do we attain sufficient philosophical competence to effectively critique those we have learned from.

Therefore, MacIntyre claims that the Cartesian notion of the solitary mind reasoning is a fiction, for that mind learned to reason and think as part of a particular *We*, thinking in a particular time, place and language. Someone’s competence as a rational inquirer is therefore dependent upon particulars of instruction and even character, as certain virtues are required for effective reasoning. Rationality is thus dependent upon contingency.

This might seem to result in a relativistic catch-22, as the philosophical tools we need to critique our teachers have been shaped by those very teachers. Furthermore, how are we to judge between the claims of different cultures and traditions, if our reasoning is indeed culturally conditioned and no objective, universal standard of rationality can be established?

According to MacIntyre, the way out of the relativist morass embraces the mean between rejecting any human capacity to perceive truth, and presuming we can perceive it clearly and universally. The crucial point, one that he shared with Gadamer, is the insistence that rejecting the Enlightenment model of reason and truth does not entail a rejection of the possibility of reason and truth. Rather, this repudiation redirects us from a dead end that in despair may lead to relativism, and instead points us toward fruitful contemplation of what reason and truth mean for historical, finite beings such as ourselves.

Far from acceding to relativism, MacIntyre, like Gadamer, believes his approach protects against it by recognizing the historical and contingent nature of human rationality, rather than imposing impossible requirements on reason. Presenting Enlightenment rationalism as the alternative to relativism is a false dichotomy, for reason is not what the Enlightenment rationalists thought it to be. Those who would resist relativism should not attempt to transcend the contingencies of human reason but should rather accept them as elements of our existence within which our reason must operate and truth be known.

Thus, MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment has obscured what must be recovered, which is “a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Rationality does not entail leaping outside of our historical existence, but develops within it.

MacIntyre’s exploration of this notes that while we can never leave our historicity behind, cultures and traditions are not entirely closed to each other. In particular, he observes that practices can be cross-cultural, and it is possible for members of one culture to recognize the superiority (in part at least) of another culture’s practices as a means of attaining ends desired by those engaged in a similar practice in another culture. From painting to navigation, practitioners have adopted and adapted from their counterparts in other cultures, as well as looking within to renew themselves. Common human ground is found not in the abstractions of a universal objective rationality, but in the particulars of human life and endeavor in projects and practices that are shared across cultures.

And this commonality is not limited to technological or artistic endeavors, but extends to philosophic inquiry, thereby providing a basis for comparison between cultures. Intellectually, some traditions will struggle and even fail on their own terms, and may be forced to look outside of themselves for solutions to difficulties that were insoluble within the original tradition. In such cases, those who have become conversant with intellectual traditions outside of their own may make significant changes to their native tradition, or even convert to an alternative that they believe better answer difficulties their native tradition cannot resolve.

This willingness to face the aporias of one’s own culture and tradition, and to seek out and contemplate alternatives from another tradition, is itself one of the traits necessary for a superior tradition. And so MacIntyre asserts that, “the only rational way for the adherent of any tradition to approach intellectually, culturally, and linguistically alien rivals is one that allows for the possibility that in one or more areas the other may be rationally superior to it in respect precisely of that in the alien tradition which it cannot as yet comprehend.” He concludes that “Only those whose tradition allows for the possibility of its hegemony being put in question can have rational warrant for asserting such a hegemony.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Only a tradition that is put at risk can be vindicated. Only a tradition that forthrightly faces its own limitations and difficulties and considers the alternatives offered by rival traditions can justly claim superior adequacy to its rivals. Such claims to rational superiority do not require recourse to a universal, ahistorical standard of objective rationality, but instead partake of the commonalities of different historical efforts at rational inquiry.

True knowledge is apprehended and articulated within the finitude of human existence, and through dialogue. As MacIntyre observes, “It is no trivial matter that all claims to knowledge are the claims of some particular person, developed out of the claims of other particular persons. Knowledge is possessed only in and through participation in a history of dialectical encounters.”[[12]](#endnote-12) While we cannot leap outside of our historical existence to evaluate truth-claims from a fixed, universal reason, this does not leave us mired in relativity. Adequate rational comparison and judgment is indeed possible, both within a tradition of intellectual inquiry, and between them.

**Ethics as Rhetoric**

This understanding of truth as real and historically-realized is of crucial practical importance. Both Gadamer and MacIntyre understood that we do not philosophize only out of idle curiosity, or because it is (for some) a career. We philosophize in order to act rightly. Moral philosophy is the impetus for philosophy as a whole, and here the complementary efforts of MacIntyre and Gadamer provide a path between the Scylla and Charybdis of rationalism and relativism. Both philosophers affirm that there are real moral truths, while denying that they must be demonstrable in an objective, universalized fashion.

Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics preclude a moral philosophy that attempts to derive objective moral propositions from timeless universal first principles. Moral knowledge is not objective; rather it is personal and relevant to the particular situation at hand or under consideration. And as he so often did, Gadamer looked to the Greek origins of Western philosophy in exploring this question. In his view, neither Plato nor Aristotle considered ethics to be an objective, scientific study capable of reaching conclusions rationally demonstrable to all (Gadamer believed that Plato’s use of dialogue brought into question his conceptualizing and metaphysics; Plato did not provide unassailable dogma, but dialogue).[[13]](#endnote-13) Rather, ethics is the attempt to illuminate and explore through dialogue that which must always be personally realized. Objectivity is impossible, for it would require discarding that which is in need of ethical guidance—the individual person who must deliberate, choose and act within contingency and finitude.

Thus, Gadamer declared that “moral knowledge, as Aristotle describes it, is clearly not objective knowledge-i.e., the knower is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes; he is directly confronted with what he sees. It is something that he has to do.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Gadamer reminds us that virtue is much more than knowledge, and that knowledge itself is dependent upon a person’s character and experiences. Moral goodness really can be incomprehensible to the wicked, whose character may preclude both the intellectual virtues needed for adequate moral philosophizing, and the personal capacity to appreciate the goods that the virtuous instantiate. Thus, general, universalized propositions are not the true form of moral knowledge; rather, moral knowledge is most fully realized in the particular—this is what is right here and now.

However, this does not make moral inquiry and insight entirely individualistic. The situation in which one has to act morally is never encountered entirely alone, because the moral resources, patterns, habits and virtues of an individual are always communal in their genesis. Moral philosophy is not a solitary affair, in which the philosopher pursues the timeless formulation of transcendent truth (let alone his own whimsy), but a communal endeavor in which the philosopher’s insights will be dependent both on the culture around him and what sort of man he is. Not only is the fullness of the good life dependent upon friendship, so too is moral philosophy, for it is a joint enterprise. There is commonality in moral truth that can be illuminated through shared reflection, experience and communication, even if it can never be fully captured in propositional statements—statements which, it turns out, are always embedded within a particular linguistic and cultural context.

Thus, the finitude that seems to some to preclude true moral knowledge in fact enables it by setting limits within which man’s own limited capacities may fruitfully operate, instead of demanding of him that he become like God, for if knowing the truth meant seeing things as God does, then no finite person could know the truth. And it is precisely in history, with its contingencies and our limited capabilities, that truth makes its demands on us.

Gadamer argues that the unconditional demands that moral truth places upon us are best understood as arising from the historicity of our being. Moral clarity arises from the realization that *this* is the right thing to do, *here and now*, in *this* particular circumstance. Extrapolating an ostensibly universal set of moral principles from these instantiations of moral truth may be very useful, even indispensable, for philosophic inquiry and moral instruction, but it can also become a calcified obstruction to genuine moral insight.

Therefore, Gadamer’s emphasis on the realization of moral truths within the historicity of human Being does not lead to relativism, and he steadily denied that he was a relativist. He affirmed the existence of real goodness, truth and beauty, though denying that they can be permanently, completely and accurately described and defined by a set of philosophical propositions. In moments of insight and action, we realize the good, the true and the beautiful far more completely than in any articulation of a philosophical or ethical system. And this enables moral inquiry and investigation to then strive for a fuller insight that will be realized in future moments of moral decision and action. As he put it, “from the standpoint of the philosophy of finitude, it’s possible for us to acquire historical consciousness again without falling prey to historical relativism, exactly to the extent that we recognize the limits of all knowledge, which is bounded precisely by its own historical situation.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Recognition of our limitations does not lead to relativism, and can even provide a safeguard against it.

Ethics is for contingent, finite persons, not impersonal, ahistorical reasoners. The real challenges within ethics are to determine and adhere to what is right in our particular circumstances, not to articulate universalizable moral theories from which particular moral decisions may reliably be made. This is not to say that general moral theories and precepts should be abandoned. They are often very useful for moral instruction and action as well as inquiry. Indeed, it is our very finitude the demands general ideas; an infinite mind with a God’s-eye view would not require them. In the words of Tocqueville’s great offhand aphorism, “God has no need for general ideas.” For us, general ideas are useful tools only so long as we recall that they are actually contingent and incomplete.

And the insufficiency of our general ideas precludes reducing moral inquiry and argument to a sort of mathematical derivation of specific precepts from general principles. Thus, Gadamer came to appreciate the role of rhetoric (understood as the honest attempt to persuade one’s partner in dialogue of what one genuinely believes) as a counterpart to hermeneutics in moral and philosophic inquiry. Hermeneutics seeks understanding of the other; rhetoric, as Gadamer came to understand it, seeks to make oneself understood by the other. Since moral truths cannot be absolutely proven as if they were mathematical postulates, rhetoric has a vital role to play in moral investigation and instruction. Rhetoric is not opposed to ethics. Rather, it is indispensable to ethics.

Indeed, all ethics turns out to be rhetorical. Gadamer ultimately located ethics within rhetoric—the realm of that which is not scientifically demonstrable in the way mathematics are. This does not, in his account, render ethics relative, but it means ethical inquiry and dialogue are always matters of persuasive personal demonstration, rather than impersonal proof—even the most abstract moral discourses are still conducted by specific persons in a particular language in a particular time and place. Furthermore, while right and wrong are not determined by human will, they are discovered historically and contingently, not as universally demonstrable absolutes from which specific courses of action may be reliably derived.

Moral truths cannot be objectively demonstrated so as to compel the assent of every rational person, but this does not mean that they are unreal. Nor does this preclude rational persuasion regarding moral truths. Rather, moral persuasion (as distinct from moral instruction, wherein the hearer defers to the teaching authority) takes place in the domain of rhetoric rather than that of objective proof. And so, complementing his previous rehabilitation of prejudice, Gadamer undertook a rehabilitation of rhetoric. It is in dialogue that the attempt to persuade can allow the truth to appear. Rhetoric in dialogue devoted to truth (and thus open to being persuaded as well as to persuading) does not seek to dominate the other, but to share a moment of insight and veracity that cannot be proven in the fashion of mathematics, but which is nonetheless truth. Thus, honest rhetoric, by its very nature, is also open to persuasion as it seeks to persuade, thereby acknowledging both the reality of truth and our limitations in understanding it.

Rhetoric and persuasion, if undertaken in good faith, presume difference, but also that there is truth as a potential common ground to be found in dialogue. As Gadamer explained, entering a dialogue assumes that there is a difference of views, but he claims that the “desire to persuade someone is not a renunciation of the truth as such. Rather, if I hold something to be true, then I try to persuade the other of it—but the presupposition for this is that I do hold something to be true.” Far from renouncing truth, such dialogue “presupposes this truth claim, be it my truth claim or his. For if I also admit that the other can persuade me, what is it that he is supposed to be persuading me of if not what is true?”[[16]](#endnote-16) The rhetoric involved in mutual attempts at persuasion in dialogue is not the “hollow rhetoric” of the will to power, or of the cynical Sophist who seeks to manipulate for personal gain. Rather, it is an honest joint search for truth.

This dialogic interplay between hermeneutic attempts at understanding and honest rhetorical attempts to persuade is at the heart of the shared task of moral inquiry. It does not renounce moral truth and its bond on us, and I avers that moral truth is knowable for historical beings such as ourselves, but neither does it attempt to leap outside of our historical existence. Rather, it searches for compelling moral truths within our contingency and finitude.

**The Moral Practices of Moral Inquiry**

Despite the richness of his insights when he did venture into moral philosophy, Gadamer did not address it as thoroughly as MacIntyre has. And though there is significant overlap between their understandings of moral knowledge, Gadamer was much more dismissive of natural law approaches than MacIntyre. To Gadamer, a natural law theory that cannot incorporate the finitude and historicity of human knowing within its account of moral knowledge is suspect. And since natural law accounts have usually been suspicious of such considerations, regarding them as dangerously relativistic, Gadamer found little to engage with in the mainstream natural law tradition. In contrast, while MacIntyre agrees that natural law theorizing has too often been prone to abstract rationality, he has endeavored to remedy this and incorporate a greater appreciation for our historicity into natural law thought.

In contrast to many natural law approaches who have tried to construct a complete ethical system out of Thomism, MacIntyre regards Thomism a tradition. And an intellectual tradition is in many ways an extended argument or discussion. Neither Thomism nor any other ethical theory will ever be a complete system, since our finitude precludes such consummation. Consequently, since inquiry is never at an end, at no point can the *phronimos* be discarded, as his character both enables further fruitful inquiry and provides a guide to practical action. No system of philosophical precepts and moral rules will ever be self-sufficient and able to dispense with the man or woman of good character and judgment.

But absent some objective standard, how are we to identify the *phronimos* without blind reliance on our cultural norms? MacIntyre’s emphasis on the concrete communities involved in moral inquiry and the development of a moral tradition raises the question of how one can detect and critique the flaws of one’s own community and tradition. Are cultures and traditions of rational and moral inquiry incommensurable? How, if there is no neutral and universal standard of rationality accessible and persuasive to all rational persons, can differences between cultures, philosophies and moral practices be judged? Can the natural law function without such a concept?

MacIntyre has devoted much of his work to answering such questions and exploring how moral inquiry can avoid being trapped within the tradition is has developed in. He argues that while we cannot achieve any culture or tradition-neutral vantage point from which to choose between cultures and traditions, we are nonetheless capable of moving toward a more adequate understanding of their merits and faults. Furthermore, cultures and traditions need not be (indeed, they rarely are) entirely closed; there is almost always interaction with others. Therefore, there is always the possibility for fruitful investigation and dialogue between them. And, as a Thomist, MacIntyre believes that the natural law will be at work in all traditions of moral inquiry, in practice if not in theory. Indeed, he argues that the practices necessary for a community of rational moral inquiry to flourish are expressions of the first precepts of the natural law, even if that community does not theoretically articulate them in natural law terms. No significant tradition of moral or philosophical inquiry can be developed without the community undertaking it having committed to standards of truthfulness and protection for its members.

Consequently, MacIntyre argues that a culture’s tradition of moral inquiry will contain within itself the seeds of the natural law, which is found as much through the practice of moral action and inquiry as through theoretical reflection and articulation. The practice (though not necessarily the theoretical articulation) of the first precepts of the natural law is a prerequisite for any rational and moral inquiry. MacIntyre declares that the “human relationships through which alone anyone can hope to learn the nature of their good are themselves defined in practice as well as in theory by the standards set by the natural law. So the natural law is discovered not only as one of the primary objects of practical enquiry but as the presupposition of any effective practical enquiry.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Thus, even moral disagreement can pay tribute to the natural law, for the natural law is expressed in the necessities of the moral inquiry attempting to resolve the disagreement. Those honestly engaged in exploring and perhaps resolving moral disagreements will need to abide by the precepts of the natural law, even if they are not theoretically articulated as such. As MacIntyre explains,

A precondition of rationality in shared enquiry is mutual commitment to precepts that forbid us to endanger gratuitously each other’s life, liberty or property. And the scope of those precepts must extend to all those from whom we may at any time in our enquiry—and it is a lifelong enquiry—need to learn…If I am to engage with you in shared rational enquiry, we must both be assured that we can expect the other to speak the truth, as she or he understands it. There must be no deceptive or intentionally misleading speech. And each of us must be able to rely upon commitments made by the others.[[18]](#endnote-18)

These requirements safeguard moral inquiry by protecting those undertaking it and ensuring their goodwill and honesty. They are, as it were, the natural law requirements for the practice of moral inquiry. However, they are not the product of abstract rationality calculating from first principles, but rather emerge as concrete requirements for pursuing both knowledge and the practice of the good within a particular community and its concrete circumstances. Moral norms against murder, theft, deception, and so on are found as the preconditions for community and joint rational inquiry, regardless of their theoretical expression and justification (or lack thereof). And given the possibility of engagement with the strangers one encounters, these moral norms that enable moral inquiry also provide for a potentially unlimited and universal application. Yet this is accomplished not through a rational demonstration or proof capable of commanding universal assent, but through the practical requirements of moral inquiry, regardless of how they are formulated in a given culture.

The practice of moral philosophy itself thus provides a means of evaluating moral theories that is internal to each tradition, yet capable of reaching beyond them to provide common ground. This realization leads MacIntyre to write that these precepts, which are “the preconditions for practical enquiry *are* the precepts of the natural law.”[[19]](#endnote-19) MacIntyre believes that these requirements are universal insofar as they are necessary for any rational inquiry to be successful, and that they may be rationally vindicated, insofar as they are at least defensible, though not necessarily compelling, to all rational persons. Indeed, they will be presupposed by the very parties that are engaged in debating their merits, and even if their formulations are not compelling to all rational persons.

The necessities of moral inquiry require conformity to natural law precepts, even in intellectual and cultural traditions that reject the idea of natural law. This natural law ground for moral inquiry will not provide a dispositive proof that must be compelling to all rational persons, for this is not (despite the ardent attempts of various modern natural law theorists) the purpose of a theory of natural law. However, it will provide a ground for moral discourse and evaluation that its adherents can use to both explain why they find truth in other traditions, and to offer a means of dialogue between them.

MacIntyre’s approach therefore integrates the contingencies of life into the universality of the natural law in a more convincing fashion than many rival versions of natural law have. The precepts to which we are directed by the natural law are apprehended in the practice of the life of virtue and moral inquiry within a particular community, and are practically necessary for inquiry between members of different cultures and traditions.

Indeed, to take one example, it may be said that on this point the practice of modern universities is significantly better than its theory (of which MacIntyre has been quite critical). The theoretical explanations offered by universities for the haphazard promulgation of disparate viewpoints by professors are often incoherent. However, the natural law, as identified by MacIntyre with the preconditions for rational inquiry, may be seen in its practice, as those who are unable to agree upon the basis for morality nonetheless behave in ways that accord with the precepts of the natural law that make rational inquiry possible. Professors advocating radically divergent moral philosophies nonetheless tend to peacefully coexist (the squabbles of academic life notwithstanding). For example, Marxist professors advocating the redistribution of property nonetheless rarely plunder their colleagues’ offices. And so the concrete requirements of moral and philosophical community and inquiry provide for the instantiation of moral virtues, even by those who might deny their existence.

In a similar way, MacIntyre’s project may also open the way for a rehabilitation of moral absolutes, not as universally accessible precepts demonstrable from first principles, but as realized by the virtuous man or woman whose character is incompatible with certain acts. The motivating power of virtue is far greater than that of theoretical demonstrations of absolute moral prohibitions, and is far harder to lead astray through clever, but mistaken, casuistry. The virtuous person will never do certain deeds not because reasoning from first principles shows them to be always and everywhere wrong, but because doing them would be incompatible with the life of virtue. That which cannot be demonstrated by rationalism and casuistry may yet be known through the life of virtue and the examples of the righteous.

**Conclusion: Natural Law Between Relativism and Rationalism**

The philosophic ethics of Gadamer and MacIntyre cannot be folded into one, despite their similarities and the influence the former had upon the latter’s project. MacIntyre was intellectually indebted to Gadamer, but also disappointed that Gadamer did not seriously engage with the Thomistic-Aristotelianism that he himself converted to, and which shaped the development of his work. Nonetheless, they have both been important contributors to the crucial philosophical task of navigating between rationalism and relativism, and defending truth as knowable to finite, contingent human persons.

Gadamer’s discussion of moral truth was often incomplete or preliminary compared to the richness of his development of philosophical hermeneutics. Nonetheless, as MacIntyre has seen, it offers insights that the natural law tradition would benefit from incorporating. In particular, Gadamer’s emphasis on moral truth as apprehended within history, and especially through dialogue, provides a valuable corrective to natural law theories that have emphasized reasoning from universal, timeless truths. Those who pay heed to Gadamer will not abandon their moral views, nor dismiss them as merely their own idiosyncratic perspective, bequeathed to them by the vagaries of contingency. But neither will they insist that their view is the Truth, timeless, universally accessible to all rational persons, and demonstrable through inexorable logic. Instead, they will enter into dialogue as much as is possible, and seek to persuade while at the same time opening themselves to the possibility of persuasion by seeking to understand.

If Gadamer is correct, then a successful natural law theory cannot be understood as a set of universal, specific moral propositions, or as a means for deriving such from first principles rationally accessible to all. Thus, there is a need for natural law theory to be developed in ways that give appropriate attention to the contingency and finitude of human existence and the conditional natural of all moral propositions.

Such a historically-conscious approach to the natural law will hold out the possibility of persuasion, but only by putting itself at risk, for it must be willing to consider the theoretical explanations of other traditions and their reasoning on matters of practical moral disagreement. A fruitful encounter between two traditions proceeds through dialogue, in which each opens itself not only to the critique of the other, but also to the solutions the other may proffer to difficulties it has encountered. As this dialogue and inquiry proceed, they will be guarded by and bear testament to the content of the natural law, as Alasdair MacIntyre observes in his exploration of the requirements of shared moral inquiry. We can only engage in inquiry with each other about what is good if we have already begun to be good in our practice by respecting the lives, property, integrity and so forth of those with whom we are engaged in moral inquiry and dialogue.

Observing the convergence between Gadamer and MacIntyre on the openness and lack of dogmatism necessary to any philosophic inquiry, Georgia Warnke notes that they both define rationality “as a willingness to admit the existence of better options. The awareness that one’s knowledge is always open to refutation or modification from the vantage point of another perspective is not a basis for suspending confidence in the idea of reason but rather represents the very possibility of rational progress.”[[20]](#endnote-20) If this understanding of rationality as openness in dialogic inquiry is correct, then the natural law is not, and never can be, a final set of formulations or a fixed set of principles that can be articulated. Rather, it is better described, as Jean Porter has argued in her exploration of the scholastics, as the human capacity for moral insight and apprehension in the historical moment.

This is not to say that the natural law is without content, only that all investigations and formulations of this content, even the best, are contingent and subject to revision. A historically-conscious approach to the natural law would allow for a variety of natural law methods, without presuming for any of them the capability to reach final and objective truth expressed in dogmatic formulations. There is no final and definitive way of arriving at moral truth, no foundation that is universally accessible and demonstrable; nor is there any universal standard of self-evident rationality that can be appealed to.

This realization opens the natural law tradition to understand itself as part of the search for, and expression of, truth within man’s historical and finite existence. It will constantly be seeking new partners in dialogue, partners who are encountered in an expanding horizon of philosophic investigation. As Macintyre has put it, “self-questioning becomes an inescapable feature of our reflective lives when we commit ourselves to philosophical dialogue with others…dialogue returns us to our condition as reflective questioning and self-questioning animals, rather than as those helplessly in the grip of their own particular beliefs.”[[21]](#endnote-21) Such dialogue, he notes, exposes inadequate self-examination of one’s beliefs and forces one to consider alternative perspectives.

This practice of dialogue and self-examination is an essential characteristic of human beings, who are, MacIntyre declares “moral and metaphysical questioners and self-questioners, beings inescapably engaged in practical enquiry and often compelled into theoretical enquiry too.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Our being is dialogic. We are always in conversation, even when alone, for even our thoughts are expressed in a language shared with others, indeed, imparted to us by them. Dasein is a conversation. Thus, there is no single dispositive natural law method or set of principles, only the commitment to the dialogue of the natural law. The natural law cannot be definitively defined, but it is nonetheless always already present as the ground of moral discourse and of moral instruction, which we can neither escape nor do without.

Such discourse is capable of encompassing all the diverse approaches that have been developed within the natural law tradition: the ontological, the teleological, that of basic goods, that of intrinsic evils, that of structures of consciousness. All sources of moral knowledge and insight can be given their due within the practice of honest rhetoric and hermeneutics—persuasion and interpretation—seeking the illuminating moment of understanding. None is definitive, for that would be to appropriate the perspective of God, and assume the adequacy of an infinite mind. Our adequacy can only serve for the moment of illumination, after which we are again thrust back into the world and its moral conversation. There is a truth that is beyond the whims of human will or the contingencies of historical existence, but it is best known not through ostensibly universal formulations or propositions, but personally, in the moment of moral insight. Such an understanding opens possibilities for shared dialogue between individuals as well as between traditions and cultures. It is neither rationalist nor relativist; one who adopts it will seek to persuade while remaining open to the possibility of a superior understanding that may be revealed in the course of dialogue.

1. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1990. Reprinted 2008. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. Page 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2004. Reprinted 2006. *Truth and Method, 2nd revised edition*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum. Page 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1976. Reprinted 2008. “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge. Berkley: University of California Press. Page 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282-283. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 301. Italics in original. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 308. Italics in original [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1999. Reprinted 2012. *Dependent, Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. Chicago: Open Court. Page 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1988. Reprinted 2008. *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. Page 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* 388. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Version of Moral Enquiry*. 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1985. Reprinted 1986. *Philosophical Apprenticeships*. Translated by Robert R. Sullivan. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. Page 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 312. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2003. Reprinted 2006. *A Century of Philosophy*, *A Century of Philosophy: A Conversation with Riccardo Dottori*. Translated by Rod Coltman and Sigrid Koepke. New York: Continuum. Page 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Macintyre, Alasdair. 2006. *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays.* Vol. *2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pages 78-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2009 “Intractable Moral Disagreements” in *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics*, Edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. Page 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Warnke, Georgia. 1987. Reprinted 2000. *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Page 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2006. *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays.* Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Page 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, 192. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)