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MacIntyre's traditionalism

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Introduction

Much of the critical response to Alasdair MacIntyre's recent ethical and political writings has centered around his use of the concept of tradition. For example, Susan Moller Okin has criticized MacIntyre for valorizing and seeking to recover a set of traditions – namely, Aristotelianism and Thomism – which are undeniably misogynist.[1] However, criticizing MacIntyre for his appeal to traditions is difficult for two reasons. First, it is not entirely clear what he even means by this crucial concept, since he never gives a unified account of it; instead, his conception of a tradition must be pieced together from remarks and arguments which are scattered throughout his three books on moral and political theory. Second, as I argue in this paper, there is no way to piece together MacIntyre's conception of a tradition coherently.[2] The incoherence in his use of this concept results from inconsistencies and confusions in his account of the relationship between tradition and rationality. Given these two difficulties with MacIntyre's conception of a tradition, philosophers who criticize or agree with him on the basis of his traditionalism run the risk of falling into the same incoherence.

In what follows, I do not wish to dispute Okin's contention that the particular traditions to which MacIntyre appeals are sexist and elitist, and therefore objectionable. Instead, I argue that MacIntyre's traditionalism should be rejected on a prior theoretical level, regardless of which particular traditions he himself prefers. I begin, in Section 1, by reconstructing MacIntyre's conception of a tradition. After laying out this conception, in Section 2, I consider MacIntyre's account of the role of rationality in the constitution and differentiation of traditions. In Section 3, I argue that this account causes problems for MacIntyre, which he can only escape in one of three ways: first, he can embrace perspectivism, a view which he argues against; second, he can adopt universalism, a view which he explicitly denies is even possible; and third, he can admit that what he is describing is not several discrete traditions, but instead a grand metatradition, the tradition of the West. Finally, in Section

4, I discuss this third possibility, the grand metatradition, which I contend represents the most plausible of the three alternatives for restoring coherence to his project. I conclude, however, that even this attempt to restore coherence to MacIntyre's project is bound to fail.

1. MacIntyre's conception of a tradition

Although MacIntyre's account of traditions is much more developed in his more recent work, there are still some important aspects of this account that emerge from *After Virtue*. In this work, a tradition is the third and most complex level of MacIntyre's "core conception" of the virtues.[3] The first level of his core conception consists of practices with goods which are internal to them. Goods internal to practices are those goods that can only be attained by participating in that particular practice. So, for example, the game of chess is a practice, participation in which allows individuals to achieve such goods as "a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity."[4] These goods, according to MacIntyre, are "partially definitive" of the practice of playing chess itself, and thus, can only be achieved by playing chess, or some game very much like it.[5] Goods external to a practice, on the other hand, include things like the trophies or money that we might acquire by playing chess competitively, but that are not constitutive of the practice of chess itself. At this level of the conception, virtues are understood as qualities that can help us to attain goods internal to practices.

MacIntyre recognizes that this level of the core conception of a virtue is unsatisfactory because some practices themselves can be morally reprehensible. For this reason, MacIntyre insists that practices and their concomitant virtues can only be understood within the context of a whole human life, unified in narrative form.[6] The narratives which encompass our lives, and of which we are co-authors, take the form of a quest for the good life. As MacIntyre puts it, "the unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest."[7] The lived narratives are thus teleological, although the *telos* of a life need only be partly determinate at the outset. Thus, the virtues are not only qualities that enable us to attain goods internal to practices; they also "sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good."[8]

However, MacIntyre notes, we can never seek the good life *qua* individual, but only as persons who inhabit certain social roles that are defined by particular historical circumstances, all of which make up our "moral starting point."[9] To recognize this is, like it or not, to understand ourselves as bearers of a tradition. Having arrived at this third and most complex level of his core conception of the virtues, MacIntyre points out that it provides the context for the first two. He writes, "the individual's search for his or her good is generally

and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life."[10] Thus, when I engage in a practice, I confront the tradition of which that practice is a part. Similarly, insofar as I am involved in a narrative quest for the good life, I am always doing so against the backdrop of the tradition of which I am a member. Moreover, the cultivation of the virtues sustains traditions and allows them to flourish. Thus, the account of traditions that emerges from *After Virtue* is one in which traditions form the necessary background to the cultivation by individuals of the virtues through practices and narratively unified lives, and in which traditions themselves can only be sustained and improved through the cultivation of the virtues.[11]

Finally, there is another important way in which MacIntyre relates traditions to narrative unity. Traditions not only provide the context in which individuals can live out their own narratives, they are themselves unfinished narratives. Moreover, because the narratives are unfinished, there will always be conflict among adherents to a tradition over how their tradition's narrative should be told.[12]

Although MacIntyre never disputes the account of traditions offered in *After Virtue*, the conception with which he operates after *After Virtue* is much more fully developed. A central feature of his more fully developed account is the claim that traditions are intellectual and social. They are made up of both intellectual arguments and a set of concomitant social practices and institutions. MacIntyre hints at this feature in *After Virtue*, where he defines a living tradition as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[13] However, the various components that make up the intellectual and social aspects of a tradition are elaborated in greater detail in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*[14]

A tradition is intellectual insofar as it is an historically extended argument, or as MacIntyre later puts it, "a coherent movement of thought."[15] Moreover, the intellectual aspect of a tradition entails that the historically extended movement of thought is coherent and reflective. As he says, "in the course of [this movement] those engaging in that movement become aware of it and of its direction and in self-aware fashion attempt to engage in its debates and to carry its enquiries forward."[16] It is important that the reflective argumentation does not concern mere beliefs or opinions; rather, from the very beginning, the debates within a tradition are rational and theoretical.[17] The subjects of the debates include the correct way to interpret the tradition's authoritative texts, to write its narrative history, and to understand which goods are constitutive of the tradition itself. In a sense, then, the intellectual dimension of a tradition

is always meta-traditional, and involves a set of reflections on that tradition. The components which make up the intellectual aspect of a tradition can be summarized as follows: a tradition is intellectual insofar as it is an historically extended, coherent, reflective, theoretical and rational argument about various aspects of the tradition itself. Further, as will become clear in the next section, MacIntyre believes that the intellectual aspect of a tradition also enables adherents to rationally adjudicate between the standpoints of rival traditions.

For MacIntyre, there are two senses in which a tradition is social. All traditions arise out of the contingent circumstances of some particular social order.[18] In this sense, all traditions are rooted in the particular social practices, institutions and beliefs of the social order out of which they have emerged. In addition, once a tradition has developed, it itself gives rise to certain types of social practices and arrangements in which the intellectual aspect of the tradition finds expression.[19] Not only do traditions become embodied in particular social practices and arrangements, they also develop their own languages, languages which "presuppose commitment to those same beliefs, institutions, and practices."[20] Since traditions are tied to particular social practices and beliefs in both of these senses, they "are always and ineradically [sic] to some degree local, informed by particularities of language and social and natural environment."[21] Traditions are social in the sense that they develop out of and are embodied in particular, local social practices, institutions, beliefs, and languages.

By claiming that traditions are both intellectual and social, MacIntyre contradicts two everyday, commonsense understandings of the concept of tradition. The first is of a tradition as a set of social practices which are passed down from one generation to the next unreflectively and uncritically. Someone who understands traditions in this way is likely to respond to the question "Why do you do things the way you do?" by saying, "Because that is how we have always done them, and to do otherwise would be to go against tradition." Against this understanding of traditions, MacIntyre offers a conception that emphasizes the reflective, critical nature of traditions, their intellectual aspect. The second everyday sense is of a tradition as a movement of thought unfettered by particular social practices and institutions. Someone who understands traditions in this way will characterize the movement of thought stretching from Plato to Davidson and Derrida as "the philosophical tradition," without considering the importance of the vastly different social contexts which affect each of the various points in the historical development. Against this understanding, MacIntyre's conception of tradition emphasizes the rootedness of traditions in particular social practices and institutions. Hence, both the intellectual and social aspects of MacIntyre's conception of

a tradition are extremely important for distinguishing his conception from other understandings of the concept.

Not only does MacIntyre believe that it is important that we understand traditions as having intellectual and social aspects, he also emphasizes their inter-relatedness. For example, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre gives a detailed historical account of three different traditions: Aristotelianism, Thomism, and a combination of Scottish Calvinist Augustinianism and renaissance Aristotelianism. He also calls for an account to be given of the liberal tradition, which paradoxically began as a reaction against authority and tradition as such. According to MacIntyre, in each of these four traditions, intellectual and social elements are tightly interwoven. He writes,

> [a]ll four of these traditions are and were more than, and could not but be more than, traditions of intellectual enquiry. In each of them, intellectual enquiry was or is part of the elaboration of a mode of social and moral life of which the intellectual enquiry itself was an integral part, and in each of them the forms of that life were embodied with greater or lesser degrees of imperfection in social and political institutions which also draw their life from other sources.[22]

This close relationship between the intellectual and social facets of a tradition is especially significant when MacIntyre considers the question of whether or not it is actually possible for a modern individual to be, say, an Aristotelian. Because of the inter-relatedness of these aspects, MacIntyre insists that we can only achieve this feat by re-embodying in our own lives features of the Aristotelian social context that are essential for attaining the standard of practical reasoning which Aristotle espouses.

Thus far, I have tried to fill out MacIntyre's conception of a tradition. I have claimed that he understands traditions as providing contexts within which individuals can achieve goods internal to practices and understand their lives as unified in narrative forms, which allow them to cultivate the virtues. Further, I have elaborated the important way that MacIntyre understands traditions as traditions of intellectual inquiry that always arise out of particular social contexts.

2. Which tradition?

The most important element which has been left out of my characterization of MacIntyre's conception of a tradition up to this point is his claim that each tradition has within it its own standards of practical rationality, and,

consequently, its own conception of justice. As he puts it, "rationality itself, whether theoretical or practical, is a concept with a history: indeed, since there are a diversity of traditions of enquiry, with histories, there are, so it will turn out, rationalities rather than rationality, just as it will also turn out that there are justices rather than justice."[23] So, two rival traditions that exist side by side are distinct from one another insofar as they employ different standards of rationality and derive from the standards different understandings of justice. Moreover, the standards of rationality and justice may be radically different. They may be logically incompatible and incommensurable, although this is not always or necessarily the case.[24]

MacIntyre not only claims that traditions embody their own conceptions of rationality and justice, he also contends that there can be no neutral ground outside of all traditions on which to stand when deciding whose justice or which rationality is superior.[25] MacIntyre writes,

> each rival theoretical standpoint provides from within itself and in its own terms the standards by which, so its adherents claim, it should be evaluated, rivalry between such contending standpoints includes rivalry over standards. There is no theoretically neutral, pre-theoretical ground from which the adjudication of competing claims can proceed.[26]

What evidence does MacIntyre have for this denial of the possibility of an objective, neutral, tradition-independent standpoint which can provide universal standards of evaluation? The argument that he employs to justify this claim is an argument from history. He notes that all philosophical attempts, whether Kantian or utilitarian, to find such tradition-neutral ground have led to interminable and unresolvable moral debate.[27] The notion that modern moral debate is interminable is one of the main lines of argument of *After Virtue*, where MacIntyre traces the development of an "emotivist culture," in which moral debate has degenerated into endless bickering over whose preferences should prevail. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre relies on this earlier argument: he opens the book by mentioning several moral debates which he regards as interminable because they are supposedly grounded in a tradition-neutral standpoint. Examples of such interminable debates include those over abortion, the possibility of a just war, and the death penalty.[28]

According to MacIntyre, not only have philosophers failed to find a tradition-neutral ground, but the socio-political movement of liberalism has also failed to make good on its appeal to universal, tradition-independent standards. Somewhat paradoxically, it has failed because liberalism itself has been transformed into a tradition.[29] Since MacIntyre regards liberalism's attempt to establish the existence of tradition-neutral standards of rationality as the

most cogent of all such attempts in history, its failure "provides the strongest reason that we can actually have for asserting that there is no such neutral ground, that there is no place for appeals to a practical-rationality-as-such or a justice-as-such to which all persons would by their very rationality be compelled to give their allegiance."[30] If liberalism has evolved into a tradition, with its own internal standards of rationality and justice, then MacIntyre's claim that there is no universal, tradition-neutral standpoint is vindicated.

MacIntyre acknowledges that since his argument is an argument from history, it is not strong enough to show conclusively that there can never be such a tradition-neutral standpoint. In fact, he claims that "it is clear that there can be no sound *a priori* argument to demonstrate that such [a neutral standpoint] is impossible."[31] Despite this recognition, he believes that his argument establishes a strong conclusion – specifically, the conclusion that "to be outside of all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution."[32] To be outside of all traditions is to be incapable of being fully rational.

The strength of this conclusion causes problems for MacIntyre's own account of liberalism's transformation from a reaction against tradition as such into a tradition of inquiry. If being outside of all traditions leaves us morally and intellectually bankrupt, and if liberalism started out as a reaction against tradition as such, thus, presumably, outside of all traditions, then how were the first liberals able to formulate the principles and begin the debates of liberalism? If the founders of liberalism were, by the very nature of their position vis-a-vis traditions, strangers to inquiry, then how were they able to found a system of inquiry, particularly one which would later develop into a tradition of inquiry, in MacIntyre's sense of the term?

To explore these questions further would be to question the validity of the conclusions MacIntyre draws on the basis of his historical argument by offering yet another historical argument which counters his history of liberalism and its relation to traditions of inquiry. Although I believe this to be a worthwhile project, I do not take this approach. Before I can spell out my approach to critiquing MacIntyre, however, I must first consider one final claim that he makes about traditions. I have already elaborated his contentions that different traditions have their own rationalities and justices, and that there is no tradition-neutral standpoint. It would seem, given these two claims, that there is no way to decide which of two rival traditions is rationally superior. After all, if there is no tradition-neutral ground on which to stand in making such judgments, then we can only evaluate other traditions from within the framework of our own tradition. Yet, it would seem that any evaluation of this sort would necessarily privilege our own tradition. MacIntyre, however, insists that things are not as they seem. He contends that we can rationally

adjudicate between the conceptual standpoints of rival traditions while still working within the rational framework of our own tradition.[33]

MacIntyre arrives at this procedure for rational adjudication by way of considering what he calls the relativist and perspectivist challenges to his position. The relativist challenge is that if we accept MacIntyre's claim that there is no tradition-neutral standpoint, then our choice to give allegiance to one tradition over another must be arbitrary. The perspectivist challenge is that given MacIntyre's account, we cannot contend that our tradition has arrived at any truths; we can only understand our tradition as offering a unique perspective on the world.

These two challenges are probably best understood as being one and the same challenge posed from two different directions: what MacIntyre calls the relativist challenge is posed from a point of view external to traditions, whereas the perspectivist challenge poses an attack on a tradition from the inside. Indeed, MacIntyre acknowledges that the relativist and perspectivist challenges "share some premises and are often presented jointly as parts of a single argument."[34] Moreover, he views both positions as reactions to the Enlightenment's search for a neutral, objective standpoint from which to begin moral inquiry. In fact, according to MacIntyre, the relativist and perspectivist challenges are merely inversions of the project of the Enlightenment, and, as such, fall victim to the same problems which haunt that project. Both the Enlightenment thinkers whom MacIntyre castigates for trying to find universal standards of rationality and their postmodern relativist and perspectivist critics accept the Enlightenment view that "truth is guaranteed by rational method and rational method appeals to principles undeniable by any fully reflective rational person."[35] The only difference between these groups is that Enlightenment thinkers believed they could find such truth, while relativists and perspectivists believe that the Enlightenment project failed to accomplish this task, and, consequently, that their positions are the only viable ones left.

MacIntyre claims that he is unwilling to fall into either of the camps. In order to circumvent the relativist and perspectivist challenges, he introduces the rationality of traditions. This form of rationality is to be found, "not in any theory of rationality as yet explicitly articulated and advanced within one or more of the traditions with which we have been concerned, but rather with a theory embodied in and presupposed by their practices of enquiry, yet never fully spelled out."[36] This type of rationality is procedural, and consists of the following three steps:

Step 1: the basic tenets and principles of the tradition are taken to be authoritative and accepted by all adherents.

Step 2: inadequacies are detected in some of the basic tenets and principles, rendering the tradition incoherent.

Step 3: the tradition reformulates tenets which were found to be inadequate, but the rest of the principles remain intact. In this way, coherence is restored to the tradition.[37]

All traditions, according to MacIntyre, exhibit this kind of rationality.

While it is fairly clear *what* this understanding of rationality entails, it is not clear *why* MacIntyre calls this the rationality of traditions and why the three step procedure should be considered a kind of rationality at all. His lack of clarity stems, in part, from an ambiguity concerning whose rationality is being described. Does the rationality of traditions concern the inner logic of the process of development of traditions themselves, or does it concern a procedure which individuals who are a part of a tradition utilize in order to decide which course of action to take in a given situation?

It seems at first glance that MacIntyre is using rationality only in the sense that has to do with the inner logic of the process of development, since the three steps that he delineates do not explicitly set out the way in which individuals determine which particular course of action to take. However, we can only make sense of the rationality of traditions if we understand that as also delimiting a necessary precondition for the possibility of rational action on the part of individual members of a tradition. MacIntyre contends that to be outside of all traditions is to be intellectually and morally bankrupt, and so to be incapable of being fully rational. If I am to be capable of being a fully rational agent, I must be part of a tradition. But, if I am a member of a tradition, then I am participating in the three step process of the rationality of traditions, which describes the way that all traditions develop over time. Moreover, according to MacIntyre, I am not just caught up in this process unwittingly. I am participating in it in a self-aware, reflective fashion.[38] Although the procedural rationality that MacIntyre describes does not seem to offer an account of how individuals make rational decisions regarding particular courses of action, it must be understood as that which provides for the possibility of individual, rational action. Thus, MacIntyre's discussion of the rationality of traditions looks like an abstract explanation of the concept of rationality. However, there is also a particular conception of rationality that emerges from MacIntyre's account which bears striking resemblance to the Enlightenment conception of rationality that he criticizes so vehemently.

MacIntyre contends that this rational procedure moves traditions toward truth, though he does not understand truth as correspondence with any objective or metaphysical reality. Instead, he understands truth as the result of the rational, dialectical process we have considered; in this sense, truth is that which "has sufficiently withstood . . . dialectical questioning and [the] framing of objections."[39] He stresses the fact that on this understanding, truth

involves more than mere warranted assertability, because to claim to have the truth is to make an appeal to something that transcends the present context.[40] When members of a given tradition claim to have the truth on a certain subject, they are not merely claiming to have arrived at a belief that is suitable for them at this particular time and in these particular circumstances, but to have arrived at a belief that will always be true. However, it is crucial to note that the dialectical nature of MacIntyre's conception of truth requires that the claim of timeless truth be continually tested and retested. In other words, MacIntyre's dialectical account of truth is also highly fallibilistic.

Sometimes the procedural rationality of traditions will usher in an epistemological crisis, meaning that the tradition at hand will be unable to cope with the inadequacies which develop in its basic principles. Further, a tradition which is in the midst of an epistemological crisis can no longer sustain its claims to truth.[41] In the event of an epistemological crisis, a tradition has three options. First, its adherents may eventually develop the conceptual resources necessary to navigate the crisis on their own, in which case the basic tenets and principles of the tradition will be rendered coherent once again, and the tradition will remain intact. Second, adherents to a tradition in an epistemological crisis may find that their conceptual resources are insufficient to deal with the crisis, in which case the tradition will fail, and, most importantly, fail by its own standards of failure.[42] Third, members of a tradition may discover that, though their own conceptual resources are insufficient to deal with the crisis, the resources of another, rival tradition, are adequate. In this event, "the rationality of tradition requires an acknowledgment by those who have hitherto inhabited and given their allegiance to the tradition in crisis that the alien tradition is superior in rationality and in respect of its claims to truth to their own."[43] MacIntyre believes that this third way of handling an epistemological crisis establishes the possibility of one tradition being judged rationally superior to another, without recourse to universal, tradition-neutral standards.

3. Traditions and the Enlightenment conception of rationality

Has MacIntyre managed to answer the relativist and perspectivist challenges while steering clear of universal, tradition-independent standards? I contend that he has not managed to do so, and that in his attempt to answer these challenges, MacIntyre has actually brought in a tradition-neutral standpoint with universalist aspirations through the back door.

By describing the rationality of traditions, MacIntyre has provided us with a rational method that all traditions must follow. The method is governed by a basic understanding of what counts as progress, which we may call a *prin-*

ciple of progress by determinate negation. On this understanding of progress, members of traditions can only revise a few select tenets or principles, while leaving a core of beliefs untouched. In the process of following this rational method, members of traditions may not negate all of their basic beliefs, they may only negate a determinate number of them. Further, as we have seen, MacIntyre has argued that through participation in this method, members of traditions arrive at the truth, where truth is understood dialectically. Finally, MacIntyre has claimed that in order to be rational, we must be a part of a tradition, where being a part of a tradition entails reflective participation in the rational method governed by the principle of progress by determinate negation.

This sounds familiar because it is a description of the same kind of universalist standpoint which MacIntyre criticized Enlightenment thinkers for espousing. The view that MacIntyre espouses is itself one in which "*truth* is guaranteed by *rational method* and rational method appeals to *principles undeniable by any fully reflective rational person*."[44] Clearly then, MacIntyre's account of the rationality of traditions entails an implicit appeal to precisely those kinds of Enlightenment standards that he claims to reject.[45]

It might be objected that MacIntyre is distinguishing between the common concept of rationality with which all traditions operate and the particular conceptions of rationality which become part of the content of particular traditions. His account of the rationality of traditions is meant to specify this concept, a concept which each individual tradition then transforms into its own particular conception. Indeed, MacIntyre himself indicates that he understands his project as an attempt to elucidate the "concept of tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive rational enquiry."[46] The problem with this objection is that MacIntyre is unable to maintain such a distinction. The concept of rationality that MacIntyre identifies actually has much content: it contains a principle of what counts as progress, a standard for truth, and a criterion by which the rationality of human beings can be judged. It is, in short, a particular conception of rationality.

However, even if my contention that MacIntyre offers a particular conception of rationality is accepted, it might still be objected that his loose sense of rationality is a long way from the conceptions of rationality developed by Enlightenment thinkers.[47] After all, the similarities that I have brought out between MacIntyre's notion of rationality and the Enlightenment's are general. This objection would be decisive were it not that MacIntyre criticizes the Enlightenment on precisely the same general grounds. His critique focuses on the attempt by Enlightenment thinkers to uncover universal standards of rationality which are not grounded in any particular tradition but which necessarily apply to all traditions. He is less concerned with the particular

conceptions of rationality espoused by Enlightenment thinkers than he is with their general pretensions to universality. However, as we have seen, his own account of the rationality of traditions shares these universalist aspirations. Indeed, it is ironic that this turns out to be the case, particularly in light of MacIntyre's recognition that it is crucial for his project that he not trap himself "by, perhaps inadvertently, continuing to accept the standards of the Enlightenment."[48]

The question remains, however, whether or not MacIntyre's project can be made coherent in the wake of this criticism. I see three possible ways in which he could restore coherence to his project. First, he could admit that he is defining the core conception of rationality from within a particular tradition, in which case, there appears to be no good reason to assume that this conception of rationality is actually operative in all other traditions. MacIntyre could give up the universalist presumptions that are implicit in his account and embrace *perspectivism*. As we have seen, however, MacIntyre explicitly rejects perspectivism as a plausible view. Thus, this option does not seem to be a live one for him.

MacIntyre's second option consists in an admission that there is a tradition-neutral standpoint, and that this standpoint is constituted by precisely the core conception of rationality that he himself delineates. He could align himself with the Enlightenment project and embrace a kind of *universalism*. However, MacIntyre is committed to an explicit rejection of this kind of view. Hence, this option does not seem any more attractive than the first.

MacIntyre's final option consists in the recognition that since rationality is a distinguishing characteristic of a tradition, and all traditions share a rather substantive conception of rationality, it is extremely difficult for him to demarcate a sharp boundary between one tradition and the next. This option certainly causes problems for the way that MacIntyre presents traditions as discrete, bounded entities which have their own internal languages, standards of evaluation, or norms of rationality. However, it is not obvious that it would be fundamentally antithetical to MacIntyre's project. To embrace this final option would simply entail making the claim that the lines which separate traditions are broken and shifting, and that the traditions which MacIntyre discusses might have enough in common to treat them all as a sort of *meta-tradition* of the West. Though MacIntyre expresses disdain for philosophers who talk about all of the West as if it were a metatradition, this option is still the most plausible of the three that I have suggested are the only options for restoring coherence to his project.[49]

4. The metatradition

MacIntyre expresses scorn for the view that we, as late twentieth century Americans, are heirs to one grand metatradition because he contends that this view strips traditions of their contexts, thus rendering them unintelligible. Nevertheless, this view can be attributed to MacIntyre, since the boundaries that he wants to draw between traditions are difficult to maintain. What is it that MacIntyre thinks separates one tradition from another? He acknowledges that all of the traditions with which he is concerned are at least in part derived from one common source: fifth and fourth century Athens. Since fifth and fourth century Athenians were heavily influenced by Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, MacIntyre begins his historical narrative of the genesis of traditions with an account of Homer. This does not mean that he believes that Homeric Greece is the cradle of all civilization; he acknowledges that there are other sources for those traditions he does analyze, as well as whole traditions that he does not discuss at all.[50] Of course, claiming that all the traditions with which he is concerned spring in part from the same source does not cause problems for the task of establishing boundaries among them. It is reasonable to suppose that as traditions proceed from their one common source, they branch out into distinct social practices and bodies of argument, and that they are each affected by different historical contingencies. It is reasonable to claim, as MacIntyre does, that traditions can be separated on the basis of their distinct histories.

Yet, as we have seen, MacIntyre also makes a much stronger claim: traditions are delineated because members of traditions have their own conception of rationality on which they base their unique understandings of justice and accounts of the virtues and vices. However, as I have argued, there are good reasons to reject the claim that traditions have their own norms of rationality. MacIntyre posits a substantive rationality which he claims that all traditions share. If all traditions share a single, substantive rationality, and boundaries between traditions are supposed to be established based on their rationality, then how are boundary lines to be drawn?

I am not suggesting that the various movements of thought that MacIntyre discusses cannot be distinguished. Clearly, they do have different histories, and their proponents do make distinct claims about justice. They do not have substantially different norms of rationality, and as a result, there is a great deal more overlap between different traditions than MacIntyre supposes. Further, if traditions were to overlap in this way, there would be no need to explain how members of one tradition could solve problems in another by way of a complicated theory about epistemological crises. We could simply say that the traditions that MacIntyre discusses are highly interrelated, and, as such,

members of different traditions routinely participate in solutions of conceptual and practical crises across traditions.

However, it is not clear that even this way of understanding MacIntyre's project is ultimately coherent. Since he insists that his traditions are intellectual and social, in order for the metatradition to fit into MacIntyre's project, it must arise out of particular social practices and institutions. But it seems impossible to imagine social institutions and practices that would be common to all of the members of the grand metatradition of the West and particular and local enough to qualify as the kinds of institutions and practices that MacIntyre is talking about. If the metatradition is not embodied and anchored in particular social practices and institutions, then it cannot be the kind of thing that MacIntyre is talking about when he discusses traditions. Thus, even the attempt to render MacIntyre's project coherent by appealing to a metatradition fails.

Since this is the most plausible of the three possible ways of restoring coherence to MacIntyre's work, its failure points to the conclusion that restoring coherence to his project is impossible. The impossibility of the task stems from the fact that the contradiction between MacIntyre's explicit rejection of the universalist standpoint and his implicit acceptance of just such a standpoint cannot be resolved.[51]

Notes

1. See Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), ch. 3.
2. For a similar assessment of MacIntyre's understanding of a tradition, see Julia Annas, "MacIntyre on Traditions," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1989): 388–404. However, Annas's reasons for claiming that MacIntyre's conception of a tradition is incoherent are different from those I will explore here.
3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 186.
4. Ibid., p. 188.
5. Ibid., p. 187.
6. Ibid., pp. 199–201.
7. Ibid., p. 219.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 220.
10. Ibid., p. 222.
11. For the claim that the account of traditions in *After Virtue* is actually compatible with the emotivism which MacIntyre argues against so vehemently, see J.B. Schneewind, "Virtue, Narrative, and Community: MacIntyre and Morality," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79 (November 1982): 653–663.
12. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 222–223. Cf. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 11.
13. Ibid., p. 222, emphasis mine.

14. For a critique of MacIntyre's account of the interplay between the social and intellectual aspects of a tradition, see Annas, op cit., pp. 394ff.
15. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 326.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 356.
18. Ibid., p. 327.
19. Ibid., p. 345.
20. Ibid., p. 373.
21. Ibid., p. 361.
22. Ibid., p. 349.
23. Ibid., p. 9.
24. Ibid., p. 351.
25. For a critique of this claim as anti-Thomistic, see Robert P. George, "Moral Particularism, Thomism, and Tradition," *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1989): 593–605.
26. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 173.
27. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 334.
28. Ibid., p. 1.
29. For an account of this transformation, see ibid., ch. 17.
30. Ibid., p. 346.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p. 367.
33. Cf. the following passage from *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*: "these lectures have as one of their aims to show that ... an admission of significant incommensurability and untranslatability in the relations between two opposed systems of thought and practice can be a prologue not only to rational debate, but to that kind of debate from which one party can emerge as undoubtedly rationally superior." MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, p. 5.
34. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 352.
35. Ibid., p. 353.
36. Ibid., p. 354.
37. Ibid., pp. 353–357.
38. Ibid., p. 326.
39. Ibid., p. 358.
40. Ibid., p. 363.
41. Ibid., p. 364.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., p. 365.
44. See note 35.
45. For similar arguments with respect to MacIntyre's project in *After Virtue*, see Susan Feldman, "Objectivity, Pluralism and Relativism: A Critique of MacIntyre's Theory of Virtue," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1986): 307–319; and Roger Paden, "Post-structuralism and Neo-romanticism or Is MacIntyre a Young Conservative?" *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 13 (1987): 125–143.
46. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 10.
47. I am grateful to Kenneth Seeskin for pressing this objection.
48. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 7.
49. Ibid., p. 386.
50. On this point, see MacIntyre, op cit., pp. 10–11.
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