CHAPTER 3

Alasdair MacIntyre's Tradition-Constituted Inquiry

> All morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular and . . . the aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all particularity is an illusion. . . . There is no way to possess the virtues except as part of a tradition.
>
> —Alasdair MacIntyre[1]

Alasdair MacIntyre has variously described himself as "an Augustinian Christian,"[2] a "Thomistic Aristotelian,"[3] a "Thomistic Aristotelian" and a "Catholic,"[4] and simply "a Thomist."[5] These self-descriptions are all the more notable in light of his earlier commitments to Marxism. Indeed, MacIntyre's intellectual journey has prompted one commentator to remark that "what distinguishes Professor MacIntyre is not the number of beliefs he has doubted, but the number of beliefs he has embraced. His capacity for doubt we share or surpass; it is his capacity for faith which is distinctive and perhaps unrivalled."[6] Although MacIntyre's thought has undergone significant changes over the course of his lengthy and highly productive career, his so-called virtue trilogy—*After Virtue*; *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*; and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*—present the views of a thinker generally committed to the tradition in which the

differing views of Aristotle and Augustine are synthesized in the work of Thomas Aquinas.[7] Ironically, although MacIntyre's "capacity for faith" has been criticized, the tone of his books, especially *After Virtue*, is decidedly pessimistic about the possibility of recovering that which has been destroyed by modernity. Thus, within MacIntyre's work we initially encounter what appears to be a paradox: belief mixed with despair, optimism with pessimism. Yet, it is in his trenchant critique of what he terms the "modern project" that the seeds of a more positive program are sown. Thus, for MacIntyre, the apparent paradox is not paradoxical at all, for in his account the possibility of bringing about a more positive conception of morality—and society more generally—is only feasible after properly diagnosing our current troubles, and such diagnosis requires a confrontation with the failures in which we are deeply mired.

As with Oakeshott, a central theme in MacIntyre's thought is the concept of tradition. As we saw in chapter 2, Oakeshott eventually substituted "practice" for "tradition" in order to avoid some of the connotations carried by the term "tradition." MacIntyre, on the other hand, employs both terms separately, so it will be important to understand how MacIntyre's conception of tradition differs from Oakeshott's. We saw that one of the central problems of Oakeshott's approach is a seeming inability to avoid a form of moral relativism, for a morality based on nothing more than the pursuit of intimations and the satisfaction produced by coherence does not appear to provide the tools necessary to escape such a conclusion. Furthermore, for Oakeshott, the question of judging between traditions is not one that he considers relevant. MacIntyre, on the other hand, recognizes and appreciates the differences between various traditions, and he is convinced that it is possible to determine the rational superiority of one tradition over another.

Since the theme of tradition is at the center of MacIntyre's so-called virtue trilogy, I will primarily focus upon those three works. To begin our discussion, we can turn to his groundbreaking 1981 book, *After Virtue*.

Modernity, Incommensurability, and Emotivism

According to Russell Hittinger, MacIntyre's *After Virtue* "was a bombshell thrown in the sandbox of contemporary ethicians."[8] Echoing G. E. M. Anscombe's sentiments voiced two decades prior that "it is not profitable

for us at present to do moral philosophy," MacIntyre declares that all modern moral philosophy is merely the incomplete and largely incoherent fragments of a premodern ethical system.[9] Employing a memorable metaphor that echoes the setting of Walter M. Miller Jr.'s novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, MacIntyre likens modern moral philosophy to a great scientific culture that undergoes an almost complete destruction from within. Science falls out of favor, and those in authority attempt to rid it completely from the society. Some generations later there is a revival of interest in the idea of science, but much has been lost, and that which remains is badly damaged and incomplete. Any attempt to reconstruct a complete science from the remains is doomed at its inception because of the inability of these new scientists to comprehend properly the context within which the information they have recovered was originally employed. The world of moral philosophy, argues MacIntyre, is in much the same situation as this fictional world of science. MacIntyre's goal in *After Virtue* is to point out how the abandonment of moral philosophy rooted in the Aristotelian tradition is the source of the breakdown, and only by recovering that which was lost, through a sort of intellectual archeology, can intelligibility be restored.

Modern moral discourse is characterized by its interminability. In most major moral disputes no resolution is reached; instead, parties continue (or break off in disgust) presenting versions of arguments that simply cannot, on their own terms, reach a conclusion whereby one is shown to be rationally superior to another. Invoking the term employed by Thomas Kuhn, MacIntyre argues that modern moral arguments are "incommensurable."[10] By way of illustration, MacIntyre presents three issues that in today's moral discourse admit of no resolution: war, abortion, and economic justice.

Regarding the first, there are those who agree with the just war tradition that a just war must distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, but the weapons and tactics of modern warfare make such distinctions impossible, so all modern wars are unjust, and the only moral course is pacifism. On the other hand, there are those who recognize the dangers of the modern world and argue that the only possible way to avoid war is to be well armed and willing to fight, even if that includes employing nuclear weapons. A third position holds that the only justifiable wars are those that seek to liberate those groups who are oppressed by the domination of wealthy countries.

The second set of arguments, those dealing with abortion, are no less intractable. First, there are those who claim that because all persons possess rights to their own bodies, it is morally permissible for a woman to abort a fetus. On the other hand, I cannot will that my mother had aborted me. But if I cannot deny this in my own case, universalizing this principle shows that I cannot deny to others the same right to life that I claim for myself; thus, abortion is immoral. Finally, there are those who argue that murder is wrong and abortion is murder, for it is the taking of an innocent human life.

Regarding economic justice, there are those who argue that justice demands that all people have an equal opportunity, and such opportunity requires equal access to education, health care, and other resources. But this sort of access requires money, so those who possess more are morally (and ideally, legally) required to give up significant portions of their wealth to ensure equality. In addition, all private schools, private medical practices, and any other organization or institution that makes it possible for one person to secure benefits not available to all must be eliminated. On the other hand, there are those who claim that all people possess the right to do as they wish so long as no one else is hurt. According to this view, individuals are morally free to make agreements, exchange goods and services, and enjoy the fruits of individual initiative (and luck of birth) in whatever fashion they choose. In this case, private schools and private medical practices should not only be allowed, but they should be unregulated and subject only to the pressures of the market.[11]

In the various arguments one can recognize positions taken by thinkers such as Marx, Locke, Kant, Rousseau, Adam Smith, Rawls, and Nozick. These arguments are indeed incommensurable, and it should be noted that the tenor of modern debates is frequently shrill. This is no doubt due, in part, to the emotional intensity with which various positions are held and defended. But, without any overarching theory of morality, nature, human nature, or the good upon which to base moral discussion, it turns out that the premises used to support the differing conclusions appear to be arbitrarily selected by those advancing them.[12] The resulting moral theory—MacIntyre calls it "emotivism"—has come to dominate modern moral debates. This is "the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character."[13] Thus, "emotivism rests upon a claim that every

attempt, whether past or present, to provide a rational justification for an objective morality has in fact failed."[14] If emotivism is, indeed, the common feature of most modern moral discourse, then it is easy to understand the seemingly arbitrary nature of the premises supporting each particular position and also the rapid speed in which so many moral arguments degenerate into shrill assertions and counterassertions incapable of rational resolution.

Emotivism as an approach to moral theory is the product of a badly damaged conception of morality rooted in Enlightenment thought, for, MacIntyre argues, there was once a time when moral philosophers could make headway in moral disputes. This suggests a historical decline, from an approach to moral questions that provided the means to resolve moral disputes to the modern situation in which resolution is virtually impossible. Indeed, MacIntyre argues that only a moral theory very much like Aristotle's is capable of providing the resources necessary for dealing adequately with the moral disagreements of our modern world. Aristotle's moral theory is founded upon the notion that human beings have a specific *telos* rooted in human nature. However, Aristotle in general and teleology in particular were rejected by the early moderns, such as Bacon and Descartes, and that rejection has continued and solidified so that the problems within moral philosophy today are a direct result of that rejection.

But, some have objected, is it necessary to embrace Aristotle's teleology? Why not construct a theory of morality on the much more obvious foundation of human reason? In other words, perhaps the notion of rationality itself is an adequate grounding for a theory of morality. Modern analytic philosophers, for example, have attempted to employ rationality per se as the foundation of morality. One need merely survey the writings of such neo-Kantians as Rawls, Nozick, Donagan, and Gewirth to see the various ways this is attempted. But, MacIntyre claims, none of these are, in fact, successful, and further, the fact that so much disagreement exists between these philosophers who generally share the same conception of rationality provides strong evidence that their approach is fatally flawed.[15]

What specifically was it about the Enlightenment that led to this degeneration of morality? Premodern European moral theory was broadly Christian in character. Thus, there existed, prior to moral considerations, certain presuppositions that virtually all people presumed as true: God exists and created a world with certain moral structures; humans have a definite nature, and thus a *telos*, and are capable of recognizing this structure

and are therefore responsible for their choices. The moral tradition that emerged out of this Christian consensus provided a common conception of morality that continued in large part into the modern period. This consensus is seen in the shared moral beliefs of virtually all the contributors of the modern project in spite of the increasingly diverse justifications for those beliefs. Thus, we see such disparate figures as Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard all affirming the moral goodness of such things as truth-telling, family, and justice, while at the same time justifying those positions on the basis of the passions, reason, and mere choice, respectively.[16] This breakdown of common justifications (common conclusions have not, nor do they ever, completely disappear) began when modern science, which was mechanistic, replaced Aristotelian science, which was teleological. This shift is more readily apparent when it is construed, as MacIntyre does, in terms of categorical and hypothetical statements. The belief that God exists and is concerned with human action provides the grounds for a categorical command the obligation of which derives directly from God. The belief that humans possess a specific nature and a *telos* that accords with that nature provides the grounds for a hypothetical moral statement. But the Enlightenment systematically undermined the belief in God. By making autonomous reason the sole criterion for morality, the existence of God became little more than a heuristic device that was eventually seen as superfluous and then eliminated.

On the other hand, when Hume denies that an "ought" can be derived from an "is" he is directly attacking the Aristotelian notion of teleology, which claims that because something possess a certain nature, it ought to behave in a particular manner—for Aristotle, to know the "is" is to also know the "ought."[17] For instance, if we know what a watch *is*, we also know what a watch *ought* to do. Thus, if a hard is/ought divide is legitimate, then any conception of teleology necessarily breaks down. We can see, then, that at both the categorical and hypothetical level, the premodern conception of morality was undermined and eventually overturned. Thus, "moral judgements are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by these practices."[18] Hearkening back to his introductory metaphor of destruction and partial though incomplete recovery, MacIntyre notes that the modern debate between the deontologists and consequentialists is merely a relic of premodern moral philosophy devoid of its original and essential foundations. Within the context of classical theism, he writes,

> Moral judgments were at once hypothetical and categorical in form. They were hypothetical insofar as they expressed a judgment as to what conduct would be teleologically appropriate for a human being: "You ought to do so-and-so, if and since your *telos* is such-and-such" or perhaps "You ought to do so-and-so, if you do not want your essential desires to be frustrated." They were categorical insofar as they reported the contents of the universal law commanded by God: "You ought to do so-and-so: that is what God's law enjoins." But take away from them that in virtue of which they were hypothetical *and* that in virtue of which they were categorical and what are they? Moral judgments lose any clear status and the sentences which express them in a parallel way lose any undebatable meaning. Such sentences become available as forms of expression for an emotivist self which lacking the guidance of the context in which they were originally at home has lost its linguistic as well as its practical way in the world.[19]

Thus, in the wake of the abandonment of theism and teleology as grounds for categorical and hypothetical moral statements, a search has ensued to replace these discarded concepts with others that do the same work but do not carry the same baggage. For categorical judgments, rationality itself was employed by Kant as a foundation. One manifestation of this is found in the prevalence of rights theories, which supposedly provide a moral foundation for categorical statements without the need to recur to God. MacIntyre notes that the concept of natural rights or human rights is a relative latecomer onto the philosophical stage. If this notion were as fundamental as some wish to make it, then it is curious that no premodern philosopher ever stumbled across it. He bluntly concludes this line of thought: "The truth is plain: there are no such rights, and beliefs in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns."[20]

Hypothetical moral statements, on the other hand, are transferred to utilitarian theories that base morality on the maximization of happiness rather than the attainment of some good essential to one's nature. MacIntyre attacks the concept of happiness as a useful standard for moral inquiry by revisiting the now familiar objection to Bentham's version of utilitarianism: there are too many types of happiness to reduce them to a single scale. MacIntyre duly notes Mill's attempt to overcome this vexing problem by distinguishing between higher and lower pleasures, but rightly concludes that despite Mill's attempts to salvage it, utilitarianism, owing

to the varied and incommensurable nature of happiness, is simply not adequate to provide a unitary standard of moral value.[21]

Thus, although certain themes remain intact despite the attacks of modernity, these remnants are ultimately groundless and are sustainable not by rational argument but by emotive affirmation. Individual will, which is the essence of emotivism, has replaced both the will of God and teleology. In the end, "each moral agent now spoke unconstrained by the externalities of divine law, natural teleology, or hierarchical authority; but why should anyone else now listen to him?"[22] Since emotivism is based solely on individual will, MacIntyre presents his readers with a dilemma: either Nietzsche or Aristotle.[23] In other words, morality is either derived from a teleological structure that is more or less similar to that described by Aristotle, or it is a function of individual will in the fashion described by Nietzsche. In light of such stark choices, MacIntyre seeks to defend an approach to morality that is essentially Aristotelian and Thomistic.

Virtues and Rules

According to MacIntyre, one of the most conspicuous features of modern moral philosophy is its emphasis on rules and its neglect of the concept of virtue. Aristotelian ethics is oriented around the virtues and in that context rules, though never discarded, take a decidedly secondary position in the overall scheme. MacIntyre notes that whenever the virtues lose their primary place within a moral system, a form of Stoicism with its emphasis on rules inevitably fills the void.[24] An ethics of virtue requires an underlying teleology. When inquiry begins with a conception of a human *telos*, the question that emerges is, "What kind of person ought I be in order to reach my *telos*?" When such a question is asked, the emphasis will be on the development of the virtues (excellences of character) necessary to attain one's *telos*. On the other hand, when teleology is abandoned, as in most of modern philosophy, the concept of virtue necessarily fades into the background, and a rule-based approach to morality takes its place. Thus, in the world of modern moral philosophy the emphasis on rules and the virtual absence of the concept of virtue is a direct result of the abandonment of any notion of teleology.[25]

This is not to suggest, MacIntyre is careful to add, that rules are unimportant in a system of virtues. Indeed, in any system of morality, rules

are necessary, but they are not sufficient in themselves.[26] "Rules and virtues are interrelated."[27] And although it seems that a system in which the virtues are primary still allows room for rules, in a system in which rules are emphasized the role of the virtues is squeezed out. But is a moral system in which rules are primary and the virtues excluded feasible? In such a system the central question becomes, "How do we know *which* rules to follow?"[28] Unless one has a conception of the virtues, especially the virtue of prudence, such questions break down into the interminable emotivist debates that characterize modern moral inquiry. Thus, MacIntyre writes, "To progress in both moral enquiry and the moral life is then to progress in understanding all the various aspects of that life, rules, precepts virtues, passions, actions as parts of a single whole. Central to that progress is the exercise of the virtue of *prudentia*, the virtue of being able in particular situations to bring to bear the relevant universals and to act so that the universal is embodied in the particular."[29] Thus, rules cannot be coherently and rationally applied unless the virtues are present and serve to determine which rule ought to be applied in a particular situation. Virtues, then, are logically prior to rules and serve to provide guidance for the application of rules.

MacIntyre notes that for the modern reader, perhaps the most surprising aspect of Aristotle's ethical theory is that "there is relatively little mention of rules anywhere in the *Ethics*."[30] This is not to say that Aristotle has no conception of rules or does not believe that some acts are absolutely and universally wrong. Aristotle writes, "One part of the politically just is natural, and the other part legal. The natural has the same validity everywhere alike, independent of its seeming so or not."[31] Since, for Aristotle, there are some acts that are simply and universally prohibited—for instance, adultery—his view is not consequentialist, but it is teleological.[32]

Another central feature of Aristotelian ethics that is generally rejected in modern circles is the notion that the good of an individual is inextricably tied up with the common good. In an approach rooted in the liberal self, the individual is conceived as standing prior to any commitment to a community; however, Aristotle understood that in important ways, the *polis* served to constitute the individual and in so doing served to make one's *telos* comprehendible. In other words, since humans are by nature political animals, and since the *polis* is the natural end of all human communities (for its end is self-sufficiency), it follows that humans require the *polis* in order fully to achieve their *telos*. Thus, the *polis* is logically prior to

the individual, for without the *polis* a person cannot fully achieve humanity.[33] Because human goods are tied up in the *polis*, one cannot consider one's own goods without at the same time considering the goods of the community, for they are inseparable.[34]

MacIntyre is quite aware that Aristotle's *Ethics* presupposes what MacIntyre terms a "metaphysical biology," and he attempts to present an account of morality that is essentially Aristotelian but one that does not require any allegiance to Aristotle's biology, which, according to MacIntyre, must be rejected.[35] It is important to note, at this point, that in a later work MacIntyre admits that considerations of biology cannot simply be ignored. Although he admits that aspects of Aristotle's biology are wrong and ought to be rejected, "I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible."[36] By attempting to construct a theory of ethics apart from any consideration of the biological fact of human existence, one essentially veers toward a Cartesian dualism, which denies the essential unity of the human being. Therefore, an ethical theory ought to consider the biological nature of human existence as well as the teleological structure of human life. Properly conceived, then, human existence is a unity comprising the biological and the nonbiological (mental, spiritual, etc.). This unity, which is the human being, is further constituted by the teleological nature of existence whereby pursuing one's *telos* is an important feature of flourishing. Further, the good of each person is only comprehendible in terms of the common good. Thus, humans are essentially embedded in a rich and complex metaphysical, biological, and social structure, and thus the modern notion of radical individualism—which is to say, the liberal self—rests, according to Aristotle (and MacIntyre), on a grave error.

History, Theory, and Truth

MacIntyre follows Aristotle in affirming the essential social and biological aspects of human life, but he goes further, for unlike Aristotle, MacIntyre argues that humans are historical beings and as such we are embedded in our historical moment. Aristotle's conception of moral inquiry is, however, ahistorical. According to MacIntyre, Aristotle believed that "individuals as members of a species have a *telos*, but there is no history of the *polis* or of Greece or of mankind moving towards a *telos*."[37] MacIntyre, for his part, is conscious of history and its importance for any type of inquiry and em-

ploys the methodology of other historicist philosophers of history in service of his project. In describing the intention of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre remarks that he hopes to find "in the type of philosophy and history propounded by writers such as Hegel and Collingwood . . . resources which we cannot find in analytic or phenomenological philosophy."[38] In his first book, *A Short History of Ethics* (1966), he writes,

> Moral philosophy is often written as though the history of the subject were only of secondary and incidental importance. This attitude seems to be the outcome of a belief that moral concepts can be examined and understood apart from their history. Some philosophers have even written as if moral concepts were a timeless, limited, unchanging, determinate species of concept, necessarily having the same features throughout history. . . . In fact, of course, moral concepts change as social life changes.[39]

This general attitude toward the historical nature of all inquiry remains a constant throughout his work. MacIntyre believes that one of the mistakes of the Enlightenment is the belief that one's historical place is accidental and can, with the proper epistemological effort, be transcended. The Enlightenment aspiration to an objective, universal perspective that manages to shake off the limitations effected by tradition, culture, language, and history is, for MacIntyre, an impossible—and ultimately damaging—dream.[40]

Language serves in important ways to frame and limit the possibilities of inquiry. Far from being a simple and neutral system of signs signifying universal truths, a language carries with it particularities unique to that language, for it in many ways reflects the particular history and culture out of which it has grown. Thus, "every tradition is embodied in some particular set of utterances and actions and thereby in all the particularities of some specific language and culture. The invention, elaboration, and modification of the concepts through which both those who found and those who inherit a tradition understand it are inescapably concepts which have been framed in one language rather than another."[41] This being the case, it is not self-evident that all concepts are readily translatable from one language into another. Part of the modern belief in objective and unmediated access to universal truth is the opinion that all texts are simply translatable.[42]

This appreciation for the historical, social, and linguistic embeddedness of the human experience has a direct influence upon the manner in which any inquiry ought to be understood. Since we are, in part, the products of a particular historical and social context, there is no way of throwing off these limitations, for to throw them off is to cause the disintegration of our very identities.[43] Thus, all inquiry is tied to the particularities of time and cultural milieu. If so, then the goal of attaining universal, objective facts completely untainted by the particularities of one's situation is impossible. The particular situation in which each individual finds himself provides the conceptual framework by which facts are interpreted and inquiry is conducted. But if the human mind is constituted, at least in part, by the particularities of history and society, then the facts that are presented to the inquirer are themselves interpreted by a mind that is oriented and shaped by forces particular to time and social context. Thus, all inquirers begin their respective inquiries with resources that are the products of a particular history and culture (we can in general lump these factors together under the rubric of "tradition").

This understanding of inquiry throws us back into the long-standing discussion between the nature of universals and particulars. Optimistic Enlightenment thinkers believed it was possible to transcend the particulars and achieve knowledge of universals quite untainted by the vagaries of tradition. But if an individual's tradition provides the framework within which all knowing occurs, then universal truth (assuming such exists) is only grasped through the mediating function of particulars rather than apart from them. One's historical place and social context do matter, for "without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists. Yet particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated. The notion of escaping from it into a realm of entirely universal maxims which belong to man as such . . . is an illusion."[44] It is important to note here that this position does not necessarily imply that universals do not exist or that they are unknowable. If we begin with the assumption that a reality exists that is independent from any perception of it (a realist view that Oakeshott denies), and if we also accept the premise that human knowing can never completely transcend the particularities of time and place, then we may still claim that universal truth may be aspired toward. Indeed, for MacIntyre, "the concept of truth is timeless,"[45] and this timeless truth is the proper goal of philosophical inquiry. At the same time, "there are no general timeless stan-

dards" by which rival claims are to be judged.[46] Thus, although timeless truth is, indeed, the ideal toward which a philosopher ought to aspire, he ought never believe that this universal and timeless truth can be known in a purely objective fashion that completely transcends the time and place from which the inquiry takes place.[47]

Practice, Narrative, and Tradition

With the above features in place, it is obvious that any account of the virtues will include the "complex, historical, multi-layered character of the core concept of virtue."[48] MacIntyre argues that the logical development of an account of virtue includes three stages: an account of the concept of a practice; an account of the narrative order of a human life; and an account of the concept of tradition.[49] Regarding these three stages, "no human quality is to be accounted a virtue unless it satisfies the conditions specified *at each of the three stages*."[50] This section will get to the heart of MacIntyre's understanding of tradition, and at the same time it will help to uncover important similarities and differences between MacIntyre's approach and that developed by Oakeshott.

Practice

According to MacIntyre, the concept of a practice is an essential precondition for understanding the virtues. He begins by claiming that his usage of the concept "practice" "does not completely agree with current ordinary usage."[51] According to MacIntyre, a practice is "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended."[52] Such a definition requires a bit of unpacking. First, a practice is coherent and complex. By way of example, MacIntyre points out that such things as tic-tac-toe, throwing a football, bricklaying, and planting turnips are not practices—they do not specify activities that are both coherent and complex. Of course, a game of tic-tac-toe is a coherent whole, but it is not complex. On the other hand, throwing a football, bricklaying, and turnip growing are not coherent wholes;

rather, they are activities the meaning of which is not fully apparent apart from a larger whole. Thus, a game of chess, the game of football, architecture, and agriculture are examples of practices, for they satisfy both the complexity and the coherency criteria. Complex activities such as physics, biology, painting, music, and politics all count as practices.[53]

Second, the goal of a practice is the realization of goods internal to that particular practice. MacIntyre employs an illustration to help distinguish the difference between internal and external goods. Imagine that an adult wishes to teach a child to play chess. The child, though, has very little interest in learning the game but does have a (typical) affection for candy. The adult might strike a deal with the child. For each thirty-minute session of chess completed by the child, the adult will promise to give the child a certain amount of candy. The child agrees and submits to the lessons wholly motivated by the promise of candy. After the child has mastered the basic rules of the game, the adult now alters the bargain. The child must win in order to secure the reward. The adult stipulates that he will never play in such a way as to absolutely preclude the child from winning, but the child must play with full concentration in order to win. The child agrees and, still motivated by the candy, plays to win. But at this point, there is no reason for the child not to cheat whenever there is no chance of being caught, for the goods the child seeks are external to the practice in which he is participating. Eventually, or so the adult hopes, the child will begin to appreciate the game of chess, not for the candy that has served as an external, contingent good, but for the goods internal to the game itself—skill, imagination, competition. At that point, the child will no longer be inclined to cheat, for to cheat is to refuse to engage the practice on its own terms and simultaneously forfeit the goods internal to that practice. The goods internal to a practice can only be achieved through excelling at a practice in terms of the practice. On the other hand, external goods, be they power, status, money, or candy, are not essential elements of a practice, for such goods can be secured in numerous ways, and achieving them does not necessarily depend on participating in a practice.[54] Furthermore, it is frequently the case that external goods are of a limited supply and therefore are objects of competition. Conversely, the goods internal to a practice are such that their achievement "is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice."[55] Thus, for example, when a golfer pushes the game of golf to new levels of excellence, all golfers can appreciate the achievement, and all are spurred to greater excellence.

Third, in addition to the achievement of internal goods, "a practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules."[56] Before a person can enter into a practice, he must first submit himself to the rules and standards that constitute the practice. The novice must subordinate himself to those who are recognized as the masters and undergo a period of apprenticeship during which the rules and skills are learned and acquired.[57] MacIntyre also employs the term "craft" in a manner that is essentially synonymous with practice.[58] MacIntyre generally speaks of craft in conjunction with the concept of apprenticeship. Apprenticeship entails an unequal relationship between a master and a student in which the student, in an act that includes something resembling a step of faith, places himself in a posture of submission to the authority of the master. It is only through such a process of submission and learning at the foot of a master that the novice can be brought into a proper understanding of a craft or a practice so that he can enjoy the goods internal to it: "Those qualities of mind and character that enable someone both to recognize the relevant goods and to use the relevant skills in achieving them are the excellences, the virtues, that distinguish or should distinguish teacher from apprentice or student."[59]

Thus, a virtue can be defined as "*an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving them*."[60] MacIntyre appears to hold that a complex relationship exists between practices and virtues. On the one hand, in the definition directly above, the possession of the virtues is necessary for properly participating in a practice such that the goods internal to it are enjoyed. Subordinating oneself to the authority of a master requires the virtue of courage. The learning process that ensues leads one to recognize what is due to the particular participants of the practice—that is, justice. In learning to appreciate the goods internal to the practice, one must participate according to the rules governing the practice—honesty. Thus, in order to properly enter into and participate in a practice, one must possess the virtues of courage, justice, and honesty.[61] It would seem, then, that certain virtues must be possessed prior to fully entering into a practice. On the other hand, at times it appears that MacIntyre believes that the virtues are the products of participating in practices: "Just as the virtues are exercised in the whole range of our activities, so they are learned in the same range of activities, in those contexts of practice in which we learn from others how to

discharge our roles and functions first as members of a family and household, then in the tasks of schoolwork, and later on as farmworkers or carpenters or teachers or members of a fishing crew or a string quartet."[62]

Thus, it appears that practices require the virtues, and the virtues require practices. This is not, I think, a vicious circle. A preliminary example could take the following form: All normally situated humans belong to a family. A child becomes aware of certain social practices through parental training and by observing older siblings and peers. Prior to engaging in familial social practices, a young child observes and mimics. He becomes aware of a rough conception of the virtues even though engaging in simple activities that do not fully fit the definition of a practice. Although the activity may occur as component parts of a practice, the child's perceptual awareness is such that he cannot yet comprehend the coherent whole of which the particular action is a part. With this partially formed understanding of the virtues, the child moves gradually toward engaging fully in familial practices. Thus, a form of the virtues is gained by observing, and that is adequate to begin the process of initiation into familial practices, and through participating in practices as an apprentice, the child acquires and refines the virtues. As the virtues are extended and refined, it is possible for the child more fully to engage in and appreciate the goods internal to a practice. Further, it eventually becomes possible for the child to seek inclusion in increasingly diverse and sophisticated practices and through them develop a better comprehension of the virtues. Thus, in a real and important way practices require the virtues and virtues require practices.

Two negative definitions of a practice should be noted. First, although a practice includes an element of technical skill, it is never simply technique. For "what is distinctive in a practice is in part the way in which conceptions of the relevant goods and ends which the technical skills serve . . . are transformed and enriched by these extensions of human powers and by that regard for its own internal goods which are partially definitive of each particular practice."[63] Further, unlike a set of definitive technical skills that can be mastered, "practices never have a goal or goals fixed for all time—painting has no such goal nor has physics."[64] Any goals that might be attached to a practice are subject to changes that are derived from the history of that particular practice. Thus, "to enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose

achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and *a fortiori* the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn."[65] It is clear, then, that a practice includes an element of technical knowledge, but is not merely that, and a practice is only coherent in terms of its own history.

Second, although practices often depend upon institutions for their ongoing existence, a practice is not an institution. To use MacIntyre's examples, the game of chess, physics, and medicine are practices. Chess clubs, laboratories, and hospitals are institutions. It is a characteristic of institutions that they are concerned with external goods, such as money, status, and power, and so forth. But although institutions are not practices in the sense defined by MacIntyre, they do play an important sustaining role in the life of a practice. But, at the same time, institutions tend to co-opt the internal goods of a practice in the service of the external goods of the institution. In other words, practices are threatened with institutionalization by the very institutions that help sustain them. A practice can avoid this fate only if those who engage in the practice possess the virtues necessary to perpetuate the practice through an appreciation of the goods internal to the practice.[66]

Narrative

The second concept necessary for a coherent account of the virtues is the notion of the narrative order of a human life. It is a feature of modern thought to divide a human life into a variety of parts corresponding to biological development, social roles, professional roles, and so on. We tend to distinguish sharply between a child and the adult he will become, and we distinguish between the adult and the frail elderly person who eventually emerges. We tend to distinguish between a person's role as a daughter, a mother, a professional, a church member, and so forth. Such sharp distinctions are incompatible with the Aristotelian conception of the virtues. It is the nature of the virtues to unify; thus, a proper accounting of the virtues requires "a concept of the self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end."[67]

Actions are unintelligible when divorced from what MacIntyre calls a "setting": "A social setting may be an institution, it may be what I have called a practice, or it may be a milieu of some other human kind." Further,

and importantly, "a setting has a history," and apart from that history the actions related to the particular setting will be unintelligible both to the actors and to any who observe.[68]

MacIntyre employs an example to further his point. Recipes in a cookbook are set out in a step-by-step series. The cook is expected to follow these directions closely in order to produce the desired results. But, apart from the concept of a setting, the individual directions—add 1 cup of flour, crack two eggs—are quite meaningless. Each element in the process is unintelligible apart from the other steps in the sequence; furthermore, "even such a sequence requires a context to be intelligible."[69] The setting provides the necessary integrating context whereby an individual act or a series of related actions are given coherence and intelligibility.

The setting that is perhaps most familiar yet most overlooked is that found in the simple act of conversation.[70] We conceive of different conversations in terms of varying genres— tragedy, comedy, farce. "Indeed, a conversation is a dramatic work, even if a very short one, in which the participants are not only the actors, but also the joint authors, working out in agreement or disagreements the mode of their production."[71] Human interaction, MacIntyre claims, is best understood in terms of conversation, in which the participants engage in a dramatic event in which the actors share authorship. The shared authorship, though, is not synonymous with complete control of the setting or outcome of the dramatic piece, for each actor is thrust onto a stage not of his own making and is part of a social and historical setting that is largely unchosen. In light of these very real constraints, it is all too true that "we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives."[72] We share authorship not only with those engaged in a particular conversation but also with those who have gone before us, who have contributed to the historical development of the setting in which we now converse. In this sense, in order to understand properly the multitude of human interactions (understood as conversational dramas) we must comprehend the narrative nature of those interactions.

What has this to do with an account of the virtues? When a human life is conceived merely as a series of fragmented and partially related events, the concept of virtue becomes meaningless. Virtues are dispositions to act in a way that promotes the *telos* of the individual actor. Such a *telos* is a holistic notion that comprehends the entirety of the person. When a narrative account of a human life is exchanged for one that is fragmented

and lacking in any unifying teleological structure, the virtues are replaced by rules. The modern rejection of an ethics of virtue and the dominance of rule-based theories, both deontological and utilitarian, merely indicates that a narrative conception of human life has been discarded, lost, or perhaps overlooked.

A human is "essentially a storytelling animal." If humans find themselves engaged in conversation in settings that are the product of a particular historical development, and if our roles (of which we are at best coauthor) are laden with moral implications, then it follows that "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"[73] Stories, then, play an indispensable role in moral education: "deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."[74]

It is the nature of conversation to increase understanding. Furthermore, conversations are ongoing. That is, they can be reopened and the issues reengaged for further consideration. Thus, a conception of the human as a unity includes the question, "What is the best way to live my life given the settings in which I find myself?" In light of this question, the purpose of a human life presents itself as a quest. The quest is an ongoing pursuit of what it means to live a good life: "The good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is."[75] A narrative account that unifies a particular life makes the continuity of such a quest intelligible, and the possession of the virtues makes the quest itself possible.

Tradition

The intelligibility of practices and narratives requires a wider context; thus, the third component for an account of the virtues is tradition. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defines a tradition as follows:

> A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes many generations. Hence 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.[76]

Another definition is given in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and although it is quite similar, it highlights certain important points:

> A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.[77]

Perhaps surprisingly, an essential element of a tradition, according to MacIntyre, is a certain degree of conflict. This does not mean that there is not substantial agreement within a tradition. Indeed, without the background of fundamental agreement setting the parameters of the conflict, disagreement between those sharing a tradition would be impossible. The internal conflict—part of the conversational aspect of human existence—is not necessarily destructive of the tradition. Instead, internal conflict is an indicator of a healthy tradition in which options are explored with vigor. The ongoing results of the conflict represent the progression of the tradition, for to engage in the debate is to participate in the authorial task of writing the history of the tradition. Thus, "to be an adherent of a tradition is always to enact some further stage in the development of one's tradition."[78]

A tradition provides the resources necessary for evaluating the rationality of its internal structure. There is no universal and objective—that is, Cartesian—standpoint from which to deliberate the rationality of a particular claim or tradition. In other words, there is no traditionless place to which the thinker can escape and from which he can make judgments. Thus, the "resources of adequate rationality are made available to us only in and through traditions."[79] Because a tradition is an extended argument or conversation through time which evolves according to the manner in which the argument plays out, and because that argument is conducted in a particular language by particular people possessing a particular history,

"traditions are always and ineradically to some degree local, informed by particularities of language and social and natural environment."[80] Again, all inquiry is framed to a certain degree by the particularities in which the inquiry takes place. Although it is certainly true that all traditions of inquiry aspire to universal and timeless truth, this goal must be understood as an ideal that time and culture-bound inquirers can only approximate and never achieve. This, of course, is not to say that all traditions are equally right or wrong. Indeed, the claim that objective, universal truth is unattainable does not entail the inference that one attempt is no better than any other. One of the chief goals of MacIntyre's project is to show how one tradition can be shown to be rationally superior to its opponents, thereby justifying its claim to a closer approximation of truth than its foes.

It is important to note at this point that tradition-constituted inquiry does not pursue an explicit and specifiable goal; instead, it is essentially open-ended, unpredictable, and always susceptible of revision. In this light, "no one at any stage can ever rule out the future possibility of their present beliefs and judgments being shown to be inadequate in a variety of ways."[81] In this regard, MacIntyre points out, his conception of inquiry is anti-Cartesian and anti-Hegelian. It is anti-Cartesian because every rational tradition "begins from the contingency and positivity of some set of established beliefs."[82] Unlike the radical doubt with which Descartes attempted to begin his inquiry, tradition-constituted inquiry begins with the resources provided by the tradition itself. In much the same manner that an apprentice must entrust himself to the authority of a master before he can learn the subtleties of a practice, so too the starting point for tradition-constituted inquiry is submission to the authority of the tradition, and it is only from this beginning point that the participant can engage in the internal discussion within a tradition. This approach is anti-Hegelian because there is no explicit and specifiable goal toward which all inquiry is intentionally moving.[83] This does not constitute an agnosticism regarding the existence of God or final causes. Rather it is a recognition of the contingent and fallible nature of human rationality. Thus, although MacIntyre's approach is a kind of historicism that agrees at important points with Hegel, his fallibilism provides an important distinction.[84]

MacIntyre describes three basic stages in the development of a tradition. In the first stage "the relevant beliefs, texts, and authorities have not yet been put in question." The second stage occurs when the inadequacies of those beliefs, texts, and authorities emerge. The third stage entails the

response in which the participants of the tradition produce "a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations." As a part of this development, those texts or authorities that are considered divine enjoy a status apart from other texts and authorities. Of course, these may undergo periodic reinterpretations, but they are exempted from repudiation.[85]

Traditions can founder and die, so we must inquire into what accounts for the success or the failure of a tradition. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argues that the reason a tradition weakens and dies is, in part, because of the failure of those participants in the tradition to properly exercise the virtues necessary to sustain the health of the tradition: "The lack of justice, lack of truthfulness, lack of courage, lack of the relevant intellectual virtues—these corrupt traditions, just as they do those institutions and practices which derive their life from the traditions of which they are the contemporary embodiments."[86] In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre's account of the failure of a tradition focuses upon what he calls an "epistemological crisis." Recall that a central feature of a tradition is the internal and ongoing conflict between the participants of that tradition. The conflict involves a discussion "about the goods which constitute that tradition"[87] and "the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements"[88] that comprise the essential elements of the tradition. This ongoing internal conflict may at any point "by its own standards of progress . . . cease to make progress. Its hitherto trusted methods of enquiry have become sterile. Conflicts over rival answers to key questions can no longer be settled rationally."[89] In addition to a cessation of progress, internal incoherencies may appear that defy the resources of the tradition. At this point, one of two things can occur. If the failures of the tradition are unresolved, the tradition itself is in jeopardy and will eventually be replaced by another established tradition, or a new tradition will grow up out of the ruins. If the tradition is to survive, MacIntyre argues, three distinct questions must be addressed. First, the revitalized tradition must, by employing new or revamped conceptual resources, be able to overcome the challenges that brought the tradition to the crisis. Second, the new account must furthermore provide an explanation of why the original approach failed. Finally, this process of explanation must take place within a structure whose continuity with the original tradition remains fundamentally intact.[90]

According to MacIntyre, if a tradition's internal conflict ceases to be a vital and ongoing process, the tradition has become sterile and an epistemological crisis is at hand or has already occurred. It is for this reason

(among others) that MacIntyre believes Burke's account of tradition is representative of a sick and dying tradition rather than a healthy one. In chapter 5, we will return to Burke and see in what ways MacIntyre's understanding of him is inadequate.

At this point, two related questions ought to be raised. First, do all people participate in a tradition simply by virtue of the social and historical context into which they have been born? Second, can one voluntarily choose to abandon one tradition in favor of another? In addressing the first, it appears that MacIntyre is not completely sure. He seems to affirm the inevitability of tradition when he notes that "I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition."[91] On the other hand, there are times he appears willing to entertain the possibility that a person may, in fact, be traditionless. In fact, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* "is primarily addressed . . . to . . . someone who, not as yet having given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry, is besieged by disputes over what is just and about how it is reasonable to act."[92] In particular he seems to believe that a person with no identifiable tradition can be found in "the kind of post-Enlightenment person who responds to the failure of the Enlightenment to provide neutral, impersonal tradition-independent standards of rational judgment by concluding that no set of beliefs proposed for acceptance is therefore justifiable." Such a person "finds him or herself an alien to every tradition of enquiry which he or she encounters and . . . does so because he or she brings to the encounter with such traditions standards of rational justification which the beliefs of no tradition could satisfy."[93] Thus, a person without commitment to any set of beliefs is one who is without a tradition. The existence of such a person seems highly problematic in terms of MacIntyre's own thought—this despite his claim to be primarily addressing such persons.[94] However, according to MacIntyre, rationality is a function of a particular tradition; thus, to have no tradition is to have no conception of rationality, and to reject one's tradition is either to reject one's own rational framework and thereby forfeit all rational justification for the rejection, or to maintain one's rationality but in so doing maintain at least a remnant of the tradition one is attempting to reject. MacIntyre, in the end, seems to take the latter tack:

> There is no neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions. Those who have maintained otherwise

> either have covertly been adopting the standpoint of a tradition and deceiving themselves and perhaps others into supposing that theirs was just such a neutral standing ground or else have simply been in error. The person outside all traditions lacks sufficient rational resources for enquiry and *a fortiori* for enquiry into what tradition is to be rationally preferred. He or she has no adequate relevant means of rational evaluation and hence can come to no well-grounded conclusion, including the conclusion that no tradition can vindicate itself against any other. To be outside all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution.[95]

Thus, although MacIntyre appears to waver on this question, the logic of his overall position seems to require us to conclude that a traditionless person would be highly deficient and completely incapable of any type of rational inquiry. In short, if such a person could be found, he would be unable to speak in any comprehensible fashion, for it is not "possible to speak except out of one particular tradition in a way which will involve conflict with rival traditions."[96] Thus, like Oakeshott, MacIntyre holds that a tradition is not simply a repository of valuable truth; instead, it represents the intellectual, social, and historical milieu into which a person is inculcated. In this sense tradition plays an indispensable epistemic role, for it provides the framework within which all inquiry occurs.[97]

MacIntyre's position regarding the first question makes the possibility of a definite answer to the second—can a person change traditions?—more difficult. He does, though, grapple with the problem. MacIntyre notes that when an epistemological crisis occurs, "an encounter with a rival tradition may . . . provide good reasons either for attempting to reconstitute one's tradition in some radical way or for deserting it."[98] If a tradition entails the epistemological function MacIntyre has attributed to it, simply abandoning one's tradition will be no simple undertaking. Of course, figures such as Descartes sought to rid themselves completely of any vestiges of tradition, but we are warranted in asking if he succeeded. According to MacIntyre, he did not. Descartes attempted to cast everything he thought he knew under the cloak of radical doubt with the hope that he might from that starting point find some truth that was indubitable. But MacIntyre correctly points out that "of course someone who really believed that he knew nothing would not even know how to begin on a course of radical doubt; for he would have no conception of what his task might be,

of what it would be to settle his doubts and to acquire well-founded beliefs." Thus, there is a logical problem at the very heart of Descartes's method. Furthermore, although Descartes claimed to be casting off all influences of tradition, MacIntyre again points out that he was less than successful. In this regard, Descartes accepted his own capacity to employ properly the French and Latin languages, both of which are the complex creations of particular traditions. In addition, he appears simply to have overlooked "how much of what he took to be the spontaneous reflections of his own mind was in fact a repetition of sentences and phrases from his school textbooks. Even the *Cogito* is to be found in Saint Augustine."[99] Thus, although Descartes attempted to rid himself of the constraints of his own tradition, it appears that he was actually working within the confines of a particular tradition and, MacIntyre argues, participating in an ongoing internal conflict that arose within his own tradition.[100]

Descartes's apparent failure to throw off completely his own tradition is not a conclusive argument for the impossibility of such an action, but his failure should give us pause. The manner in which one might conceivably abandon one's tradition in favor of a new one will be addressed in more detail in the next section. Suffice it to say at this point, if tradition is as complex and as deeply rooted as MacIntyre suggests, the task of successfully moving from one tradition to another will involve immense challenges. Yet, in the end, the logic of MacIntyre's overall account requires that the possibility exists, for MacIntyre believes it is possible to determine the rational superiority of one tradition over another. If that is possible, then it also must be possible for an individual to recognize the general superiority of a tradition and change allegiance to it.

Practice, narrative, and tradition must all be included in an account of an ethics of virtue. MacIntyre does not claim to be simply rehearsing Aristotle's position, for he denies (until eventually changing his position) Aristotle's "metaphysical biology" and affirms the historical nature of inquiry, something Aristotle denies. In spite of the differences, MacIntyre believes himself to be working within Aristotelian tradition. That is, according to the account of tradition just described, it is perfectly consistent to claim to be working within a tradition while at the same time engaging that tradition in constructive debate, which may produce changes in the tradition as it progresses in the unpredictable and open-ended fashion typical of a healthy tradition.

Tradition and Translation

MacIntyre holds that some traditions are rationally superior to others, but since according to his position all rationality is constituted by a tradition, and every tradition is the product of cultural, social, linguistic, and historical forces, it is, on his own terms, impossible to step outside of all tradition and adjudicate from a tradition-independent epistemic vantage point.[101] Thus we must inquire how MacIntyre can maintain his strong view of tradition while at the same time avoid sliding into some form of relativism.[102]

MacIntyre recognizes the significance of the problem and devotes considerable effort in describing a solution. He presents the problem as follows:

> There is always the possibility of one tradition of action and enquiry encountering another in such a way that neither can, for some considerable stretch of time at least, exhibit to the justified satisfaction of its own adherents, let alone to that of the adherents of its rival, its rational superiority. And this possibility will arise when and if the two traditions, whether embodied in the same language and culture or not, cannot find from the standpoint of either an adequate set of standards or measures to evaluate their relationship rationally.[103]

When such a confrontation occurs, an obvious solution is simply to deny the possibility of a resolution. MacIntyre describes this possibility: "If the only available standards of rationality are those made available by and within tradition, then no issue between contending traditions is rationally decidable. To assert or to conclude this rather than that can be rational relative to the standards of some particular tradition, but not rational as such. There can be no rationality as such. Every set of standards, every tradition incorporating a set of standards, has as much and as little claim to our allegiance as any other."[104] MacIntyre calls this the "relativist challenge." Another related hurdle is what he terms the "perspectivist challenge," which "puts in question the possibility of making truth-claims from within any one tradition."[105] Unless both of these challenges can be overcome, MacIntyre's position stumbles at the same point as does Oakeshott's.

MacIntyre rightly points out that both challenges rely in part on a false dilemma: either the Enlightenment ideal of direct access to universal, objective truth is valid, or the postmodern rejection of all truth is correct. Since the first horn of the dilemma is rejected (by MacIntyre and also by the postmodernist), then the second horn must obtain. Hence, both the relativist and the perspectivist challenges hold.[106] But the tradition-constituted account developed by MacIntyre claims that there is a third alternative that makes it possible to reject the Enlightenment version of universalism without succumbing to postmodern relativism. This position, as we have seen, acknowledges the social, cultural, linguistic, and historical embeddedness of all traditions of inquiry, but it also affirms the existence of a reality that is independent of human inquiry, a reality knowable (at least in part) and timeless.[107] Thus, tradition-constituted inquiry will affirm the particular nature of all inquiry while at the same time aspiring to knowledge of universal truth in an open-ended and contingent process of inquiry that progresses in unpredictable ways and is always open to revisitation and revision.

The relativist challenge fails to consider the possible implications of an epistemological crisis. Although a tradition may successfully overcome such a crisis as described in the previous section, such successful resolutions are not always the case. If a tradition fails to resolve a crisis, the tradition will crumble, for its rational center will prove inadequate to maintain the coherence of the overall structure. Thus, the tradition will be discredited on its own terms.[108] If a tradition fails to meet the challenges posed by an epistemological crisis while at the same time other traditions avoid or successfully meet such challenges, then it is necessarily the case that some traditions are more capable than others of rationally justifying their own positions in terms of their own internal rationality. Thus, some traditions are rationally superior to others, and if that is the case, the relativist challenge collapses.

The perspectivist, who questions the possibility of making truth-claims from within any one tradition, fails on slightly different grounds. This position assumes the possibility of attaining a position free of any tradition from which to make the claim that truth claims from within any one tradition are impossible. The perspectivist assumes it is possible to flit from one tradition to the next, trying on each in turn and determining that truth claims are untenable when made from within a tradition. Perspectivism, according to MacIntyre, "is a doctrine only possible for those who

regard themselves as outsiders, as uncommitted or rather committed only to acting a succession of temporary parts."[109] Herein, though, lies the rub, for "genuinely to adopt the standpoint of a tradition thereby commits one to its view of what is true and false and, so committing one, prohibits one from adopting any rival standpoint."[110] Thus, if the perspectivist claims to move easily from one tradition to another, he is actually self-deceived, for participating in a tradition requires commitment and submission to the internal authority of that tradition. Furthermore, if "the resources of adequate rationality are made available to us only in and through traditions,"[111] then a person without a tradition is simply incapable of rationally justifying the perspectivist claim. Thus, the perspectivist challenge fails in multiple ways.

One tradition can be judged rationally superior to another if it is able to overcome or avoid epistemological crises where other traditions demonstrate their inadequacy by their failure to do so. But what conclusions can we draw if two traditions persist over a period of time without succumbing to the challenges of an epistemological crisis? Must we therefore conclude that both are equally true? This, it would seem, leads us back into the problem of relativism. Is there a way to determine what MacIntyre terms the "rational superiority" of one apparently successful tradition over another? MacIntyre believes that there is.

From the perspective of each successful tradition the other is wrong. If the inquiry could proceed no further than this, we seem to have something resembling emotivism at the level of traditions whereby commitments are merely the products of arbitrary, irrational choices, or, more accurately, accident of birth. The key, according to MacIntyre, involves learning the "language" of the other tradition: "One has, so to speak, to become a child all over again and to learn this language—and the corresponding parts of the culture—as a second first language."[112] Such a learning process enables the inquirer to understand the other tradition from the inside. It is an empathetic engagement in which one takes the time and effort to understand another tradition in its own cultural, historic, and linguistic terms. This approach admits that many concepts cannot simply be translated without a distortion or loss of meaning. This flies in the face of Enlightenment sensibilities, which hold that "all cultural phenomena must be potentially translucent to understanding, that all texts must be capable of being translated into the language which the adherents of modernity speak to each other."[113]

Once this process of language learning is completed, the inquirer is in a unique position to judge differing, yet apparently successful, traditions. By employing his "second first language" the inquirer can comprehend the challenges, the limitations, and the failures of the rival tradition in terms of the tradition itself. If those limitations and shortcomings can be overcome by resources supplied by the opposing tradition along with an explanation of why the limitations and shortcomings exist, there is good reason to conclude that one tradition is rationally superior to its rival.[114] Thus, only through gaining a sympathetic insider's look at the internal components of a rival tradition is it possible to attempt to demonstrate the rational superiority of one apparently successful tradition over another. This, of course, is no easy task, and such a process cannot occur overnight. Indeed, such attempts may prove, at least for a time, inconclusive. This does not, of course, indicate that the two traditions are equally true. It does, though, point to the open-ended and ongoing nature of inquiry and should spur further attempts to move toward the timeless ideal of truth rather than engender complacency.

Epistemology, Submission, and Faith

Tradition-constituted inquiry, it would seem, proceeds on a track that is epistemologically antithetical to what we have come to expect from more modern approaches. We should not expect the kind of epistemological first principles to which Descartes and his descendants aspired. As MacIntyre has made clear, there are no pretheoretical facts; there exists no tradition-independent rock upon which one can stake one's epistemological fortunes. In short, epistemological first principles in the Cartesian sense are "mythological beasts."[115]

If no absolutely indubitable epistemological starting point exists, then knowing must proceed on some other basis. But if we cannot begin with some sure knowledge, how can we go on to know anything at all? It seems that we are thrown into a paradox very similar to the one described by Plato in the *Meno*. Socrates, in reply to Meno, his interlocutor, formulates this paradox: "Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know

what to look for."[116] The solution suggested by Plato, his theory of recollection, though ultimately unconvincing, may contain more truth than we might at first suppose. In order to know, we must at least know how to know, else we could never begin. In short, we must begin with some knowledge or else the inquiry would never get under way.[117] This seems to produce something of a circular argument when we attempt to justify our knowledge: I begin with some semblance of knowledge; from that unsecured, unjustified starting point, I proceed to gain more knowledge; the adequacy of the knowledge I have gained serves retrospectively as a justification for the adequacy of the unsecured starting point. Thus, in an important way "the end is to some significant degree presupposed in the beginning, in which initial actualities presuppose and give evidence of potentiality for future development."[118]

Thus, we must begin at a point that is not foundational in the Cartesian sense. Along with this very un-Cartesian starting point, MacIntyre argues that we also need a teacher to show us the proper manner in which to proceed: "Hence there emerges a conception of rational teaching authority internal to the practice of the craft of moral enquiry, as indeed such conceptions emerge in such other crafts as furniture making and fishing, where, just as in moral enquiry, they partially define the relationship of master-craftsman to apprentice."[119] Here we take up again the discussion that was begun earlier when we explored the manner in which a practice is learned and mastered. Because of that prior discussion and because this topic will come up again in chapter 4, it will not be necessary to dwell on it here for long.

It is important to note, though, that when we originally encountered the concept of master and apprentice it was in the context of entering into a practice, such as agriculture or architecture. Now the field has expanded considerably to include moral inquiry itself, which MacIntyre conceives as a craft (or a practice). If moral inquiry falls under the rubric of a practice requiring submission to the authority of a master, then it is reasonable to assume that all rational inquiry requires the same learning process. But when one submits oneself to the authority of a master (be this an individual person or a tradition of inquiry or both), trust is essential. When one submits to the authority of another, one must by faith follow where the master leads without knowing fully the destination. It is only after this relational process has produced the proper moral and intellectual habits that the apprentice can look back and rationally comprehend the path that

has been trod. Thus, "faith in authority has to precede rational understanding."[120] This requires, among other things, the virtue of humility, for only with such virtue is submission and trust possible. But if we must believe before we can understand, or, more properly, so that we can understand, it follows that "rational justification is thus essentially retrospective."[121] It is in light of this account that MacIntyre notes that "Anselm's arguments are in no way accidentally in the form of a prayer."[122] Thus, contrary to the false ambitions of Descartes, rational thought cannot ground itself in indubitable first principles. Like any other practice or craft, moral inquiry requires submission to authority, trust, and the wisdom of a teacher.

MacIntyre and Oakeshott

As far as I can tell, neither MacIntyre nor Oakeshott ever mentions the other in print. It is certain, though, that MacIntyre is familiar with Oakeshott's work. In 1967, MacIntyre published an article titled "The Idea of a Social Science."[123] The article is a review of Peter Winch's influential book of the same title published in 1958.[124] In the book, Winch includes a fairly substantial discussion of Oakeshott's view of a morality based on habit and affection rather than one that is primarily rule-based.[125]

Temperamentally, Oakeshott and MacIntyre could not be more different. Whereas MacIntyre regularly informs his readers of his beliefs and has been accused of an excessive capacity for belief, Oakeshott consistently describes himself as a "sceptic."[126] Ironically, despite MacIntyre's inclination for belief and Oakeshott's self-described skepticism, both men have been accused of rejecting reason.[127] These accusations are the result of both men's belief that thought cannot be properly conducted in a purely abstract and rationalistic manner. This belief can be summed up in the emphasis both put on the role of tradition. To be a part of a tradition is to submit oneself to the basic premises upon which the tradition rests. Apprenticeship is an important element in the process of inculcation into a tradition, and apprenticeship requires that the student submit himself to the master in an attitude of trust.[128] But such notions as submission, trust, and the decided nonegalitarianism entailed in the relationship between a master and a student are concepts that find little favor in a world that celebrates the liberal self along with epistemic independence and autonomous rationality. Thus, it should not be surprising that accusations of irrationality

have been leveled against both by those who do not share their appreciation for the tradition-dependent nature of all inquiry.

According to Oakeshott, modern philosophy, which is characterized by a desire for certainty and uniformity, insists that all knowledge can be reduced to technical knowledge. MacIntyre, too, rejects this view when he notes that "a practice . . . is never just a set of technical skills."[129] However, he notes that "the success of the natural sciences has conferred prestige upon technique as such, and outside the natural sciences agreement on technique has often been allowed to substitute for agreement on matters of substance."[130] Technical skills are indeed necessary, but practical knowledge is less easily learned, for although technical knowledge can be gleaned from a book, practical knowledge is only obtained by participation. Oakeshott sees this neglect of practical knowledge as a harbinger of a crisis of the Western tradition, for practical knowledge, once lost, is not easily recovered.[131] MacIntyre's belief that modern moral philosophy is seriously damaged overlaps significantly with Oakeshott at this point. When morality is separated from practice, narrative, and tradition, it loses its rational coherence and descends into emotivism. Practice, narrative, and tradition produce a context in which moral action can be learned and in which the virtues can become habitual. When those contextual conditions are removed, all morality must be reduced to a consideration of rules. A morality of rules is nothing if not a morality of technique, while a morality that emphasizes the virtues within the context of practice, narrative, and tradition also leaves room for practical knowledge. In this respect, both MacIntyre and Oakeshott agree that one of the problems faced by modern philosophy is an elevation of technical knowledge at the expense of the practical. They agree further that this problem, which at its root is a problem of knowledge, has deleterious effects that extend outward from the realm of philosophy into the moral and political spheres.

An important similarity, and one that is the focus of this book, is the central role tradition plays for both Oakeshott and MacIntyre. What I have termed the "epistemic role of tradition" is crucial in understanding the thought of both. The centrality of the role of tradition points to the fact that the particularities within which each individual is embedded are in many ways constitutive of the individual, and thus such particularities as history, culture, language—which is to say, tradition—cannot be transcended in the quest for universals.

Whereas Oakeshott emphasizes the flexible, the habitual, and the procedural nature of tradition, MacIntyre speaks primarily in terms of conflict, rationality, and substantive goods. For MacIntyre, a tradition is "an argument extended through time."[132] The subject of the argument is in part "about the goods which constitute that tradition."[133] Thus, conflict takes center stage, and the subject of the conflict is the nature of the good. The argument or conflict is conducted in a rational fashion, for at the heart of tradition is a reasoned argument extending through time and participated in by all those who count themselves members of the tradition.[134] Like Oakeshott, MacIntyre understands the open-ended nature of all inquiry; thus, the argument that takes place within every healthy tradition is ongoing and contingent, even if some (or all) of the participants fail to recognize that fact. Furthermore, both Oakeshott and MacIntyre recognize that those who participate in a tradition contribute to its ongoing development.[135]

Central to MacIntyre's conception of a practice is the twofold distinction between internal and external goods. Whereas Oakeshott describes practices primarily in procedural terms, MacIntyre speaks in terms of securing goods internal to the practice. But since, for Oakeshott, "practices are themselves the outcomes of performances," a practice is the "by-product" of performances the goal of which are "the achievement of imagined and wished-for satisfactions other than that of having a procedure."[136] Thus, for Oakeshott, a practice is the procedure that emerges through the act of pursuing a desired satisfaction. It is not the achievement of the satisfaction; rather, it is the procedural conditions that make the realization of satisfactions possible. For MacIntyre, the practice itself contains goods internal to it, and those goods are realized through pursuing standards of excellence unique to the particular practice.[137]

The morality that both Oakeshott and MacIntyre affirm is one in which rules play a secondary, though indispensable, role. For Oakeshott, a morality based primarily upon "habit and affection" is preferable to one in which rules are primary. Since, according to Oakeshott, theory is derived from practice and not vice versa, moral rules (theory) are abridgments of habits and affections, which are the products of practice. Thus, a morality based primarily upon rules is a morality that is guided by abridgments that are erroneously believed to represent complete and unabridged truth—such a morality is based on a confusion of thought, and it is no wonder that moral confusion results. For MacIntyre, an ethics in which the virtues

are given a central role is preferable to that in which rules are primary. Recall that, for MacIntyre, the rise of rule-based moral philosophy is the result of the abandonment of theology and teleology. In *After Virtue* he argues for a return to a teleological conception of human life in order to provide a rational framework upon which to construct an account of the virtues. In his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre acknowledges that the position he is defending includes "metaphysical realism," which "has as its core the view that the world is what it is independent of human thinking and judging and desiring and willing." Furthermore, the opponents of this view, MacIntyre notes, realize that "realism is inherently theistic."[138] MacIntyre's position also includes an affirmation that one's good is inextricably tied up with the common good. Thus, to pursue the common good is simultaneously to seek one's own good.[139] MacIntyre's account of morality, then, affirms a teleological account of human nature; metaphysical realism, which he believes implies theism; and the connection between the common good and individual good.

Oakeshott denies all three. First, Oakeshott strikes an existentialist note when he claims that man "has a 'history,' but no 'nature'; he is what in conduct he becomes. This 'history' is not an evolutionary or teleological process."[140] People become what they become as a result of the choices they make, and these choices are not guided by a teleology that provides the essential pattern to which humans ought to strive to conform. Next, although Oakeshott does not deny the existence of God, his skepticism requires that he consider moral and political questions without consideration of metaphysical or theological claims. In this regard, Oakeshott strikes a Humean note when he writes that if the "self-consciously conditional theorist . . . is concerned to theorize moral conduct or civil association he must forswear metaphysics."[141] Finally, Oakeshott rejects the Aristotelian notion that man's individual good is tied up with the common good. This understanding is a ramification of his rejection of any notion of teleology, for teleology postulates that there is a good that is good for all humans and (in Aristotle's view) that good is fully realized in the common good. Aristotle argues that all men pursue happiness (*eudaimonia*), yet Oakeshott denies that such a concept has any content. "I cannot want 'happiness'; what I want is to idle in Avignon or to hear Caruso sing."[142] Thus, there is no "common end" to which humans ought to aspire, for at the heart of Oakeshott's moral theory is individual choice, which is the product of autonomous persons pursuing self-chosen ends.[143]

Like Oakeshott, MacIntyre realizes that traditions can encounter crises, both internal and external, and for MacIntyre, an important indicator of the "rational superiority" of a tradition is its ability to overcome a crisis where other traditions fail. Another manner by which the rational superiority of a tradition can be established is through the painstaking process of learning the language of the rival tradition as "a second first language." In so doing a person can learn to speak the idiom of two traditions equally well and from that position evaluate the weaknesses of each from the inside. Although MacIntyre is careful to stress that such an investigation may prove (at least for a time) inconclusive, he is firmly opposed to any suggestion of a relativism of traditions. Thus, one tradition must be rationally superior to all others, even though we may not be able to determine with absolute certainty which one that is. Oakeshott, on the other hand, would never imagine that it would be possible to learn the idiom of another tradition as a "second first language." Since we are constituted by the ideas derived from our tradition, to imagine that we could grasp another tradition at the same fundamental level is, for Oakeshott, simply a confusion. He does not deny that the study of other traditions is beneficial, for "to know only one's own tradition is not to know even that."[144] Yet, such studies should provide us with a better understanding of our own tradition rather than serve as an opportunity to find a tradition that we believe is better. For Oakeshott, "to range the world in order to select the 'best' of the practices and purposes of others . . . is a corrupting enterprise."[145] This ought not to surprise us, though, for Oakeshott's emphasis on the coherence of a self-contained world, which is analogous to language, does not permit comparisons of one whole against another. To do so presumes a reality that is independent of both, and for Oakeshott no such thing exists.[146] From the above discussion it should be clear that whereas MacIntyre leaves open the possibility of switching allegiances from one tradition to another, for Oakeshott such a suggestion is unintelligible.

This brings us back to the basic philosophical orientation of both Oakeshott and MacIntyre. Oakeshott's idealism relies on satisfaction produced by a comprehensive coherence. MacIntyre's realism, on the other hand, holds that knowing requires that the mind adequately grasp a reality that is independent of it. Oakeshott's position leads him to conclude that it is simply a confusion to imagine that a person could switch from one tradition to another. One's tradition provides him with the only resources at his disposal; thus, to switch traditions would be to abandon all of one's

intellectual resources. This is simply an impossibility. Instead, experience is a unified whole, and inquiry seeks to produce an ever-increasing level of coherence within that whole.

Oakeshott's approach produces a rather complex picture of conflicting traditions. First, the resources at each person's disposal constitute that person's tradition. Each person is born into a complex web of social, intellectual, political, and moral practices. These are inherited through inculcation into the milieu that produced them, and they become part of an individual's experience—they serve to produce a more or less coherent whole that represents the world of experience for that person. Second, it is a confusion to speak of evaluating different traditions and, having determined which is superior, committing one's self to that tradition. Since the experience produced by each respective tradition represents a more or less coherent world of ideas, and since one's resources for evaluating one's tradition and other traditions are the totality of one's own tradition, it is inconceivable that a person could move from one world of ideas to another. This point is clear if one understands that a world of ideas is a totality; there cannot exist more than one such world. Thus, when two comprehensive traditions collide, one is not presented with an either/or option. The resources by which the collision is comprehended are the product of one's tradition; thus, the particularities of one's own tradition will serve to define the features of the other tradition. If an opposing tradition appears to provide desirable resources (that is, desirable for effecting greater coherence of the whole), they are, in the very recognition of their desirability, incorporated into one's own tradition, and in being so incorporated, they become part of one's tradition. Thus, the either/or is transcended by a both/and whereby the resources of one tradition are subsumed into a larger whole of one's total experience, a whole which is continually seeking greater coherence.

In the end, the differences between MacIntyre and Oakeshott can only be adequately addressed when we consider the viability of their respective understanding of the nature of reality, and it is at this point that MacIntyre's realism seems to fare better. Oakeshott's theory of knowledge does not seem able to avoid sliding into a soft form of relativism, for as we saw in chapter 2, coherence alone does not appear adequate as a test of truth. In other words, coherence itself is not a good, for it is conceivable that a coherent tradition is at the same time an immoral tradition, unless, of course, one first postulates that the coherent whole is *morally* good. In

this case, the goal of coherence makes moral sense, for in seeking coherence, a tradition is attempting to fashion itself in keeping with a reality that is morally structured. But at this point it becomes obvious that we are no longer relying completely upon a coherence test of truth, for we have introduced an independent moral reality that serves as a model. In attempting to avoid a relativism between traditions, we have inadvertently slipped into a realist mode of thought.

Furthermore, Oakeshott appeals to satisfaction as a constitutive part of coherence or, at times, even synonymous with coherence. Oakeshott writes, "Reality is the world of experience in so far as it is satisfactory, in so far as it is coherent."[147] But satisfaction as a measure or indicator of coherence—and therefore of truth—seems to be little more than an emotivist appeal, and MacIntyre's arguments against emotivism would seem to hold against Oakeshott's account insofar as it depends on satisfaction as a criterion.

It is here that MacIntyre's account seems more successful on its own grounds than does Oakeshott's. As a realist, MacIntyre recognizes that various traditions can and do exist, each one attempting with varying degrees of success to apprehend an independent reality. Because that reality provides the goal for rational discourse, and because in that reality rationality and morality converge into a single point, one can determine the morally superior tradition by determining the rationally superior tradition. However, the case is never completely closed, for questions are always susceptible of revisitation, and our conclusions are always provisional and fallible.

Neither Oakeshott nor MacIntyre provides us with what Oakeshott terms a "mistake-proof" method or technique by which to judge the tradition in which we find ourselves a part. In this they both agree: the human situation is full of uncertainty, and knowing resembles an art more than a well-formulated system of rules. It is at this important point that their traditionalism converges and presents a strong argument against those—like Descartes and Bacon—who would claim that human knowing is a purely objective, detached affair in which rationality exists prior to and apart from the particularities of one's tradition. For both Oakeshott and MacIntyre tradition is an epistemological necessity, and they would agree that to attempt summarily to throw off one's tradition and proceed free from all of the commitments entailed therein is, in a word, incoherent.

The Achievement of MacIntyre

MacIntyre recognizes that an apparent dilemma seems implied by modern conceptions of moral inquiry: "*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."[148] According to MacIntyre, this dilemma is patently false, for what it

> conceals from view is a third possibility, the possibility that reason can only move towards being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded, is a condition for genuinely rational enquiry and more especially for moral and theological enquiry. . . . A prior commitment is required and the conclusions which emerge as enquiry progresses will of course have been partially and crucially predetermined by the nature of this initial commitment.[149]

MacIntyre employs the word "tradition" to describe this third way that avoids both horns of the dilemma. This is an important insight. If this alternative is viable, then we are justified in simultaneously denying both the universalistic aspirations of the Enlightenment, upon which the liberal project is founded, and the nihilistic conclusions of those who labored to overcome it. In chapter 4, I will explore the ideas of Michael Polanyi in an effort to supplement what we have achieved so far. It is my hope that the concepts with which he deals will provide a further dimension to the account of tradition that has emerged thus far.

A final comment. If our rationality is constituted by the tradition we inhabit, then the very manner in which we comprehend a historically embedded reality is inevitably conditioned by who we are and when, historically, we are. If that is the case, then simply to recover an Aristotelian or a Thomist ethics is impossible. However, the fact that we do aspire to recover concepts that have apparently passed into history indicates that the resources of the past are never completely lost. But if history is as pervasive as MacIntyre believes, then attempts at recovery are better understood as attempts to appropriate with the understanding that the appropriated con-

cepts will, in the very process of appropriation, undergo a change by virtue of the historic moment into which they are drawn. Thus, it is only too true that one can never go home, for home exists only as a memory, and it can be resurrected only by the refurbishment that is the inevitable result of exposure to the present historical moment. The past, then, is indeed an indispensable resource, yet its goods are not simply appropriated, for in appropriating them we make them our own, and in so doing, we unavoidably color them with the present.