

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 9

1-1-1991

MacIntyre, WHOSE JUSTICE? WHICH RATIONALITY?

Philip L. Quinn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Quinn, Philip L. (1991) "MacIntyre, WHOSE JUSTICE? WHICH RATIONALITY?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol8/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

BOOK REVIEWS

Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, by Alasdair MacIntyre. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988. Pp. xii, 420. \$22.95.

PHILIP L. QUINN, University of Notre Dame.

The bulk of this large book is devoted to telling what is in effect a tale of three cities. They are classical Athens, papal Rome of the high middle ages, and Presbyterian Edinburgh of the Scottish Enlightenment. The tale is episodic. Each of its episodes involves the development of a tradition of moral inquiry focused on justice and practical reasoning. And the tale as a whole is carefully constructed with an eye to drawing from it philosophical morals for today.

Aristotle is the hero of the first episode, supported by a cast of characters that includes Homer, Thucydides, Sophocles and Plato. The plot line turns on a dispute about how to extend the legacy of Homeric thought on justice. Aristotle's achievement is portrayed as linking justice and practical rationality within the context of the *polis*. The *polis*, according to MacIntyre, is "the institution whose concern was, not with this or that particular good, but with human good as such, and not with desert or achievement in respect of particular practices, but with desert and achievement as such" (p. 34). A particular *polis* must therefore embody principles about how particular goods are to be ordered into a comprehensive way of life that constitutes the good for human beings; a *polis* cannot be neutral with respect to rival conceptions of the good. Justice, being concerned primarily with desert, is the norm by which the *polis* is ordered and lacks application apart from the *polis*. So neither can justice be neutral with respect to competing conceptions of the good. And since practical reasoning involves essentially claims about the good at stake for the agent in acting or not acting, the *polis* also fixes the context of intelligibility for practical rationality.

The hero of the second episode is Aquinas, and the supporting cast is made up of such diverse figures as Cicero, St. Paul, Augustine and Pope Gregory VII. The plot hinges on a conflict between the Augustinian theological tradition and a revived Aristotelian philosophy. The achievement of Aquinas is depicted as overcoming the conflict by integrating Aristotelian elements into an Augustinian framework. MacIntyre takes pains to emphasize the ways in which the resulting Thomistic synthesis is at odds with deeply cherished beliefs of liberal modernity. Thus, for example, Aquinas holds that the Pope has legitimate authority over secular rulers because secular power is subject to spiritual power as the body

is subject to the soul. He also maintains that a just political order will include education into the virtues in the interest of the common good. Hence, MacIntyre argues, “the modern liberal conception of government as securing a minimum order, within which individuals may pursue their own freely chosen ends, protected by and large from the moral interference of government, is also incompatible with Aquinas’ account of a just order” (p. 201). And he also insists that the “standard commercial and financial practices of capitalism are as incompatible with Aquinas’ conception of justice as are the standard practices of the kind of adversarial system of legal justice in which lawyers often defend those whom they know to be guilty” (p. 200).

The third episode in MacIntyre’s tale has no hero, but David Hume is its antihero. The supporting cast is composed of assorted Scottish worthies, most notably James Dalrymple (Viscount Stair) and Francis Hutcheson. The plot revolves around pressures toward Anglicization of distinctively Scottish institutions of religion, law and education. Hume’s achievement is pictured as an anglicizing subversion. It was anglicizing because Hume articulated philosophically the principles embodied in the thought and practice of the dominant English social order. According to MacIntyre, it was a social order “in which passions and interests were, or rather were taken to be, organized so as to provide mutuality in satisfaction and benefit” (p. 214). And Hume’s achievement was subversive because it consistently drew out the implications of the sentimental moral epistemology in terms of which Hutcheson had tried to justify the moral beliefs he inherited from Calvinism and scholastic Aristotelianism. The result was to put practical reason at the service of the passions and to focus justice on insuring systematic mutuality and reciprocity in their satisfaction.

What are we to make of these three narratives? A full answer to this question would have to be based on a discussion of the details of MacIntyre’s interpretations of Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume and others. But the space available in a brief review does not permit, and the limits of my own competence do not make me well suited to conduct, a discussion of this sort. So I shall confine myself to considering the more general philosophical lessons that MacIntyre hopes to teach by means of his narratives. They seem to me to be of two kinds.

The first kind of lesson has to do with conceptions of justice and practical reasoning. On this score, MacIntyre emphasizes three distinct themes. One is *pluralism*. Disagreements among traditions of inquiry are not best explained by the hypothesis that they share a single conception of justice or practical reasoning. Rather different traditions of inquiry embody irreducibly diverse and often conflicting conceptions of justice and practical reasoning. Another theme is *holism*. Within traditions, conceptions of justice and conceptions of practical reasoning are “closely linked” (p. ix). Moreover, this linkage also extends to conceptions of human psychology or theories of the

person and, in some cases at least, to other metaphysical or theological doctrines. And the third theme is *contextualism*. Premodern accounts of justice and practical reasoning such as those of Aristotle and Hume presuppose social contexts of fairly specific sorts. Thus, "Aristotle's presupposed social context is one in which evaluation is primarily in terms of the achievement of the ends of activity; Hume's is one in which evaluation is primarily in terms of the satisfaction of consumers" (p. 298). The claim here seems to be that those accounts would only be, or perhaps were only meant to be, applicable within or adequate to social contexts of the sorts they presuppose. In my opinion, MacIntyre's three narratives provide good illustrations of these themes.

The second kind of lesson has to do with the higher-order methodological question of how the epistemic credentials of competing traditions of inquiry into questions about justice and practical reasoning are to be evaluated. Here MacIntyre takes a controversial stand on the side of a traditionalist methodology. Early in the book he proclaims: "What the Enlightenment made us for the most part blind to and what we now need to recover is, so I shall argue, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition" (p. 7). Or, to put things in a nutshell: "To justify is to narrate how the argument has gone so far" (p. 8). Within this complex methodological claim, two further themes may be distinguished. One is *historicism*. Justification proceeds by way of historical narrative. The other is *internalism*. Standards of justification are internal to and inseparable from particular intellectual and social traditions in which they are embodied. It is the historicist theme of MacIntyre's methodology that explains why the bulk of the book is devoted to three narratives. It is the internalism that explains why critics of MacIntyre's earlier work, particularly his *After Virtue*, have charged it with having relativistic consequences. And it is from this methodological stance that MacIntyre launches what I take to be the two most important philosophical arguments of the book. One is, as one might expect, a defense against relativism; the other is, not surprisingly, an assault on modern liberalism. I shall consider these arguments in turn.

The notion of tradition-bound rationality ingredient in MacIntyre's internalism bears more than a superficial resemblance to the idea of paradigm-bound rationality characteristic of the views of Kuhn in philosophy of science. Though MacIntyre nowhere in the book mentions Kuhn, he makes use of arguments that are plainly Kuhnian in spirit. Thus, for example, Kuhn and Feyerabend had argued that observations cannot decide between rival scientific theories because there are no theory-neutral observations. MacIntyre endorses a similar view. Speaking of the rivalry between Hume's claim that reason must be the

slave of the passions and the claim by Aristotle and Aquinas that reason can direct the passions, he maintains that examples of human action cannot settle the issue. This is because "there are no preconceptual or even pretheoretical data, and this entails that no set of examples of action, no matter how comprehensive, can provide a neutral court of appeal for decision between rival theories" (p. 333). Since Kuhn's critics had accused his views of having relativistic implications, it comes as no surprise to discover MacIntyre's critics making the same accusation. Nor is it surprising to find that there are analogies between MacIntyre's response and claims made about scientific research programs by Lakatos.

MacIntyre takes the relativist challenge to amount to the claim that if standards of rationality are tradition-bound, then "no issue between contending traditions is rationally decidable" (p. 352). His response comes in two parts. The first is, in effect, an argument for the possibility of a rational decision in some cases of conflict. Just as a scientific research program may cease to make progress by its own lights, so also "it may happen to any tradition-constituted enquiry that by its own standards of progress it ceases to make progress" (p. 361). When a tradition thus becomes stagnant or sterile, it enters a period of what MacIntyre calls 'epistemological crisis.' One possible outcome of an epistemological crisis is the defeat of the tradition in crisis by an alien tradition. Defeat occurs provided the alien tradition can both construct an explanation, which is cogent and illuminating by the standards of the defeated tradition, of what it was that rendered the defeated tradition sterile or incoherent and furnish the resources to solve the problems that were intractable for the defeated tradition.

But, of course, this is only one possibility. There is no guarantee that all conflicts between traditions can be resolved by defeat. Indeed, in the light of the historical record, it does not now even seem likely that the conflict between relatively robust traditions of moral inquiry such as those represented by Aristotle and Kant will at any time in the foreseeable future be resolved by the defeat of one by the other. As MacIntyre himself is quick to acknowledge, it is a matter of historical fact that "for very long periods traditions of very different kinds do indeed seem to coexist without any ability to bring their conflicts and disagreements to rational resolution: theological, metaphysical, moral, political, and scientific examples are not hard to find" (p. 366). So it is incumbent on MacIntyre to do more by way of responding to the relativist challenge.

What he does is try to construct a dilemma for the relativist that will show it to be impossible for the challenge to have a rational basis. For the person who would issue the challenge "must during such period of time *either* be him or herself an inhabitant of one of the two or more rival traditions, owing allegiance to its standards of enquiry and employing them in his or her

reasoning, *or* be someone outside all of the traditions, him or herself traditionless" (pp. 366-67). In the former case, absent a severe epistemological crisis in the tradition in question, the person will be committed to its rationality and so precluded from mounting a rational challenge to it. In the latter case, because by hypothesis rationality is tradition-bound, the person will lack the wherewithal to mount any rational challenges. So, in neither case is there a real possibility that the relativist's challenge is itself rational.

But this argument is unsound, for its major premise does not exhaust the possibilities. The neglected possibility is that the challenge is raised from within a rational tradition which is, so to speak, no party to the conflict. This is not just an abstract possibility in a culture like ours that is rich in sharply differentiated traditions of inquiry. Thus, for example, it is easy to imagine an inhabitant of the rational tradition of modern natural science mounting a relativist challenge to all traditions of moral inquiry. In fact, if I am not mistaken, this is a common occurrence. One way the argument might go is this. Because theories in natural science are empirically testable, rational convergence is at least a possibility. Either rival theories will differ in empirical content, in which case it is possible in principle for experiment to decide between them, or they will be empirically equivalent, in which case they are not, appearances to the contrary, really rivals at all but alternative formulations of a single theory. But because moral theories are not empirically testable, rational convergence is not even a possibility. Hence there are bound to be at least some issues between contending moral traditions that are rationally undecidable. And so because such arguments can be constructed within a tradition of one kind to give rational support to relativism with respect to all the traditions of another kind, MacIntyre's attempt to show that it is impossible for the relativist challenge to have a rational basis fails. Hence his position remains undefended against this type of local relativism.

Let us turn now to MacIntyre's polemic against liberalism. What he wishes to challenge is the current "cultural and political hegemony of liberalism" (p. 401). His strategy is to undermine this position of privilege by demoting liberalism to the status of just another tradition of moral inquiry with its own distinctive conceptions of justice and practical reasoning. He contends that a political order in which liberal justice and practical reasoning are embedded is "not neutral with respect to rival and conflicting theories of the human good" (p. 345). And he maintains that "the overriding good of liberalism is no more and no less than the continued sustenance of the liberal social and political order" (p. 345).

I think both these claims are mistaken. To be sure, there is a liberal tradition of moral inquiry in whose history Kant and Mill have prominent roles, and there is a liberal conception of the human good in which such characteristics as individualism, autonomy and sincerity have an important place. However,

it is just because liberalism is an individualistic moral doctrine that social and political concerns cannot be, for liberals, the whole story about the human good or even of overriding importance in all circumstances.

What is more, as John Rawls has recently shown, it is possible to argue for a liberal political order without presupposing any general moral conception and *a fortiori* without assuming the liberal conception of the human good. Such an argument begins with the recognition that a workable conception of political justice for a modern democratic state “must allow for a diversity of doctrines and the plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable, conceptions of the good affirmed by the members of existing democratic societies.”¹ Under such conditions of pluralism, a *polis* state would have to be, to a significant extent, a police state. And it seems that MacIntyre shares something like this recognition, for he takes it to have been a discovery of Europe’s educated classes during and after the Wars of Religion following the Reformation that “no appeal to any agreed conception of *the* good for human beings, either at the level of practice or of theory, was now possible” (p. 209). So the argument remains neutral with respect to competing conceptions of the good. It also applies the principle of toleration to philosophy itself; it remains neutral on controversial questions in philosophical psychology and does not involve a metaphysical doctrine of the self. Neither Hume’s bundle theory nor Kantian noumena may be presupposed. This is what Rawls is getting at when he speaks of justice as fairness as a conception that is political, not metaphysical. The only appeal is to overlapping consensus, the hope that as a matter of fact the various philosophical and religious doctrines likely to persist in a more or less just constitutional democracy will turn out to have enough in common to permit a working agreement on fundamental questions of political justice.

Of course such a consensus will be at best a contingent and rather fragile thing if it exists at all. But I think there is reason to hope that in the United States something close to such a consensus can be extended at least to the constitutional scheme of basic rights and liberties. I am encouraged in this hope by such things as the work of John Courtney Murray, which argues from within a Roman Catholic tradition of natural law morality for the legitimacy of the constitutional separation of church and state.² Perhaps those arguments can serve to remind readers of this journal that Christians who quite properly dissent from the conception of the good for human beings embodied in secular liberal moral theory need not on that account consider themselves at odds with the liberal political culture of constitutional democracy.

So, if I am right, MacIntyre’s position remains undefended against local relativism and is unsuccessful in its assault on political liberalism. I conclude that *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* fails to achieve two of its most important philosophical objectives. But I must confess that I found

MacIntyre's liberal-bashing provocative. Thus I recommend the book both for its rich historical narrative, which is interesting quite apart from the philosophical lessons MacIntyre tries to extract from it, and as a useful antidote to liberal complacency, which lingers in academic circles despite the fact that liberalism has fallen on hard times in the political arena.

NOTES

1. John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer 1985), p. 225.

2. John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964).

Thomistic Papers IV, edited by Leonard A. Kennedy. Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988. 207 pp. \$23.95 Cloth; \$12.95 Paper.

MICHAEL L PETERSON, Asbury College.

This book is mandatory reading for those interested in the contemporary discussion of the epistemology of religion. Leonard Kennedy, editor of the previous two volumes in the *Thomistic Papers* series, has assembled a group of very capable Thomist scholars dedicated to the defense of Thomistic natural theology, which is criticized in *Faith and Rationality* (Plantinga and Wolterstorff, eds. 1983). In this spirited fourth volume of *Thomistic Papers*, "Thomistic epistemologists" Henry Veatch, Henri DuLac, Thomas Sullivan, Dennis McNerny, Richard Connell, Joseph Boyle, and Thomas Russman sally forth against the "Reformed Epistemologists" in *Faith and Rationality*. Most chapters in *Thomistic Papers IV* target the chapters in *Faith and Rationality* by Plantinga and Wolterstorff; one chapter scrutinizes Alston's work; a small part of one chapter comments briefly on one of Mavrodes' stories and a part on Marsden's work. This review discusses all of the chapters in the book, but gives slightly greater emphasis to those by Veatch, McNerny, and Boyle.

Henry Veatch sets the stage for discussion by devoting most of his lengthy chapter to the analysis of Plantinga's piece "Reason and Belief in God." Veatch affirms at the outset the essential agreement between Thomistic and Reformed thinkers: that one chief aim of Christian philosophy is the exhibition of the rationality of the Christian faith. The great differences lie in how the two groups of scholars conceive of this project.