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Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre

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VIRTUES &
PRACTICES
IN THE
CHRISTIAN
TRADITION

Christian Ethics after MacIntyre

E D I T E D B Y

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Brad J. Kallenberg &
Mark Thiessen Nation

Chapter 1

The Master Argument of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*

Brad J. Kallenberg

What's All This Noise?

In September of 1995 the Associated Press released a wirephoto showing Russian lawmakers of both genders in a punching brawl during a session of the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament.¹ Is this behavior an ethnic idiosyncrasy? Do only government officials duke it out over matters of great importance? Or have fisticuffs suddenly become politically correct? No, on all counts.

Pick a topic, any topic — abortion, euthanasia, welfare reform, military intervention in the Balkans — and initiate discussion with a group of reasonable, well-educated people and observe the outcome. Chaos ensues. Of course the volume of the debate may vary according to how “close to home” the issue hits the participants. But any moral discussion, given a group of sufficient diversity, has the potential of escalating into a shouting match...or worse.

An even more striking feature of moral debates is their tendency *never* to reach resolution. Lines are drawn early, and participants rush to take sides. But in taking sides they appear to render themselves incapable of hearing the other. Everyone feels the heat, but no one sees the light.*

Many thinkers are inclined to see *shrillness* and *interminability* as part and parcel of the nature of moral debate. But Alasdair MacIntyre begs to differ. In *After Virtue* he offers the “disquieting suggestion” that the tenor of modern moral debate is the direct outcome of a catastrophe in our past, a catastrophe so great that moral inquiry was very nearly obliterated from our culture and its vocabulary exorcised from our language. What we possess today, he argues, are nothing more than fragments of an older tradition. As a result, our moral discourse, which uses terms like *good*, and *justice*, and *duty*, has been robbed of the context that makes it intelligible. To complicate matters, although university courses in ethics have been around for a long time, no ethics curriculum predates

1. Sergei Shargorodsky, “Russian Lawmakers Do Battle,” *The Sun* (San Bernardino, Calif.), 12 September 1995, A5.

this catastrophe. Therefore, for anyone who has taken ethics courses, and especially for those who have studied ethics diligently, the disarray of modern moral discourse is not only invisible, it is considered normal. This conclusion has been lent apparent credibility by a theory called *emotivism*.

Emotivism, explains MacIntyre, "is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling..."² On this account, the person who remarks "Kindness is good" is not making a truth claim but simply expressing a positive feeling, "Hurrah for kindness!" Similarly, the person who exclaims "Murder is wrong" can be understood to be actually saying "I disapprove of murder" or "Murder, yuck!"

If emotivism is a true picture of the way moral discourse works, then we easily see that moral disputes can never be *rationally* settled because, as the emotivist contends, all value judgments are nonrational. Reason can never compel a solution; we simply have to hunker down and decide. Moral discussion is at best rhetorical persuasion.

There are sound reasons for questioning the emotivist picture. In the first place, emotivism is self-defeating insofar as it makes a truth claim about the non-truth-claim status of all purported truth claims! To put it differently, if all truth claims in the sphere of ethics are simply expressions of preference, as emotivism maintains, then the theory of emotivism itself lacks truth value, and thus we are not constrained to believe it if we prefer not to. In addition, emotivism muddies some ordinarily clear waters. Any proficient language speaker will attest to the fact that the sense of "I prefer..." is vastly different from the sense of "You ought..." The distinct uses to which we put these phrases is enabled precisely because the sense of "You ought" cannot be reduced without remainder to "I prefer."

But MacIntyre is not content to offer first-order arguments against emotivism. Stopping there would have made his book simply another ethical theory — just the sort of thing that emotivism so convincingly dismisses. Instead, what MacIntyre is up to has been called *meta-ethics* — an exploration into the conditions (or conditioners) of human ethical thought. As a human enterprise, ethics must be shaped in the same way that language, culture, and history shape the rest of our thinking. By investigating the historical conditionedness of our moral life and discourse, MacIntyre undermines emotivism, making a strong case for its own historical conditionedness. Emotivism as a moral philosophy appears to explain why contemporary moral debates are irresolvable. But it cannot account for the oddity that rival positions within these debates all employ incommensurable concepts. Why cannot the Kantian ("The taking of human life is always and everywhere just plain wrong") concede even a modicum of legitimacy to the Lockean argument ("Abortion is the natural right of women") if

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11–12. Hereafter, page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to this book.

both views boil down to "I don't/do approve of abortion"? Nor can emotivism explain the oddity that interminable moral debates are conducted with the expectation that such debates *can be* resolved and, in keeping with this optimism, are conducted in such a way that rival positions appeal to principles presumed to be ultimate. In other words, if all value judgments are expressive, how did this belief in ultimate principles arise? MacIntyre suggests that it makes more sense to look for a source of this optimism, and its belief in ultimates, in a tradition that predates emotivism.

In fact, if one looks closely at the modern moral self, it has the appearance of being dislocated, as if it were missing something. The moral self as conceived by the emotivist is "totally detached from all social particularity" and is, rather, "entirely set over against the social world" (32). This autonomous self has no given continuities, possesses no ultimate governing principles, and is guided by no *telos*. Instead it is aimless, having "a certain abstract and ghostly character" (33). If MacIntyre is correct in asserting that "the emotivist self, in acquiring sovereignty in its own realm lost its traditional boundaries provided by a social identity and a view of human life as ordered to a given end," then it comes as no surprise that such a self flounders helplessly and endlessly in moral quagmires (34). But how did this catastrophe come to pass, and what exactly are the social identity and *telos* that were lost?

The Failure of the Enlightenment Project

The catastrophe that left the modern moral world in such disarray was a series of failed attempts to provide rational justification of morality for a culture that had philosophy as its central social activity. This eighteenth-century culture was called the Enlightenment, and its misguided agenda MacIntyre dubs the Enlightenment Project.

Among the first attempts to justify morality were those of Denis Diderot (1713–84) and David Hume (1711–76). Diderot tried to make human desire the criterion of an action's rightness or wrongness but failed to answer how a conflict of desires, and hence a conflict between an action's rightness and wrongness, could be resolved. Like Diderot, Hume conceived human passion as the stuff of morality because it is passion, not reason, that ultimately moves the moral agent to act. Hume goes further than Diderot by specifying a ruling passion (he calls it "sympathy"), but he can provide sufficient explanation neither for why this passion ought to predominate nor for why his account of the moral life looks suspiciously like that of the English bourgeoisie he emulated.³

Provoked by the failures of Hume and Diderot to ground morality in human passion, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) strove to ground morality in reason alone. He argued that if morality was rational, its form would be identical for all ra-

3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 300–325.

tional beings. Therefore, the moral thing to do is to follow those principles that can be universalized, that is, to follow those principles that one could consistently wish for everyone to follow. This sounds suspiciously like the Golden Rule. What makes it different, however, is Kant's conviction that the principle of universalizability (also called the *categorical imperative*) gets its punch from the requirement that it be willed without falling into *rational* contradiction.⁴ Unfortunately, Kant's system has several large flaws, not the least of which is its ability to "justify" immoral maxims such as "Persecute all those who hold false religious beliefs" as well as trivial ones such as "Always eat mussels on Mondays in March" (46).

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) heartily agreed with the content of the morality that Kant defended (middle-class German Lutheran piety), but he also perceived that Kant's *rational* vindication of morality had failed as miserably as its predecessors. According to Kierkegaard, all persons are free to choose the plane of their existence. But this leaves open the problem of how to decide which plane to inhabit, since the criteria for making the decision are internal to the plane under consideration. Shall I inhabit the plane of the pleasure-seeking aesthete or that of the ethical rule-follower? To choose according to passion is to be relegated to the plane of the aesthetic. To choose according to reason is to have already chosen the ethical plane. Hence, neither passion nor reason can be the criterion for making the choice. The choice is a criterionless leap. MacIntyre concludes:

Just as Hume seeks to found morality on the passions because his arguments have excluded the possibility of founding it on reason, so Kant finds it on reason because *his* arguments have excluded the possibility of founding it on the passions, and Kierkegaard on criterionless fundamental choice because of what he takes to be the compelling nature of the considerations which exclude both reason and the passions. (49)

4. This can be understood by means of the following illustration. Consider first the case where lying is simply speaking the opposite of the truth. A person faced with the question of whether to lie on a given occasion should easily realize that lying cannot be universalized without rational contradiction. For if everyone lied, then lying would become the normal mode of communication. If everyone always lied, we would simply adjust our expectations and hence could navigate just fine. For example, one day my eight-year-old son declined my offer of a peanut butter sandwich but then reminded me with a grin that Tuesday was "opposite day." Once I knew the plan, we had no trouble communicating because I could bank on the opposite of what he said. ("Do you like it?" "No, it's awful. I hate it!") Similarly, in a world where lying was the universal practice, deception could not exist because lying, in effect, would have become the means of truth-telling. Of course, this would fly in the face of what we understand by the term *lying*. So we run headlong into a rational contradiction: *lying* cannot be universalized because when universalized, lying ceases to be lying. Therefore, the opposite of lying must be universalizable; or to put it differently, truth-telling is the categorical imperative.

Now imagine the case that lying is not simple opposite-saying but distortion of truth — a mixture of truth and error. It should be clear that the sort of confusion that would be produced by universalizing this brand of lying would be on the scale that disables all communication — including *deception*. In such a world "intent to deceive" has no meaning. So, once again, we run up against a rational contradiction: universalization of lying leads to the state of affairs in which what is universalized, i.e., lying, is logically impossible.

So by Hume's standards Kant is unjustified in his conclusions; by Kant's standards Hume is both unjustified and unintelligible. By Kierkegaard's, both Hume and Kant are intelligible, but neither is compelling. The proof of the Enlightenment Project's failure is the stubborn existence of rival conceptions of moral justification.

Why the Enlightenment Project Had to Fail

The important thing to realize is that the Enlightenment Project didn't simply happen to fail, it *had* to fail. What doomed the Enlightenment Project from its inception was its loss of the concept of *telos*. The word *telos* is borrowed from classical Greek and means "end" or "purpose." When applied to human morality the term signifies the answer to the question "What is human life for?" In Aristotle's day (fourth century B.C.), moral reasoning was an argument consisting of three terms. The first term was the notion of the untutored human nature, which so desperately needed moral guidance. The second term was human nature conceived in terms of having fulfilled its purpose or achieved its *telos*. Moral imperatives, the third term, was that set of instructions for moving from the untutored self toward the actualized *telos* (see fig. 1). In this way moral precepts weren't snatched out of thin air but got their "punch" or their "oughtness" from the concrete notion of what human life was for.⁵

The wristwatch is a good example of how this works. If we ask "what is the wristwatch for?" the usual answer is that watches are for timekeeping.⁶ To put it more technically, we could say that the purpose or *telos* of the watch is timekeeping. Or, to put it in still other terms, we can say that the watch is *functionally defined* as a mechanism for keeping time. Knowledge of this *telos* enables us to render judgment against a grossly inaccurate watch as a "bad" watch. Furthermore, our functional definition also allows us to identify the functional imperative for watches: "Watches *ought* to keep time well."

Because the Enlightenment rejected the traditionally shared concept of what human life is for and started, as it were, from scratch by inventing the idea of humans as "autonomous individuals," the concept of *telos*, so very central to morality, was lost. Having rejected the received account of *telos*, the only remaining option upon which moral principles might be grounded was the untutored human nature — the very thing in need of guidance and, by nature, at odds with those guiding principles! (see fig. 2).

The results of the failure of the Enlightenment Project were far-reaching. First, without the notion of *telos* serving as a means for moral triangulation,

5. Admittedly, the Aristotelian model of morality makes moral imperatives appear hypothetical — as means to socially conceded ends — but theistic morality has the same basic shape. The primary difference is that the theistic version contends that the human *telos* is divinely determined, a determination that has the effect of bestowing a categorical status on moral imperatives.

6. Of course, it could also be argued that watches make fashion statements, have sentimental value, and so forth. But for sake of the illustration, let us imagine that watches are useful only for timekeeping.

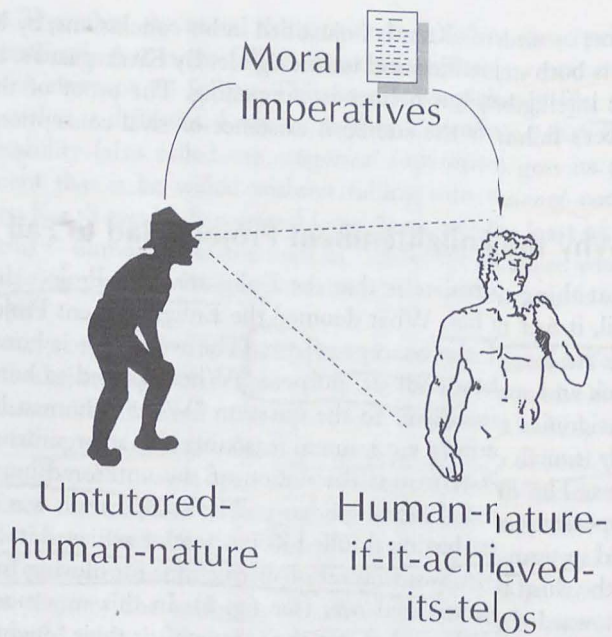


Figure 1

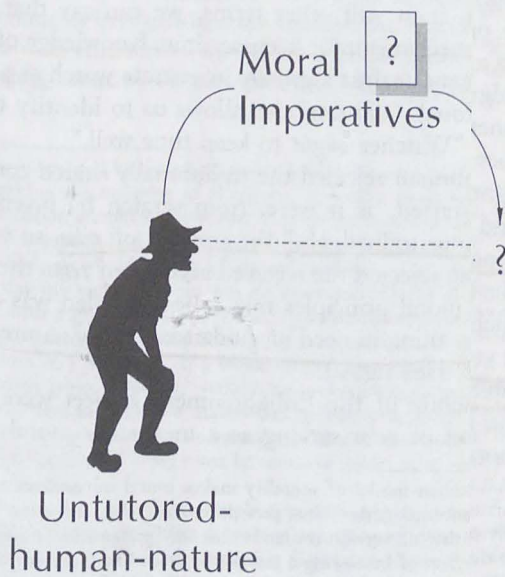


Figure 2

moral value judgments lost their factual character. And, of course, if values are "factless," then no appeal to facts can ever settle disagreements over values. It is in this state of affairs that emotivism, with its claim that moral values were nothing but matters of preference, flourishes as a theory. Second, impostors stepped in to fill the vacuum created by the absence of *telos* in moral reasoning. For example, utilitarianism can be seen to offer a ghostly substitute when it asserts that morality operates according to the principle of *greatest good for greatest number*. But this principle is vacuous because the utilitarians who assert it cannot adequately define what "good" means.⁷ Similarly, Kant tried to rescue the (newly) autonomous moral agent from the loss of authority in his or her moral statements by attempting to provide "rational" justification for statements deprived of their former teleological status. Not only did Kant fail but later analytic philosophy cannot advance Kantian arguments without smuggling in undefined terms such as *rights* and *justice*. MacIntyre's point is that *tradition* alone provides the sense of terms like *good* and *justice* and *telos*. The presence of this moral vocabulary in debates today only goes to show that "modern moral utterance and practice can only be understood as a series of fragmented survivals from an older past and that the insoluble problems which they have generated for modern moral theories will remain insoluble until this is well understood" (110–11). In the absence of traditions, moral debate is out of joint and becomes a theater of illusions in which simple indignation and mere protest occupy center stage:

But protest is now almost entirely that negative phenomenon which characteristically occurs as a reaction to the alleged invasion of someone's *rights* in the name of someone else's *utility*. The self-assertive shrillness of protest arises because the facts of incommensurability ensure that protesters can never win an argument; the indignant self-righteousness of protest arises because the facts of incommensurability ensure equally that the protesters can never lose an argument either. (71; cf. 77)

7. Please note, however, that the situation in the wake of the Enlightenment Project's failure is far worse than merely a state of being unable to settle disagreements. MacIntyre argues that the disagreements themselves are wrongheaded in the first place. Seventeenth-century empiricists thought themselves adequate to the task of dealing with *brute* facts, when the truth of the matter is that facts cannot be perceived apart from a conceptual framework that recognizes, sorts, prioritizes, and evaluates the facts. Value-laden theory is required to support observation as much as vice-versa. This insight was overlooked when, in the transition to the world of "modern" science, the medieval notion of final cause (i.e., causes that proceed according to *teloi*) was rejected in favor of making efficient causes the whole ball of wax. When this scientific view becomes adopted by ethicists, what emerges is a mechanistic account of human action framed in terms of "laws of human behavior" with all reference to intentions, purposes, and reasons for action omitted. The "facts" of human behavior are thus construed free from value concepts (such as "good"), and human action is thereafter presumed to be predictable and manipulable like all other physical bodies. This presumption is embodied in the central character of the emotivist era: the bureaucratic manager. Unfortunately for the manager we do not possess lawlike generalizations for human behavior. In fact, human behavior is systematically unpredictable for a number of reasons. Both the expert manager and the attending virtue of "effectiveness" are fictions which expose the poverty of the Enlightenment Project. Cf. *After Virtue*, 93–99.

Nietzsche or Aristotle?

MacIntyre concludes that we are faced with a momentous choice. The present emotivist world cannot be sustained much longer. Nietzsche saw this clearly. He argued convincingly that every time a person made an appeal to "objectivity," it was none other than a thinly disguised expression of the person's subjective will. When we look at post-Enlightenment ethics through Nietzsche's eyes, we can see that insofar as the Enlightenment Project offers putative moral principles (that is, ones that are devoid of the background context that gives them their clout), it creates a moral vacuum which will inevitably be filled by headstrong people asserting their individual will-to-power; and to the victor go the spoils. To put it differently, the emotivist world is neither stable nor self-sustaining. Rather, it is a battleground of competing wills awaiting the emergence of a conqueror. Once the Aristotelian model of morality was rejected and the Enlightenment Project had failed, the danger of an imminent *Übermensch* (who resembles Hitler more than Superman) must be conceded. The only stopper to this danger is the possibility of recognizing that the Aristotelian model ought not to have been rejected in the first place. We are faced, then, with a momentous choice between Nietzsche and Aristotle. "There is no third alternative" (118).

In Praise of Aristotle

In order for MacIntyre to make a case that the Aristotelian morality ought never to have been discarded, he must first demonstrate the strength of this moral tradition from its origin in Homeric literature to its full-blown Aristotelian-Thomistic form of the late Middle Ages.

Heroic Society

Storytelling was the primary tool for moral education in classical Greece. It was for this reason that Homer's epic poems reflect the moral structure of their times. Not only does art reflect life, but literature in particular is the repository for moral stories, stories that have the peculiar ability of becoming embodied in the life of the community that cherishes them. This fact, that human life has the same shape as that of a story, will come up again in our discussion.

The moral structure of heroic society has two other outstanding features. First, morality has a social dimension. The social mobility that typifies our age was entirely absent in Homer's time. Then, one was born into a social structure that was fixed: "Every individual has a given role and status within the well-defined and highly determinate system of roles and statuses" (122). One's social place determined both the responsibility to render certain services to others (for example, it was incumbent on the head of the clan to defend and protect the clan) and the privileges one could expect from others in return. What one lacked in "upward mobility" was compensated by greater security. To know one's role

and status in this small social system was to have settled forever the question "Who am I?" In fact, no one ever thought of asking such existential questions in heroic society because who one was was indistinguishable from what one did. Within this social framework the word *virtue* (*aretē*) describes any quality that is required for discharging one's role. As the clan's warrior-defender, the head of the clan needed courage as well as physical strength and battle savvy. Courage is also intimately linked to another virtue, fidelity. Fidelity and courage become obligatory because the community can survive only if kinsmen can be relied upon to fight valiantly on each other's behalf should the need arise.

This highlights a third feature of the moral structure of heroic societies. Since morality is bound up with the social structure of the clan, questions about moral value are *questions of fact*. Just as what qualifies as a "right" move in the game of chess is predetermined by the agreed-upon object of the game, so, too, the morally acceptable "move" was easily identified for those who participated in the "game." However, there was no way for a person in heroic society to step outside the moral "game" to evaluate it, as is possible with chess. "All questions of choice arise within the framework; the framework itself therefore cannot be chosen" precisely because the person who does try to step outside his or her given social position "would be engaged in the enterprise of trying to make himself [or herself] disappear" (126).

Athenian Society

Life in Athens illustrates an important moment in the life of a moral tradition: growth comes through crisis. In large measure, morality was a subject that received a great deal of attention from the Athenians because of a perceived discrepancy between their moral "scriptures" (the Homeric literature) and life as they knew it. No Athenian could conceive of living like an Achilles or an Agamemnon. This does not illustrate that the heroic society had been mistaken about morality's *social* dimension, but rather, that the social structure since the days of Homer had undergone such a drastic change (with the emergence of the city-state, or *polis*) that morality had necessarily changed shape too. The changes in the social world had the effect of broadening the range of application of the concept of virtue. The term no longer denoted excellence in the performance of one's well-defined social roles (where excellence could be understood only from within such a role), but rather virtues signified qualities that were applicable to human life in general (or, at least, human life in Athens, which in their minds was human life *par excellence!*). While the Athenians inherited the vocabulary of the virtues from heroic society, the content of these terms was up for grabs.

For example, the Sophists were inclined to see *virtue* as the generic name for those qualities that ensure successful living, and what counts for success was relative to each different city-state. When in Sparta, do as the Spartans do — treasure physical prowess and warcraft — but when in Athens do as the Athenians do and hanker after beauty and truth. In response to their appalling relativism, Plato charged the Sophists with failing to discern the difference be-

tween mundane virtues and “true” virtue. Plato is willing to grant that the virtues are the means to a happy life, but getting clear about the nature of “true” happiness (and “true” virtue) requires shifting one’s focus from the earthly *polis* to contemplate instead the “ideal” world. Plato was convinced that this exercise in contemplation would show that true happiness is the satisfaction of having lived in accordance with one’s true nature. Human nature, according to Plato, was composed of three parts. The highest part — that which participates most fully in the realm of the Ideal — is the intellect and is assisted in its function by the virtue of wisdom. The lowest part — that which is shared with the beasts — is the desiring part and is to be constrained by the virtue of prudence. Between lay a motivational well-spring, or high-spirited part, which is assisted by the virtue of courage. A fourth virtue, justice, refers to the state of affairs when all three are in proper order with respect to each other. This set of four virtues is called cardinal (from the Latin *cardo* which means “door hinge”) because they are the qualities upon which the truly happy life hangs.⁸

It is important to remember that these two contemporaneous but varying conceptions of the virtues were attempts to align the concept of virtue with the purpose of life as understood in the newly broadened context — that of the *polis*. This broadening was the first movement toward the belief in a universal moral order, which finds clearer expression in Aristotle.

But Plato did not have the last word even in his own day. His package of virtues, together with the moral order it depicted, was all too neat. The tragic dramatists, such as Sophocles, explored the kinds of real conflicts that might arise between virtues or between goods. To put it differently, the moral order sometimes makes rival and incompatible claims on a person which can force him or her into a tragic situation of having to make a choice between two or more socially incumbent duties, each of which entails dire consequences. In grappling with this conflict, the Sophoclean protagonist is forced to transcend his or her society while remaining inescapably accountable to the higher moral order.

Here, then, is not simply an argument over which of two lists of virtues is better (Achilles’ courage or Oedipus’s wisdom) but rather an argument over which narrative form (Homer’s epic poetry or a Sophoclean tragedy) best depicts the form of human living. MacIntyre suggests a general lesson to be learned: “to adopt a stance on the virtues will be to adopt a stance on the narrative character of human life” precisely because narrative and virtues are mutually supporting and “internally connected” concepts (144).

8. Plato goes on to argue that society is, or ought to be, arranged along the same lines. The bronze class of society are those working folk whose citizenship is assisted by the virtue of prudence. The silver class comprises the warriors in whom the high-spirited part of the soul dominates. The quality they need above all is courage. The gold class, of course, is made up of the philosopher-kings, whose role in society is not merely to rule but to contemplate truth with the aid of the virtue of wisdom. Social justice, in Plato’s view, signified keeping the classes in the proper order, which amounted to maintaining the status quo. In this way Plato’s system is by nature conservative: change (including progress) was bad; stability was good.

Aristotle's Model

To defend Aristotle as the apex of virtue theory, MacIntyre must make a characteristically un-Aristotelian move. He must show that Aristotle lies along the historical trajectory that begins with Homeric literature and is, therefore, indebted to and dependent upon his predecessors.⁹ Furthermore, MacIntyre must show that Aristotle's formulation of moral philosophy has advanced beyond his predecessors while retaining characteristic features of the overall tradition. To do this MacIntyre focuses on four features in Aristotle's thought.

First, the concept of a moral order, which began to emerge in Plato's thinking, becomes more explicit in Aristotle. However, unlike Plato's conception of moral order, which ruled as it were from above, Aristotle sees this moral order as internal to what it means to be human. Humans are *teleological* beings, which is to say, human living aims at an end, or *telos*. Some ends are intermediate rather than terminal. The ship at which shipbuilding aims may in turn be means for the practice of warcraft, which itself may be a means to a yet more distant end. Aristotle reasons that human action consists of means-end chains, which converge on one ultimate end called the Good. The extent to which humans achieve their *telos* is the extent to which they participate in the Good. In Aristotle's mind, the *telos* can be conceived only in terms of a thing's natural function. Similarly, virtues are function-specific, or more precisely, excellency of function.¹⁰ To illustrate, if the function of a horse is to run, then the *telos* of a horse is racing, and its virtue is its speed. Virtues, therefore, are qualities that assist achievement of the *telos*, and the *telos* of a thing is bound up in the nature of the thing.

The nature of human beings, upon which the notion of the human *telos* depends, is bound up in the metaphysical structure of the soul. According to Aristotle, while we may share the vegetative (growth) and locomotive (movement) soul-stuff with the animals, humans are distinguished in the chain of being by their rational souls. The end of human life, therefore, is rationality, and the virtues are (1) *virtues of character* which assist living according to reason and (2) *virtues of thought* which enable proper exercise of reason itself.

The notion of a function-specific *telos* represents an advance over earlier formulations of the tradition by providing a clearer account of moral imperatives. As noted earlier in the wristwatch illustration, it is the concept of *telos* that provides human beings with moral imperatives. If the function of a watch is

9. Frederick Copleston notes that Aristotle, like Hegel, saw himself to be systematizing and improving upon previous philosophy. See *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1:371-78. Yet while Aristotle appreciated his platonic heritage, he conceived his own work in terms of "getting it right" in those places Plato "got it wrong." What is un-Aristotelian, therefore, is MacIntyre's historicist claim that Aristotle's work lies along a trajectory that stretches from Plato to the Middle Ages and beyond; a claim that necessarily relativizes Aristotle's contribution to the conceptual framework he shared with his predecessors. Thus the "new ground" Aristotle broke must be seen as nothing more than *intrasystematic* improvements.

10. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes, "every virtue causes its possessors to be in a good state and to perform their functions well." *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1985), 1106a16.

timekeeping, then it *ought* to keep time well. If the function of human beings is rationality, then humans *ought* to live in accordance with, and in right exercise of, reason.

The second feature of Aristotle's moral philosophy is *eudaimonia*. A difficult word to translate — blessedness, happiness, prosperity — it seems to connote “the state of being well and doing well in being well, of man's being well-favored himself and in relation to the divine” (148). *Eudaimonia* names that *telos* toward which humans move. Virtues, then, assist the movement toward *eudaimonia*, but *eudaimonia* cannot be defined apart from these same virtues:

But the exercise of the virtues is not in this sense a means to the end of the good for man. For what constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to secure such a life. We thus cannot characterize the good for man without already having made reference to the virtues. (149)

The apparent circularity of the relation between *telos*, *eudaimonia*, and *virtue* is not a mark against Aristotle's system but, rather, an advance over Plato's. For Plato, “reality” not only denoted the world of rocks and doorknobs, it also included the world of intangibles such as “love” and “17” — things whose existence in the realm of Form is every bit as real as the middle-sized dry goods that clutter our sensible world. As Plato saw it, “true virtue” belonged to the realm of Form, and particular human qualities were deemed “virtuous” to the extent that they resembled the “true virtue” of which they were copies. Thus, there could be no inherent conflict or disunity between particular virtuous qualities; any tragic conflict was simply a function of imperfection in copying universal virtue into particular living. In this way, morality was thought to be objective and moral reasoning an exercise of the intellect according to which the mind grasped the Form of “true virtue.” Ironically, Plato's doctrine failed even to overcome the relativist claims of the Sophists and tragic dramatists of his own day. Although MacIntyre does not think that Aristotle himself explicitly conquered the problem of what to do when virtues conflict, his model, which defines *telos*, *eudaimonia*, and *virtue* in terms of each other, does point the way toward conceiving moral reasoning as a skill rather than as an exercise of intellect (as Plato and the later Enlightenment thinkers imagined). Such skill could be attained and cultivated only from within the form of life in which these concepts were at home.

The third feature of Aristotle's system is the distinction between theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning. Practical reasoning begins with a want, or goal, or desire and always terminates in action. Suppose you are thirsty after a long day of shopping. The major premise of your reasoning process is your (obvious) belief that anyone who is thirsty is well advised to find a drinking fountain. The minor premise of this line of thought is your knowledge that a drinking fountain exists in the northwest corner of this particular department store. Your practical reasoning terminates in your act of walking to the northwest corner of the store and quenching your thirst.

In Aristotle's way of looking at things, moral reasoning is an instance of practical reasoning. It is assisted by virtues of character (which temper, guide, and shape initial desires) and virtues of thought (such as *phronēsis*, which enables the perception of practical reasoning's major premises).¹¹

Perhaps the most important use of practical reason is its employment in the balancing of human activities. I cannot spend all my time in theoretical contemplation, the highest faculty of reason and thus the highest human good (158), because I would soon starve to death. In order to maximize the amount of time I can engage in contemplation, I must balance this activity with work, civic duty, and the like. This mental balancing act is the domain of practical reason. This explanation also sheds light on why virtuous persons make the best civic leaders, since skill in practical reasoning is also what it takes to run the *polis*.

The fourth feature of Aristotle's moral philosophy that MacIntyre emphasizes is friendship. Friendship, of course, involves mutual affection, but for Aristotle, "that affection arises within a relationship defined in terms of common allegiance to and a common pursuit of goods" (156). This is to say that Aristotle's notion on friendship presupposes, first, the existence of the *polis*, which renders common good possible, and second, that this good itself is the health of the *polis*: "We are to think then of friendship as being the sharing of all in the common project of creating and sustaining the life of the city, a sharing incorporated in the immediacy of an individual's particular friendships" (156).

The emphasis on friendship in Aristotle illustrates one aspect of continuity in this historic tradition, namely, that the moral structure is intimately linked with social relationships.

Obstacles to Be Hurdled

Aristotle is definitely the hero of MacIntyre's account. And at the time *After Virtue* was written (1981, revised 1984) MacIntyre saw Aristotle as the apex of the virtue tradition.¹² However, if MacIntyre is to succeed in rejuvenating the Aristotelian tradition, he must overcome three difficulties in Aristotle's account that threaten to topple the whole project. First, Aristotle's notion of *telos* rests on his distinctive "metaphysical biology." In Aristotle's view, the form guarantees that all humans share a common essence. The essence of humanness is rationality. Rationality is of two sorts, theoretical and practical. The *telos* of human

11. Since right action follows in straightforward fashion from the initial desire and major premise, and since differences in initial desires as well as differences in major premises boil down to variations in the exercise of the respective virtues, moral quandaries are nonexistent for Aristotle. When in a bind, he can always defer to the maxim "the morally right action is that taken by the virtuous person."

12. In later works, MacIntyre becomes convinced that Aquinas had succeeded in surpassing Aristotle on several points. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

life, then, is actualization of both forms of reason. The goal of theoretical reason is contemplation; the goal of practical reason is life in the polis. Aristotle's problem was to give an account of how pursuit of these two forms of rationality could be reconciled. MacIntyre's problem is to provide a replacement for Aristotle's concept of form that will enlighten us as to the *telos* of human life. Traditions provide answers to this question. Second, the virtue tradition sees morality as inextricably enmeshed in the life of the polis. What does this do for the applicability of the Aristotelian model today, in view of the extinction of the *polis*? Third, Aristotle retains Plato's belief in the unity of the virtues, which implies that every putative case of tragedy reduces to an instance that is "simply the result of flaws of character in individuals or of unintelligent political arrangements" (157). As Sophocles dramatized, instances of tragic evil were not inconceivable. Can such real conflicts be interpreted as contributing to the moral life rather than confusing it?

In addition to the three problems internal to Aristotle's account, MacIntyre notes one problem external to it. To identify the trajectory from Homer to Aristotle to Aquinas to the present as a single tradition, something must be done to reconcile the diversity in the lists of virtues taken from every age. Not only have the lists changed with each successive formulation of the tradition,¹³ but *how* virtue is defined at one point in history is at odds with the definition explicated in another age.¹⁴ Thus, the fourth problem MacIntyre must overcome is the challenge of demonstrating the kind of continuity between these formulations that makes these disparate accounts a single, unified tradition.

We now turn to MacIntyre's own "metanarrative" to see if he is successful in his endeavors.

Ethics à la MacIntyre

The disparity between virtue lists and even between the definitions of the term can be reconciled, says MacIntyre, by bringing to light the particular backdrop that each formulation presupposes. The tricky part of his analysis is that each of the central concepts — *virtue, practice, narrative, and tradition* — can be defined only, finally, in terms of the other concepts. This does not make the MacIntyrean version guilty of circularity. It simply means that getting a handle on his explanation is not like building a house (which progresses incrementally, brick by brick) but like watching the sun rise — the light dawns gradually over the whole.¹⁵

13. E.g., the early church fathers champion humility as a virtue, while Aristotle repudiates it as a vice (182)!

14. E.g., Aristotle sees virtues as the means to internal ends, while Benjamin Franklin sees virtues as means to external, even utilitarian, ends (184).

15. This illustration comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969, 1972), §141.

Practices

The cornerstone of this backdrop is the idea of practices. MacIntyre defines a *practice* somewhat tortuously as

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. (187)

Attention to the grammar of this sentence reveals four central concepts. First, practices are human activities. However, these are not activities of isolated individuals but socially established and cooperative activities. Such activities cannot be executed alone but require participation by like-minded others. In addition to being social, these activities are also complex enough to be challenging, and coherent enough to aim at some goal in a unified fashion. Building a house is a practice, while taking long showers is not. The game of tennis is a practice, but hitting a backhand is not. Medicine is a practice, while gargling mouthwash is not.¹⁶

Second, practices have goods that are internal to the activity. Some practices, for example, jurisprudence, have external goods — money, fame, power — which come as by-products of the practice. But true practices are marked by internal goods — those rewards that can be recognized and appreciated only by participants.¹⁷ For example, I can bribe my son with pieces of candy to learn the game of chess. But at some point he may begin to enjoy the game of chess for itself. At this point he has become a practitioner and member of the greater community of chess players. He has, furthermore, become hooked on its internal reward — the joy of chess — something to which all players have access.

Third, practices have standards of excellence without which internal goods cannot be fully achieved. The joy of chess is in having played *well*. And what counts for excellence has been determined by the historical community of practitioners. The practitioners have recognized that stalemate is not as desirable an endgame as checkmate. And to execute a queen-rook fork is more satisfying than simple *en passant*.

Fourth, practices are systematically extended. As practitioners have striven for excellence day in and day out over the years, the standards of the practice, along with practitioners' abilities to achieve these standards, have slowly risen. Perhaps no field better illustrates this than medicine. Doctors were no doubt sincere when they once treated fevers with leeches, but contemporary physicians possess skills that far surpass those of their predecessors. Yet the dependence of contemporary practitioners upon their predecessors is unquestionable: it is

16. For an extended discussion of practices see Chapter 7 in this volume.

17. It is often, but not always, the case that internal rewards are shared among all practitioners without diminution.

precisely because previous doctors strove for excellence that the specific advances in medicine that have been made *have* been made. But increase in technical skill does not quite capture what is meant by the notion of systematic extension. It also includes the way technically proficient doctors have come to appreciate how the health of a patient is a function of a larger system. Thus, the practice of medicine is slowly being extended to encompass care for the whole patient in all his or her psychosocial complexity.¹⁸

Against the backdrop of practices, 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 any such goods" (191). The clan leader who *practices* warcraft and the church father who *practices* evangelism are assisted by the qualities of courage and humility respectively. Against this backdrop many of the discrepancies between virtue lists can be reconciled as a matter of differences of practice.

In our smörgåsbord era it is tempting to think of practices as self-contained exercises. In fact, many practices are so complex that they have become an entire tradition in themselves. Medicine, science, and warcraft all have attending epistemologies, authoritative texts, structured communities and institutions, and histories of development. Other practices are parts of clusters that contribute to the identity of a tradition. For example, the Christian tradition defines itself as a socially expanding movement called "the kingdom of God." At its core, therefore, Christianity seems to consist primarily of the practice of community formation. Subpractices that contribute to community formation can be categorized under the rubrics of *witness*, *worship*, *works of mercy*, *discernment*, and *discipleship*.¹⁹ Other schemes can be imagined of course, but my point is that Christianity cannot be explained or understood without reference to a distinctive cluster of practices. In order to participate in the tradition called Christianity one must necessarily participate in these practices. To put it another way, to participate in the community is to participate in practices because communal life is the point at which the practices intersect. Furthermore, knowing the constitutive practices of Christianity tells us a great deal about how Christians ought to live. If virtues are cultivated by striving for excellence in the practice of practices, then we are unable to grow in Christlikeness unless we participate in Christianity's practices.

Narrative

A second crucial concept that serves as a backdrop to our understanding of the virtues is narrative. MacIntyre explains narrative this way. Imagine that a woman

18. The changing mode of physician-patient relationships is detailed by William F. May in *The Physician's Covenant* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) and in Chapter 15 of this volume.

19. See Chapter 2. For an alternate list of constitutive Christian practices see Craig R. Dykstra, "No Longer Strangers: The Church and Its Educational Ministry," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6, no. 3 (1985): 188-200, as well as Chapter 7 in the present volume.

approaches you at a bus stop and says "The name of the common wild duck is *histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*." Now, what would you make of this person? Truth is, you can't make anything of her, or of her action, without more information. Her act is completely unintelligible. But now suppose it becomes known that this woman is a librarian, and she has mistaken you for the person who earlier had asked for the Latin name of the common wild duck. We can now understand her action because it has been put into a context. The contexts that make sense out of human action are stories or narratives. To explain an action is simply to provide the story that gives the act its context. We can imagine any number of stories that might make sense out of the bus stop incident (for example, perhaps she is a Russian spy whose password is the sentence in question). But we will also say that the explanation of her action is rendered more fully if we can tell the story that takes her longer- and longest-term intentions into account and shows how her shorter-term intentions relate to the longer-term ones. So we might discover that she has rushed out of the library in search of a particular patron because she has been put on a standard of performance under threat of losing her job. Her longer-term intention is to save her job. Her longest-term intention might be uncovered in telling the story of how she is the sole provider for her paraplegic son. MacIntyre reasons that if human actions are intelligible only with respect to stories that contextualize intentions, then that which unifies actions into sequences and sequences into a continuous whole is the story of one's life. My life as a whole makes sense when my story is told.

This has important consequences for the problem of Aristotle's "metaphysical biology." Imagine we had the opportunity to ask Aristotle "How can I know that I am the same person as the me of ten years ago?" He would likely reply, "Though your body changes through growth and decay, your form, or essence, is immutable." But this answer is not likely to fly very far for a modern audience. In contrast, MacIntyre suggests that *narrative* provides a better explanation for the unity of a human life. The self has continuity because it has played the single and central character in a particular story — the narrative of a person's life. MacIntyre puts it this way: the unity of the self "resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as a narrative beginning to middle to end" (205).

Just as practices have a characteristically social dimension, so also do narratives. Humorist Garrison Keillor reminisces about the distinctive characters who populated the Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, of his childhood. But notice how in identifying themselves as "Norwegian bachelor farmers" such folk have immediately linked who they are with others who share these ethnic, gender, and occupational features. I cannot explain who I am without utilizing some social placemarkers which identify me with certain strata of my community. If pressed to go beyond this first-level answer to "Who am I?" where can one go but to say that I am also someone's neighbor, child, sibling, student, mate, friend, constituent, or employee? In occupying these roles we simultaneously become subplots in the stories of others' lives just as they have become subplots in

ours. In this way, the life stories of members of a community are enmeshed and intertwined. This entanglement of our stories is the fabric of communal life: "For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity" (221). Our stories are concretely embedded, or our stories intersect, in those practices in which we are co-participants. For example, the role of ethics professor links the instructor with the rest of the faculty in general and one group of students in particular, within the wider practice of graduate education.

This construction overcomes the fear that the Aristotelian account of the virtues cannot be sustained after the extinction of the polis. In MacIntyre's construction, virtues are those qualities that assist one in the extension of his or her story, and, by extrapolation, the extension of the story of his or her community or communities. The question "What ought I to do?" is not a question of one's political duty as it was in Aristotle's day, but it *is* a question whose answer must be preceded by the logically prior question: "Of which stories am I a part?"

Although none of us will ever have the clear moral parameters that were to be had in the well-defined social framework of Aristotle's *polis*, the concept of narrative embeddedness still explains the presence of natural boundaries and moral momentum. In 1994 a U.S. postal worker lost his job and retaliated by going on a killing spree. Our responses to his actions were telling. People reacted by saying he "flipped out," "snapped," "went berserk," or "had gone insane." Our expectation is that postal workers (even unemployed ones) aren't killers, and once a postal worker type, always a postal worker type.²⁰ This illustrates our deeper belief that rational human behavior is action that stays within the boundaries of "character." To step outside these boundaries is not merely to act irrationally but to lose one's sanity. This is because the narrative shape of human life carries with it a certain degree of moral momentum. For example, my wife can bank on the fact that I won't wake up tomorrow morning and say "Today I think I'll become an ax murderer!" There is a certain momentum in who I am; I will generally stay "in character." The transition from who I was yesterday to who I am today will be a smooth one, marked only by minor changes. A drastic change in character — whether for the better or for the worse — is always taken to be the result of a long-term, preexistent (though perhaps not publicly visible) process.

Tradition

The third term that forms the backdrop to all the various accounts of virtue is the notion of *tradition*. MacIntyre defines tradition as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute the tradition" (222). This definition has three components. First, MacIntyre's understanding of tradition is really the logical extension of his treatment of narrative. To be "historically extended" is to be narratively ex-

20. We would even say that someone who sincerely harbors paranoia that the mail carrier is a killer is mentally maladjusted.

tended. Just as the self has the unity of playing a single character in a lifelong story, so too the community has its own continuity—despite loss and gain of members—because the community itself is a character of sorts in a narrative that is longer than the span of a single human life. For example, Christians in the Reformed tradition feel kinship with John Calvin because they can tell the story (recount the history) of the Reformed Church from Calvin's Geneva to their present church community.

Second, a tradition is "socially embodied" because traditions are lived in community. A tradition has its inception in the formation of the community that is defined by those who have pledged corporate allegiance to the tradition's authoritative voice or text.²¹ In that this prophetic word shapes the practices of communal life, the community is said to "embody" the tradition's persona in that age. For example, early Christians prayed because their scriptures exemplify, illustrate, and command the practice of prayer. Outsiders, who have no access to the authoritative text, can still read the nature of the Christian tradition off the lives and practices of the community's members. Should the community die off or disband, the tradition passes out of existence (at least until another group rallies in the same way around the same text). In this way the tradition has the quality of being "socially embodied." However, because the application of the authoritative text or voice is done afresh in every successive generation, the tradition remains a live option only so long as the discussion about the text's relevance and meaning is sustained. Hence, third, traditions are necessarily long-standing arguments. But let's get clearer on the notion of historical extension because this will help us evaluate the current status of the virtue tradition.

Just as selves and communities are characters in their respective stories, so too traditions are also characters in an even wider narrative. When we recount Christian, Jewish, or Muslim history, we are telling the story of just such a character. The viability of any one tradition is not merely its historical survival, however, but its *historical extension*. MacIntyre uses this term to describe the growth a tradition undergoes through time as it overcomes obstacles raised against it. In his sequel to *After Virtue* called *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* he defines a tradition as

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...and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.²²

For example, early Christians faced a crisis when they tried to reconcile three seemingly inconsistent beliefs: God is one, Jesus is divine, and Jesus is not the Father. The well-known "solution" to this quandary came when the Cappadocian

21. For an extended account of how traditions are born and develop see chap. 18 of MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

22. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* 12.

fathers borrowed Platonic resources to frame the doctrine of the Trinity. This enabled Christians to believe all three propositions without logical contradiction. The universal adoption of their formulation as orthodoxy at Constantinople (381 A.D.) freed the Christian tradition to move on to tackle the next obstacle in its path.²³ We don't know how long the trinitarian problem might have been sustained had the Cappadocian fathers not entered the debate. We *do* know that by 325 A.D. the stakes were very high — unacceptable proposals were deemed heretical, and their authors were banished from the community (or worse). Were it not for belief in God's sovereignty over history, it would be tempting to wonder how long Christianity might have lasted had not the trinitarian problem been overcome.

If virtue theory is itself a tradition in the sense just described then we can see that its viability depends upon overcoming the obstacles that threaten the Aristotelian version. We have already seen how *narrative* overcomes the problem of Aristotle's metaphysical biology and how *practices* overcome the problem of discrepancies in the virtue lists. The extinction of the *polis* is a third crisis that must be overcome. For Aristotle, the *telos* of life, together with the attending virtues, can be expressed only in terms of life in the *polis*. One reason the virtuous person was identical to the virtuous citizen was that without the prosperity and leisure engendered by the shared life of the city-state, the highest *telos* (for Aristotle, metaphysical contemplation) was an impractical and impossible ideal. But by exercise of practical reason the *polis* flourished in such a way that contemplation could be maximized (at least by the elite). However, a more fundamental reason virtue was tied to the *polis* was that the Good, at which human life aims, was thought to be a corporate good that could not be possessed by isolated individuals but only jointly in community. The *polis* was the by-product of pursuing this corporate Good together. To put it differently, the Good *was* this corporate life. But now the *polis* is no more. Therefore, in order for the virtue tradition to be extended, there must be an alternative way to understand the social dimension of virtue. Of course, this is ground we have already covered. The narrative shape of human existence — that is, that human sociality is identical to the embeddedness of our respective narratives — shows the way to preserve the sociality of virtue theory even in the absence of the *polis*.

Narrative extends the Aristotelian tradition in another way as well. MacIntyre credits the high medieval age with conceptualizing the genre of our narrativity to be akin to the quest for the Holy Grail: "In the high medieval scheme a central genre is the tale of a quest or journey. Man is essentially *in via*. The end which he seeks is something which if gained can redeem all that was wrong with his life up to that point" (174–75). MacIntyre goes on to say that this move was *un-Aristotelian* in at least two ways. First, it placed the *telos* of life beyond life, in contrast to Aristotle, who imagined the *telos* of life to be "a certain kind of

23. The next major debate was the doctrine of Christ: if Christ was God the Son, how are we to understand the relation of his divine and human natures while preserving the unity of his person?

life." Second, it allowed for the possibility of positive evil in contrast to the Aristotelian scheme, which understood evil as always the privation of good. These two features gave the medieval view an advantage over Aristotle in dealing with the problem of tragic evil. In the eyes of the medieval person, the achievement of the human *telos* counterbalanced all evil, even evils of the tragic sort envisioned by Sophocles. Thus, the fourth objection that threatened Aristotle (that is, tragic evil) has been overcome by the Aristotelian *tradition*:

The narrative therefore in which human life is embodied has a form in which the subject... is set a task in the completion of which lies their peculiar appropriation of the human good; the way toward which the completion of that task is barred by a variety of inward and outward evils. The virtues are those qualities which enable evils to be overcome, the task to be accomplished, the journey to be completed. (175)

★ MacIntyre concludes, therefore, that tragic choices are real but that the inevitability of such choice does not render morality unintelligible or criterionless (as the emotivist claims, thereby concluding that moral choices boil down to matters of preference). Rather such choice plays a central role in the development of character by providing an occasion for moral agents to exercise and build virtue when they sustain the quest for good precisely at the time it is most costly to do so. If "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," then tragic evil is overcome because evil, even evil of the tragic sort, cannot diminish this kind of good (219). Instead of detracting from this kind of goodness, tragic evil can even be thought to contribute to the moral fiber of the life so lived. This solution to the problem of tragic evil employs a view of life that has come out of a particular historical cross-section of the tradition. Because the medieval period provides them with the resources for overcoming this obstacle, adherents to this tradition are warranted in retaining this feature from their corporate past. So then, not only are practices and narratives sources for understanding the human *telos*, but tradition itself contributes to this understanding.

Identifying the genre of a tradition's narrative also makes sense out of the fractal symmetry that can be seen when we look at the way in which the narrative unity of (1) a life, (2) a community, and (3) a tradition are mutually nested. Individual, community, and tradition, while telling different parts of the master story, nevertheless share equally in the genre of that story. Thus, if the genre of the tradition is that of a quest, the genre of a human life is also that of a quest. And if human life is a quest, then human virtues are those qualities that assist it:

The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. (219)

Retrospect

Looking back, we can see not only that the virtue tradition that MacIntyre has recounted fits MacIntyre's definition of tradition but that it is one in which MacIntyre represents the most recent advance! He has succeeded in overcoming four important obstacles to the Aristotelian model by elucidating the story about stories, or what has been called the metanarrative about the narrative quality of human life. In so doing he has clarified how the notions of *telos*, *virtue*, *practice*, *narrative*, and *tradition* form a mutually supporting and interlocking web of concepts.

Let us recall now the master argument of *After Virtue*. MacIntyre challenged us to reconsider the emotivist conclusion (namely, that morality is by nature nothing more than matters of preference) by arguing that the Enlightenment Project's move to repudiate all things social (that is, virtues and practices) and all things historical (that is, narrative and tradition) was a major misstep. He argued further that moral imperatives can be derived from an answer to the question "What is human life for?" In the same way the functional definition of a watch ("A watch is for timekeeping") entails its virtue (accuracy), its functional imperative ("A watch *ought* to keep time well"), and its ground for being evaluated ("This grossly inaccurate watch is a *bad* watch"). To have a grasp on the human *telos* affords us with moral virtues, moral imperatives, and sufficient grounds for moral judgment. Furthermore, because narratives intersect at social practices, and practices constitute traditions, and traditions are historically (that is, narratively) extended, to understand virtue adequately as those qualities that assist pursuit of *telos* at all three levels, virtue itself must be given a threefold definition:

The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual may seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide the practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context. (223)

This relationship might be diagrammed as in Figure 3.

Aristotle's notion of virtue as "excellency of function" has thus been expanded. Human virtues are learned qualities that assist us in achieving the human *telos*, which can be understood by considering (1) the functional definition of the human person, which is provided by the master story of the tradition, (2) the internal goods of those practices that constitute the tradition, and (3) those roles that arise at the intersection of our life stories. To put it differently, moral imperatives arise from that understanding of the human *telos* that arises within the context of those practices, narratives, and tradition in which we locate ourselves.



Figure 3

Conclusion

In the end there is much unfinished business. MacIntyre himself bemoans the marked absence of moral communities in the modern world. But this is not the only problem that must be addressed in the wake of *After Virtue*. For example, if the answer to "What is human life for?" is supplied to each of us by our respective practices, narratives, and traditions, doesn't this still leave us with an incurable problem of moral pluralism if not one of downright relativism? Are there some criteria for adjudicating multiple traditions? Further, if MacIntyre's project succeeds, are we in the Western world not faced with the dilemma of being inheritors of at least two conflicting traditions (namely, Aristotelianism and political liberalism)? Or can MacIntyre's thesis possibly succeed if, in fact, the Aristotelian tradition *died* with the Enlightenment? With what resources can it be exhumed and resuscitated?

MacIntyre is not unaware of these perplexities. Some of the objections earned responses in the second edition of *After Virtue* while others he has made the central concern of later books. But the mere presence of these objections does not count against his system because they become the fodder for enlivening the debate by which the tradition is extended. The question "Is MacIntyre's moral philosophy the *final* word?" is wrongheaded. The better question is "Is it the best one so far?"