

After Relativism: Alasdair MacIntyre on Tradition and Rationality

OLLI-PEKKA VAINIO

University of Helsinki

Helsinki, Finland

In debates, it is common to summon the concept of “reason” or “rationality” as neutral arbiters. However, there is something problematic in this proposal, as it erroneously suggests that rationality is something completely self-evident, transparent, and free from interpretation.¹ Over the course of history, all the great words, including “reason” and its derivatives have been dressed in a wide variety of garments. Moreover, is it not often at the heart of the disagreement that we disagree over what is in fact rational? Providing rationality as a solution to the problem of rationality does not seem to help us much.²

One of the key themes of Alasdair MacIntyre’s career has been to analyze this conundrum.³ His influential and much discussed works *After Virtue*

¹ Why is it that common sense is being offered in this way as a solution to the various problems? Over the past one hundred years, technology has evolved at an accelerating rate. At the same time, reasoning about values (or any classic philosophical questions) has not developed much in the last couple of thousand years. As science progresses in the field of technology but philosophy, ethics, and theology are constantly revolving around the same basic exchanges, it is quite natural to bet on the horse that even seems to be moving forward. But in this case, technical reason is assumed to solve problems that are not even within its jurisdiction. See Brandon Harnish, “Alasdair MacIntyre and F. A. Hayek on the Abuse of Reason,” *The Independent Review* 15, no. 2 (2010): 179–99.

² The same applies to other generic concepts such as “love,” “justice,” “moderation,” and so on. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), 172–73.

³ MacIntyre (born 1929, Glasgow) is one of the most influential moral philosophers of our time. He has taught at various universities, including Leeds, Oxford, Duke,

(1981), *Whose Justice? Which Tradition?* (1988), and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990) are reviews of the history of Western philosophy that attempt to uncover the connections of given ideals of rationality with particular traditions.⁴ In this way he provides a critique of the Enlightenment type of reason that presents itself as free from all traditions, and as thus being universal. However, the mere critique of the Enlightenment is often taken to be a concealed argument for relativism. If rationality is born within and bound by a tradition, is the truth also defined by the criteria adopted by each community?

In this article, I will look at MacIntyre's views that are related to the problem of relativism. My focus is on the Thomistic philosophy of his late career, through which he seeks to complement the shortcomings of his previous thinking. Incipient Thomism is already part of *Whose Justice?* and *Three Rival Versions*, but only in his essays and other works written since the late 1990s does MacIntyre present his theory of knowledge more accurately.

MacIntyre's thinking has evolved from the communitarian sociology of knowledge towards Thomistic realism. His Thomistic turn can be seen as an answer to the accusations of relativism, but does this mean that his system devolves into conservatism and authoritarianism, as some of his critics have argued? Or will relativism continue to bother MacIntyre's system?⁵

Reason and History

For MacIntyre, rationality is not an abstract principle or an allegedly neutral method, but a complex and ever-evolving set of arguments. Rationality is holistic: it is not just about individual claims, for it is comprehensively linked to a whole group of beliefs through which the

and Notre Dame. He converted to Roman Catholicism in the early 1980s, and since then his philosophical project has been influenced by the Catholic intellectual tradition, especially Thomism. See Bruce W. Ballard, *Understanding MacIntyre* (Lanham, MD: University of Press of America, 2000).

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984); MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988); MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*. In addition to these three groundbreaking books, his virtue project continues in the following later works: Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999); MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁵ This has been suggested by, e.g., Timothy Mosteller, *Relativism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 78–89.

individual perceives his place in reality and evaluates what a good life should be.⁶

MacIntyre sums up the idea of tradition-based rationality as follows: "There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other."⁷ In other words, arguments do not float in the air, for they are always related to the history of each community. Traditions are "socially embodied arguments."⁸ As a result, "to justify is to narrate how the argument has gone so far."⁹

According to the ideal of the Enlightenment, rationality is something that exists *outside* traditions, while MacIntyre argues that rationality is always *internal* to a tradition. If the Enlightenment view were true, we should have some universal means of dealing with differences between various traditions by relying on this general principle of rationality. However, according to MacIntyre, we have good reason to consider this notion to be wrong, because no philosopher who has followed the Enlightenment view has been able to tell us what these generally accepted principles are—or to provide us with a generally accepted interpretation of these principles.¹⁰

In other words, according to MacIntyre's critique, the Enlightenment is a failed project according to its own criteria. The Enlightenment not only failed to define commonly agreed principles; it also made it much more difficult to have a debate on the nature of such principles. The reason for this is that it offers a too simple and totalizing idea of what is rational, which is also unable to justify why it should be listened to in the first place. After all, the Enlightenment appears to be just another contingent tradition among others.¹¹

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks: A Thomistic Reading of *Fides et Ratio*," in *The Tasks of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 179–96.

⁷ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 350.

⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222: "A living tradition then is as an historically extended, socially embodied argument."

⁹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 8.

¹⁰ Micah Lott, "Reasonably Traditional: Self-Contradiction and Self-Reference in Alasdair MacIntyre's Account of Tradition-Based Rationality," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30, no. 3 (2002): 317.

¹¹ E.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, "Some Enlightenment Projects Considered," in *Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 172–85: "Notice then that it is not just in its inability to provide rationally justifiable and agreed moral values and principles that the Enlightenment and its heirs have failed. The failure of those modern institutions that have been the embodiment of the best

Against this, MacIntyre presents his own theory, which can be summarized in the following five theses:¹²

1. Rationality is always tied to the history of the tradition that gave rise to it.
2. Rationality is therefore only valid in relation to its own tradition.
3. Dissenting traditions cannot rely on any criterion of rationality outside traditions in the event of disagreement.
4. Competing traditions cannot overturn each other on their own criteria of rationality.
5. However, a tradition may find itself in a situation where it has to recognize another rival tradition as a better one.

As soon as MacIntyre describes his own model (which is just a description of what the world is like, not a prescription of what it should be like), he points out how two challenges, relativism and perspectivism, arise. Here “relativism” means that a sensible debate and a rational choice between traditions is impossible, and perspectivism makes it impossible to make universal truth claims.¹³

If the Enlightenment suggested a universal method that provides us with one truth to solve the problem of knowledge, postmodern thinkers

social and political hopes of the Enlightenment is quite as striking. And those institutions fail by Enlightenment standards. For they do not provide—in fact they render impossible—the kinds of institutionalized reading, talking and arguing public necessary for effective practical thought about just those principles and decisions involved in answering such questions as: ‘How is a human life to be valued?’ or ‘What does accountability in our social relationships require of us?’ or ‘Whom, if anyone, may I legitimately deceive?’—questions to which we need shared answers. And there is no type of institutional arena in our society in which plain persons—not academic philosophers or academic political theorists—are able to engage together in systematic reasoned debate designed to arrive at a rationally well-founded common mind on these matters, a common mind which might then be given political expression. Indeed the dominant forms of organization of contemporary social life militate against the coming into existence of this type of institutional arena. And so do the dominant modes of what passes for political discourse. We do not have the kinds of reading public necessary to sustain practically effective social thought.” See also Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), 16.

¹² E.g., MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 350–56.

¹³ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 352.

(MacIntyre uses the term “Post-Enlightenment,” which he employs to underline postmodernism’s dependence on the Enlightenment) provide a reverse solution to the problem. According to postmodernism, we really do have only one solution, and it is to give approval to all traditions. Each tradition offers one perspective on the same problem, and none of them are true or false as such.

MacIntyre sees the Enlightenment and postmodernity as two sides of the same coin. What they have in common is that neither of them is able to see rationality as emerging from human experience. Instead, both of them are inaccurate, unhistorical, and unable to do justice to a phenomenological analysis of what human reasoning is in practice.

According to MacIntyre, traditions go through three stages of development. In the first phase, nothing actually challenges the authoritative views and they are adopted as they are. In the second phase, one has to deal with a competing tradition and the differences between the traditions become visible. The third stage begins with the assessment, application, and re-formulation of given views. In this way, traditions develop when they come into contact with other traditions. When the encounter is particularly serious, “an epistemological crisis” takes place. In this case, tradition A notices a problem in its system that it cannot solve on its own. At the same time, it may notice that tradition B contains ways to solve the problem. In this case, A adopts something that used to be only B’s property.¹⁴

MacIntyre’s goal is therefore to provide a model of rationality that at the same time recognizes the context of rationality without collapsing into relativism. However, several critics have argued that his model may not be able to avoid relativism. We will next look at these claims.

Reason and the Challenge of Relativism

Relevant critiques of MacIntyre on this theme can be summarized as follows:

1. Although MacIntyre denies the existence of rationality beyond tradition, he nevertheless provides a way of assessing traditions independent of, or transcending, the traditions.¹⁵

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 361–66. MacIntyre’s original essay on the epistemological crises dates back to 1977, but he continues to return to this theme in his later works.

¹⁵ Jennifer A. Herdt, “Alasdair MacIntyre’s ‘Rationality of Traditions’ and Tradition-Transcendental Standards of Justification,” *The Journal of Religion* 78, no. 4 (1998): 524–46. See also Lott, “Reasonably Traditional.”

2. MacIntyre's view of rationality seems to require simultaneous adherence both to open-endedness and to certain predetermined outcomes.¹⁶
3. MacIntyre is forced to create a "liberal" metatradition independent of past traditions that is capable of behaving in a virtuous manner in epistemological crises.¹⁷

Jennifer Herdt, among others, has formulated a detailed criticism of MacIntyre, seeking to locate a contradiction in his thinking. According to Herdt, MacIntyre cannot both stick to the notion of reason as dependent on tradition and, at the same time, attempt to evaluate traditions, since this principle, which is used to provide better explanations, must ultimately be part of a partisan tradition that is not recognized by everyone.

So, does MacIntyre contradict himself? To answer this question, a closer look is needed to see exactly what MacIntyre means by tradition and how he sees the relationship between the different traditions.

First of all, according to MacIntyre, rationalities are not *entirely* incommensurable.¹⁸ In the event of a disagreement, for example, we would not even be able to know what we are disagreeing about if there were no common ground. Different traditions are likely to sign on to the same rules of logic. In addition, traditions can share many more or less crucial fundamental beliefs.

MacIntyre distinguishes between weak and strong standards of rationality. Weak standards include, for example, the rules of logic mentioned above, such as the law of contradiction. As a rule, weak standards are common to all traditions. However, separated from individual traditions, they are quite worthless and cannot actually solve disputes between traditions that are axiomatic in nature. Strong standards, on the other hand, are traditions' own criteria; they are local applications of universal rules, which give traditions their typical character. Weak standards will therefore not help us to decide which tradition is right. But what is really at stake when the explanatory power is described as a way to resolve epistemological crises?

¹⁶ John Haldane, "MacIntyre's Thomist Revival: What Next?," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 91–107.

¹⁷ Ian Markham, *Truth and the Reality of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

¹⁸ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 370–88; Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 26–30.

In many places, MacIntyre underlines precisely the transparency and open-endedness of reasoning: we do not know in advance which solutions are right. At the same time, especially after his late Thomistic turn, he sought to emphasize the teleological nature of reasoning. However, the obvious question arises: is the question of transparency only a red herring if the results are already clear? MacIntyre is fully aware of this problem. He addresses the same issue in relation to the *Fides et Ratio* encyclical and points out how the basic criticism in this text puts its finger on this particular problem.¹⁹ If the encyclical intends to guarantee to philosophy autonomy in relation to theology, why does it seem to favor Thomism as the best available philosophical and theological method?

MacIntyre strives to solve this dilemma by creatively applying pragmatist philosophy and the thinking of Thomas Aquinas. Here the concept of *first principle* becomes a key element.²⁰ The first principles are the assumptions underlying all thinking and knowledge acquisition. Unlike the Cartesian solution, MacIntyre suggests that we may not always know what these principles are. Only when the fact-finding process has been completed will we be able to show how our results follow from precisely these specific principles. However, the first principles do not remain completely obscured, and when they are revealed in due course, they do not come as a surprise, but are found to have been an organic part of knowledge acquisition all the time.

According to MacIntyre, it is possible for us to “know without yet knowing that we know.”²¹ In Cartesian epistemology, which MacIntyre considers to be a failure, we need to know that we know in order to really know anything. The Cartesian model looks back at the factor that justifies our beliefs and from which all other beliefs can be derived. The Thomistic model, on the other hand, looks forward towards the telos, the end and goal—which ultimately guarantees the legitimacy of the belief. In the case of knowledge acquisition, this means that the decision is presumed to be correct even if it cannot yet be proved to be so. As a proof-text, MacIntyre quotes lectio 3 of Aquinas’s commentary on book I of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*. We may not know the absolute answer, for example, in the case

¹⁹ MacIntyre, “Philosophy Recalled”; Alasdair MacIntyre, “Truth as Good: A Reflection on *Fides et Ratio*,” in *Tasks of Philosophy*, 213; Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities* (London: Continuum, 2009), 8.

²⁰ Especially Alasdair MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth, and Justification,” in *Tasks of Philosophy*, 52–73.

²¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues,” in *Tasks of Philosophy*, 148–51.

of a mathematical proof, but we can know it in a limited sense, as in anticipating the outcome (*praecognitio*). MacIntyre complements this image with *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.9 (1142a), where it is stated that young people cannot have the practical wisdom required for their ethical way of life and practice because they lack experience. However, not just any experience whatsoever provides the necessary abilities to act ethically; only a life that is oriented towards the good and values the right virtues in the right way can contribute to the growth of practical wisdom. In other words, the end result is anticipated in advance, although it is not fully known.²²

The relationship between the first principles and the information derived from them is always dialectical.²³ It is like a construction project in which the builder has an idea of what a house should be like in order to be livable. However, the builder does not have detailed plans of the house, and he may be unable to explain all the assumptions on which he will take action. The plans of the house can be drawn only after the house has been completed, and the principles used to build it can be verified only afterwards.

So what are these first principles? According to MacIntyre, the first principle is always determined by the goal that each person pursues. Each objective can be achieved only by certain appropriate means of achieving that particular objective. *Arkhe* (*archē*) and *telos* are thus intimately linked.²⁴ Jean Porter points out that the role of first principles is not epistemic, but logical and conceptual.²⁵ The nature of the first principles is that they cannot be verified, though they are used to give the world an intelligible structure. They must be presumed to exist in order to have a coherent structure of human reality.

²² MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 152–53. MacIntyre refers here to John Henry Newman to demonstrate how pre-philosophical convictions play a major role in all knowledge acquisition. These assumptions guide our thinking so that we either accept or reject claims as they resonate with our existing beliefs. MacIntyre claims that it is the advantage of Thomism to openly recognize these meta-level commitments.

²³ MacIntyre, “First Principles,” 150, 160–61, 165. MacIntyre sets his Thomistic-Aristotelian model against the other two theoretical models. Against Cartesian solutions, he notes that we must start where we are instead of trying to find a neutral starting point. Against Hegel, he claims that we must learn to be contented with fragmentary and fallibilist knowledge that is never perfect.

²⁴ MacIntyre, “First Principles,” 174–77.

²⁵ Jean Porter, “Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre: Contemporary Philosophy in Focus*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 51.

Why Thomism?

But why should we think that the Thomistic solution as described by MacIntyre is the correct one? First of all, the fact that a theory originates from a tradition does not exclude the possibility that it may be true for everyone. But on what grounds does he think that Thomism is better than its rivals. MacIntyre's answer is astute. According to him, we already are Thomists, even if we do not recognize it. Secondly, the fact that this cannot be recognized is an indication of the incoherencies within the system, which is in itself a reason to be critical of that system.²⁶

MacIntyre admits that both encyclopedists working in an Enlightenment type of tradition and postmodern genealogists are unlikely to explicitly favor Thomism.²⁷ He acknowledges that the main philosophical trajectories of our day have chosen other routes besides Thomism. Against this background, he provides a genealogical interpretation of the history of Western philosophy, in which after the Enlightenment there is a turn away from the teleological interpretation of reality. Over time, this trajectory will take a number of different forms, which MacIntyre considers to be a kind of mirror image of the Aristotelian-Thomistic model. It is essential that these models arise from the attempt to avoid a teleological (and hence theological) interpretation of reality, and the internal problems of all these models are precisely due to the rejection of the Aristotelian-Thomistic theory of knowledge.²⁸

²⁶ MacIntyre, "Philosophy Recalled," 192: "But the necessary conditions for its not being absurd, the necessary conditions for the possibility of the completion of the human questioning enterprise, are just those specified by Thomistic realism in its account of what is required for perfected understanding and of what it is that makes such understanding possible. Thomistic realism is in this way a doctrine presupposed by the questioning of plain persons. And its vindication is a vindication of that questioning as well as of the enquiries of philosophers, Thomistic and nonThomistic alike, who extend further the questioning of plain persons. It follows that any type of philosophy that is to be able to function as philosophy must function, if it is to achieve its own ends, may be nonThomistic or even antiThomistic in many respects—as were the philosophies of Scotus and Pascal and Newman, as are the philosophies of the phenomenological and of the Eastern Orthodox traditions—but that they will have to find some place for those truths that were classically articulated as the doctrine of Thomistic realism."

²⁷ In *Three Rival Versions*, MacIntyre uses these two concepts to mark the abstract philosophy of the Enlightenment, which searches for contextless knowledge (*encyclopaedia*), and postmodernism (*genealogy*), which emphasizes the absolute relativity of all knowledge.

²⁸ See, for example, MacIntyre's analysis of Derrida's thought in "First Principles," 151–54.

However, all philosophers confirm the teleological nature of reality in their own practice, even if they reject it on a theoretical level. However, those who reject teleology face a dilemma. Such a philosopher inevitably sees the transition away from the Aristotelian-Thomistic model as a positive development. But as a development towards what? If a positive response is given, this indicates that something is being pursued, but this is something that was just banned a minute ago. If one does not want to admit this, then the result is an idea of a philosophy in which it is no longer possible to achieve anything. We can then ask whether this itself is an achievement or not. In this way, MacIntyre seeks to make manifest the performative contradiction in rival systems.²⁹

Thomistic Realism and the Progressive Nature of Knowledge

MacIntyre's earlier philosophy has been considered to be anti-realistic by some of his critics.³⁰ However, his later Thomistic turn exhibits an explicit commitment to realism.³¹ What does he mean by this?

First, the truth is understood to be the equivalence (*adequatio*) between the intellect and the object. Secondly, understanding is a teleological activity. It is natural for humans to seek to understand the nature of things and their mutual relationships. According to Aquinas, we cannot have access to the essence of things as such, but the essence of a thing is understood through its effects. This means that our knowledge of the world is understood to be a progressive movement from inadequate definitions towards better definitions.³² The existence of mind-independent reality forces us to correct our views every time reality reveals itself to us more. Thirdly, understanding requires that not only the human mind but also reality is organized and teleological in nature. Understanding ultimately means seeing how things are placed in the world, and what are its necessary and contingent features. Thus, semantic relationships and truth conditions are always based on some metaphysical view of the nature of reality that directs us to understand things in a way that correlates with metaphysical commitments.

MacIntyre also distinguishes between truth and warranted assertabil-

²⁹ MacIntyre, "First Principles," 177; "Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks," 204.

³⁰ E.g., Scott R. Smith, *Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge: Philosophy of Language after MacIntyre and Hauerwas* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003).

³¹ MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism"; "Philosophy Recalled," 185. See also Mats Wahlberg, "Faith, Realism, and Universal Reason: MacIntyrean Reflections on *Fides et Ratio*," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 16, no. 4 (2018): 1313–36.

³² See, e.g., MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism"; "Philosophy Recalled," 184–92; "Truth as Good," 198–13. See also Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 21.

ity.³³ If something is true, it is true for everyone and at all times. Because this is quite a high ideal, truth and rationality do not always fall into one category. In other words, it is not pragmatically wise to say that it is rational to believe only those things that are known to be true.³⁴ On the other hand, the condition of rationality *is* warranted assertability. If we have good reasons to assert something, it also makes sense to believe it. Nevertheless, we must constantly strive towards not only good arguments but also the truth.

It follows from all this that knowledge acquisition is approached through personal characteristics and not only through the analysis of propositions and their truth conditions. In order for our knowledge to grow, the right habitus is needed that combines the right goal with the right kind of action. This involves the unity of moral and intellectual virtues and also the interconnectedness of all knowledge.³⁵

A key feature of MacIntyre's thinking is the holistic attitude of the role of philosophy in both the academy and society. Philosophy is not just about tinkering with professional fringe issues that seem absurd in the eyes of ordinary people. The academic discipline of philosophy must be linked to the kind of questions that ordinary people ask. A philosophy that cannot incorporate this into its own role is in danger of becoming superfluous. Secondly, philosophy must be able to do justice to the phenomenological reality of the everyday world without reducing itself to a position that no longer has any deeper questions to ask.³⁶

It is clear, however, that over time the Thomists have held beliefs that have subsequently turned out to be wrong, and MacIntyre openly admits this. But in Thomism the essential commitment is not to the conclusions, but to the way of thinking. Not all beliefs that are held by Thomists are necessarily true, but if they come to embrace some other belief, it is made possible precisely by Thomism *as a method*. A distinction must therefore be made between the method and the results achieved through it.

MacIntyre thinks there are only two options aside from Thomism: Enlightenment and postmodernism. Both are performatively impossible. Enlightenment is unable to learn new things or to do justice to particular

³³ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 363; Alasdair MacIntyre, "A Partial Response to My Critics," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 187.

³⁴ A similar epistemic strategy has been suggested by, e.g., Robert Audi, *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁵ MacIntyre, "Philosophy Recalled," 186.

³⁶ MacIntyre, "Philosophy Recalled," 180–84.

situations. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is unable to justify itself and falls into internal conflict from the very beginning. Only a teleological interpretation of reality can justify the growth in knowledge and truth, while at the same time doing justice to particular contexts of knowledge.

At this stage, it is possible to respond to challenges (1) and (2) that were mentioned earlier. First, MacIntyre does not seek to provide a way beyond the traditions to resolve disputes between traditions because the key factor in epistemological crises is that the tradition itself discovers how its own explanatory power disappears in epistemological crises. In other words, tradition itself fails *on its own terms*.³⁷

Secondly, the relationship between transparency and teleology, as MacIntyre understands them, emerges from his phenomenological analysis, which describes how human reasoning works *anyway*. In practice, we have no other way of reasoning than the one which is more accurately described by Thomism.

Tradition and Change

The third criticism (3) concerns MacIntyre's way of interpreting existing Thomist or quasi-Thomistic traditions. According to the critics, MacIntyre's model requires the liberalization and relaxation of the core commitments of given traditions. According to Ian Markham, MacIntyre's commitment to some partisan tradition, and a critical inquiry that emerges from this, may not fit together.³⁸ In other words, MacIntyre's preference for a tradition-based rationality requires acceptance at least of some Enlightenment ideals. The most important of these are probably the critical distance of one's own beliefs and the importance of education.³⁹

Does MacIntyre's model actually require the traditions to be liberalized, that is, as Markham says, to embrace the ideals of the Enlightenment so

³⁷ Bretherton explains well the epistemological crisis theory from this very point of view (*Hospitality as Holiness*, 28–30).

³⁸ Ian Markham, "Faith and Reason: Reflections of MacIntyre's 'Tradition-Constituted Enquiry,'" *Religious Studies* 27, no. 2 (1991): 259–67.

³⁹ MacIntyre writes: "We will not however be able to and be what that which we are thereby committed to do and be, unless we have been able to become disinterested, that is, to distance ourselves from those particular material and psychological interests that are always apt to find expression in those partialities and prejudices that are nourished by our desires for pleasure, money and power" ("Aquinas and the Extent of Moral Disagreement," in *Selected Essays*, vol. 2, *Ethics and Politics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 78). It is noteworthy that MacIntyre does not claim that we should distance ourselves from our traditions, but from different selfish requests and prejudices.

that they can fulfill the virtues that MacIntyre wants to favor? MacIntyre would deny this claim. For example, Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* is in itself an example of dialogue and the ability to absorb the elements of other traditions.⁴⁰ As has already been said, although Aquinas was wrong about some things, it is his method that allows the change and progress to take place. According to MacIntyre, it would be a mistake to regard openness to criticism as a characteristic of the Enlightenment alone.⁴¹

In addition, MacIntyre nowhere claims that all communities and narratives are equally good or that a virtuous attitude towards one's own beliefs will somehow arise by itself or automatically.⁴² From MacIntyre's point of view, the problem of a fundamentalist community, for example, would be that it judges the world only from the perspective of its own experience and is imprisoned by it. That is why the world categorically becomes structured by "us" and "them," which is, of course, a great breeding ground for hatred rather than mutual dialogue. In such a situation, however, it is not a benefit to say to fundamentalists that their views are irrational, intolerant, and immoral. Instead (according to MacIntyre's point of view), they should take advantage of the resources of their own traditions, which can expand their perspective from within.⁴³ This, on the other hand, requires the study of a new "language," which in practice implies the ability to set oneself within a foreign tradition and to understand it from within.

However, MacIntyre's assessment of the current situation is bleak. Disagreements between different traditions show no signs of resolution.⁴⁴ In the event of a dispute, each party presents its own views and the reasons for them, as well as responds to the challenges of foreign traditions in a way that meets only the requirements of its own tradition. However, there

⁴⁰ MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 127.

⁴¹ Markham argues that critical attitudes and transparency were made possible by shattering the ecclesiastic power structure after the Enlightenment ("Faith and Reason," 264). However, Markham acknowledges that this is only a partial reason, and this softens the blow of his criticism. Of course, an open inquiry (or something that at least seems like it) is easier in the post-Enlightenment cultural state. But this does not mean that the Enlightenment invented critical thinking or dialogue.

⁴² MacIntyre thinks that it is modern liberalism that is the main example of a tradition that is stuck in place. Contrary to what one would expect, MacIntyre claims that our culture is precisely the culture of answers, not questions: we are offered different responses, both liberal and conservative, both secular and religious, which are designed to stop us asking further questions ("First Principles," 182).

⁴³ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflict of Modernity*, 312.

⁴⁴ MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 176.

is a lack of enquiry that would look for and articulate criteria that could be understandable from the point of view of a competing tradition.

The applicability of MacIntyre's vision depends directly on whether the real virtues can flourish. According to MacIntyre, the practicing of intellectual virtues should allow a person to think and make individual judgments, while at the same time being conscious of dependence on others. This is conditional on participation in social relations, which involve reciprocal sharing, giving, and receiving in a way that reflects the ideals of natural moral law.⁴⁵ Although, according to MacIntyre, this kind of attitude to the world is natural, various factors can quite effectively prevent it from being realized. These include the perverse will of individuals, as well as institutions and ideologies that restrict the scope of the human experience too tightly.

Additional Challenges

As mentioned earlier, MacIntyre's philosophy has moved from implicit relativism towards Thomistic realism. This has also resulted in a theological turn. MacIntyre says frankly that the theistic framework is the only coherent teleological worldview we have reason to believe in.⁴⁶ Does this mean that MacIntyre's theory has value only within a Christian theological framework? I do not think so. Thomism includes a strong emphasis on natural theology as one of its key elements,⁴⁷ and there is always a common ground between different communities and traditions. According to MacIntyre, this policy means that the representatives of different traditions can understand what the other person says, even though they may not be able to see how a view that is opposite to theirs is justified.⁴⁸ In addition, people have the resources for a third-person perspective because they are

⁴⁵ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 155–56.

⁴⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues and Goods," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (London: Polity, 1998), 152: "The only type of teleologically ordered universe in which we have good reason to believe is a theistic universe. Hence, moral progress of the plain person towards her or his ultimate good is always a matter of more than morality. And the enacted narrative of that progress will only become fully intelligible when it is understood not only in terms of metaphysics but in an adequate theological light, when, that is, the particularities of that narrative are understood to embody what is said about sin and about grace in the IaIae of the *Summa* as well as what is said about law and the virtues. The moral progress of the plain person is always the beginnings of a pilgrim's progress." See also Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 24–25.

⁴⁷ MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 231.

⁴⁸ Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 27–28.

human, not because they are Thomists.⁴⁹ Although MacIntyre's premises strongly draw from the Christian tradition, it is dialogical and open-ended. In the end, it is an empirical question how it and the competing alternatives will succeed in this goal.

Secondly, Porter asks whether MacIntyre's model really applies to moral problems. The dialectic process he describes is easily realized in science because in this context the researcher is conversing with an empirical reality that inevitably guides him or her towards theories that always correspond with reality better. However, in terms of values, we do not seem to have such a reality in front of us that would guide us in the same direction, or at the very least, its existence is much more controversial.⁵⁰

The situation is hampered by the fact that MacIntyre admits that there is nothing to guarantee that unanimity will be found.⁵¹ The Augustinian feature of MacIntyre's thinking is reflected in his emphasis on the influence of sin in human thinking. Although the imprint of natural law is strong in us, we can still be blind to what is really good and what is not. In the latter case, we consider things like honor, property, and enjoyment as the ultimate goods. According to MacIntyre, the salient and particularly problematic feature of our modern world is the ideal of freedom of choice: everyone must be free to choose their own idea of good without acknowledging any standard outside one's own will and self-understanding. Good is created through choices; it is not already found as an existing feature of reality.⁵²

The interesting question is whether this possibility of disagreement deprives MacIntyre's theory of credibility. In his essay on Aquinas's theory of natural law and its ability to deal with the disagreement, MacIntyre admits that reality yields to a wide range of interpretations, and according to Aquinas, it is possible for a person to define a hierarchy of values in many different ways.⁵³ Ultimately, it is precisely this possibility of creating different hierarchies that creates disagreement. However, according to

⁴⁹ In evolutionary psychology, this is called "the theory of mind," or the ability to recognize the same moods in other beings as in yourself. It is a unique human trait. See Peter Carruthers, *The Architecture of the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 155–57.

⁵⁰ Porter, "Tradition," 53–55. This same problem is already raised in Plato's dialogue *Phaedros* (263a–b).

⁵¹ MacIntyre, "Aquinas and the Extent of Moral Disagreement," 71–72: "Continuous disagreement is a permanent condition of philosophy."

⁵² MacIntyre, "Philosophy Recalled," 195.

⁵³ MacIntyre, "Aquinas and the Extent of Moral Disagreement." See also Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, qq. 2–4.

MacIntyre, the first principles of natural law govern reasoning in each case, even in the event of disagreement.⁵⁴

Truth is the purpose of all knowledge acquisition. However, this will never be completed. Therefore, different traditions should listen to each other in order to make progress possible. This, in turn, requires the continued exercise of essential intellectual and moral virtues.⁵⁵ What meta-level theory, then, can combine these principles? According to MacIntyre, the answer is clear, but potentially unpleasant.⁵⁶ N.V

⁵⁴ MacIntyre argues the first principles are known non-inferentially, they are the same for all, they are unchanging, every normal person is able to recognize them, and their knowledge can never be destroyed from the human mind (“Aquinas and the Extent of Moral Disagreement,” 65). The actual differences between persons relate to practical applications made of these principles.

⁵⁵ MacIntyre, “Aquinas and the Extent of Moral Disagreement,” 76–80; *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 314.

⁵⁶ A previous Finnish version of this article has been published in *Teologinen Aika-kauskirja* 5–6 (2014): 443–53. The English version is published with permission.