

The concept of virtue is neither new nor antiquated. Most moral philosophers throughout history have given that concept a role of some importance within their ethical schemes. However, recent moral philosophies have begun to emphasize virtue to a greater extent than previous ones, making it one of the most important concepts of the field. This has been one of the first and most prominent thinkers to emphasize virtue in this way. MacIntyre, taking exception to the confusion he believes has occurred in contemporary moral debates, argues that the reintroduction of the concept of virtue is necessary to the restoration of a viable and progressive moral culture. Without virtue, MacIntyre believes, no comprehensive and coherent conception of moral action can be attained. However, not just any conception of virtue will suffice for this purpose. Rather, MacIntyre has a distinct and measured conception of what it means for someone to be virtuous. In order to understand MacIntyre's moral claims, therefore, it will first be necessary to examine his concept of virtue.

An Honors Thesis
by
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MacIntyre's concept of virtue is certainly a complex one. However, he does give it down enough to provide a direct definition. He says "a virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are intended to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving such goods." (See *Three*, p.191) For MacIntyre, virtues are only to be found within human activities. This is an extension of Aristotle's view that "every virtue or excellence has for its end a good condition of the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing done well." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a 14-19) All ethical goods are the goods of some practice or another. Thus, it will

The concept of virtue is neither new nor antiquated. Most moral philosophers throughout history have given this concept a role of some importance within their ethical schemes. However, recent moral philosophies have begun to emphasize virtue to a greater extent than rules, natural law, respect for rights, or utility, making it one of the most important concepts for the study of ethics. Alasdair MacIntyre has been one of the first and most prominent thinkers to emphasize virtue in this way. MacIntyre, taking exception to the confusion he believes to be inherent in contemporary moral debates, argues that the reintroduction of the concept of virtue is necessary to the restoration of intelligible and progressive moral debate. Without virtue, MacIntyre believes, no commonly shared conception of moral behavior can be attained. However, not just any conception of virtue will suffice for this purpose. Rather, MacIntyre has a distinct and structured conception of what it means for someone to be virtuous. In order to understand MacIntyre's moral claims, therefore, it will first be necessary to examine his concept of virtue.

MacIntyre's concept of virtue is certainly a complex one. However, he does pin it down enough to provide a direct definition. He says "a virtue is 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 such goods." (*After Virtue*, p.191) For MacIntyre, virtues are only to be found within human practices. This is an extension of Aristotle's view that "every virtue or excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing done well." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a.16-19) All ethical goods are the goods of some practice or another. Thus, it will

be necessary, prior to examining virtue, to examine what these practices are.

MacIntyre explicitly defines this concept as well. He defines a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established 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.” (*After Virtue*, p.187)

Proceeding from this definition, a wide variety of activities can be envisioned that would qualify as practices. MacIntyre himself supplies several examples, including “games (chess and football), productive activities (farming and architecture), intellectual activities (science and history), artistic pursuits (painting and music), and politics (creating a political community).” (Miller, p.247) However, lesser activities such as “tic-tac-toe, bricklaying and planting tulips,” (Miller, p.247) would not be considered practices. To understand this distinction, it is necessary to reexamine MacIntyre’s initial definition. We notice that a practice must be both “complex” and “socially established.” (*After Virtue*, p.187) While MacIntyre acknowledges that “practices must have some kind of institutional setting” (McMylor, p.152), he makes it clear that institutions and practices are not one and the same. However, institutions are necessary for two important reasons: they provide the concepts and the rules necessary to make the virtues intrinsic to practices intelligible.

Intelligibility is vital for MacIntyre’s ethics. MacIntyre is very concerned with intelligibility because an unintelligible moral system would be incapable of

determining how to act in particular situations. Since we develop systems of ethics in order to better determine what we ought to do, an unintelligible ethical system therefore fails in its primary purpose. Indeed, this is the state in which MacIntyre finds the tradition of Liberalism. In addition to MacIntyre's belief that Liberalism can make no moral determinations about how one ought to act when the rights of others are not involved, he also believes Liberalism cannot even answer this question when conflict arises. While Enlightenment morality attempts to outline the inalienable rights of each individual, it "possesses no method of weighing . . . claims based on legitimate entitlement against claims based on need." (*After Virtue*, p. 246) MacIntyre believes that rights often contradict one another. One person's right to choose is another's violation of the right to life, and vice versa. These principles do not "provide for ordinary citizens a way of uniting conviction on such matters with rational justification." (*Whose Justice*, p.6) MacIntyre believes that, while modern-day individuals are equipped with the necessary moral language to justify what they have already done, they are given few ethical tools with which to discern how they ought to act in the future. As contemporary modern debates become interminable, moral philosophy becomes unintelligible, and decisions become arbitrary.

In an attempt to combat unintelligibility, MacIntyre's system of ethics is based around those concepts of which he believes we already have an intrinsic understanding. These concepts are functional concepts. In our common use of language, a reference to anything from clocks to farmers would "define both . . . in terms of the purpose or function which a watch or a farmer is characteristically expected to serve." (*After Virtue*, p.58) Our concept of what a farmer is cannot be divorced from our concepts of

what good and bad farmers are. MacIntyre argues that all human practices involve a similar functional understanding of the role one is to play. By adhering to these criteria, one is provided with an intelligible and predictive moral system. One's role determines how one will act. We have a greater understanding of how good soldiers, fathers, friends, and bosses should act, and as such we are able to arrive at a better understanding of the moral excellences required of each role. While we would certainly have disagreements about this, our understanding of the function of each role would allow us to narrow our moral debate in a way that we could achieve some degree of consensus about the excellence for each role. Furthermore, the connotation of the words for each role would then carry with them the community's understanding of this consensus, meaning that the community's moral understanding would be implied in common usage of the terms.

It should be pointed out that this question of roles is a major source of contention between MacIntyre and other post-Enlightenment thinkers. The objection is that forcing individuals into societal roles has caused many of the wrongs that have been perpetuated throughout history. Slavery and the suppression of women, for example, both resulted from societal roles based on "the illegitimate moral claims that communities [made] on their members, linked . . . to hierarchies of domination and subordination." (Friedman, p.237) Not only do there exist "competing interpretations and descriptions" (Frazer and Lacey, p.276) of the concepts and roles involved in practices, such as the practice of engaging in sexual or romantic relationships, but these interpretations include conceptions of the practice in which the "central good is the affirmation of male superiority and activity, and female passivity." (Frazer and Lacey,

p.276) Critics remark that a MacIntyrean approach would cement the roles involved in detrimental practices, both encouraging wrong behavior and preventing protest against it. It certainly would appear as if the concepts of the good husband and the good wife throughout history invited men to dominate their wives, just as they prevented women from protesting the injustices resulting from this behavior.

MacIntyre offers a rebuttal that first appeals to the practices themselves. He admits that feminist writers are “completely in the right in underlining the feminist emphasis on the evils that have historically been bound up with practices.” (“Response,” p.289) However, in examining the feminist predicament in particular, he is quick to note that feminist examples demonstrate a pronounced “harm done . . . not only to women, but also to practices.” (“Response,” p.290) In this case, the practices themselves are not unethical. Feminist writers do not contend that the *practice* of engaging in heterosexual relationships is necessarily wrong; it is simply misused. MacIntyre argues that “practices are often distorted . . . when irrelevant considerations relating to money, power, and status are allowed to invade the practice.” (“Response,” p.289) While it is certainly possible that one might gain money, power, and status through a relationship, these goods are external to the practice of that relationship. Not only can they be obtained by other more practicable means, but they are not what the practice itself was designed to secure. When examining this, or any other practice, it is therefore necessary to first examine the sociological and biological reasons for the practice. In this case, the practice of heterosexual relationships was established in connection with a very basic biological function. Determining this foundation is not an attempt to discover how the practice arose historically, but is rather an examination

of the reasons why humans participate in it, apart from external reasons such as social pressure and material gain. Thus, any good obtained external to these original aims is a distortion of the practice, and does not require virtue because it does not lead one toward moral advantages for which the practice was established.

Here it will be necessary to examine MacIntyre's conception of evil, for it deviates somewhat from the modern usage. His view is largely a classical one, in that MacIntyre believes that evil exists only as a perversion of the good. He states, "it is very difficult in Aristotelian terms to distinguish between *failure to be good* on the one hand and *positive evil* on the other." (*After Virtue*, p.175) However, while MacIntyre holds that all evil stems from a lack of the good, he also incorporates Augustine's view, which "sees the evil of human nature in the consent which the will gives to evil." (*After Virtue*, p.175) What it means for someone to be evil is for that person to consent to the distortion and perversion of something that is in itself good. Evil comes into being as one perverts the "gradations according to nature," (Augustine, p.79) and thus "abandons what is above itself and turns to what is lower." (Augustine, p.87) MacIntyre's notion of evil within a practice makes sense only when its inheritance from Augustine is considered. Evil here does not exist as a distinct entity, but rather as the express perversion of the existing good. Evil within a practice, therefore, consists in one's divergence from the original goods intrinsic to that practice.

It is important to recall that MacIntyre believes that, as far as ethics are concerned, "all goods are internal to . . . particular practices." ("Response," p.288) In order to have moral worth for us, a good must be understood based upon the standard of excellence within a given practice. As someone takes on a societal role, our only

determination of their excellence is by the standards that we already hold as a part of our concept of that role. We only know that someone is a good soldier, mother, teacher, or football player based on the standards of excellence that we already hold as a part of these concepts. External “goods” such as wealth, power, and fame only serve to pervert a practice, and therefore the individual engaged in that practice. MacIntyre denies any appeal to goods that “transcend all our practices, such that we are capable of transforming or even repudiating these latter in their name.” (Taylor, p.35) This would seem to be problematic, for we can conceive of many practices which would seem to be in themselves evil. How can an appeal to the internal goods of practices be made when burglary, kidnapping and slave holding might seem to be practices? These would seem to have internal “goods” that are in fact evil.

MacIntyre agrees that “there *may* be practices – in the sense in which I understand the concept – which simply *are* evil.” (*After Virtue*, p.200) However, MacIntyre believes that this merely demonstrates another important aspect of the virtues: that they can only be examined within the context of a community. MacIntyre argues that “it is always within some particular community with its own specific institutional forms that we learn or fail to learn to exercise the virtues.” (*After Virtue*, p.194-195) Practices are not exercised alone, but necessarily involve “subordinating ourselves within the practice in our relationship to other practitioners.” (*After Virtue*, p.191) We are essentially interacting with others in the pursuit of all our practices. And, since all morally worthy goods come as the result of excellence achieved within practices, virtues are therefore developed and exercised through our interpersonal relationships. For MacIntyre, morality must be based upon the practices

because it governs all of our interactions with others. We can reconcile this with the fact that many actions that affect others are done in private because, as with the example of the farmer, we construct the rules for our conception of “good farming” based on duties to others. The good farmer, for example, will provide for his family, meet his buyers’ demands, provide a safe crop for the consumer, and not pollute the land around him. Connectedness with others must be part of our cultivation of the virtues because, in each practice in which we are engaged, others are necessarily affected. Not only do the virtues provide us with the “concepts to help us understand the various kinds of human interdependence which are part of the life of both families and polities,” (Shanley, p.360) but they make these concepts vital to ethics.

Perhaps this aspect of MacIntyre’s morality most clearly demonstrates his split from the Liberal tradition, for Enlightenment thinkers have traditionally emphasized autonomy, freedom, and objective points of view. While Liberalism is certainly a diverse tradition, one of its major themes has been a search for universal principles that apply at all times. MacIntyre does not believe that there can be “a rational agent who can be radically separated from his or her particular circumstances.” (Kelly, p.132) Moral agents must be considered as members of a particular moral and political community. This ultimately is a result of MacIntyre’s reliance on history. For when engaging in practices, one enters “into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extend the reach of the practice to its present point.” (*After Virtue*, p.194) Practices are historical because they must be learned. We are taught how to be students, friends, citizens or football players, and this teaching involves

examples of the standards of excellence for these practices. Thus, our morality must take as its starting point the community into which we are born and whose practices we learn. The argument is almost circular, but makes an important point: in our practices we are interacting with those around us, so we must consider the community as we engage in our practices. If a practice were to be evil in itself, MacIntyre's view would allow us to give the explanation that it is evil because it is detrimental to the community as a whole. Furthermore, a practice must be based upon the community's structure, meaning that activities such as burglary could not even be considered practices. Also, even if activities such as slave holding or political corruption could be considered practices, their detrimental effect upon the community as a whole would exclude them from MacIntyre's system.

The Narrative Self: The Quest for Good as a Standard of Excellence

Underlying this view is MacIntyre's belief that "what the agent is able to do and say intelligibly as an actor is deeply affected by the fact that we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives." (*After Virtue*, p.213) Each practice, and therefore all of our morality, is affected by our web of connections to those in our community, our practices, and even in our past. However, important in all of this is the fact that, while one may be merely a co-author of his own life, he is still "not only an actor, but an author." (*After Virtue*, p.213) In every ethical consideration, it must be kept in mind that the agent is in the process of developing him or herself. The self is the third criterion for moral excellence in MacIntyre's ethical tribunal. In order to be virtuous, one must not only pursue the goods internal

to the practices in which he engages, and ensure that those goods are for the benefit of those with whom he is connected, but must also ensure that his actions lead to his own self development in a way that aims at his telos.

MacIntyre's notion of the telos is taken largely from Aristotle. The telos is described as man's ascendancy to eudemonia, the state of being a good man. MacIntyre describes this state as involving "blessedness, happiness" and "prosperity." (*After Virtue*, p.148) This, however, is a happiness that appeals to the educated and developed man, and does not consist of those things that bring pleasure to an "untutored human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be." (*After Virtue*, p.53) The telos distinguishes "between man as he is and man as he ought to be." (Phillips, p.53) In order to be virtuous, one's actions must be consistent with the self's higher goods. While it remains important to pursue the goods internal to practices and beneficial to the community, morality must ultimately improve a person. If it is indeed the goal to improve people, any pursuit that prevents one's development is therefore immoral.

Here MacIntyre is concerned partially with the idiosyncratic modern emphasis on therapy. For, while many modern thinkers have focused on a "kind of schism and conflict within the self," these writers have focused their efforts on "the therapeutic, with means of curing the divided self." (*Whose Justice*, p.347) Thus, while Freud, Laing, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard all focus their efforts on curing the divided self, an assumption is made that a divided self is natural for all human beings. MacIntyre argues, however, that as contemporary society forces each individual to "present him or herself as a single, well-ordered will," it causes the self to "be disguised and repressed" as "a false and psychologically disabling unity of presentation is . . .

required.” (*Whose Justice*, p.347) While these writers’ goals of seeking what Richard Rorty would call private perfections (Rorty, p.xiv) are certainly admirable, these writers have ignored a possible source of their concerns. Whether this source would be accepted by these writers or not, the point is still made that a morality which does not attend to the inner happiness of the self is fundamentally flawed. Even Enlightenment thinkers had some conception of this type of argument, such as “Jefferson’s indictment of slavery in the *Notes on Virginia*,” which appealed primarily to slavery’s detrimental “effect upon the character of the slave owners.” (Jaffa, p.383) Jefferson argued that slavery “destroys the morals” (Jefferson, p.215) of those who practice it through an “unhappy influence on the manners.” (Jefferson, p.214) While the language of rights pitted those favoring the right to liberty against those favoring the right to property in this debate, an examination of the practice’s affect on the individuals involved clearly demonstrated slavery’s immorality. Seizing on this idea, many recent writers have focused on the importance of this inner improvement and peace of mind. Jefferson is clearly after this “private perfection,” and demonstrates the connection between this type of self-development and moral obligation through the example of slavery.

For the most part, however, MacIntyre looks to Aristotle to recover the concept of the telos. Yet, his description of the nature of the human telos diverges from Aristotle’s in important ways. Most notably, MacIntyre takes issue with the fact that Aristotle’s telos, despite incorporating the ideas of progress and ends into the concept of a life, sees that kind of life not as, “something to be achieved at some future point, but in the way our whole life is constructed.” (*After Virtue*, p.175) MacIntyre finds this to be contradictory to the Christian conception of one’s end, namely that

one overcomes past failures through an ultimate salvation. He notes that “the notion of a final redemption . . . has no place in Aristotle’s scheme.” (*After Virtue*, p.175) The classical view arrives at a crossroads between rival views of the telos, one that emphasizes a self-as-it-ought-to-be and another that envisions a final goal to be reached.

In order to resolve this conflict, MacIntyre synthesizes these two views in a way that emphasizes what he believes to be the important aspects of each. MacIntyre incorporates Aristotle's notion of human-nature-as-it-can-become with Christianity's notion of the progression of the search for good to create his concept of the narrative self. This is a view that envisions one's life as a story. While there is a definite progression in the narrative self, this progression makes up “a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole.” (*After Virtue*, p. 205) The good is then neither immediate nor eternal, but is “defined by how best to live out [one's] narrative and bring it to completion.” (McMylor, p.158) This retains the Christian view of the telos as the end of a journey, while overcoming Aristotle's objection that this would make it so that “a man is happy when he is dead.” (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1100a.13) Both man's progression toward an end and the state into which he molds himself must be considered as a part of the telos.

Through this view of the narrative self, MacIntyre again attempts to overcome the problem of unintelligibility. He notes that it is “the notion of intelligibility” that is the “conceptual connecting link between the notion of action and that of narrative,” (*After Virtue*, p.214) for there is, “no such thing as ‘behavior’ to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs and settings.” (*After Virtue*, p.208) We can only “identify a particular action . . . by invoking two kinds of context,” (*After Virtue*,

209) the agent and his situation. MacIntyre uses as example someone coming up to us at a bus stop and saying, “the name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*.” (*After Virtue*, p.210) This action is unintelligible to us; we simply cannot make sense of it. An immediate reaction might be to call the man crazy, and say that he believes he is engaged in a conversation where this statement would be meaningful. This would be a description of the agent that would allow us to make sense of the action. Other explanations would necessarily involve both the man’s identity and his situation. He might be someone who is trying to “break down his shyness” by saying “anything at all,” or a “Soviet spy” who is “uttering the ill-chosen code sentence which will identify him to his contact.” (*After Virtue*, p.210) In any case, if one does not keep in mind the agent and the context, we have no way of dealing with the act. We are helpless. Similarly, in judging our own actions, we must consider both our identity and our situation. I cannot judge whether an action I have taken, such as killing a man, is ethical or not until I consider my identity (am I a soldier or a police officer?) and my situation (am I at war? Making a raid? Defending my home?). Every moral appeal must be made within this personal context that involves not only one’s identity, but also one’s place within the community.

Furthermore, neither communities nor people remain static, but are rather constantly changing and progressing. Not only does MacIntyre refer to traditions rather than communities, but he also makes clear that, “the unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest.” (*After Virtue*, p.219) In the narrative life, one moves toward an end. Yet, this is not a pre-established end. As our quest is a quest to become good, we cannot know what this entails at the beginning because this is exactly

the knowledge we seek. While we have some idea of what we are searching for from the examples of our ancestors and contemporaries, "it is in the course of the quest . . . that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood." (*After Virtue*, p.219) An integral part of becoming ethical is coming to understand the good.

Yet, MacIntyre's philosophy is not an individualist one. Rather, as stated previously, the individual's moral development is inseparable from the place and time in which he lives. MacIntyre believes that the "self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities," (*After Virtue*, p.221) and thus the narrative quest must take place within a given setting. As all of the members of a community simultaneously engage in their moral quests, "communities are always, to a greater or lesser degree, in a state of change." (*Whose Justice*, p.354) What each community "supplies is a set of premises from which" one is able to "argue to conclusions about what ought to be done." (*Whose Justice*, p.342) Through the narrative quest, each person within a given tradition will encounter situations that will lead them to, "the rejection, emendation, and reformulation of beliefs," (*Whose Justice*, p.355) even those that are central to the tradition. Through the history of a tradition, there will be trials and tribulations that will "reveal within established practices and beliefs a lack of resources for offering or for justifying answers to these new questions." (*Whose Justice*, p.355) Simply because one's setting is the starting point for one's quest does not mean the individual cannot reform or improve that starting point. Rather, it would seem that if one were to have a truly successful quest, it would have a profound impact on those around him.

As those embarking on the quest discover new and more refined characteristics of what the good is, they will better direct the quests of those who come after them, and will encourage moral progress within the tradition. Thus, the healthy tradition will not only resolve the moral questions of the day, but will “embody continuities of conflict.” (*After Virtue*, p.222) A tradition is not only constantly refining the answers it has, but is finding new questions to answer. In a tradition, while “there can be rival conceptions of the virtues,” (*After Virtue*, p.142) these rival conceptions can be worked out within the tradition. Through this process a community's functional concepts can be molded in various ways. A tradition provide the community with a way in which to refine the roles and practices that it employs in order to make them more consistent with each other and the community's aims. By allowing all of those within a tradition to pursue their own quest in that context, the tradition can be improved based upon individual discoveries. Not only does the community help to determine the course of an individual's life, but that life also has an impact on the life of the community.

Thus, D.Z. Phillips is not quite correct when he states that “MacIntyre’s own book is an embarrassment for his thesis,” (Phillips, p.49) because its existence serves as an antithesis to MacIntyre’s view that “there is in our society no established way of deciding between [moral] claims.” (*After Virtue*, p.8) While MacIntyre makes no bones about what he believes to be the proper virtues and methods of moral inquiry, he believes that the real moral work is to come after the adoption of his core set of beliefs. It is only once we agree on a common ground for moral inquiry that progress can occur. And only as we progress in ethics can we understand the answers to the moral questions we must learn to ask. In this way, MacIntyre’s ethics is a hopeful one.

Despite his “disquieting suggestion” (*After Virtue*, p.1) that morality has been thrown “into grave disorder,” (*After Virtue*, p.3) pessimism remains for MacIntyre a “cultural luxury that we shall have to dispense with in order to survive these hard times.” (*After Virtue*, p.5) Our lives are complicated, and at times involve difficult decisions, but this does not mean we can give up. While MacIntyre discards much of modern morality, he establishes new moral criteria in every area where he has knocked down the old. MacIntyre’s is an attempt to establish a methodology for ethics and to allow for progress. By making morality intelligible, MacIntyre seeks to make all people capable of tackling difficult moral decisions by making those decisions rational. Certainly, MacIntyre cannot do this alone. He requires the quests of all within the community to attain these ends. This may be why MacIntyre might be seen as pessimistic, for this is surely a foreboding task. But MacIntyre’s is a philosophy that cannot allow for remaining at home and demands the climbing of the philosophical mountain that is morality in its current state.

MacIntyre vs. Nietzsche: Three Caricatures and an Appeal to Science

D.Z. Phillips’ objections are helpful in another way, however, in that they help bring to light what *ought* to characterize MacIntyre’s theory. For if MacIntyre is arguing that all philosophical theories must take place within the context of an age, then his own philosophy ought demonstrate that his own theory is somehow shaped by the late twentieth century. Indeed, MacIntyre’s heavy reliance on ancient philosophers does seem to cast doubt on this hypothesis. But there are many ways in which MacIntyre is responding to contemporary philosophical concerns, even if these

are not great enough to demonstrate the reliance on this age that his moral theory would seem to require of all such theories. Primary amongst these modern concerns is the project of establishing a moral theory in the post-Nietzschean age. A great deal of ethical debate over the past century has centered on the question of the possibility of making moral claims in light of Nietzsche's views. In so much as this is one of MacIntyre's major projects, the argument that he puts forth is very much contemporary. In his reaction to modern concerns in moral philosophy, MacIntyre shows his theory to be shaped by the age in which he writes.

What makes Nietzsche so important for ethics is that he presents a persuasive argument against the entire practice of morality that remains problematic for the study of ethics. His assertion that "there are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena," (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 108, p.275) and his consequent argument that moral interpretations inhibit human flourishing makes the establishment of any moral claim difficult. At the very least, Nietzsche casts doubt on any "ought" statement uttered by the philosopher. For while Nietzsche has a project in mind for humanity, he simultaneously argues that we cannot suppose "the good man" to be of greater value than 'the evil man,' of greater value in the sense of furthering the advancement and prosperity of man in general." (*Genealogy of Morals*, P6, p.456) Thus, instead of a pursuit of the "good," Nietzsche argues that all descriptions of the good are rather assertions of the individual will-to-power. Man wills something, and uses the claims of morality to mask the desires of his basic animal nature. Thus, the desired end for mankind would not be a communal "good," but a

situation in which all people would be able to exert the full force of their will toward their own good.

Nietzsche's philosophy is much deeper and more complicated than any cursory explanation could provide. Yet even this most basic description shows the difficulty of establishing a moral theory that can answer Nietzsche's objections about the possibility or benefit of all moral theories. Rather than face this difficulty head on, MacIntyre deals with Nietzsche in a roundabout way. In his most thorough explication of his moral theory, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre uses Nietzsche as a foil to his own theory. He does this through three major caricatures of Nietzsche's philosophy, exaggerating certain strains in Nietzsche's work without taking on the brunt of his arguments. However, while these caricatures of Nietzsche's work do not accurately depict what MacIntyre is up against, they do allow him to make arguments against specific elements in Nietzschean thought.

MacIntyre's first caricature of Nietzsche is as that of the moral nihilist. He writes: "it is in his relentlessly serious pursuit of the problem, not in his frivolous solutions that Nietzsche's greatness lies, the greatness that makes him *the* moral philosopher *if* the only alternatives to Nietzsche's moral philosophy turn out to be those formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and their successors." (*After Virtue*, p.114) Thus, "if Nietzsche wins, he wins by default." (*After Virtue*, p.257) Hence, Nietzscheism is a result of the failure of moral theories. Since the moral theories of his day had failed, Nietzsche created a philosophy in which moral theory was no longer a desired element. While MacIntyre does not attempt to argue that Nietzscheism is nihilism, he does state that Nietzsche's is a theory that has given up on

the entire project of morality. This view is, to a certain extent, correct. Nietzsche's rejection of moral theory in general entails that no moral theory will work. Thus, MacIntyre is able to posit himself as an advocate of morality in general when arguing for his own theory. Since other theories have failed thus far to answer Nietzsche, his is an attempt to save morality as a whole.

MacIntyre creates another caricature of Nietzsche as an opponent to his own philosophical foes. He praises Nietzsche's criticism of the morality of "freedom from compulsion, disturbance, noise, from tasks, duties, worries," (*Genealogy of Morals*, III 8, p.544) so as to join with him in proclaiming, "there is . . . nothing of 'virtue' in this." (*Genealogy of Morals*, III 8, p.545) MacIntyre makes sure to capitalize on Nietzsche's attacks on their common enemy. Yet MacIntyre ignores Nietzsche's inclusion of Aristotelian morality in his critique of all morality, despite such claims as "that tuning down of the affects to a harmless mean according to which they may be satisfied, the Aristotelianism of morals . . . this, too, for the chapter 'Morality as Timidity.'" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 198, p.299-300) MacIntyre sidesteps these arguments in writing that "the cogency of the Nietzschean rejection and refutation of modern moralities of rules . . . did not necessarily extend to the earlier Aristotelian tradition." (*After Virtue*, p.257) Hence, while MacIntyre characterizes Nietzsche as a moral nihilist, he also characterizes this belief as one fashioned primarily in opposition to the Enlightenment, not Aristotle. MacIntyre presents a caricature of Nietzsche as a man fed up with attempts at universal morality. While this distorts Nietzsche's deep-seated opposition to all morality, it helps MacIntyre in his opposition to Enlightenment morality.

That is not to say MacIntyre's dismissal of Nietzsche's claims against pre-Enlightenment morality is a matter of mere oversight. Rather, MacIntyre believes that Nietzsche's critique fails on the grounds of his own philosophical theories and categorizations. This objection is that Nietzsche does not sufficiently separate himself from Enlightenment assumptions to successfully critique other traditions. The third caricature of Nietzsche is therefore as the end result of the flawed Enlightenment tradition. Primarily, this concerns Nietzsche's position on individuality. MacIntyre writes that, "the concept of the Nietzschean 'great man' . . . represents individualism's final attempt to escape from its own consequences." (*After Virtue*, p.259) MacIntyre presents Nietzsche's theory as just another in a long line of individualist Enlightenment theories. Thus, while Nietzsche is helpful in showing the failure of the Enlightenment project, his philosophy itself rests on the assumptions of this tradition. Nietzsche relies on a conception of the individual as an autonomous agent who is merely surrounded, and not connected with or dependent upon, those around him. MacIntyre writes that "the Nietzschean stance turns out not to be a mode of escape from or an alternative to the conceptual scheme of liberal individualist modernity, but rather one more representative moment in its unfolding." (*After Virtue*, p.259) A connection is made between Nietzsche and writers such as Kant, Descartes, and Hume on the basis of this aspect of his philosophy. In MacIntyre's view, Nietzscheism fits in neatly with these philosophies because it is the ultimate conclusion of a tradition that excludes the influence of others in its examination of ethics. If the individual is all that matters, every moral claim will eventually devolve into a Nietzschean claim of will.

These moral claims will fail because they assume that in the individual lies the beginning and end of morality.

Thus, *After Virtue* presents a picture of Nietzsche that is simplified and distorted, but makes important points about the nature of Nietzsche's views. He is the one who stands against morality, yet must present his own "ought" before mankind. He rips down much of the Enlightenment, but is unable to escape its most basic assumptions. Nietzsche becomes somewhat of a tragic character in MacIntyre's presentation of him. These two criticisms present the grounds on which we could object to important aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy. However, several other attributes of Nietzscheism are unfortunately overlooked. It is important to remember here that Nietzsche's presentation of an "ought" is not a moral ought. Rather, what Nietzsche is after is a mode of being, the creation of an "emancipated individual, with the actual *right* to make promises, this master of a *free* will, this sovereign man." (*Genealogy of Morals*, II 2, p.495) Nietzsche is after human flourishing, which for him entails the rejection of the bonds of morality. Nietzsche's project, then, cannot be rightly said to be a moral one. However, there is a definite ethical strain to this project. MacIntyre gets Nietzsche's refusal of morality correct, yet misses other ethical aims in his work.

Interestingly, *After Virtue* uses this sort of individual flourishing to serve as a measuring stick for the success of a morality. MacIntyre writes that "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." (*After Virtue*, p.219) In MacIntyre's concept of a human telos,

the quest for human flourishing is vital. Furthermore, the human telos is not shared. Rather, “a quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge.” (*After Virtue*, p.219) Just as in Nietzsche, the individual pursues his or her own good over the course of an ethical life. The difference is that “the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe.” (*After Virtue*, p.221)

Here, MacIntyre pushes Nietzsche into an arena where some of his claims can be combated head on, even though he argues that “we cannot reply to Nietzsche on his own terms.” (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.165) In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre reconceptualizes his theories so that he may conclude with a more comprehensive critique of Nietzsche. He writes that “In *After Virtue*, I attempted to give an account of the place of the virtues, understood as Aristotle understood them, . . . while making that account independent of what I called Aristotle’s ‘metaphysical biology.’” (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.x) However, he acknowledges that he “was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible.” (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.x) In *After Virtue*, it is evident how MacIntyre’s argument rests on a sort of biology. MacIntyre notes that Aristotle’s conception of the telos is biological when he writes, “human beings, like the members of all other species, have a specific nature; and that nature is such that they have certain aims and goals, such that they move by nature towards a specific *telos*.” (*After Virtue*, 148) While he does not develop this biological aspect of Aristotle’s theory in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre’s reliance on a telos demonstrates that his theory had already begun to rely on biology.

Furthermore, while he does not make a biological claim in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre does make sociological ones. He argues, “a moral philosophy . . . characteristically presupposes a sociology.” (*After Virtue*, p.23) Modernity has supposed a conception of the community as “simply an arena in which individuals each pursue their own self-chosen conception of the good life, and political institutions exist to provide that degree of order which makes such self-determined activity possible.” (*After Virtue*, p.195) What the Enlightenment project presupposes is a sociology similar to that of Weber's, where individuals pursue personal goals in the context of community constraints. In order to argue for what an individual ought to do, some conception of what humans do is required. For MacIntyre, this is the source of much of what is wrong with the Enlightenment project. What Enlightenment thinkers assume in their moral theories is a sort of atomist universal individual. Individuals progress toward self-prescribed goals hindered only by law and luck.

MacIntyre's statement that “goods can only be achieved by subordinating ourselves to others within the practice in our relationship to others,” (*After Virtue*, p.191) is therefore an empirical sociological claim. His claim is that, while modernity may subscribe to an atomist worldview, mankind actually acts in a way that demonstrates mutual and communal dependence. In all human pursuits, others are required in order for the pursuit of our goods. The claim that all people should be free to do as they wish ignores that this will necessarily involve subordinating social interaction. If I wish to become a father, I must find someone willing to become a mother. If I wish to pursue wealth, I must participate in an economic activity. As MacIntyre points out, all of these pursuits require not only other participants, but also

a socially defined practice in which to interact with these participants. If the practices are not there, the interaction becomes meaningless. The rules of the practice are required in order to know what we are doing, how we are to proceed, and what goals we are moving toward. Even with the father and mother, the successful family requires acknowledgement and agreement as to shared goals within the structure of the family if the family is to avoid becoming dysfunctional.

MacIntyre's sociological claim is simple yet important. He argues that mankind does and must interact with others within communally defined practices. Thus, Weberian sociology is replaced by a type of sociology we could imagine as a presupposition in Aristotelian moral philosophy. This reasoning is circular since, if we do not accept MacIntyre's claim that all moral philosophies presuppose a sociology, this sociology would not exist. However, we can imagine a sociology (many have sprung into existence since MacIntyre) that shifts its focus from the individual to the community. Yet the question still remains as to why this type of sociology would be preferable to Weber's. This question, as well as his desire to confront Nietzsche, serves as the foundation for MacIntyre's examination of human biology. In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre makes the claim that atomistic sociologies fail from a biological standpoint, and that an exploration of human characteristics as animals mandates a communal sociology and moral theory. He argues that thus far in moral philosophy "an acknowledgement of anything like the full extent of that dependence and of the ways in which it stems from our vulnerability and our afflictions is generally absent." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.3)

Thus, MacIntyre agrees with Nietzsche that humans are, at a fundamental level, animals that pursue biological desires, and that human nature is not separate from animal nature but is rather animal nature in a developed state. MacIntyre presents the animality of man through reliance on a variety of sources, both recent and ancient. He mentions works from Aquinas' referral to human and non-animals as well as recent studies on the linguistic capabilities of dolphins. The proof of MacIntyre's point here is not as important as what it allows him to do. This line of reasoning allows MacIntyre to take on one of the Nietzsche's fundamental assertions. MacIntyre writes that Nietzsche's, like his own philosophy, begins "from a consideration of our animal nature." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.162-163) Yet Nietzsche's account of man's animal nature is a "contrast between the animal as predator and the domesticated animal." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.163) Nietzsche uses the analogy that a flock of "lambs dislike [of] great birds of prey does not seem strange" but "gives no ground for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs." (*Genealogy of Morals*, I 13, p.480) Man, or at least the greatest among the human species, is naturally an aggressive animal. It must use the failures of others to its own advantage in order to flourish and survive.

MacIntyre's account for man's animal nature is much different. He emphasizes the "immense importance of . . . human vulnerability and disability," and remarks that this is the "central feature of human life." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.x) Our lives are structured around our needs rather than our wants. For MacIntyre, man's animal nature is neither solitary nor aggressive. We can imagine a sort of scientific examination of the habits of early man. We might see that he tends naturally toward

starting families, attacks only to feed or protect this family, builds communities together with other families, and so on. For proof of this, MacIntyre points to the examples of life, "in early childhood, in old age and during those periods when we are injured or physically or mentally ill." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.155) One must be cared for by the group in order to continue to contribute and to flourish later. Biologically this would be far from unique among animal species. Even the bird of prey must depend upon its mother from birth until it can fly. By noting the great extent to which the human animal is dependent, MacIntyre can show the importance of recognizing that dependence in a moral theory. Pity and compassion are important because without them the family, tribe and species all die. By placing his moral theory on the foundation of biology, MacIntyre is able to show the *evolutionary* importance of the virtues.

In this way, MacIntyre is able to come to a sort of confrontation with Nietzsche. However, MacIntyre admits that this confrontation must be incomplete. This is because MacIntyre readily admits to relying on logic and pursuing truth. When referring to academics, Nietzsche wrote that "it is precisely in their faith in truth that they are more rigid and unconditional than anyone." (*Genealogy of Morals*, III 24, p.587) Thus, in making a logical argument we can only come so close to Nietzsche. MacIntyre assumes that at best Nietzsche will eventually have to say, "This - is *my* way: where is yours?" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* III, 'Of the Spirit of Gravity,' 2, p. 195, quoted in *Dependent Rational Animals*, p.164) Since MacIntyre freely acknowledges that his is a philosophy based on rationality and knowledge, he accepts that he will only be able to defeat certain elements in Nietzsche's philosophy. MacIntyre's

objections bring into question several key elements of Nietzscheism. Yet, with this in mind, MacIntyre overlooks an objection that Nietzsche would definitely have had to this conception of the human animal.

Nietzsche's primary objection to MacIntyre's biological slant would most certainly center on his failure to consider the possibility of breeding, or the general improvement of the species. He argues that "we know from the experience of breeders that species accorded superabundant nourishment and quite generally extra protection and care soon tend most strongly toward variations of the type and become rich in marvels and monstrosities." (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 262, p.400) The type of care that MacIntyre argues for serves here as a means to a species that does not need to be so dependent, either physically, emotionally, or socially. It is one of Nietzsche's core assertions that what is needed for man is to evolve into something greater. This is not to be done by caring for the dependent, because Nietzsche believes that "the sick represent the greatest danger for the healthy." (*Genealogy of Morals*, III 14, p.557) As humans ought to strive toward an independent and autonomous ideal, caring for the weak merely holds the strong back. Thus, human flourishing "requires above all that the healthy should be *segregated* from the sick." (*Genealogy of Morals*, III 14, p.560) Since morality and community are based on human dependency they prevent the evolution of man and his ideas, as well as his achievement of sovereignty.

MacIntyre never approaches the subject of development in humans, even though he does do so for other animals. His reference to dolphins as "prelinguistic" shows that he acknowledges that the development of a species is possible. However, he does not say whether development of the type Nietzsche discusses is impossible or

undesirable. MacIntyre's biological claims deal with a static species, whose duty is to its preservation as a species now and for the foreseeable future. Human flourishing is something that is accomplished within individual lifetimes, not over epochs.

MacIntyre writes, "If I am to flourish to the full extent that is possible for a human being, then my whole life has to be of a certain kind, one in which I not only engage in and achieve some measure of success in the activities of an independent practical reasoner, but also receive the attentive care needed when I am very young, old and ill, or injured." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.108) Human flourishing, then, is aided by both individual excellence and community care. The preservation of the species and each of its dependent members constitutes this flourishing.

While to a certain extent MacIntyre is missing Nietzsche's point, several important accomplishments have been achieved through this exploration of biological morality. First, Nietzsche's conception of the human animal is significantly challenged. While Nietzsche's argument of what man can be remains mostly untouched, his beliefs about what man is today are shown to be, to a large extent, incorrect. Yes, man can be violent, and may seek freedom from the restraints of society, polity, and family. But, just as with wild chimpanzees or dolphins, a will to community is natural in the animal man. Man is a communal and familial animal, and relies on dependent relations in order to both survive and thrive. Through what might be referred to as "altruistic" or "philanthropic" actions, man is actually protecting those who are weak, usually temporarily, so that they, and the species as a whole, can thrive.

The Possibility of Progress and Certainty in MacIntyre's Moral Theory

Furthermore, MacIntyre's biological slant provides his theory with a greater element of certainty. One of MacIntyre's primary critiques, as is the case in the first chapter of *After Virtue*, is that contemporary moral philosophers cannot make certain statements about their decisions. However, if morality is based upon a science, such as biology, it can be determined in a way that is grounded in the practice of science. Excellence within practices that are to benefit both the individual and the community can be shown as the excellence of a member of a species. Just as a zoological examination of a group of apes in the wild would be able to determine which apes were good hunters and mothers, and which members contributed to the group through an examination of their contribution to the group's survival and flourishing, we could make the same type of examination among people.

MacIntyre, whose representation of what virtues we ought to pursue is at best vague in *After Virtue*, is able to state clearly in *Dependent Rational Animals* that the proper virtues for humans are precisely those which lead to the flourishing of the human animal, both individually and collectively. These virtues he terms the virtues of independent rational agency and of acknowledged dependence. The virtues of independent rational agency can be thought of as those virtues that are encouraged by the Enlightenment. They encourage sovereignty in so much as they focus "upon individual autonomy, upon the capacity for making independent choices." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.8) By being virtuous in this way, the individual better his own situation by making prudent choices in the quest toward his telos. Nietzsche can be seen as an extreme version of this as his is a philosophy "according to which a right

understanding of the virtues of independence excludes the possibility of there being any genuine virtues of acknowledged dependence." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.164)

MacIntyre's biological claims about human flourishing, however, mean that these virtues must be developed alongside and in accordance with the virtues of acknowledged dependence. These virtues encourage the individual to contribute to the betterment of the group and species. They include benevolence, truthfulness, friendliness, liberality and gratitude, as acknowledged dependence seeks to facilitate both the giving and receiving required for group betterment. Thus, if a virtue does not fit into either of these categories, *or fits into one but conflicts with another*, it must be rejected as a possible virtue. We would reject greed as a virtue, even if it makes the individual more autonomous, because of its negative impact on the group. Similarly, chronic dependence itself would have to be rejected as a virtue because it would prevent individual achievement and improvement. While we must acknowledge our dependency as a natural characteristic of our species, becoming or remaining dependent does not "actualize the distinctive potentialities that are specific to the human rational animal," (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.9) and thus runs counter to MacIntyre's project.

MacIntyre's reliance on biology also helps him to further develop the scientific themes he first began in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre attempts to create in that work a moral theory that is scientific in several important ways. This becomes evident from its first page, where the contemporary state of moral inquiry is compared to a world in which the sciences could not determine scientific fact. In this situation, scientific

claims would contain “an element of arbitrariness and even of choice . . . that would appear very surprising to us.” (*After Virtue*, p.1) Clearly, MacIntyre’s point is that this is analogous to contemporary moral philosophy’s uncertainty about its moral statements. In its proper state, moral inquiry is neither arbitrary nor uncertain. This implies that uncertain and conflicting elements in morality demonstrate a failure in theory, and not in the nature of ethics itself. When properly formulated, a theory’s moral claims will have the same capability for informed and precise debate as scientific claims. By basing his moral theory on a sociological/biological conception of man, MacIntyre shows how a moral theory might begin to do this. For we can, to a certain extent, show how a specific action benefits the species. We can examine the role that actions, customs, institutions and individuals play amongst the species and its society, and can thus make a claim to their worth. If it can be shown that moral claims must rely on this type of conception about human nature, then an element of proof is imparted to morality.

With this appeal to science as an integral part of his moral theory, MacIntyre can present the rest of his theory as scientific. That is not to say that he believes ethics to be a science. Even when he is presenting his theories on the biological characteristics of animals, MacIntyre relies almost exclusively on philosophical evidence. Furthermore, MacIntyre presents a considerable argument against scientific objectivity, especially in the social sciences. Clearly, the type of debate to take place in ethics is of a different nature than that taking place in science. Furthermore, even in light of his argument for ethics’ reliance on biology in *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre does not reject the arguments he makes in *After Virtue*. Rather, MacIntyre’s

biological claims are presented as a basis for those arguments. The standards for moral excellence still reside within human practices as they lead to the betterment of the individual and his or her community. Yet with this basis moral debate as a human practice can employ new elements that would allow its standards of excellence to become more precise. By taking on these scientific properties, moral debate can become more like scientific debate, allowing it to become less arbitrary.

Prominent among these scientific properties is falsifiability. In his critique of the social sciences, he writes that, "social scientists themselves characteristically and for the most part do in fact adopt . . . a tolerant attitude to counter-examples, an attitude very different from that of either natural scientists themselves or of Popperian philosophers of science." (*After Virtue*, p.90) Ironically, what MacIntyre criticizes for its unfalsifiability is precisely is presented as scientific in the social sciences. MacIntyre employs Quine's argument that "if there is to be a science of human behavior whose key expressions characterize that behavior in terms precise enough to provide us with genuine laws, those expressions must be formulated in a vocabulary which omits all reference to intentions, purposes, and reasons for action." (*After Virtue*, p. 83) Indeed, this is exactly what MacIntyre believes the Enlightenment project has done. In attempting itself to make moral beliefs rational and objective, it has eliminated the main criteria for falsifying an action as bad. MacIntyre thus asks, "what would human actions deprived of any falsifying narrative order be like?" (*After Virtue*, p.214) In this view, without an understanding of the end toward which someone is working, we cannot demonstrate that his or her actions are wrong. For example, if we do not know

why someone is yelling fire, it is difficult to evaluate his utterance from a moral standpoint. If there is a fire he is a hero; without a fire he is a criminal.

Of course, most moral judgments are not falsified this quickly. Usually, moral debates concerning human actions occur over extended periods of time. This brings into question MacIntyre's reliance on individual circumstance. Recall that the individual telos is found in the form of a narrative quest that is often very personal in nature. We might ask how we can demand a standard of falsifiability if we are to use personal situations as that standard. Popperian falsifiability demands that a claim stand the test of time, which would seem to therefore make it inapplicable in MacIntyre's moral theory. Yet it is precisely the extended nature of moral debate that MacIntyre has in mind when he posits it as a characteristic of proper moral theory. MacIntyre is not only concerned with the narratives of individuals, but communities as well. Thus, it is in the progression of an ethical tradition that moral claims will become falsifiable, and therefore rationally justified.

This is the thrust of MacIntyre's argument in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*. In this book he examines three ways in which moral claims can be made. The rival approaches of encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition differ primarily in their conception of the project in which they are engaged. MacIntyre argues that the encyclopaedists, who are largely constituted by Enlightenment thinkers, are after a static system of moral law. Thus, "to be a good or just person, to be virtuous in character, is to be disposed to do what the rules require." (*Three Rival Versions*, p.174) Once these rules are established, moral inquiries are ideally not made over what these rules should be, "but only over their application in particular circumstances." (*Three*

Rival Versions, p.175) An opposing method of inquiry is genealogy, which has attempted to overcome this notion of a singular truth or way of being by undermining the foundation of all "truths." "Where the encyclopaedist aspired to displace the Bible as a canonical book, the genealogist intended to discredit the whole notion of canon." (*Three Rival Versions*, p.25) MacIntyre uses *Genealogy of Morals* as his primary example for this type of writing. He prepares the way for his final dismissal of Nietzsche in *Dependent Rational Animals* by showing here how Nietzsche's project and paradigm are radically different from other ethical projects. Nietzsche is still shown as having a project in mind for humanity, which undermines his arguments against truth and rationality. Yet, in a genealogy, the goal is to undermine the belief in a truth through the presentation of the events leading to its establishment and the fundamental assumptions on which it rests. In response to this, MacIntyre aims to present an alternative to both the encyclopaedists and the genealogists. Rather than argue for static morality or no morality, MacIntyre argues for moral inquiry through historically extended tradition.

MacIntyre writes that tradition "is a third possibility, the possibility that reason can only move towards being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded, is a condition for genuinely rational enquiry." (*Three Rival Versions*, p.59-60) A moral inquiry in a tradition requires that one learn what has already been discovered and perfect that knowledge. Philosophers in this vein are therefore able to issue moral claims "which are rationally justified as the best so far, in light of those formulations of the relevant

standards of achievement which are rationally justified as the best so far.” (*Three Rival Versions*, p.64) The philosopher begins with what has been learned by his predecessors and subsequently taught to him. Rather than subverting this knowledge, or simply defending it, he employs it in his work in order to make it more precise and accurate. Here again the scientific aspects of MacIntyre’s moral theory become plain.

It is important to make note of MacIntyre’s philosophy of science here. For while he relies on Popper for much of his critique of social scientists and Enlightenment thinkers, MacIntyre holds a view of science that is closer to the historicism contained in Larry Laudan’s *Progress and Its Problems*. Laudan argues that, “rationality lies in the way in which the change to a new theory is made in order to solve the empirical and conceptual problems unresolved by its predecessors.” (Stern, p.151) Thus, MacIntyre can argue for progress in ethics, even though “like Laudan MacIntyre abandons any talk of such transcendental properties as universal validity or timeless truth for ethical systems.” (Stern, p. 152) The reason why MacIntyre’s ethical truth is not timeless in this sense is because it maintains internal mechanisms that subject its own moral claims to the intense scrutiny of rational debate for the entirety of their existence. Unlike contemporary moral debate, in which conflict is interminable over the same issues, both morality and science progress for MacIntyre as they discover new questions in answering the old.

Falsifiability is again brought to light here. What is capable of falsifying moral theory is reform from a common ground. While Nietzsche can provide us with important reasons why morality fails, it always remains a possibility that morality has only failed thus far. Indeed, many philosophers have continued as if this was the case,

if they have not ignored Nietzschean concerns altogether. What MacIntyre is getting at here is that in order for us to be rid of a concept we must acknowledge the foundation for that concept yet reject its formulation. Incommensurability becomes a factor here. While MacIntyre's theory of traditions as conceptual frameworks is extended and complex, what is important to note is that while we can make an argument for one tradition over another, we do so on the basis of its use, progress, and capabilities. If we are to defeat a theory, however, these types of appeal will not be sufficient. Fundamental agreement allows for internal appeals to standards of excellence, and therefore proof, thus paving the way for the rejection of a theory. If we do not agree on whether or not there are things that are true, we cannot debate the truth of a thing without our argument devolving into an assertion of fundamentals. Only when working from a common foundation can a philosopher defeat a moral theory.

Thus, falsifiability must take place within the context of a philosophical tradition in which fundamental assertions are agreed upon, and are only changed through other established standards internal to the tradition. MacIntyre has a scientific ideal in mind here, where agreement upon basic theories and methodologies characterizes research even though none of those theories standing alone is impervious to attack based upon the findings of the enquirer. This allows for prolonged debate over moral issues through which moral excellence can be determined with increasing precision. Greek tragedies serve as one of MacIntyre's major examples of what he is after in moral inquiry. In the plays of Sophocles, characters are confronted with situations in which their virtues are brought into conflict. He writes, "the Sophoclean

self transcends the limitations of social roles and is able to put those roles into question, but it remains accountable to the point of death . . . for precisely the way in which it handles itself in those points of view." (*After Virtue*, p.145) In this way, Sophocles brought conflicts within his moral tradition to light. For example, we see that Oedipus' reliance on the standards of excellence for kings (for example, courage when facing another caravan on the road) led to his downfall as a man. Oedipus' reliance on the virtues of both a king and a man showed these virtues to be inconsistent with each other and in need of reform. Thus, without rejecting virtue outright, debate would occur about what within the virtues needed to change. We might reject that aspect of manly courage associated with kingliness that caused Oedipus to kill his father, and perhaps replace this virtue with mercy. In this case, a flaw in the moral beliefs of the day is found and rejected from a common fundamental philosophical ground. By sharing these examples, the failures of morality can be brought to light and repudiated while still allowing the moral tradition progress.

Perhaps an even better example of this would be Aristotle's moral inquiry in *Politics*, where he asks, "whether the virtue of a good man and a good citizen is the same or not." (*Politics*, 1276b.17-18) There, Aristotle notes the conflicting nature of the virtues of the good man and the good citizen and attempts to resolve them. Making the two virtues, and therefore the two concepts, consistent allows this to occur. MacIntyre remarks that in Aristotle, not only is there a "belief in the unity and harmony of both the individual soul and the city-state," but also a "perception of conflict as something to be avoided and managed." (*After Virtue*, p.163) MacIntyre criticizes Aristotle's treatment of conflict between the virtues because, "it is through

conflict and sometimes only through conflict that we learn what our ends and purposes are." (*After Virtue*, p.164) What MacIntyre fails to recognize is that Aristotle is seeking to resolve, and not to avoid, conflict.

Earlier, MacIntyre demonstrated that in Aristotle moral debate involves "at least one central concept, the concept of *man* understood as having an essential nature and an essential purpose or function" so that "'man' stands to 'good man' as 'watch' stands to 'good watch' or 'farmer' to 'good farmer.'" (*After Virtue*, p.58) Yet MacIntyre does not recognize what Aristotle does to this functional concept in his examination. What MacIntyre is after is what Aristotle attempts in the reconciliation of the good man with the good citizen. He is after the changing of functional concepts toward the goal of human flourishing. By making the virtues necessary to the roles taken on in human practices consistent with the virtues necessary to individual progression toward a telos, concepts become altered in a way that shapes our use of moral terms. We can see this in our contemporary concept of a 'citizen', which now includes most people in free societies. Also, our reconstruction of government towards the inclusion of most individuals as citizens demonstrates that the function implied by contemporary use of this term has been changed through moral debate. It is this reconciliation of the good man with the good citizen that has led us to categorize the good citizen in such a way as to include the activist claims-making activities that would have been judged to be immoral in ancient Athens. Furthermore, this reconciliation allows us to form a conception of the good man that includes conformity among its vices.

Thus, we become certain about moral statements in that the function implied in our terms is consistent with the standards of excellence established by the community

for the pursuit of good. Moral inquiry would shape terms such as "man," "soldier," "mother," and "teacher," so that their linguistic use would make evident the moral qualities expected of each role or position. By changing the functional concept behind each term, the moral philosopher allows moral judgments to become wrapped up in their definitions, so that when we would use a term the moral excellence of what is described by the term would be as certain as our definition of that word. Thus, while Nietzsche would criticize the definitions of concepts because "now this, now that element comes to the fore and dominates at the expense of others," (*Genealogy of Morals*, II 13, p.516) MacIntyre uses this characteristic of definitions to allow the moral philosopher to make moral statements of which the community can be certain. For, if the moral understanding of a term is implicit in its definition, it will be applied with the same certainty as that definition.

Thus, while MacIntyre does not mention it in his explication of tradition, Aristotle's reconciliation of the good man with the good citizen would appear to be what MacIntyre is advocating in his moral theory. It meets all of the criteria for proper inquiry in a moral tradition. First, Aristotle accepts the foundations of his predecessors. MacIntyre shows Aristotle to be building upon the foundation of moral debate in Athens through his demonstration of the influence of Sophocles. Aristotle then confronts the moral theories of his day without seeking to subvert their fundamental propositions or to simply argue that they be accepted. Furthermore, his work aims at reconciling the concepts used in that debate by reshaping popular conceptions. Finally, it falsifies the theories of that day by demonstrating internal inconsistency. In doing this, Aristotle participates in a tradition while allowing that

tradition to progress. The implication is that, thus resolved, the new concepts would be subject to some inconsistency, and would provide further problems for the philosophers of the next generation. Philosophers would have to use the concepts of their historical time and place in their moral inquiries, but would still be able to mold these concepts based on the results of those inquiries.

Accountability and the Problem of Rights

Thus, MacIntyre argues for the creation and use of a historically extended tradition in the pursuit of moral inquiry. The formulation of a proper method of moral inquiry is of the utmost importance for MacIntyre as "the history of morality and the history of moral philosophy are a single history." (*After Virtue*, p.268) But the question of individual employment of morality still remains. For MacIntyre, each person is personally accountable for his or her own moral path. He writes that, "to be accountable in and for enquiry is to be open to having to give an account of what one has either said or done, and then having to amplify, explain, defend, and, if necessary, either modify or abandon that account." (*Three Rival Versions*, p.201) Each person therefore must supply his or her own account for his or her own actions as demonstrative of moral excellence. This account can then be accepted or falsified by means of MacIntyre's criteria. A moral account of this sort may also demonstrate the internal contradictions of a moral system, as in the case of Oedipus. However, that does not relieve the individual from moral duty. "The Sophoclean self transcends the limitations of social roles and is able to put those roles in question, but it remains accountable to the point of death." (*After Virtue*, p.145) While our lives may give an

account of the virtues that shows them to be flawed, individual rejection of those virtues still shows a person to be lacking in moral excellence.

What MacIntyre is attempting to do is to separate explanations from excuses. In part, this is exemplified in our current legal system. First, accounts are given of a specific incident. Decisions are made as to what contextual facts are pertinent to the understanding of the case. An individual's incitement of an incident would affect how the offender would be treated, while social pressures would most likely be considered immaterial. The same goes for MacIntyre's moral account. What prompts one to action, as well as the situation one is in, help to determine the moral excellence of that action. Whether I am prompted to kill a stranger because he has a gun to my head, he has offended me, or because I am prejudiced against his race will all affect how the incident is considered. However, although the social and political context in which the action takes place may have in some way led to the incident, they do not excuse my action. The attitudes of the community might be shown to be flawed in how they caused a particular transgression, but the individual remains accountable.

That does not mean, however, that this accountability centers on deeds, as in the example of the legal system. A focus on deeds is problematic for MacIntyre in that it focuses only on one portion of moral excellence. In the above example of the legal system, what is determined is whether or not a particular transgression took place. If guilty, it is determined that the person ought not to have done the action. While the transgression is most often demonstrative of vice, this does not necessarily provide a description of how one ought to act. Indeed, one of MacIntyre's major arguments against the Enlightenment project is that it only provides those who subscribe to it

with taboos, which themselves require a political and cultural foundation in order to be justified and intelligible. (*After Virtue*, p.112) To live well is to obey the rules, making all morality legal in its nature. MacIntyre argues that in Kant “the notion that morality is anything other than obedience to rules has almost, if not quite, disappeared from sight.” (*After Virtue*, p.236) MacIntyre believes that Kantian ethics, when standing alone, cannot state that a good chess player is anything more than a player who is obedient to the rules. Certainly, this type of determination would allow us to pick out the bad chess players; we could weed out both cheaters and those who do not understand the game. However, we would have no measure of excellence. A world champion and myself would have to be said to be equally good at chess.

Yet we know this is not the case. MacIntyre writes that “a practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods.” (*After Virtue*, p.190) In social practices, obedience to the rules is only a prerequisite for excellence. There may be exceptions, as some great players may have cheated at some point in their careers. However, in order to achieve excellence, a player must at least have a tendency to obey the rules. By applying this concept to social interaction, MacIntyre demonstrates the importance of standards of excellence beyond the rules or laws. Yet, while this stance would appear to support obedience to rules as an important part of a moral system, other aspects of MacIntyre’s theory downplay this fundamental importance of rules. He mentions that “there is relatively little mention of rules anywhere in the *Ethics*,” (*After Virtue*, p.150) and emphasizes the lack of appeals to rules among the Athenian philosophers. Throughout his work, MacIntyre shows how rules must be changed, and how exceptions must constantly be made to

them. In presenting a theory in which rules are insufficient to constitute a moral system, MacIntyre fails to establish their fundamental importance. Instead, MacIntyre seems to imply that, were moral excellence to become developed well enough, rules would become relatively unimportant.

One specific class of rule that MacIntyre argues against is that of rights. We can define rights as those political or moral privileges that are owed to individuals on a universal basis. One of the primary tenets of Enlightenment morality is that individual actions must not interfere with the rights of others. However, while contemporary morality holds the respect for individual rights in high regard, MacIntyre says of rights that "belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns." (*After Virtue*, p.69) Here, MacIntyre has in mind the concept of universal and inalienable rights. This concept is fictional, says MacIntyre, because if rights are what are owed to individuals, there must be some specific entity that owes the debt. "Lacking any such social form, the making of a claim to right would be like presenting a check for payment in a social order that lacked the institution of money." (*After Virtue*, p.67) The term "universal rights" would therefore be a non sequitur. Furthermore, only in a culture where the individual is emphasized above the community could the need to protect what is owed the individual exist as a right.

MacIntyre also objects that rights are not falsifiable, nor can they be shown to exist. MacIntyre believes that "the best reason for asserting so bluntly that there are no such rights is indeed of precisely the same type as the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no witches . . . [or] unicorns: every attempt to give good reasons for believing that there *are* such rights has failed." (*After Virtue*, p.69) The

abstract concept of rights makes them impossible to examine in the same way that we would look at the standards of excellence in a practice, or the benefit of an action or virtue to the community or the species. We can examine how excellence is determined within the standards of a practice, yet we cannot say for certain which rights exist and which do not. For MacIntyre, much of this argument rests on his agreement with Nietzsche that abstract concepts of morality do not exist. The standards of the community must be relied on, therefore, because "there are no self-evident truths."

(*After Virtue*, p.69)

Yet, perhaps a more concrete objection of MacIntyre's to rights rests in the fact that they are universal by their very nature. Rights cannot be applied within specific situations or contexts, because "if I claim a right in virtue of my possession of certain characteristics, then I am logically committed to holding that anyone else with the same characteristics also possesses this right." (*After Virtue*, p. 67) Any claims for just treatment must be extended to everyone, and must be based on assumed similarity. A good example of this is the debate within contemporary feminist circles about how best to make arguments for the improved treatment of women. Feminists have traditionally succeeded in their political and philosophical projects by making claims to deserving rights equal to those of men. However, in establishing these rights, women had to demonstrate that they were like men "in all *important* respects."

(Wolgast, p.21) When problems later arose where gender differences were important, such as with family leave, universal rights seemed to be insufficient to solving the problem. The result is that, in cases such as these, "equal" treatment meant that either no one received family leave, or that women only received leave under the category of

"disability." (Young, p.269) In this case, women would be at a serious disadvantage in their attempts to be good employees, yet being granted equal rights would not solve this problem. If differences are to be addressed justly, we cannot do so simply through the application of rules regarding the respect for individual rights.

Claims to special rights have similarly failed. The notion of special rights is that certain individuals are owed rights on the basis of specific characteristics, not merely because they are human. Yet many differences in society are accepted, and even praised. Thus, in order to be recognized as worthy of a special right, a group must demonstrate that it has been wronged in some way. The result is that moral claims to right "come to be identified with 'injury politics,' that is, claims and counterclaims about who has been injured and how." (Valverde, p.346) MacIntyre recognizes this when he remarks that "protest is . . . almost entirely that negative phenomenon which characteristically occurs as a reaction to the alleged invasion of someone's *rights*." (*After Virtue*, p.71) In making a claim to right, one asserts that one has been wronged, and is therefore owed something. In this way, the language of rights can serve "to conceal behind the masks of morality what are in fact the preferences of arbitrary will and desire." (*After Virtue*, p.71) In this view, rights should not be part of a moral system because they are better suited to allowing individuals to claim personal privileges owed to them by a particular community than to assisting moral inquiry by protecting those individuals from moral harms.

MacIntyre, in examining rights, deals with them as claims by individuals in a liberal atomist society. Yet we can formulate rights in several other ways. Feminist thinkers, in dealing with the problems of rights, have continued to include them in

their theoretical systems, largely because of the victories for women and minorities that have been won in recent history because of rights claims. The result has been that much of the recent literature in feminist ethics has attempted to combine Enlightenment morality and communitarian thought within a single moral system. While MacIntyre has distanced himself significantly from those thinkers who call themselves communitarian, the idea is still to temper arguments for community with liberal individualism and respect for rights. Feminist thinkers, while supporting many of MacIntyre's claims to community and dependence, have made it a goal to find "a coalescence (or merging) between liberalism and at least some forms of communitarianism," (Dietz, p.125) even going so far as to reject any "false dichotomy" between individual liberty and political community." (Dietz, p.123) The idea has been to protect the gains of the past while accepting views like MacIntyre's.

p.164) The question remains, however, what this synthesis would look like.

MacIntyre certainly does not foresee this type of coalescence, as rights claims stand in opposition to the community orientation of his theory. MacIntyre believes rights presuppose an individualism that is not consistent with his views. Even if we examine the virtues of independent practical reasoning that MacIntyre describes in *Dependent Rational Animals*, we do not see anything resembling respect for the rights of others. Rather, the virtues of independent practical reasoning provide individuals with the ability to do what is best for "this particular agent in these particular circumstances." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.92) This is tempered, not by the respect for rights, but by an acknowledged dependence on others. Only our connection to others through social practices tempers the pursuit of our own particular goods.

That MacIntyre objects to rights does not mean that he objects to what rights have accomplished, however. When MacIntyre writes that Aristotle's assumption that men were superior to women was an "injury to moral philosophy," (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.7) he acknowledges that women were to some degree correct in their claims to equal rights. Their exclusion from the polis was not warranted, and they ought to have been treated equally by the community. MacIntyre argues that his own model can demonstrate this without showing the situation to involve a violation of right. The improvement of the individual and the community relies on the acknowledged dependence of men and women on each other, and their cooperation toward shared goals. A healthy community is not oppressive because its members acknowledge their reliance on one another. Yet, while MacIntyre notes Aristotle's failure to see that which women bring to the community (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.164) he downplays women's exclusion from the Aristotelian community. Aristotle excluded all women, the poor, slaves, barbarians, and others from equal moral consideration in his works. Furthermore, this was supposedly for their own good, as well as the good of the community. This type of argument has carried through to the modern day, where the oppression of women and minorities is still believed by some to be beneficial precisely on the grounds that MacIntyre believes it to be unacceptable.

In retrospect, we can see how oppressive attitudes and actions towards women and minorities were detrimental to communities, as well as to both the oppressors and the oppressed. However, when one is within such an age, this is much more difficult to perceive. While MacIntyre would call on progressive thinkers within the tradition to discover the harm caused to society because of oppression, MacIntyre's system

would not require the fair and equal treatment of all people. Without any recognition of what people are owed simply on the basis of their humanity, it is easy to exclude others from moral consideration based on arbitrary differences. When MacIntyre argues against rights as claims, he overlooks that those claims, at least those "which are cited as a reason for holding that people ought not to be interfered with in their pursuit of life, liberty and happiness," (*After Virtue*, p.69) are attempting to establish a system in which all people are treated morally. Without respect for rights, MacIntyre cannot establish the basis for a community in which all people are working both for their own good, as well as the good of the group. If the community strips individuals of their basic freedoms, even when those individuals are not part of the community, the basis for a comprehensive theory of virtue is lost. While MacIntyre can argue that there is more to the game than simply following the rules, he fails to recognize the importance of those rules as the basis for the game in the first place.

Hence, we can understand Thomas Jefferson's claim to the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as an attempt to establish the basis for a community in which moral excellence for the purpose of community benefits would be established. Abraham Lincoln wrote that "the principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society," (Lincoln, p.489) which can be interpreted both as a political statement and as a moral one. Recognizing that someone has a right to both life and basic freedoms can serve as the basis for the development of a moral attitude towards them. This can then serve as a foundation for a theory of moral excellence based on virtue. We must begin by recognizing rights, and then continue to act morally by pursuing what is best for our community and ourselves. MacIntyre recognizes the need for this

type of recognition when among friends. He writes that "it is in and through the relationships of friends that the particularity of each and the distinctive value of each as being *this* particular individual with his or her own distinctive good to achieve is accorded recognition." (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.160-161) Certainly, we can see that this type of recognition would be magnified in friendship, yet some semblance of this notion is required in order to interact ethically with any person. Without an understanding of the moral identity of another human being, it is impossible to choose actions that will be in their best interest. So, just as "the virtues that we need for . . . relationships, are the same virtues that we need in general," (*Dependent Rational Animals*, p.150) the principles underlying this sort of friendship are also necessary in order to act morally when among strangers.

Conclusion: MacIntyre's Theory Today

Through this examination we can see why MacIntyre's theory works well today. Were the fundamental rules and principles of the Enlightenment project to be understood as its necessary foundation, MacIntyre's moral theory would be helpful in making moral statements in light of Nietzscheism, increasing the certainty with which we make moral judgments, and encouraging moral excellence beyond a mere obedience of the rules. Yet, MacIntyre's attempt to establish standards of moral excellence above and beyond the rules of fair play overlooks the tremendous amounts of effort and philosophical debate it took to establish those rules in the first place. Indeed, only now is society at a point where restrictive rules and rights have begun to lose their usefulness. It is precisely because we have such a high regard today for the basic rights

of individuals that we can redirect our philosophical focus toward the needs of the community and towards virtue.

MacIntyre's project can be understood in terms beyond his own characterization of it. While MacIntyre writes in opposition to Enlightenment morality, to a large extent he is relying on its moral assumptions. Not only does MacIntyre respond to the challenge set down for morality by Nietzsche, he also presents a system that works best once basic Enlightenment ideals are adhered to. These ideals, regarding the respect for rights, are necessary to the formulation of the type of moral community that MacIntyre's moral theory requires. Lacking these ideals as a foundation, there are insufficient guards within the theory to prevent the atrocities of oppression that existed in Aristotle's day. With those ideals as a foundation, however, MacIntyre is able to accomplish a great deal. Not only does he present a moral theory that is useful and capable of greater certainty, MacIntyre also makes meaningful moral statements that recognize the criticisms of Nietzsche. While MacIntyre's theory may not be perfect, it is perfectly open to critique from those who are willing to accept MacIntyre's fundamental assertions without inhibiting the acceptance and usefulness of the theory. It is a theory that lends itself to adjustment, so that it may be both perfected and adapted to one's age. Through both his recognition of modern concerns about ethics, as well as his revival of many of its important but forgotten concepts, MacIntyre has truly made an advance in ethics. And, through a recognition of the foundation necessary to his project, ethics can be made to advance even further.

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