

**Staying Grounded: Overcoming Circularity and Conventionalism
in MacIntyre's Virtue Ethics**

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Chapter 1:

Circularity and Conventionalism in MacIntyre's Tradition-Dependent Rationality

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre provides a novel justificatory scheme for his ethical theory – what I have come to call the Tripartite framework. However, his extended discussion in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* opens this framework up to multiple potentially troublesome lines of criticism, some of which he addresses and some of which he ignores. While MacIntyre addresses relativist and perspectivist critiques in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (WJWR), I have noticed one concern that is left unacknowledged. On the basis of this concern, I will develop what I have called the conventionalist critique.

In the opening section of *WJWR*, MacIntyre provides a few reasons detailing why contemporary disputes over the nature of rationality cannot be resolved. One of these is that, by attempting to address questions related to rationality in the (supposedly) disinterested way characteristic of liberal modernity, one must already presuppose that the procedures being followed are themselves rational. Because such a procedure must presuppose a certain understanding of what constitutes rationality, then in this process “a certain degree of circularity is ineliminable.”¹ As such, we can rightly infer that one of MacIntyre’s major goals is the development of a conception of rationality – both theoretical and practical – that manages to avoid circularity. Indeed, we should expect any truly rational account to be free of such circularity, while also being grounded by a sufficiently strong foundation. To achieve this, he proposes what he calls “tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive” rationality.²

The question we must ask ourselves, then, is whether or not MacIntyre’s own account meets this requirement. Based on my understanding of *After Virtue* and *WJWR*, I do not think it does. Thus, if this project is successful it will provide an account of why, by the very foundations of his framework, MacIntyre cannot achieve the goal he sets up in the opening section of *WJWR* based on his theory of rationality alone.

¹ MacIntyre. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*. Notre Dame, 1988; p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

In this first chapter, I will briefly summarize MacIntyre's Tripartite framework. Because the notion of tradition is the fundamental part of this framework, I will mainly focus on this as it relates to his expanded discussion of rationality and justification in *WJWR*. Through this, I will argue that his conception of standards of rational justification and standards of practical rationality results in a circularity – a circularity from which conventionalism is the only possible escape. Most importantly for the present work, I will show why this results in a framework where virtue itself cannot be justified without appeal to these conventions.

However, MacIntyre's theory does provide some revealing insights into the nature of humans as tradition-embedded. To reject his theory of virtue outright, due to the insufficient foundation it provides for practical rationality and virtue, seems misguided. As such, in the second chapter of this project I will work to provide a firmer foundation for virtue and practical rationality – one that allows them to be justified without appeal to circular argumentation or convention. To this end, I will look to the foundations provided by other recent virtue ethicists to determine whether a synthesis of some sort can be formed.

1 – The Tripartite Framework

There are three main parts to MacIntyre's moral scheme – practice, the narrative form of human life, and tradition. It is in these that virtue finds its expression, and through these that beliefs, decisions and actions are made intelligible. Of these, the notion of tradition is the most fundamental, since practices and human lives are always situated within the broader context of traditions. Let us first go through each one briefly, after which I will relate this to the discussion found in *WJWR*.

A *practice* is any cooperative activity such that the goods internal to that activity are achieved by striving to meet the standards of excellence internal to the activity. Striving for excellence in a given practice has two goals: 1) the extension of human excellence in the practice, and 2) an increased understanding of the goods internal to the practice. Meeting these two goals allows for the gradual modification and improvement of the standards of excellence internal to a given practice as excellence and understanding increase.³ Someone can alter the established standards of a practice, but only once they have attained mastery of these standards.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984; p. 187.

Among these activities, MacIntyre includes “[arts], sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life.”⁴

The virtues find their expression here by allowing members of a community of practitioners to cooperate for the sustaining and advancement of a practice. For example, we can see this clearly in the example of a chess player who lacks honesty (for the sake of discussion, we will suppose that honesty precludes cheating). If this individual cheats, then it is clear that he or she is not striving for excellence and understanding within the game of chess. By forgoing this quest for excellence and understanding, it follows that he or she will not be able to contribute to the *advancement* of excellence and understanding of the goods internal to chess – tactics and strategies, for instance. The act of cheating is done, not with cooperation, but with competition in mind – it is done to win *a* game, not for the sake of excellence in *the* game. If every member of the chess community acted in this way, then the notion of excellence in chess would dissolve, and it would cease being a practice. Thus, practitioners depend on the virtues to sustain both the practices to which they are committed, and their relationships with other practitioners.⁵

The *narrative form of human life* is a bit more unusual. MacIntyre argues that every intention, belief, action, and interaction is made intelligible only by way of its being situated at some stage in the narrative of an individual – the narrative history and the expected/desired future (the *ends*) of an individual provide us with the context necessary to understand his or her intentions, beliefs, actions and interactions in the present.⁶ In our personal narratives, we find ourselves placed in a variety of intertwining stories, both chosen and inherited. The choices we make and the actions we perform are illustrative of the narrative we want to tell of ourselves, and of the shared teleological ends that we strive toward for ourselves and for those involved in our narrative, within the constraints of these intertwining stories.⁷

While our ends, views, and personalities may change, the narrative that belongs to each of us makes these changes intelligible – they are part of the rational history of each individual, a rational history that provides the self with a certain constancy. Ends, and the means used to achieve these ends, can change over the course of time as the individual develops a better

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-191.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 206-210.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

understanding of him or herself, and of what counts as a good for him or herself. But these changes are always situated within the context of one's narrative. Because these changes are always based on improved self-understanding, the narrative of one's life should be viewed as a rational history. This narrative of one's life is the narrative of a unified self – unified, that is, by a history of changes that can be rationally explained as improvements in self-understanding. Thus, each life is unified by the rational history that is its narrative. MacIntyre claims that the good of an individual consists in how he or she can best live out this unified narrative to completion, and thus reach the desired ends of his or her life.⁸ All of this, however, is concerned with goods and ends – with individual goals and desires. What about *the* good and *the* end (the human *telos*)?

The good for humans as such, he claims, is what every instance of the unified narrative and the good of the individual have in common. What they have in common, according to him, is the very search for the human good. He states this thusly: “the good life for man is the life spent in seeking 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”.⁹ In other words, the good for humans is the moral quest. We may consider this quest to be a practice, but a very unique type of practice – one that itself occurs within the context of other practices, and to which all humans are committed, to a greater or lesser degree, by virtue of their involuntary membership in the human species.

Virtue is essential in the case of particular goods, since it enables individuals to judge among the potentially conflicting demands and responsibilities imposed by the roles they have adopted in their intertwining sets of stories, and thus to decide which course of action, which path, is most likely to lead to the ends that they envision for the future. It is essential for *the* good as such, since it provides individuals with the ability to direct their attention toward moral perfection, while also allowing them to avoid and overcome the challenges, distractions, and temptations faced along their journey toward human goodness – along their moral quest.¹⁰

The third and final part of MacIntyre's framework is what I will call the socio-historical embeddedness of the individual. Every person and every journey has an unchosen starting point,

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

one that provides us with an inherited history through which all later decisions and actions are made intelligible and given context. One may be born into a family of soldiers or of businesspeople; one may be born in 21st-century Canada, or one may have been born in 3rd-century Rome; one may be born wealthy or poor. All of these conditions affect, either directly or indirectly, the possible paths, stories, and ends that individuals can pursue and achieve through their personal narrative.¹¹

However, the most important part of this socio-historical embeddedness, when considering intellectual and moral engagement and development, is *tradition*. Nobody can work completely outside of the standards provided by his or her inherited tradition, since these standards serve as the backbone of each individual's world-conception (although one can question aspects of their tradition). As MacIntyre says, a living tradition (one that is ongoing) is “an historically extended, socially embodied argument”, in part about “the goods which constitute that tradition.”¹² The goods in question, and the questions themselves, are informed and guided by the standards set out by that tradition.

A tradition is embodied by the contemporary practices that have developed on the basis of the beliefs, knowledge, norms, and standards internal to that tradition.¹³ It is also embodied through the lives of its members, whose goals, desires, and moral quests are pursued through the practices that constitute their tradition. The standards of a tradition are of two main types. The first of these are standards of practical rationality – these inform and guide the actions of individuals as they exercise the virtues throughout their lives in the context of practices. But a tradition is not just a set of social practices, it is also a collection of worldviews, theories, and enquiries which simultaneously derive from and provide a foundation for the socially embodied aspects of the tradition. Among these theoretical features are the standards of rational justification – these inform and guide the development of knowledge, along with the thoughts and beliefs internal to a tradition. But what exactly are these two types of standards? How do members of a tradition come to hold them, and what purposes do they serve?

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 220-221.

¹² Ibid., p. 222.

¹³ Ibid., p. 222-223.

2 – Standards of Rational Justification

The standards of excellence in a *practice* are pre-determined from the perspective of a contemporary practitioner – they have been laid out by previous generations of practitioners, and have become entrenched by the time any new practitioner is welcomed into the fold. The same can be said of *traditions* – the standards of rational justification developed and deployed by any tradition have been vindicated by traditional modes of inquiry, and are thus widely accepted by the time an individual inherits them upon becoming a member. These standards, once accepted as the foundations for the knowledge, beliefs, and values of a tradition, become guides to correct thought and thus serve as normative principles. But, in their nascence, they do not derive their normativity from sources of justification external to themselves.

As MacIntyre says, all traditions of enquiry originate from *unquestioned authoritative* “beliefs, utterances, texts, and persons.”¹⁴ What does this say about the foundations upon which traditions are based? First of all, if they are unquestioned, they need not be, and are likely not, derived from any immutable, objective source.¹⁵ Second, if they are authoritative, then we must ask ourselves about the nature of this authority— by authoritative, does MacIntyre mean a merely trusted source (e.g., text, individual, utterance), or a source that is both trusted *and* knowledgeable? The important thing to notice is that according to MacIntyre’s theory of rationality, each tradition has its own standards of rationality and its own mode of reasoning to knowledge, and that these develop throughout the history of a tradition.¹⁶

As such, it is unclear how an authority in a pre-traditional or tradition-formatational stage could possess knowledge according to any standard of rationality. If the standards of a tradition are not derived from a source outside of the tradition, and if they have not yet been developed within the tradition (due to the infancy of the tradition at this stage), then it is clear that the authoritative beliefs, texts, and utterances could not be derived in any way that might be called rational. Thus, the source of authority in unquestioned beliefs, utterances, texts, and persons during the tradition-formatational stage would be based merely on unquestioned trust, seeing as no standard of rationality would yet exist to allow justification of these sources based on some set of

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 354.

¹⁵ MacIntyre would almost certainly endorse the claim that they *could not* be derived from any immutable, objective source external to traditions.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

rational principles or standards. This is in line with what MacIntyre describes as “pure historical contingency,”¹⁷ a characteristic feature of the formational stage of traditions.

As problems arise within the beliefs and practices of a tradition, members of that tradition begin to question the unquestioned sources, and the views and practices stemming from these sources, that functioned authoritatively during the foundational stage of the tradition. MacIntyre calls a more severe form of this, occurring after a tradition has already transitioned from the foundational stage, an “epistemological crisis.”¹⁸ He gives a few examples of these crises and their solutions – the proposal of the Holy Trinity to pre-empt the likely development of schisms in Christianity based on varying interpretations of scripture; Aquinas’ development of a system which could reconcile the rift between Augustinian and Aristotelian Christians; Bohr’s development of theories of atomic structure and quantum mechanics, which served to resolve the paradoxes in classical mechanics derived by Boltzmann.¹⁹ Each of these examples features an instance of creation and innovation, and the proposal of a solution that was not directly derived from the previous beliefs and knowledge of the tradition.

While these are not directly derived from the tradition, the questioning and ensuing innovation/creation that occur during an epistemological crisis are always achieved by applying the vindicated “standards of rational justification”²⁰ internal to the tradition in crisis. (Herdt lists standards of “cogency and illumination”²¹ as examples of standards of rational justification given by MacIntyre, but I was unable to locate the section where he discusses this.) However, these standards of rational justification emerge from and achieve vindication in practices of inquiry, through their ability to sustain and develop the very aspects of the tradition that they are used to question – aspects that themselves proved to be insufficient, either through “sterility or incoherence.”²² It is completely feasible that the vindicated standards of rational justification in a tradition might in some cases be the source of the epistemological crises that MacIntyre suggests they are employed to correct.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 361.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 362-363.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 364.

²¹ Jennifer A. Herdt, “Alasdair MacIntyre’s ‘Rationality of Traditions’ and Tradition-Transcendental Standards of Justification”, *The Journal of Religion* 78 (1998): p. 535.

²² Ibid.

If the members of a tradition with such problematic standards were creative enough, we can imagine a reality in which they would be able to consistently overcome successive epistemological crises by applying the very standards of rational justification that were the cause of these crises. It is clear in this instance that the standards of rational justification of such a tradition would be insufficient, since they would lead to repeated epistemological crises. Nonetheless, insofar as they enabled members of a tradition to successfully and consistently overcome these crises, and in the interim develop the tradition further, they would likely be viewed as correct from the standpoint of the members of that tradition. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for them to recognize that the standards which enabled them to overcome their epistemological crises and develop their tradition were the very cause of these crises.²³

In such a hypothetical case you may begin to notice that standards of rational justification, if they are tradition-specific, may be viewed from within a tradition as strong, even when they are very problematic to that tradition. This is the case for instances in which these standards are able to remedy the problems of which they are the cause. The only reasons a tradition would have for continuing to hold these standards are 1) that they are an established part of the tradition, and 2) that they serve to uphold the normativity internal to the tradition. In other words, they are conventions that serve to sustain the tradition. Such is the case of problematic standards of rational justification. But what about instances in which it is not these standards that create epistemological crises?

As MacIntyre says, between traditions there is “a multiplicity of antagonistic commitments.”²⁴ There are also no tradition-independent standards of rationality equally available to all persons.²⁵ Further, standards of rational justification achieve vindication through practices of inquiry by upholding the beliefs, norms, and practices that constitute a tradition, while also enabling developments in the knowledge that underlies these. As such, it follows that these antagonistic commitments both *derive from* and *result in* multiple potentially conflicting standards of rational justification. Consider what might happen if a tradition opted to adopt wholly new standards of rational justification belonging to another tradition. In doing so,

²³ If anything, the ability of standards of rational justification to sustain the tradition in the face of crises would further vindicate them in the eyes of members.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

members of the tradition would need to engage in the rejustification of their knowledge, beliefs, norms and practices. In some instances this would perhaps be successful, but in many instances it would require the removal or reformulation of certain core aspects of a tradition.

For instance, Christians cannot adhere to the standards of scientific materialism and call themselves Christians. For the fundamental standard of justification in scientific materialism requires that any knowledge claim about the existence of some entity be verifiable/falsifiable using the scientific method. But the existence of God, as supernatural entity, cannot be verified/falsified using the scientific method. Thus, belief in the existence of God is not compatible with scientific materialism – it is a false belief according to these standards. As a result, Christians operate based on their own vindicated standards, which allow them to continue holding their belief in the existence of God. In this way, a tradition is benefitted by maintaining its own standards of rational justification. Based on this, it is difficult to imagine a reason why standards of rational justification exist, while in conflict with other such standards, other than to uphold the tradition-specific knowledge, beliefs, norms, and practices from which they originated, and which they are continually employed to develop and justify.²⁶

Thus, if standards of rational justification effectively uphold the knowledge, beliefs, norms, and practices of their tradition, against internal epistemological crises and against critiques advanced by other traditions, and if they allow for the generation of new knowledge, then those standards may be viewed as sufficiently strong from within the tradition. Or, to frame it differently, the standards of rational justification are strong if they have achieved vindication through their ability to sustain their parent tradition, and through their ability to enable advancements in intellectual and moral understanding.

MacIntyre does acknowledge that, in very rare cases, the standards of one's own tradition may lead to a judgment that the views of another tradition provide a better resolution to the problems internal to one's own.²⁷ One tradition recognizes that the other, if it has managed to escape a similar crisis, is superior in this particular way. This may only be the case when an

²⁶ A quick additional note – even if two or more traditions share some of the same standards of rational justification (as is the case with the basic syllogistic form, for instance), this cannot be due to some tradition-independent feature of rationality, since there are no such features.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

epistemological crisis has reached a point of apparent insolubility²⁸ – when the only alternatives are to completely reject the problem areas of the tradition, or the tradition as a whole. However, even when this is the case, members of the tradition in crisis will view the perspective of the other tradition according to their own standards of rational justification. This results in a situation where certain views are shared between traditions, but where the reasons that each tradition has for holding these views differ (insofar as their standards of rational justification differ). As such, while the views of the tradition in crisis may change, the standards by which members of this tradition judge their views remain relatively constant.

He also opens the possibility that members of one tradition might put considerable effort into learning the conceptual scheme of another tradition for the purpose of better understanding how that tradition sees the world. He calls this learning a second first language,²⁹ and argues that doing so successfully requires an act of *empathetic conceptual imagination*. This does not necessarily occur in the context of epistemological crises, and cannot be understood as a conversion to the alternate tradition. Instead, it allows individuals to engage argumentatively with members of another tradition, but requires them to recognize that they are “already to some degree at home in some tradition.”³⁰ In any case, this does not involve learning the standards of rational justification of another tradition (as far as I can tell), so this will have no effect on the following discussion – it is just important to note that one need not be limited to understanding one’s own tradition.

At first glance, the vindication of standards of rational justification sounds quite pragmatic. As I have pointed out, vindication of these standards is tied to their ability to produce favourable results (the sustaining and advancing of a tradition). If these standards are the foundation for the knowledge, norms, and practices in the later stages of a tradition (i.e., after the unquestioned authority stage), then one may be inclined to say that any tradition which has passed beyond its foundational stage is grounded by pragmatically-justified principles. But this would be a mistake. To understand this, we have to look more deeply at the nature of these

²⁸ Ibid., p. 364.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 374.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 395.

standards of rational justification, and what may lead members of tradition to view them as vindicated.

Consider the following: before and after they have achieved vindication, members of a tradition must hold that the ability of these standards to sustain and advance their tradition is sufficient justification for those standards to be treated as foundational. A judgment of sufficient justification of these standards must be based on one of two things – either members of the tradition *trust* unquestioningly that vindication in this way is sufficient, or they *reason* that it is sufficient based on the pragmatic considerations mentioned above. Because there are no tradition-independent standards of justification, then to reason that this pragmatic justification is sufficient they would necessarily need to appeal to the standards of rational justification whose vindication was in question, producing a circularity. Thus, unquestioned trust is the only possible way for members of a tradition to view this form of vindication as sufficient. And this results in an unquestioned trust in the standards of rational justification.

One thing that I hope you have begun to notice through this is that standards of rational justification, once vindicated, are the central unifying aspect of the conceptual (knowledge/belief) parts of a tradition. As such, it is important to notice one crucial feature of these standards – that there are no resources available to question them from within a tradition. Questioning them would necessarily require the use of the standards of rational justification internal to that tradition – the very same standards that would be in question. The same point was just shown regarding their justification. As such, it follows that while these standards can be modified or further developed, any modification or development cannot itself be rationally justified according to any standard without producing a circularity. These modifications and developments must therefore be subject to the same process of vindication outlined above, which is itself unjustified according to any standard.

Recall MacIntyre's view on the foundational stage of traditions – that they are based on members' trust in unquestioned authoritative sources. At a later stage, members then begin to question these unquestioned sources by holding them up to standards of rational justification. These standards achieve their vindication through their ability to sustain a tradition, by upholding the knowledge, beliefs, norms and practices of that tradition and by allowing for the generation of new knowledge. But as we have just established, these standards are themselves supported by

an unquestioned trust that the way in which they were vindicated is sufficient to warrant giving them a foundational place within that tradition. It cannot be otherwise, since, if they were rationally vindicated, they would be vindicated self-referentially.

Understood in this way, unquestioned standards of rational justification are no less conventional than the original unquestioned authoritative sources central to the foundational stage of traditions. Because in the later stages of a tradition standards of rational justification serve as the foundation upon which the knowledge, beliefs, norms, and practices of that tradition are built (at the conceptual level), and through which they are justified, it follows that these features are grounded by an appeal to conventional standards. If all of this holds for standards of rational justification broadly speaking, then we must wonder whether standards of practical rationality are distinct in this regard. There are, however, other considerations worth mentioning regarding standards of practical rationality. In what follows, I will turn my discussion toward issues of practical rationality. In doing so, I will establish that MacIntyre's ethical framework results in a circularity, and as a consequence implies a certain conventionalism that cannot satisfy his requirement for a truly rational account of practical rationality and the virtues.

3 – Ethical Conventionalism

A brief recapitulation. MacIntyre claims that the good life for an individual qua human, as opposed to qua individual, is a life spent in pursuit of the good life. This pursuit may appropriately be called the *moral quest*. This quest is to be understood in the context of the tradition inherited by the individual – both the inherited historical narrative provided by this tradition, and the standards and practices that constitute the tradition as it exists throughout the moral quest. Associated with the standards of rational justification of a tradition are standards of practical rationality. These enable members of a tradition to understand what ways of life will guide them toward excellence in practices, and toward what is to be counted as good along their moral quest. The moral quest is also to be understood based on what one envisages as the end of the moral quest – the human *telos* toward which the moral quest is directed. This *telos* is understood by the application of a new virtue, suggested by MacIntyre – one that allows us to grasp “those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present.”³¹

³¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 223.

Before anything, a bit more needs to be said about standards of practical rationality. First, it can be said that they identify and guide individuals toward the ways of life that sustain and advance the practices which constitute their tradition (thus sustaining and advancing the tradition itself). Based on the discussion of the Tripartite framework, we know that these ways of life are characteristically virtuous. As such, we can say that a practically rational action is an action performed in the context of a life that is characteristically virtuous. To be considered truly virtuous, individuals need to embody the beliefs and values of the tradition, the practices, and the communities they inhabit, in a way that serves to sustain and advance the practices in which their lives and actions are expressed. Thus, we can infer that standards of practical rationality, along with understandings of what constitutes a characteristically virtuous life, emerge in the context of practices from the beliefs and values shared by members of traditions, practices, and communities. All of this will be made clear in the following discussion.

As we saw earlier, standards of rational justification also emerge in practices of inquiry, from beliefs and concepts as traditions develop. And just as we expect a rational justification for those standards, regardless of their emergence through practices, so too should we expect a rational justification for standards of practical rationality and virtue. How do members of a tradition or practice come to view these as vindicated?

I pointed out in the previous section that standards of rational justification are vindicated through their ability to sustain a tradition by effectively upholding and resolving issues within that tradition, and by enabling continued intellectual and moral development within the tradition. As such, we can say that the function of these standards is to sustain their parent tradition (although it is unlikely that members of the tradition will see this as their function). Because there is an apparent relation between standards of rational justification and standards of practical rationality (the latter provide grounds for the justification of actions), then it is possible that they are subject to the same considerations as standards of rational justification. Is this really the case?

If this is so, then standards of practical rationality will achieve vindication in a manner similar to standards of rational justification. In this case, we might say that standards of practical rationality are vindicated insofar as they identify and guide individuals toward the rational actions and ways of life that sustain both their parent tradition and the practices which constitute that tradition (through which practical rationality finds expression). But recall that this form of

vindication cannot be rationally justified according to any standard without circularity, seeing as standards of rational justification are themselves vindicated in this way. As such, if standards of practical rationality are vindicated by their ability to sustain a tradition and its practices, by identifying and guiding individuals toward the ways of life that serve this purpose, then they cannot be rationally justified according to any standard. Or, in other words – if standards of practical rationality are like standards of rational justification, then they are conventional. Is this account correct? Let us look more closely at MacIntyre’s views on practical reasoning.

One interesting thing to note before going any further – MacIntyre asserts that “Aristotle’s account of practical reasoning is in essentials surely right.”³² This brings back memories of something written by Daniel Dennett (albeit in a completely different context) – that whenever we see the ‘surely’ operator “a little alarm bell should ring,” and we should “look for what we might call a mental block.”³³ His use of the ‘surely’ operator implies that he is speaking not just for Aristotelianism, but for all traditions. As we have seen, there are no standards of rationality independent of traditions which would allow him to make this type of universal determination. As such, we might wonder whether MacIntyre has put in sufficient work to acquire all of the necessary ‘second first languages’ that would allow him to make this assertion for all traditions (or whether it would even be possible for him to justify this assertion according to the standards of each tradition). As someone who is not well versed in every tradition I can neither confirm nor deny this, but it seems highly unlikely based on what has been said up to now. It is also worth pointing out that other philosophers have noted and addressed similar inconsistencies between his claim that rationality is tradition-specific and claims where he appears to be speaking for all traditions.³⁴ Addressing this in a satisfying way is beyond the scope of the present work, but it merits consideration.

³² Ibid., p. 161.

³³ Daniel C. Dennett. “What RoboMary Knows.” *Phenomenal Concepts and Phenomenal Knowledge: New Essays on Consciousness and Physicalism*, edited by Torin Alter and Sven Walter; p. 18.

³⁴ See the above citation of Herdt – throughout this paper she argues for a solution to this inconsistency. Further, she lists the following instances of philosophers addressing the same issue – Max Stackhouse, “Alasdair MacIntyre: Overview and Evaluation” *Religious Studies Review* 18 (1992): 204; Jeffrey Stout, “Homeward Bound: MacIntyre on Liberal Society and the History of Ethics,” *Journal of Religion* 69 (1989): 221; Peter J. Mehl, “In the Twilight of Modernity: MacIntyre and Mitchell on Moral Traditions and Their Assessment,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19 (1991): 23.

Regardless, he does provide justification for why *he* (an Aristotelian with Thomist tendencies, or perhaps vice versa) holds Aristotelian practical rationality to be correct – that this form of reasoning allows us to render intelligible the actions of others, to the degree that these actions express the beliefs, utterances, goals and desires of individual actors (understood as members of a tradition, and of practices and communities).³⁵ If we view this quality as a necessary and sufficient condition for the correctness of some conception of practical rationality (as he implies), then we may again be led toward an interpretation that standards of practical rationality are vindicated based on pragmatic considerations – that, insofar as some form of practical rationality allows individuals to act and interact in ways that are intelligible within their tradition and the practices that constitute it, then they will view it as justified. But when we look to the source of standards of practical rationality in MacIntyre’s framework, we find that this cannot be.

To show why this is so, I will outline the way in which virtue and practical rationality develop in the early stages of a tradition and its practices. Important to this discussion is MacIntyre’s claim that exercise of the relevant virtues is essential for sustaining and developing traditions and practices.³⁶ From this, it follows that for any tradition to get off the ground in the first place, members must already relate to each other via the virtues in some way or another. That is, from the outset of the foundational ‘unquestioned authoritative sources’ stage of a tradition, and prior to any major developments in the tradition, members must already have at least some shared conception (however basic) of the virtues necessary for sustaining and developing their tradition and their practices. But what members of a tradition have at this stage is a collection of unquestioned beliefs and values. Thus, some basic conception of what constitutes virtue and characteristically virtuous ways of life needs to be implicit in these shared beliefs and values. It follows that what is counted as virtuous in a given tradition or practice depends in key part upon these beliefs and values. The implicit conception provided by these shared beliefs and values in the earliest stage of a tradition acts as a starting point from which developments in the tradition and its practices can occur.

³⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 161.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

As the lives of individuals unfold in the context of practices, the virtues, and thus characteristically virtuous ways of life, emerge and develop from the beliefs and values that implicitly contain a basic conception of these virtues and ways of life. Insofar as these virtues and ways of life effectively sustain and advance the practices in which they are expressed, then members will identify them as virtuous and view them as vindicated. Or, as MacIntyre puts it, the point and function of the virtues is to be found in practices³⁷ – they are expressed in practices, as a way to sustain and advance practices. Something cannot be called a virtue unless it meets these two criteria. This is the source of my earlier claim that characteristically virtuous ways of life express the beliefs and values of the tradition and the practices that individuals inhabit, in a way that enables them to sustain and develop the practices through which their lives unfold.

Out of these vindicated virtues and ways of life, standards of practical rationality can emerge. This leaves us in a place where we can understand MacIntyre's view of practical reasoning in the context of tradition-dependent ethical judgments. For virtuous actions express the beliefs and values of a tradition and its practices, and are thus intelligible in the context of the practices through which they are performed. These actions are practically rational to those who inhabit the same tradition and practices since they express the beliefs and values shared among members, along with a desire to contribute to sustaining and advancing the practices in which the actions take place.

But returning to the point of this discussion – why could practical rationality not be rationally vindicated based on the pragmatic idea that it allows us to render intelligible the actions of others? Based on this outline of the development of practical rationality within MacIntyre's theory, we can infer that virtue, virtuous ways of life, and standards of practical rationality must be present in a tradition before any standards of rational justification. This follows when we recall that standards of rational justification are developed in, and require vindication through, practices of inquiry within a tradition. But this is not possible if members of a tradition and its practices cannot relate to one another via the virtues. Thus, in its nascence a tradition is sustained through its practices by (at least) basic virtues, from which standards of practical rationality emerge. Only later is it sustained by both virtues/practical rationality *and*

³⁷ Ibid., p. 201.

standards of rational justification. Members of a tradition and the practices that constitute that tradition could not rationally justify the vindication of practical rationality based on any standard of justification, let alone based on pragmatic considerations.

There is another point worth mentioning here. As with standards of rational justification, standards of practical rationality and the virtues will almost certainly undergo modification and development as a tradition and its practices progress. But modification and development would equally need to be possible in the foundational stage of a tradition, if that tradition had any hope of progressing beyond this foundational stage. Thus, it must be the case that these modifications and developments are vindicated by means other than rational justification, since no standards of rational justification exist during the foundational stage of traditions. It makes sense here to conclude that these early modifications and developments of virtue and practical rationality achieve vindication in the same way outlined above, and in the same way outlined for standards of rational justification – by their ability to sustain and advance their tradition and practices (in a way that generates more success than previous virtues/standards).

However, there is one distinction that I will make explicit here. The vindication of standards of practical rationality is not achieved by the successful justification and development of the concepts that represent the beliefs, norms, and values of a tradition, as it is with standards of rational justification. Instead, it occurs in the context of the practices which constitute the tradition as it is socially embodied. For standards of practical rationality emerge from, and thus describe, characteristically virtuous ways of life – ways of life that exemplify the beliefs and values of a tradition and its practices, and which allow the practices through which all lives find expression to be sustained and developed. Thus, developments in standards of practical rationality and virtue achieve vindication insofar as the ways of life they describe, and through which they are exemplified, sustain and advance the practices that constitute the social embodiment of their tradition. But because this vindication cannot itself be rationally justified according to any standard, the vindication of virtue and practical rationality in the early stages of a tradition cannot be rational. It follows that tradition-dependent instantiations of virtue and standards of practical rationality cannot themselves be rationally justified at this stage – we can only say that they are conventions that exist to sustain and develop a tradition and its practices.

However, MacIntyre is clearly not working in the early stages of a tradition, and as such he is using rational argumentation to justify holding an Aristotelian conception of practical rationality. It is evident that to rationally justify standards of practical rationality later on in a tradition is to justify them on the basis of standards of rational justification. But these standards of rational justification emerge from and achieve vindication by sustaining and developing a tradition that was itself sustained and developed on the basis of standards of practical rationality and the virtues during its earlier stages. Thus, to rationally justify standards of practical rationality and the virtues, within this framework, is to justify them on the basis of unquestioned standards of rational justification that emerged from and were vindicated on the back of a tradition sustained and developed by the standards being justified. Not only is this justification deeply circular, but the standards of rational justification being employed are themselves unquestioned and unjustified (as we saw in the previous section). The only option available within this framework, if we are to avoid these issues, is to view virtue and practical rationality as unjustified conventions.

What does all of this mean for the moral quest? It is clear in this framework that individuals can still pursue the human good, by leading ways of life that are viewed as characteristically virtuous within their tradition. They can look to what is valuable and valued within the tradition and practices they inhabit, and with an eye to the future they can determine the course of action that is most likely to lead to the human good as it is conceived within their tradition. That is, if they lead a characteristically virtuous way of life, then they will be able to determine “those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present”³⁸ – what it is that they should be aiming toward (i.e., what is likely to be counted as the human good at that stage in the development of their tradition).

Problems only arise when we try to rationally justify this quest according to MacIntyre’s framework. It is clear that, in their original undeveloped form, virtues and the standards of practical rationality that follow from them are not rationally justified according to any standard. As they develop in practices, they are vindicated in a process that is not itself rationally justified. But if they are to guide us toward the good, we should expect them to be justified in some way at a later point – on this MacIntyre would agree. If we rationally justify them, then we justify them

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

according to standards of rational justification. This, as we have established, leads to two problems: 1) these standards are themselves unquestioned and unjustified from within a tradition, and are therefore conventional; and 2) the resulting justification is circular, seeing as standards of rational justification are produced and vindicated by their ability to sustain and advance a tradition that was developed on the back of the standards being justified. Because justifying practical rationality and the virtues according to standards of rational justification results in circularity, it is impossible to rationally justify them according to any standard. All attempts to justify them would necessarily need to ignore the circularity and the unjustified nature of standards of rational justification, and would thus fail by neglecting these problems. As such, virtues and the standards of practical rationality that emerge from them must be conventions.

4 – Summary

MacIntyre's position, while interesting, has some flaws. The most notable of these is the relationship between standards of rational justification and standards of practical rationality (and the virtues) on the one hand, and his emphasis that both of these are essential for sustaining and advancing traditions on the other. The framework he has established makes standards of rational justification unquestionable and unjustifiable from within a tradition – to say that they are justified in the way MacIntyre describes (by their ability to sustain and advance a tradition), members of a tradition would need to draw on the same standards being justified, thus resulting in circularity. While in this way they may achieve vindication for members of a tradition, the vindication itself cannot be justified according to any standard. Further, these standards remain unquestionable from within a tradition due to the same circularity. Therefore, standards of rational justification must remain unquestioned conventions.

More importantly for the present discussion, this framework also makes justifying standards of practical rationality and the virtues impossible via a similar self-referential circularity. To justify them means to draw on standards of rational justification. However, these standards themselves emerge from and achieve vindication by their ability to sustain and advance the tradition and practices developed on the basis of the standards and virtues being justified. Because they cannot be rationally justified without leading to circularity, standards of practical rationality and the virtues must remain unjustified, as they were during the foundational stage of their tradition. Even if this circularity was not present, justification of these standards

would occur by drawing on standards of rational justification which are themselves conventions, with the resulting justification being no less conventional. This is a double-edged sword, where either edge leaves the framework wounded by a necessary appeal to conventions as the foundation for practical rationality and the virtues.

Based on his claims in the opening section of *WJWR*, we know that MacIntyre has his sights set on a system that is free of circularity. While appeal to conventions provides a way of escaping the circularity inherent in his framework, it does not satisfy the requirements of a truly rational system. Thus, while the foundations of MacIntyre's framework are intriguing, they result in a view where truly rational standards of theoretical and practical rationality are not possible. Is it possible for us to salvage the insights of his theory by providing a more concrete theoretical foundation for his views? In the following section, I will examine the theories of other contemporary ethicists – both independent thinkers and those commenting on MacIntyre – to determine whether any foundation can form a coherent synthesis with the remainder of MacIntyre's theory. While grounding standards of rational justification is of great significance, based on the purpose of the present work the main goal of the following chapter will be to ground practical rationality and virtue within his theory. If we can simultaneously manage to ground standards of rational justification, then I will consider that a plus. Otherwise, it will be of no hindrance to the argument.

Chapter 2:

Finding a Firm Foundation

To escape the circularity and conventionalism of MacIntyre's framework, we must find some foundation or point of origination for standards of rationality, other than the tradition-dependent standards we have been discussing until now. Because the concern of the present work is not so much with his theory of rationality broadly speaking, but with his theory of virtue, this foundation could be related to either standards of rational justification or standards of practical rationality/virtue itself (since either would allow for the rational justification of virtue). To place his framework within the context of contemporary virtue theory, I will mainly be looking at the foundations proposed by other contemporary and 20th-century virtue ethicists to determine whether a reasonable synthesis can be formed. Such a synthesis must at once be based on a strong foundation (which will be found outside of MacIntyre's own theory), while also allowing us to maintain the stronger aspects of MacIntyre's theory.

There are a few likely candidates for such a foundation. Naturalism is the most prevalent among foundations for virtue ethics – proponents of this view include Julia Annas, Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and John McDowell, among many others. While naturalism in virtue ethics has many instantiations, Annas identifies two major types, based on the notion of weak and strong relations between our nature as *rational* beings and our four main natural ends as *social* beings. Borrowing from Hursthouse, she identifies these four ends as: individual survival, continuance of our species, the pursuit of enjoyment and freedom from pain characteristic of our species, and the proper functioning of our social group.³⁹ MacIntyre appears to place great emphasis on the latter of these four ends, insofar as he views humans as necessarily being members of traditions and communities of practitioners. Thus, I think finding a viable foundation for virtue within his theory will come to depend, in part, upon the relation of human reason to this latter end.

³⁹ Julia Annas. "Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?" *Virtue Ethics: Old and New*. Edited by Stephen M. Gardiner. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005; pp. 15-17. Taken from – Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Another possible solution to this problem, provided by the notion of tradition-transcendental standards of justification, is developed by Jennifer A. Herdt.⁴⁰ To be clear, she develops this notion as a potential explanation of MacIntyre's proclivity to speak inter-traditionally in a way that is not intuitively available to him through his theory. However, because in doing so she is trying to make room for standards that do not depend on individual traditions for their development, this may well be a viable solution to the issue presently under discussion.

1 – Tradition-Transcendental Standards?

Before considering potential naturalistic foundations, let us look at Herdt's proposed tradition-transcendental standards of justification to see if MacIntyre's theory can accommodate them. In this paper, she deals with MacIntyre's tendency to speak in a way that is not tradition-dependent – to speak, without justification, for all traditions while using the same language. She postulates these standards as a way of addressing this issue – the apparent contradiction of advancing non-tradition-dependent arguments to justify a tradition-dependent conception of inquiry and justification. While the subject matter of her work does not address the issues circularity and conventionalism that I developed in the previous chapter, her proposal may provide some insight to the present discussion if it manages to withstand greater scrutiny.

First, what are tradition-transcendental standards of justification? Herdt identifies only one that she thinks is central to MacIntyre's theory, which was only briefly mentioned in the previous chapter – empathetic conceptual imagination.⁴¹ As I explained before, this is a procedure by which individuals in one tradition learn the concepts, beliefs and standards of another tradition – a second first language. This allows them to both engage in rational dialogue with that tradition, and to view themselves and their tradition from an alien perspective.

The central aspect of Herdt's view is that this tradition-transcendental standard is *necessarily presupposed* by traditions. For this to be the case, she says, this standard must be, “in a logical sense, situated before all such existing traditions.”⁴² This implies that the standard is not

⁴⁰ Jennifer A. Herdt. “Alasdair MacIntyre's ‘Rationality of Traditions’ and Tradition-Transcendental Standards of Justification.” *The Journal of Religion* vol. 78, no. 4 (1998): pp. 524-546.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 537-538.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 538.

independent of traditions, but that the existence of any given tradition requires, as a matter of necessity, that it implicitly hold this standard. It does not need vindication, since it is an essential structural element of all traditions. I think it may be helpful to view this by way of analogy. Consider the following: the existence of an earthly living being necessarily presupposes a genetic code, but no being needs to make this code explicit for it to function; further, while this code is prior to living beings due to its necessity, it finds expression only through living beings. This analogy is not perfect (imperfection seems to be a universal feature of analogies, does it not?), seeing as genetic code varies greatly, whereas this hypothetical procedural standard does not according to Herdt. But if we look at genetic code broadly speaking, and not at the multitude of its configurations and instantiations, then this may serve as a helpful image.

In spite of its implicitness, it is possible for individuals or traditions to realize that this procedure exists, and to make it explicit. MacIntyre points out that Aquinas was perhaps the first to systematically employ it, although Aquinas did not view himself as working between radically different traditions with different standards of justification (he believed that Aristotelianism and Augustinianism were different articulations of the same truth, within a shared framework).⁴³ And in MacIntyre we find a formulation of this procedure that is made more explicit, and which is far more developed. Such explicit formulations occur at some stage in the history of a tradition, based on members' need to consider their own viewpoints in relation to rival viewpoints, either dialectically with those who hold rival viewpoints or otherwise. More on this shortly.

Because we are rational creatures, and because for MacIntyre rationality depends on tradition, then we cannot avoid membership in a tradition (provided that we remain rational). Thus, here we have a procedural standard that, because it is a necessary structural element in all traditions, has been equally available to all humans at all times since the development of traditions. This follows from Herdt's account of MacIntyre, but it seems to be at odds with one of his major claims about the nature of rationality. In the previous chapter, I mentioned MacIntyre's dismissal of the notion that there exist standards of rationality, *equally available to all humans*, that would allow anyone to evaluate rival and conflicting accounts of one and the same issue as advanced by multiple traditions.⁴⁴ In this he is not only denying tradition-

⁴³ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 167-168.

⁴⁴ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 393.

independent standards, but *any* standard that is available to every human, in any tradition, at any point in time, that would enable the rational evaluation of these rival claims. And because the procedure (the method of empathetic conceptual imagination itself) is given definition by a standard of practice, we cannot separate the former from the latter.

It follows from this that what Herdt calls the ‘tradition-transcendental standard of justification’ cannot be a universal standard according to MacIntyre’s framework. But it can, at best, be a nominally universal standard. By this I mean that while a particular instantiation of the procedural standard cannot be universal, it can be necessary for traditions to have *some form* of this standard. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, MacIntyre claims that all traditions have some set of standards of cogency, illumination, and practical rationality, which may be more or less incommensurable with the standards of other traditions. There is no reason why this could not be the case with empathetic conceptual imagination. But if this is so, then there is nothing particularly noteworthy about this procedural standard – it is just like all other standards of rationality that are required for a tradition to be sustained and developed.

Perhaps such a standard could remain implicit within a tradition, but this would not demonstrate any foundational or structural necessity. It is likely that it would be employed far less frequently than standards of cogency, illumination, and practical rationality – a tradition need not be in constant conflict with other traditions, nor in constant epistemological crisis, but it must be perpetually sustained and developed from within. An explicit formulation would be unnecessary unless constant inter-traditional conflict became an issue. Thus, Aquinas attempted to resolve the long-standing conflict between Aristotelianism and Augustinianism by formulating a systematic way of bridging the conceptual gap between the two; thus, MacIntyre is attempting to resolve the various conflicts that are occurring within the liberal tradition by making explicit a similar procedure. These two instances have taken place at times when various extended and far-reaching conflicts have existed between the tradition of the thinker and other tradition(s).

But even this leads to inconsistencies with MacIntyre’s theory. As we can gather from the previous chapter, for MacIntyre both standards of rational justification and standards of practical rationality emerge from and are developed in the context of practices (practices of inquiry in the former, and practices broadly speaking in the latter). The standards themselves do not exist until they have emerged from practices – they prescribe proper (*intelligible*) ways of engaging in

practices, ways that are not themselves vindicated until they have been proven to sustain and advance those practices and the tradition to which the practices belong. If tradition-transcendental standards of justification are akin to other standards of rationality, then it is difficult to imagine a way in which they could exist implicitly while always being accessible within a tradition, without first emerging from members' activity in the practices which constitute that tradition.

Based on this, the notion of tradition-transcendental standards of justification cannot serve the purpose we need it to serve – it cannot act as a foundation for MacIntyre's theory. For if these standards are not necessarily presupposed by traditions, and if they must emerge in the context of practices, then they cannot provide us with a non-tradition-dependent foundation. Whether or not they can serve the purpose for which Herdt intended them is another question entirely, but it is not within the scope of the present work to discuss this. Thus, we will now turn to naturalism to determine whether a solid foundation can be found there.

2 – Naturalism?

Naturalism is the prevailing metaethical foundation in contemporary virtue ethics. Because adherence to this view is widespread, its flavour varies from theory to theory. However, it is evident that I cannot give due consideration to all of these theories in the present work. As such, a way to narrow the focus of the coming discussion is needed. Annas provides us with a way to achieve this narrowing, when she distinguishes between 1) the weak account of the relation between human reason and human (biological and social) nature, and 2) the strong account of the relation between these two human aspects of the human self. By determining which of these two accounts more closely resembles MacIntyre's theory, we can then narrow our focus to theories that resemble the same account. I think this will also provide us with the greatest chance of forming a coherent synthesis of some sort. Before anything, let us start by more adequately characterizing our four ends as rational social beings.

The first two, individual survival and the continuance of our species, are fairly straightforward. These are shared by all living beings – plants, animals, and fungi alike. All species have means of nourishment, growth and development, reproduction, and defense. In the case of humans these take on a certain social quality, while also expressing a certain directedness and meaning due to our rationality. We do not simply eat for nourishment – we take the time to

craft elaborate recipes, and many of these recipes represent and recall certain nostalgic memories. Moreover, the act of eating itself is imbued with meaning – most of us think of eating as something we share with family and friends, and over which we bond by sharing with them our day, our thoughts, and our feelings. The continuance of our species, through reproduction, also takes on a distinctly human quality – we celebrate birth, we view parenthood as another stage in the lives of individuals, and we teach and guide younger generations so that they can contribute to the continuance of the species as well. Further, we help and protect our loved ones and other members of our species when they are faced with danger or adversity, sometimes at the risk of danger to ourselves.

The pursuit of enjoyment and freedom from pain characteristic of our species is also affected by our rational social nature. For we can have physical, emotional, social, and intellectual enjoyment and pain, and these often overlap. Let us look again at the example of food. We clearly derive physical enjoyment from eating, as it acts to satisfy our need for nourishment. But what is characteristically human is that we also experience emotional enjoyment when this recalls good memories, social enjoyment when we bond with family and friends over a meal, and intellectual enjoyment when we successfully craft an enjoyable meal with our own hands. In the same case, we can imagine that pain arises when the opposite of one of these is experienced. One can think of countless other examples – we need not worry about fine details at this stage, as long as this is clear.

The proper functioning of our social group is the most intriguing of these. To better understand this we must ask ourselves, what constitutes a social group? We may be inclined to answer that it is the group of individuals with whom we have direct social contact – our family, friends, coworkers, neighbours, and so on. But we also find ourselves enmeshed in larger social groups – our communities, our practices, and our tradition. Unless these broader social groups are extremely limited, there is no way for us to have direct social contact with every individual who inhabits them alongside us. Importantly, however, we do not need to look hard to notice that the salience and depth of a given social group plays a part in determining which social group one values the most. The emotional and social bonds, the shared memories, and the interpersonal understanding that form in the context of close relationships shape the choices we make, and the ways in which we view the world. And if we look around us, we see that no social group has

more salience and depth than the family (although strong friendships can follow closely behind). MacIntyre seems to agree – he associates with evil the artist who neglects his family while pursuing excellence in the practice of painting (i.e., while focusing exclusively on his role as an inhabitant in a community of painters).⁴⁵ This is not to deny the value of our other social groups, since they are all important to varying degrees. We must be committed to the communities that we inhabit, if we are to be considered members of those communities. But in any ethical inquiry it is important to acknowledge what we value most as humans, in a variety of areas in our lives. Now that these four ends have been explicated, we move to the question at hand – how do they, along with our broader biological and social nature, relate specifically to our nature as rational beings?

The weak account of this relation, Annas says, is based on a conception whereby our nature, and our four ends as social beings, act as biological constraints on the possibilities of reason, thus limiting our ability to transform these ends.⁴⁶ There are understandings or conceptions of these four ends that, by their very contravention of facts regarding human nature, can be viewed as irrational. She lists impersonal benevolence as a prime example of such a conception. On the weak account, we would say that being benevolent toward strangers at the expense of one's family damages the proper functioning of one's most valued social group (the family) and impairs one's pursuit of enjoyment and freedom from pain (by causing aversion, and likely emotional trauma). While it is true that impersonal benevolence may benefit the larger social groups which we inhabit, those larger social groups cannot provide us with the depth and salience that we value most in our relationships as rational social creatures.

The irrationality here stems from the fact that, in an attempt to achieve the *human* good in accordance with this principle, we would effectively be trying to make ourselves into something *other* than human – a species that does not value loved ones over strangers, for instance. And because it does not sit well with human nature, we are naturally averse to these sorts of values and practices. It would have to be forced upon us, and even if this was successful our nature would prevent us from flourishing under these conditions. Such a 'good' cannot be considered a human good, if it can be considered a good at all. Importantly, this rejection of impersonal

⁴⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 200.

⁴⁶ Annas, p. 17.

benevolence is based on brute facts about human nature.⁴⁷ Annas claims that Aristotelianism fits within this view. This can be seen in Aristotle's belief that women cannot partake in the good life as a result of (what he views as) their biologically-determined social role as mothers, which imposes natural and strict limits on their ability to participate in public life.

She describes the strong account of the relation between reason and human nature through the analogy of a craftsperson working with raw materials.⁴⁸ The sculptor, for instance, sees a block of marble as a workable starting point out of which her ideal representation can be carved. As she works the marble, it is transformed into a more or less refined form of the ideal representation. And as each of us is capable of sculpting, our ideals will be many and varied. Importantly, however, the sculptor always respects the material with which she is working – marble is its own material, and it can neither be made into nor treated like wood. As humans we are presented with our individual circumstances (health, wealth, nationality, etc.), but also with certain pre-existing ways of life that satisfy, to varying degrees of success, our four social ends. These make up the raw materials presented to us as sculptors of our own lives.

On this view, any feature of our nature that is not directly limited, either by our physical or psychological boundaries, can be (and indeed *is*) moulded by our ability to formulate and live according to a variety of ways of life. This is achieved through a process of forming a rational conception of the human good (the ideal representation). Successfully shaping our lives according to such rational conceptions requires us to live in accordance with practical reason and the virtues – these are the qualities that allow us to render our ideal representation in the most refined form possible. If we look closely, then we can see that the features we are able to mould end up being our personal characteristics and circumstances, and more broadly social institutions and norms.

This account is strong in the sense that it describes reason as enabling us to reshape the brute aspects of our human nature, as well as our natural social ends (in the sense of both theoretical and practical rationality). For instance, while we may always be required to maintain the proper functioning of our social groups, the meaning of 'proper functioning' and 'social group' can rationally differ between individuals, groups, societies, and eras. These differences,

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

insofar as they are rational and do not jeopardize our social ends, will lead to the embodiment of different conceptions of the human good. And while we inherit some meaning of these terms, and some conception of the human good, these meanings and conceptions are always open to reshaping by the individual human mind. More specifically, while things like eating, reproduction, and the forming and maintaining of group relationships are part of the nature of any social animal, human rationality allows us to give them deeper meaning, and to evaluate and determine what form they should take based on our individual conception of the good. Practical rationality then allows us to successfully act in ways that will support and lead us toward the ways of life stemming from these evaluations and determinations.

Annas points out that the strong account does not allow for any and all conceptions of the human good and our four ends. She once again gives impersonal benevolence as an example of an impermissible conception, but here the reason for rejecting it differs – it is not related to facts of human (biological and social) nature. While at an abstract theoretical level we can advance rational arguments in favour of impersonal benevolence, we must take into account our aversion to the possibility of needing to sacrifice the wellbeing of our family for strangers. But on the strong account, this alone does not provide a reason for rejecting impersonal benevolence. What is crucial here is that, in practice, individuals would need to be forced to follow this principle. Because this is the case, implementation of this would be unlikely to succeed. The actual *project* presupposed by the principle of impersonal benevolence is irrational, since broad implementation of the principle would not be possible. This is but one reason to reject this principle (she lists others as well, but it is not necessary for my purposes to cover all of them here). Therefore, while you can advance rational arguments in favour of this principle, you can make just as many, if not more, against it. Instead of being based on brute facts of human nature, this rejection is based on the simple premise that impersonal benevolence is a bad idea, rationally *and* practically speaking.⁴⁹

While it is true that both the weak and strong accounts describe certain limitations on rational ways of life, the weak account postulates greater limitations. For on both accounts possible ways of life are limited by what is rationally conceivable and implementable, whereas on the weak account possible ways of life are also limited by brute facts about human nature. In

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

practice this distinction may be less significant than it appears in theory. As I mentioned, the fact that humans are averse to the principle of impersonal benevolence in some important instances is, on the weak account, a brute fact of human nature that limits our ability to rationally transform our lives. On the strong account, we can argue that our aversion makes the successful implementation of this principle highly improbable (if not impossible), rendering the project irrational. In either case, our aversion leads to a rejection of this principle. The only real distinction in this example is that, on the weak account, our aversion is viewed as representing a fact of human nature, meaning we need no further reason to reject the principle. Whereas on the strong account, we need to present reasons for rejecting it (e.g., it could never be successfully implemented). There are likely cases in which the strong account would allow for things that the weak account would not, but I thought I would note this observation. It needn't affect the discussion.

At first glance, the strong relational account is notably different from MacIntyre's own views in a few ways. It is true that this account acknowledges the inheritance of particular social institutions and norms, which we might relate to traditions and practices, as well as individual circumstances, which we might relate to the narrative form of human life. However, the similarities end once we consider the strong account's proposal that there are multiple ways of life that humans can pursue based on *individual* rational conceptions of the good life. Such a framework does not take into account the essential and lifelong influence that traditions have on individuals, nor the inherent limitations imposed by these traditions (for one must always work from within a tradition, based on the standards, beliefs, and values that are provided by that tradition). For MacIntyre, there is no such thing as a completely independent sculptor.

For instance, true Christians cannot avoid the doctrine of original sin (otherwise their beliefs would be considered heretical). Many of the virtues and values of Christianity stem from this doctrine, and the conception of human goodness that Christians must strive for mainly involves overcoming the natural state of depravity we face as a result of original sin. This tradition-dependent conception of human nature necessarily limits possible ways of life for Christians. Thus, while traditions themselves can develop into a variety of forms, membership in a tradition precludes individuals from completely reshaping their lives. The sculptor may be able to shape the outermost layer of marble, but as she approaches the core she will find that it is too

durable to be sculpted by her hands alone (if she even has the tools necessary to reach the core). And, as in the example of Christianity, other sculptors will often more readily reject her and her sculpture than help her reshape the core. Does the alternative, weak account more neatly accommodate MacIntyre's perspective?

Unsurprisingly, his view is also not wholly consistent with the weak account, in one key way. The difference lies in the fact that the weak account does not take into consideration the notion that humans *do* have a certain amount of material to work with when undertaking a quest toward the human good – their socio-historical embeddedness. By this I mean two things. First, while in MacIntyre's account traditions limit the possibility of radically different ways of life, they nonetheless provide individuals with the ability to mould certain aspects of their lives. Members of the liberal tradition cannot possibly support theocracy, but they can be religious. Augustinians cannot possibly be secularists, but they can adhere to some form of humanism. Second, we all face external circumstances that are either not within our control (our inheritance), or not completely within our control – health, wealth, nationality, race, birth family, biological sex, disability, etc. These factors contribute to the possible lives one can live, and often alter the course of one's life. But for MacIntyre they do not impact one's ability to pursue the good – they serve as the moral starting point in the life of an individual.⁵⁰ In most versions of the weak account, at least some of these do impact one's ability to pursue the good. As I pointed out previously, for example, Aristotle does not believe women can participate in virtue and the good life due to his perception of their biologically-determined social role as mothers.

However, the weak account does accord with MacIntyre in an important way. Both agree that humans do not have the power to shape their lives, and their social ends, according to *any and all* theoretically and practically rational conceptions of the human good. As we have seen, limitations in such an endeavour stem from human nature on the weak account. But what is important to consider here is that our understanding of nature in the broadest sense (i.e., not just human nature) *deepens* over time, as we learn through our experiences with the world. Thus, what actually defines the limits of human nature is our understanding of human nature – the depth of the knowledge we have of ourselves. While on the weak account we do have to acknowledge something called 'human nature', how we relate this nature to our social and moral

⁵⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 220-221.

limitations has changed over time, and will continue to change as human self-understanding deepens through experience. Based on the state of the contemporary world, Aristotle would find it difficult to defend the idea that his position on women and virtue was somehow grounded in facts about human nature. He would have to adapt his theory to account for what time and understanding have made evident – that women can participate equally in the life of virtue, in the good life. This is especially appropriate, considering the resurgence in virtue ethics since the mid-20th century has mostly been spearheaded by brilliant female thinkers like Anscombe, Foot, Hursthouse, and Annas.

As has been implicit in our discussion, MacIntyre espouses a historicist view of human intellectual and moral development. This means that human understanding, of both the world and the self, changes and deepens over time as we strive to achieve excellence in practices and in life, and as our tradition, and the practices and communities that constitute our tradition, are developed and/or improved. Thus, our conception of human nature, of what is possible within the bounds of human limitation, changes and deepens as well. This is an essential part of his theory. And we know that conceptions of human nature, like all other rational conceptions, originate in the context of traditions.

While the weak account agrees with MacIntyre in this respect, it still differs in the way mentioned above. How can we possibly fit MacIntyre into either account? Clearly, to do this will take some reworking. Thus, I suggest the following: if we borrow the inherited and circumstantial aspects of the strong account, while retaining the weak account's view of the limited transformative power of reason, then we end up with a picture that is more consistent with MacIntyre's theory. However, rationality in MacIntyre's theory is not limited by human nature, but by the fact that the ability to exercise reason stems from an individual's embeddedness within a tradition. As we know, traditions have beliefs and values which lead to differing, more or less incommensurable conceptions of characteristically virtuous ways of life. Membership in one tradition precludes individuals from practicing ways of life that are considered virtuous by other traditions, but which are incommensurable with their own conceptions of characteristically virtuous ways of life.

Because the relationship between reason and human nature is the central feature of Annas' weak/strong distinction, it is fair to say that MacIntyre's view most closely resembles the

weak account. The idea that there are constraints on reason, which limit our ability to reshape our lives on the basis of individual rational conceptions of the good, is shared by both. In the weak account outlined by Annas, these limitations stem from biological and social human nature, and the degree to which we understand human nature (an understanding which evolves over time). In MacIntyre's theory, they stem from either *tradition-dependent* conceptions of human nature (as with the example of original sin in Christianity), or from tradition-dependent beliefs, values, and conceptions of the human good itself. Whether these constraints derive from natural limitations or from tradition-embeddedness, they are constraints nonetheless.

There is another consideration that lends a bit more credence to the suggestion that MacIntyre's theory may be best described by the weak account. As we know, MacIntyre considers himself to be, at heart, a follower of Aristotelianism and Thomism. And as Annas points out, the weak account is most closely related to Aristotelianism. As such, it is no surprise that the more likely candidate for synthesis with MacIntyre's theory is the account that most closely describes Aristotelianism. While in itself this is not a concrete point, it reinforces the above categorization of MacIntyre slightly.

Regardless of whether we view MacIntyre himself as a naturalist, if we are looking for some naturalistic foundation that would allow us to escape the circularity and conventionalism within his theory (and thus to justify virtue within a tradition), then the appropriate place to search would be among those theories that are generally well-described by the weak account. And if we can find one such theory that also manages to account for (or, at the very least, does not prohibit) the socio-historical embeddedness found within MacIntyre's theory, then that will likely be the theory with which we can most readily form a synthesis. Who among recent virtue ethicists has proposed a theory that could be mapped onto this framework? Answering this question will be the goal of the following section.

Philippa Foot

Foot has an interesting view of naturalism, in which she looks to the nature of other living beings for guidance. Indeed, she describes human goodness, understood as goodness of the will, as a special type of subcategory to the natural goodness we find in all living beings in nature (i.e., among plants, fungi, and other animals). In this sense, her theory features perhaps one of the most literal formulations of naturalism. Importantly, she distinguishes between what

she calls ‘natural goodness’ and ‘secondary goodness’.⁵¹ When we speak of something as being good for the sake of something else, we are referring to secondary goodness. For example, when we say ‘the weather is good’, we are not referring to an inherent feature of the weather – we are referring to the weather as being good for some particular thing *other* than itself. The weather may be good for hiking, for skiing, or for growing chrysanthemums, but none of these goods are goods of the weather as such. Consequently, if the weather is not conducive to these external purposes, we cannot say that there is something inherently bad about the weather. This can also be applied to living beings. For instance, we may be trying to grow pink chrysanthemums – if when they flower they are pink, then we may be inclined to proclaim ‘these are good chrysanthemums!’. If when they flower they are white, then we may be inclined to proclaim ‘these ones are no good!’. Assuming they have grown properly (i.e., as healthy chrysanthemums should grow), in both cases there is nothing inherently good or bad about the colour of their flowers. Their colour is only good or bad in relation to the purpose they serve for the grower.

Natural goodness, on the other hand, describes that which is the good of a living being in itself, and of the various parts and characteristics that constitute that living being. This is to be explicated in terms of Aristotelian categoricals, which describe truths “about a species at a given historical time.” And while it is true that even the most fundamental characteristics of species evolve over extended periods of time, “it is only the relative stability of at least the most general features of the different species of living things that makes these propositions possible at all.”⁵² We are not required to make claims about universal and unchanging truths about species, we just need the ability to notice and describe those fundamental characteristics of species as they exist at a particular point in time, and, most importantly for the present discussion, as they have existed in recent history up to and including now.

But Aristotelian categoricals do not simply describe all common characteristics of a species. To say ‘trees have brown wood’ does not describe a natural good for trees; to say ‘this tree has green wood’ does not denote some fault in that tree, insofar as this characteristic does not impinge upon the ability of that tree to achieve the natural *ends* of living beings. The fundamental characteristics that are described by Aristotelian categoricals are those elements

⁵¹ Philippa Foot. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001; pp. 26-27.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

which generally allow individuals, and a species in general, to participate in the processes that enable them to survive and thrive – nourishment, growth and development, reproduction, defense, and the like. The natural ends of living beings are attained when these natural processes are successfully fulfilled (these are the ends of the processes themselves, not of individual beings; i.e., they are not purposive and directed, they are functional and instinctive).⁵³ In other words, Aristotelian categoricals describe what it is for a member of a given species to flourish with respect to these processes at a given point in the history of that species. In this sense, they provide us with propositions that describe not all fundamental characteristics, but the fundamental *teleological* characteristics of a species (i.e., those that contribute to the ends presupposed by natural processes). These are the natural goods of a species. Thus, if this same tree had no leaves, then we would say that it had a natural defect. It would not have the characteristics necessary to successfully undertake the process of nourishment (in this case photosynthesis), and would neither be able to survive and thrive, nor contribute to the survival and thriving of its species.

The first two ends suggested by Hursthouse (and quoted from Annas) in the previous section are contained within this framework (individual survival and the continuance of a species). All species have characteristic adaptations that enable individuals and species as a whole to survive and thrive. It is clear that these vary greatly among species, seeing as habitats, diets, predators, biological makeup, and so on are immensely diverse. This is so even across subspecies which are more or less biologically identical, insofar as these subspecies are subject to different environmental factors and constraints.

We can suppose that the natural good for social animals, including humans, would have associated Aristotelian categoricals describing the fourth end suggested by Hursthouse (the proper functioning of the social group). Additionally, we can suppose that the natural good for a rational social being (i.e., a human) would include the third end (the pursuit of enjoyment and freedom from pain characteristic of a species). And for rational social animals, we can conclude without much controversy that the survival and, most importantly, the *thriving* of individuals and species is not independent of these two latter ends. A rational social animal or species in constant

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

pain, unable to pursue enjoyment, and without a functioning social group is unlikely to survive for long, let alone thrive in any context.⁵⁴

How does all of this relate to her conception of virtue and the good life for our species? Clearly virtue and the good life must be expressions of some form of natural goodness that enables humans, as individuals and as a species, to survive and thrive. Further, this natural goodness must be describable in the form of Aristotelian categoricals, outlining those elements which are relatively stable across time, and which serve the four ends outlined by Annas (insofar as these are implicit within this framework).

Consider first what we mean when we say, for instance, that a tiger is a ‘good tiger’ (i.e., in and of itself, not based on human considerations). Based on the preceding discussion, we must mean that it is a tiger whose individual characteristics as a whole align with the Aristotelian categoricals describing its species. Thus, we see as ‘good’ a tiger all of whose natural processes successfully achieve the ends they presuppose, allowing it to survive, thrive, and contribute to the survival of its species. This is vastly different than the meaning of ‘good person’. When we say that some individual is good, we are not speaking of the whole being of the person. We are describing their “rational will” – a will that is naturally good for a rational social being.⁵⁵

For Foot, ascriptions of goodness to human character and action are not “to be explained in terms of ‘commendation’ or any other ‘speech act’.”⁵⁶ In other words, goodness does not derive from external recognition. Goodness of human character and of the will, similarly to the preceding discussion, is to be understood as a collection of practical human characteristics or dispositions. These characteristics or dispositions enable us to fulfill the processes (to aim toward and successfully achieve the ends) that are necessary for the flourishing and survival of individuals and humanity. This type of goodness is much more complex than we find in the case of plants and animals, and as a result of our rationality it ends up being purposive as opposed to merely functional. As she says:

⁵⁴ Upon further thought, it occurred to me that this might be construed as excluding those with certain disabilities from human thriving/flourishing. However, I think the most significant aspect of this framework for humans is the social dimension. A social group can be defined in any number of ways – friends, co-workers, family, caregivers, etc. As such, I think most individuals are able to attain this.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37

Men and women need to be industrious and tenacious of purpose not only so as to be able to house, clothe, and feed themselves, but also to pursue human ends having to do with love and friendship. They need the ability to form family ties, friendships, and special relations with neighbours. They also need codes of conduct.⁵⁷

As a species, we cannot possibly hope to survive, let alone flourish and thrive, without some measure of success in attaining these ends (which, it should be said, are natural to our species). This is achieved through the establishment of social norms – the making and keeping of promises, taking only what one is due, sharing, protecting others, and so on. These have associated virtues, dispositions of the will that are centered around these norms – trustworthiness, justice, generosity, and courage, for instance. There must also be some characteristic that enables us to successfully act on these dispositions – this will end up being practical rationality.

However, it is not simply a case of practical rationality allowing us to find this success, for there is nothing here that prevents it from being directed toward other (superficial or, at worst, evil) ends. To address the individual who asks ‘But why *should I* be concerned with these ends at all, not least when they conflict with my other individual interests?’, Foot asks us to reverse one of our common ethical conceptions. It is not that practical rationality is necessary for a good will, but that a good will is necessary for practical rationality.⁵⁸ One cannot be said to be acting rationally unless one is acting from a good will – from a will that is centered on supporting our natural ends as rational social beings by way of virtuous conduct. We can therefore say that practical rationality is the human characteristic which expresses goodness of the will, goodness of character, virtue.

To flourish as rational social beings, we need some measure of the natural goods which lead to the ends that are presupposed by our nature. A virtuous disposition is the defining characteristic of a naturally good rational will. Possession of such a will leads to actions that are practically rational, since these actions contribute to the individual and collective attainment of our natural ends. As such, a good or virtuous will is necessary for human flourishing – it is a

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

natural good that leads to our natural ends. Just as a tree without leaves is defective and cannot flourish, so too does the absence of a good or virtuous will constitute a natural defect for humans. For Foot, without a virtuous will we cannot act in accordance with our rational nature, and thus cannot pursue our natural ends.

3 – Synthesis

I think enough has been said here. While this does not wholly describe Foot's views, this foundation should enable us to sufficiently relate her theory to what MacIntyre argues. First, what Foot advances here clearly fits within the weak account proposed by Annas. To survive and flourish, we, as humans, need to be able to pursue our natural ends. This means not only those ends we share with all other species (e.g., nourishment, defense, growth/development, etc.). It also includes those that belong exclusively to rational animals (pursuit of enjoyment/avoidance of pain), and those that belong to social animals (e.g., proper functioning of the social group) which take on a uniquely human character due to our rational and purposive nature (e.g., friendship, love, community, etc.). And it is evident, I think, that what we share with other species is intimately related to what is uniquely human. We defend our friends, our loved ones, and our community; we laboriously craft complex meals to nourish those we care for; we contribute to the growth and development of those around us, as parents, friends, teachers, and members of communities; and so on. This is what it means to be a rational social being – to be a human.

Thus, we call someone a 'good person' or 'virtuous' to the extent that his or her will is directed toward our natural ends as rational social beings, and then only to the extent that this directedness is expressed through actions which successfully lead to these ends (which are practically rational). Because a good will is a necessary condition for practical rationality, then what counts as practical rationality is, at least in part, *determined* by these natural ends. As such, we cannot alter or act contrary to these aspects of human nature while maintaining our rationality – the power of rationality is limited by our nature. And while these natural ends are fundamental to human nature, Foot also allows that our ways of attaining them can change throughout the history of our species. Their existence as hallmarks of human nature will remain stable, but what they mean to us, and consequently what they require of us, can (and likely will) differ over the

course of our natural history. Friendship meant something different for Aristotle, as an Athenian living in the 4th century BCE, than it does for someone living in the modern liberal tradition.

MacIntyre's discussion of rationality is focused on *conceptual* rationality – or, more specifically, *descriptive* and *prescriptive* rationality. In his framework, traditions begin with authoritative sources which are both prescriptive and descriptive. Later on, they develop standards of justification that serve as prescriptive (and, based on the previous chapter, conventional) norms for enquiry and action. In the case of enquiry, if the outcome is successful then the tradition is supplied with descriptive and (conventionally) justified knowledge about some aspect of members' experience. In the case of action, if the outcome is successful then the action contributes to excellence in the practice in which it is performed, and is seen as intelligible by other inhabitants of that practice. But this picture leaves out something significant, upon which Foot places the utmost importance – the very notion that we are rational animals.

What does it mean to be a rational animal? To put it simply, according to the preceding discussion it is to pursue our ends with purpose – that is, to have *reasons* for acting. Purpose is what distinguishes rational action from mere action – what I have called functional action, based on Foot's characterization. We have more than instinctual functions that lead to the fulfillment of the ends of our *natural processes* as rational social beings. We have the ability to actively pursue *our* ends because we have reason to do so. For instance – if there is a storm, non-rational animals may notice a sheltered area and take cover; however, they cannot specifically set out in search of a sheltered area. As Foot says, animals can only “go for the good (thing) *that they see*.”⁵⁹

What about humans? What distinguishes us is that we can “go for *what [we] see as good*.”⁶⁰ I can decide to look for shelter – I can set out with this specific purpose in mind, and I can understand that fulfilling this purpose will keep me warm and dry. And if I cannot find shelter, then I need not think much to realize that a few bare branches, resting at an angle and covered with additional coniferous branches, will create a makeshift shelter. This example illustrates an instance of the non-conceptual applications of rationality, understood as purposive

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

action. As such, one does not require descriptive and prescriptive frameworks of belief and value to be purposively rational. With this, I think MacIntyre would have to agree.

Now I must ask – do traditions not have some purpose when they originate? Individual traditions throughout recorded history have often originated for purposes that are themselves conceptual in nature (although their progenitors likely did not view themselves as founding a tradition). Examples of these conceptual purposes include: overcoming the perceived conceptual problems of another tradition (as the Enlightenment/liberalism tried to do with Aristotelianism); systematizing the already-existing beliefs of a community (as Aristotelianism did for aristocratic Athenians); and deepening the conceptual content of a tradition to which the progenitor of the new tradition was devoted (as Augustinianism did for Christianity). But why has any tradition at all come to be?

I think this can be best answered by asking another question – what was the nature of the very first tradition (T1) for a given group of humans, whatever that may have been? While answering this will necessarily involve a hypothetical discussion (since T1 was undoubtedly prehistoric), I think a few basic points can be made on the basis of the preceding discussion without too much controversy. First, based on MacIntyre's views, we know that individuals who have no tradition have no framework by which to judge the claims that descriptive and prescriptive beliefs or concepts make on their rationality. From this we can infer that, prior to the creation of T1, the progenitorial prehistoric group had no framework by which to judge such claims. But we cannot suppose that T1 was simply conjured into existence on the whim of this prehistoric group. In an age when day-to-day survival was much less certain than it is today, T1 would have needed to confer at least some form of benefit upon the group, or upon its individual members.

As I have just pointed out, purposive rationality does not require descriptive or prescriptive frameworks of belief. If T1 did not stem from some pre-existing framework of conceptual belief, and if it was not created without reason on the whim of some prehistoric group, then it must have originated purposively, to meet some need of that group. We cannot say with certainty what this need would have been – perhaps it was to strengthen the group's sense of unity (e.g., by providing members with shared rituals, beliefs, and values); perhaps it was to ensure security within the group (e.g., by prohibiting certain behaviors); perhaps it was to ensure

plentiful nourishment (e.g., by forming myths mandating sacrifices and prayers to the gods); or perhaps it was to provide them with an advantage over other groups with whom they had contact (in any number of ways). In any case, the creation and adoption of a shared conceptual framework of descriptive and prescriptive beliefs in T1 is akin to the building of a makeshift shelter during a storm – it would have served some purpose related to the needs of humans. The distinction here lies in the complexity, the scope of group participation, and the prospective considerations that would have contributed to the establishment of T1.

However, there is one other key distinction. In each of the possibilities suggested for T1, the purpose in question is primarily related to the needs of this group as a group of *rational social beings*, and secondarily to the goods needed to ensure their survival as living beings. Whether we say that this group wanted security, group unity, a sense of reassurance that they would have plentiful nourishment, or an advantage over other groups, what we are really saying is that they wanted some way to cooperate to achieve common ends. But this is not the whole picture.

The relationship between our nature as rational social beings and social cooperation goes deeper than simply wanting to achieve common ends. As rational social beings we *need* community, along with the good (i.e., friendly) relations that allow for a sense of community to develop. While Foot would call friendship and community natural human ends, such an understanding of ‘ends’ is not possible within this framework. However, within the framework I am developing we can describe them as necessary human goods – goods without which humans could not conceive of, let alone pursue, the good life; goods without which humans, as rational social beings, could not flourish.

To understand this, recall once more MacIntyre’s new primary, teleological virtue – the ability to grasp those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present. This refers not only to the past and future of one’s *personal* narrative. It refers to the past narrative that one inherits by voluntary and involuntary membership in practices, communities, and a tradition – and, importantly, to the future that one envisions for the practices, communities, and the tradition of which one is a part. This future is the *telos* one envisions as the good life, as flourishing. It would be hard to conceive of any practice, community, or tradition in which members had neither a sense of unity by virtue of their common membership, nor the ability to

maintain good relations by some common understanding of friendship. And whatever such a group might look like, we cannot believe that it would survive long enough for members to grasp those future possibilities which the past had made available to the present. The teleological virtue, that which provides guidance along one's quest for the good life, would not be possible if community and friendship were not necessary human goods. As members of the human species, we would not be able to flourish if they were not necessary.

But, following MacIntyre, we cannot be said to be participating in the practice of friendship, nor in the practices that unify a community broadly speaking, unless we are doing so as members of a tradition. For traditions provide us with shared beliefs about what it is to be a friend. They provide us with shared values, instilling in us knowledge about what friends and loved ones expect of us, and allowing them to reciprocate in kind. And they provide us with knowledge of what is considered valuable in our community – what our community expects of us. We cannot be certain of the exact purpose underlying T1. However, we can infer that this purpose was related to ensuring that the human needs of unity and wellbeing within the T1 group, and thus good (i.e., friendly) relations among its members, were met.

As discussed on page 8 of the present work, the beliefs, values, and norms at this formative stage of a tradition could not have been derived in any way that might be called rational. This is because rational *derivation* of such concepts requires prescriptive norms of enquiry (standards of rational justification). But prescriptive norms are not necessary for purposive rationality. If friendship and community are necessary human goods, and if these can only be achieved through traditions by way of shared beliefs and values, then it follows that T1 was a *necessary* human development – something we as humans had to develop to meet our needs as rational social animals. Thus, insofar as the adoption of a tradition was required to fulfill the purpose of providing us with these necessary goods, then this purpose justifies the development of tradition. Just as we did not evolve with other necessary human goods readymade for our benefit (shelter, clothing, etc.), and just as we purposefully developed these goods to meet our human needs, so too did we develop traditions to meet our human rational-social needs.

Insofar as the development of tradition, as I have described it here, was essential for providing us with the necessary human goods of friendship and community, then virtue and

practical rationality are justified. For the existence of friendship and community require that individuals formulate a shared understanding of what it means to say that someone is a ‘good person’ – what it means to say that someone is committed to human flourishing through the pursuit of our human *telos*. We cannot maintain good relations unless we have some shared understanding of honesty, compassion, generosity, etc. (and for more complex reasons, wisdom, courage, and the like). Nor can we sustain and advance the communities and practices that follow from a tradition, and through which our relations are expressed, unless we have a shared understanding of the same human qualities. As we saw in the previous chapter, this understanding is implicit in the beliefs and values shared by individuals who inhabit the same tradition, practices, and communities. From this implicit understanding, characteristically virtuous ways of life emerge and are developed as the lives of members unfold in the context of those practices and communities.

This last point is crucial, since a mere shared understanding of these notions is not enough. For there can be no good relations, and no communities, unless individuals express these shared beliefs and values in their lives. I can think to myself – ‘My community values compassion, and I value compassion in others’. But if everyone in my community values compassion in others, and no one, including myself, has a compassionate disposition according to which they act, then this shared value will do nothing to sustain and advance the relationships and communities that constitute a tradition and its practices. And this is so for whatever other values are shared within a community. Thus, a disposition to live one’s life according to the shared values of the communities, practices, and tradition that one inhabits is essential.⁶¹ Based on this, we would say that one who is disposed toward acting according to the values of one’s communities, practices, and tradition has a virtuous disposition.

Where does practical rationality fit into this? As we know, descriptive and prescriptive rationality are only made possible by the shared framework of beliefs and values provided by a tradition and its practices and communities. Thus, it follows that an action which expresses implicit beliefs and values is only practically rational insofar as it accords with the beliefs and values prescribed by the tradition of the actor. Recall that, for MacIntyre, this is what allows

⁶¹ On pages 3-4 of the present work, we can see that MacIntyre agrees wholeheartedly with this characterization of the relationship between virtue on the one hand, and practices, communities, and friendly relations on the other.

individuals to render intelligible the actions of members of their own practices, communities, and tradition. If one acts from a virtuous disposition, then, because one is expressing tradition-dependent shared community values, the virtuous actions in question are practically rational to those who hold the same beliefs and values (i.e., those who inhabit the same tradition, practices, and communities).

Based on this, how can we justify the existence of the differing standards of practical rationality and virtuous ways of life that exist among traditions? I suggest that what MacIntyre describes as the ‘pure historical contingency’ of early beliefs and values within a tradition is in fact more akin to the natural adaptations we see in other species, as mentioned in the previous section. These adaptations can themselves vary by time and geographical location within one and the same species, according to various factors and constraints. But this variability arises because it is exactly what enables members of a given species to survive and thrive, regardless of the differing circumstances in which they find themselves. If traditions originate in a similar way, then what leads to the beliefs and values of a tradition in its earliest stages is not simply a matter of pure historical contingency. Instead, it is intimately related to the purpose the tradition is intended to serve, or the issues it is intended to address, as the progenitors of the tradition attempt to deal with their circumstances in a way that allows them to flourish. If you look at any of the purposes suggested above for T1, or any of the conceptual purposes I listed for actual traditions, you will see that this is the case.

Thus, we should say that in the early stages of traditions, frameworks of shared beliefs and values purposefully arise as adaptations to various factors and constraints, and these differ based on the factors and constraints that each tradition is intended to address (i.e., based on its purpose). From these differing beliefs and values, various virtuous ways of life and standards of practical rationality emerge in the practices of each tradition. These ways of life and standards of action allow members of each tradition to render intelligible the actions of fellow members as these relate to their shared beliefs and values, thus allowing them to form the friendships and community needed to sustain and advance their tradition. This allows the tradition to continue serving its purpose. It also enables members to envision and pursue the human *telos*, in a way that addresses or accounts for (or that is in part determined by) the factors and constraints that gave purpose to the tradition. As a tradition progresses throughout history, its members will

likely encounter new factors and constraints that they must deal with.⁶² With their own standards of practical rationality and rational justification, they cannot simply change traditions when faced with new challenges. Thus, to ensure their continued ability to pursue human flourishing, they must also ensure the continued existence of their tradition in the face of these factors and constraints.

Here we see a picture of practical rationality and virtue similar to that proposed by Foot – where practical rationality depends in key part upon one’s possession of virtue, the natural good that ensures we can attain the natural human ends of friendship and community and thus flourish. The only difference is that the account I have advanced describes virtuous ways of life as leading us toward tradition-dependent human ends, with community and friendship being necessary goods for attaining these ends. The ends themselves can be understood as present conceptions of possible future forms of perfection in practices and in life, which are made intelligible by the history of one’s tradition and practices up to now (understood via the teleological virtue). Foot, on the other hand, views virtue as leading us toward a natural state of flourishing for humans, which includes the natural ends of friendship and community.

If we combine what I have argued here, we arrive at a view in which: 1) tradition was purposively developed; 2) this was done to provide us with the necessary goods of friendship and community which allow us to flourish; 3) the specific beliefs and values that form the original material of a given tradition represent a necessary adaptation to the factors and constraints that members face in their lives – an adaptation that allows them to pursue human flourishing while addressing these factors and constraints. With the addition of these considerations to MacIntyre’s framework, I think we can say that maybe he was on to something. Maybe the natural state of flourishing for humans *is* the pursuit of tradition-dependent ends – pursued, that is, on the basis of tradition-dependent shared values that *enable us* to say what is or is not practically rational, and thus to express our rationality to the fullest extent.

⁶² These could be internal (e.g., epistemological crises) or external (e.g., new technologies). The most important of these would be factors that place the original purpose of the tradition in jeopardy (e.g., the development of reliable irrigation in a tradition founded to ensure agricultural success through worship of a rain deity; to account for such an occurrence, members may shift toward the view that their deity is more than a rain deity, for instance).

4 – Recap, Discussion, and Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I located a problem with MacIntyre's theory of the rationality of traditions – that standards of rationality could not be justified without circularity or appeal to conventions. Of primary concern for the present work was the conclusion that this problem also applied to standards of practical rationality, and thus to virtue. As such, we began this chapter with the goal of finding a more solid foundation for virtue and practical rationality in MacIntyre's theory. And as I noted, such a foundation could have been related either to standards of rational justification, or directly to standards of practical rationality and virtue. I began with a potential solution based on standards of rational justification – Herdt's tradition-transcendental standard of justification. However, I ended up pursuing the latter of these due to the inconsistencies I noticed between Herdt's proposed standard and some of MacIntyre's claims.

I then moved on to contemporary theories of virtue. Because naturalism is the most prominent meta-ethical framework for virtue ethics, I thought this would provide us with the best chance of finding a suitable foundation. I associated MacIntyre's theory with Annas' weak account of the relation between reason and human nature, in order to narrow my focus. I began this search by looking at the position advanced by Philippa Foot. I must acknowledge that I had originally planned on considering multiple theories. Having read works by McDowell, Anscombe, Hursthouse, and Schneewind, as well as additional works by Annas, I was prepared to cover more than one theory before arriving at something viable. In fact, I began with Foot because I did not think she would provide a likely candidate for synthesis. However, as I worked through her position I was struck by a way in which it could provide a likely avenue for strengthening MacIntyre's theory, and thus I decided to pursue this possibility. Perhaps this was at the expense of a more inclusive discussion, but at the time I thought it better to pursue a conclusion than to present a discussion with no satisfying resolution.

However, because the account I have developed here is concerned with the foundations of virtue and practical rationality, it cannot serve to strengthen the foundation for standards of rational justification (or, if it can, what I have provided here is not sufficient to show how this can be done). The resulting exploration led to the following account, which strengthens MacIntyre's theory of virtue and practical rationality while maintaining his emphasis on tradition-dependence.

I have argued that we developed traditions out of necessity, to provide us with the shared framework of beliefs, values, and standards of rationality that is essential for the formation and development of communities, and the practices and relationships that underlie them. The communities and practices, and thus the tradition, that every individual inhabits provide them with an inherited history of beliefs and values. As a result, one is able to see what is possible for the future, based on how the communities and practices that embody one's tradition have improved or developed up to the present. When one envisions potential further improvements or developments, one is imagining the human *telos* as a member of various communities and practices, and thus as a member of a tradition. And when one pursues the *telos* that is envisioned, one enters upon a quest for the good life, for human flourishing.

Therefore, according to this framework virtue is justified by the ineliminable role that it plays as the rational-social characteristic that leads to the human goods of friendship and community, which are necessary for our flourishing as rational social beings. Actions are practically rational insofar as they express a disposition to act virtuously, as determined by the beliefs and values of one's practices, communities, and tradition. These actions are rational because they are intelligible to those who share the actor's beliefs and values. As such, standards of practical rationality are justified insofar as they identify what it means for individuals to act according to these beliefs and values, rendering intelligible their actions to other members and providing members of a tradition with the friendship and community necessary for sustaining their tradition and its practices. Such is the justification for virtues and practical rationality broadly speaking. But what of the variety of virtuous ways of life and standards that we find among traditions?

Every tradition begins as an adaptation to the particular environment in which it originates – as a way to ensure that members can achieve human flourishing in their particular circumstances, by instilling shared beliefs and values that allow community and friendship to develop. The particular purpose underlying the development of each tradition (the factors and constraints that each is intended to address in the lives of its members) greatly influences the nature and content of its early beliefs and values. Consequently, this leads to the emergence of a variety of possible virtuous ways of life and standards of practical rationality between traditions, to the degree that the purposes of those traditions differ. Based on MacIntyre, we know that

individuals cannot readily adopt new standards of practical rationality or standards of rational justification, and thus cannot adopt a completely new tradition. With this understanding, we can fairly conclude that these various virtuous ways of life and standards of practical rationality are necessary if every individual is to have a chance at flourishing. They have emerged naturally out of a need to ensure flourishing in different circumstances, and are binding once acquired.

One cannot eliminate tools and building materials when constructing something as complex as a house. In the same way, one cannot eliminate tradition and a shared understanding of values, virtuous character, and rational action when constructing something as complex as a community, nor when striving for something as great as human flourishing.

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