NARRATIVE AND THE RATIONALITY OF TRADITIONS.
MACINTYRE'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCE

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SUMMARY: *1. Narrative and the Rationality of Traditions. 1.1. The Rejection of Facts as Pretheoretical, Tradition-Independent Data. 1.2. Practices. 2. The Rationality of Traditions in MacIntyre's Recent Work. 2.1. God, Philosophy, Universities (2009). 2.2. What Next? (2009) and Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity (2016). 3. Conclusion.*

Alasdair MacIntyre's mature work in ethics and politics, beginning with his 1977 essay *Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science*[1] and continuing through his 2016 book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*,[2] has two interrelated but distinct components. One is a substantive account of human action and human excellence that develops within the tradition of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. The other is a general theory about the means by which human beings engage in rational enquiry, which is best called "the rationality of traditions." This essay will examine the latter component, the rationality of traditions, as this notion has developed over the whole arc of MacIntyre's mature work from 1977 to the present. I will distinguish the two components more carefully before continuing with that examination.

MacIntyre's substantive, Thomistic-Aristotelian moral and political philosophy pursues Aristotelian questions about the goods that we seek through our actions and also about the qualities of mind and character that allow us to judge what is truly good and best and enable us to act effectively on those judgments. It considers the relationships between private goods and common goods. It considers the individual's need for community life to illuminate true

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[1] A. C. MacIntyre, *Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science*, «The Monist», 60 (1977), pp. 453-472. Reprinted in Id., *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume 1*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, pp. 3-23; hereafter *ECDN*; all citations from *Tasks*.

«*Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science*, marks a major turning-point in my thinking during the 1970s», *Tasks*, cit., p. vii.

[2] A. C. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016.

goods, whether private or common, and to enable the pursuit of those goods. It also considers our need for the virtues, those excellences of mind and character that fit us for community life and for the pursuits of common and private goods. MacIntyre introduced his defense of Aristotelian ethics and politics in *After Virtue*[3] and refocused those arguments nearly two decades later with *Dependent Rational Animals*.[4] He proposes it anew in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. This essay will not focus on MacIntyre's Aristotelian ethics and politics.

This essay focuses on the second component of MacIntyre's mature work, the rationality of traditions. This theory marshals the lessons of history against any notion that our beliefs are not framed by our cultural inheritances. MacIntyre first deployed the rationality of traditions in *After Virtue*, but he named, explained, and defended the theory only later, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*[5] and in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.[6] The rationality of traditions remains MacIntyre's epistemological stance throughout his mature work, including *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, although in this latest book he appears to put more emphasis on narratives. It will be necessary, therefore, in this essay to show how MacIntyre has treated the relationship between narratives and traditions since *Epistemological Crises*.

These two components of MacIntyre's mature work, his substantive Thomistic-Aristotelian ethics and politics and his general theory of the rationality of traditions, are interrelated. Moral and intellectual virtues, understood in Aristotelian terms, play an important role in MacIntyre's account of the rationality of traditions, since the virtues and vices of the members of communities make a great deal of difference in what those people are able to learn from their predecessors and discover through their own enquiries. The two are interrelated in another way insofar as Thomistic-Aristotelianism, so often called "the perennial tradition" by its adherents, is *the* tradition that MacIntyre defends, and is a tradition *par excellence* because it understands itself and its progress in history as a tradition in MacIntyre's sense of the word.

Nonetheless, these two components are distinct. Tradition, for MacIntyre, is not simply the name for Thomism, Aristotelianism, or even Western thought in general; the rationality of traditions is a general epistemological stance. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre examines four different traditions: the Aristotelian tradition[7] (beginning with its Greek and Athenian

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[3] A. C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (in) 1981; 2nd ed. 1984; 3rd ed. 2007; hereafter *AV*.

[4] A. C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, Open Court, Chicago 1999.

[5] A. C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (in) 1988; hereafter *WJWR*.

[6] A. C. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (in) 1990.   [7] *WJWR*, chs. 6-8.

precursors[8]), the Augustinian tradition,[9] the Scottish tradition that blended "Calvinist Augustinianism and renaissance Aristotelianism,"[10] and the liberal tradition.[11] Elsewhere, MacIntyre discusses the differences between the Aristotelian and Confucian traditions.[12] In these places and others, it is clear that the rationality of traditions names MacIntyre's general epistemological stance.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to examine the development of this second component of MacIntyre's mature work, the rationality of traditions, as he has presented it in his own writings from 1977 to the present. My goal in doing this is to make MacIntyre's primary works more available to his readers, including his critics. Given the quantity of primary literature reviewed in this essay, I have chosen not to engage the similarly voluminous secondary literature responding to MacIntyre over these four decades. Much of this secondary literature is quite valuable, illuminating background issues in MacIntyre's thinking[13] or raising significant questions about the adequacy of his claims.[14] Nonetheless, in this essay I have chosen to draw my interpretation of Alasdair MacIntyre's epistemological stance «from his own fountains,»[15] in order to explore as much of his writing as possible within the limits of a journal article.

I will look at MacIntyre's explication of the rationality of traditions in some of his main works from 1977 to 2006, when he published two volumes of selected essays, *The Tasks of Philosophy* and *Ethics and Politics*. Then I will

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[8] *Ibidem*, chs. 2-5. [9] *Ibidem*, chs. 9-11. [10] *Ibidem*, chs. 12-14.
[11] *Ibidem*, chs. 15-17. MacIntyre summarizes this list of traditions on p. 349.
[12] A. C. MacIntyre, *Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians About the Virtues*, in E. Deutsch (ed.), *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1991, pp. 104-122. In this essay, MacIntyre expands upon a critique of his early book, *A Short History of Ethics* (Macmillan 1966), which had failed to take into account differences in "conceptual schemes" among contending traditions. Cf. G. H. Mahood, *Human Nature and the Virtues in Confucius and Aristotle*, «Journal of Chinese Philosophy», 1/3-4 (1974).
[13] E.g., K. Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 2007; G. Graham, *MacIntyre's Fusion of History and Philosophy*, in J. Horton and S. Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (IN) 1994, pp. 161-175; G. Graham, *MacIntyre on History and Philosophy*, in M. C. Murphy (ed.), *Alasdair MacIntyre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 10-37; J. Caiazza, *Paradigms, Traditions, and History: The Influence of Philosophy of Science on MacIntyre's Ethical Thought*, Special Edition on Alasdair MacIntyre, C. S. Lutz (ed.), «American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly», 88 (Fall 2014): pp. 685-704.
[14] E.g., J. Haldane, *MacIntyre's Thomist Revival: What Next?*, in *After MacIntyre*, cit., pp. 91-107.
[15] Cf. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (English version), 31; «*providete ut sapientia Thomae ex ipsis eius fontibus hauriatur*», http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/la/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html, accessed 6 June 2019.

consider MacIntyre's continued insistence on this epistemological stance in three more recent works: in his response to the lectures given in his honor at the 2009 Dublin conference, *Epilogue: What Next*,[16] in the book published in the same year, *God, Philosophy, Universities*[17] and in his most recent book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. Among these three recent works, I will focus on *Epilogue: What Next* as an important moment for appreciating and perhaps even testing MacIntyre's "rationality of traditions" in light of its predictive power. I will begin by investigating the interplay between narrative and tradition.

1. NARRATIVE AND THE RATIONALITY OF TRADITIONS

Whose Justice? Which Rationality? begins with the assertion that the most significant moral conflicts in our time are conflicts between adherents of rival traditions who hold contending ideas about what is just and what is rational. Members of any given community, governed by the standards of their own tradition, may agree among themselves about the rational justification of their own standards of justice and about the irrationality and injustice of rival traditions, but the standards by which they judge their rivals are standards established and maintained within their own tradition, owing to the peculiar experiences and discoveries of their predecessors within that tradition. In short, MacIntyre contends that there is no universal and disinterested standpoint of reason from which people may make tradition-transcendent judgements about universal justice. There are instead various forms of rationality, various sets of strategies, skills, and standards discovered, developed, and maintained, for better or worse, within communities of enquiry that the adherents of traditions use to judge truth and falsity, good and evil:

So rationality itself, whether theoretical or practical, is a concept with a history: indeed, since there are a diversity of traditions of enquiry, with histories, there are, so it will turn out, rationalities rather than rationality, just as it will also turn out that there are justices rather than justice.[18]

Human enquiry is an earthbound affair. We learn to do it within groups who speak to one another, and those conversations about how to judge rightly and how to discover the truth are extended into traditions.

In the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, a narrative is any interpretive account of human experience. In *Epistemological Crises*, MacIntyre argues «that dramatic

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[16] A. C. MacIntyre, *Epilogue: What Next?*, in F. O'Rourke (ed.), *What Happened In and To Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (IN) 2013, pp. 474-486.

[17] A. C. MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2009; hereafter *GPU*.   [18] *WJWR*, p. 9.

narrative is the crucial form for the understanding of human action».[19] In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre underscores the pervasiveness of narrative in our interpretation and understanding of the world by quoting Barbara Hardy:

[W]e dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative.[20]

A narrative can be as personal as one's autobiographical beliefs and moral opinions, or as shared as the common stock of stories remembered and retold among the adherents of a tradition. Myths and fairytales are narratives of one kind,[21] scholarly histories and scientific theories in physics and biology are narratives of another kind. Narrative, in this sense, is the broadest category of explanatory expression.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre writes, «I am presenting both conversations in particular then and human actions in general as enacted narratives».[22] We make our words and actions intelligible to one another as narratives:

It is because we all live out narratives in our daily lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.[23]

Narrative is a very broad category, embracing every kind of interpretation and misinterpretation, understanding and misunderstanding.

Narratives are entwined with traditions. Every narrative is constructed by people within a given tradition, using the language and interpretive schemata of that tradition, to explain some feature of reality, some event, or some person, in a way that makes sense to others who share the intellectual resources of that tradition. Personal narratives are shaped by the traditional narratives of the communities that provide individuals with their languages and hence shape individuals' ways of assessing and judging intellectual and practical claims. Histories and scientific theories are the narratives of the traditions of academic history and modern science. The philosophy of history and the philosophy of science are traditions in which theorists struggle to produce adequate narratives about the failures, difficulties, and discoveries that have revolutionized the narratives of academic history and modern science in the courses of their histories.

Our self-understanding, like our understanding of the world, is constituted by narratives that we tell, revise, reconsider, and enact in our daily lives. We make sense of our world, our relationships, our history and our future

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[19] *ECDN*, p. 15.
[20] B. HARDY, *Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach through Narrative*, «Novel», 2 (1968), pp. 5-14 (p. 5), quoted in *AV*, p. 211.   [21] *ECDN*, p. 7.   [22] *AV*, p. 211.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 212.

by placing our trust in narratives about these things, narratives that we have received from people we trust, narratives that we have created on our own, trusting in our broader understandings of things. When success allows our narratives to go unquestioned, we may enjoy a naïve certainty about them. If our narratives fail to make sense of our experiences, we may face crises in which our understanding of the world and our trust in the judgments of our teachers and friends come into question. MacIntyre calls this condition an epistemological crisis.[24]

Since an epistemological crisis begins when we recognize some failure in our understanding, it can be resolved only by renewing our trust in our understanding. Replacing erroneous ideas about the issue in question with what we take to be a better understanding is only a first step to overcoming an epistemological crisis, for we also face the distinct challenge of renewing our trust in our ability to judge the narratives through which we interpret the world. Overcoming this other challenge requires another narrative, a narrative about our failure:

When an epistemological crisis is resolved, it is by the construction of a new narrative which enables the agent to understand both how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs and how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them. The narrative in terms of which he or she at first understood and ordered experiences is itself now made into the subject of an enlarged narrative.[25]

This new, enlarged narrative is essential to the recovery of epistemological self-confidence in the wake of an epistemological crisis.

MacIntyre lists three requirements for the resolution of an epistemological crisis in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* First, the person or tradition must find a way to solve the problems that had caused the crisis. Second, the person or tradition must be able to explain why their former narratives had been open to the kind of failure that caused the crisis. Third, the person or tradition must be able to show how the new solution and the account of the former weaknesses of the tradition fit together into the larger narratives of the tradition.[26]

The successful resolution of an epistemological crisis should not restore the naïve epistemological certainty that preceded it. MacIntyre proposes that the epistemological self-consciousness that arises from the struggle through such a crisis «*may*» lead a person «to acknowledge two conclusions».[27] The first is that our epistemological self-confidence should always be tempered by awareness that hidden inadequacies in our narratives might lead us into to new epistemological crises in the future. The second conclusion follows from the first:

[24] *ECDN*, p. 3. See also *WJWR*, pp. 361-362.   [25] *ECDN*, p. 5.
[26] *WJWR*, p. 362.   [27] *ECDN*, p. 5, emphasis added.

[B]ecause in such crises the criteria of truth, intelligibility, and rationality may always themselves be put in question – as they are in *Hamlet* – we are never in a position to claim that now we possess the truth or now we are fully rational.[28]

MacIntyre offers Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a brilliant example of a character, trapped in an epistemological crisis, who draws both of these conclusions from his experience.

MacIntyre offers Jane Austen's *Emma* as the more conventional example of the more typical character who draws neither conclusion, and moves simply from recognition of error to adherence to some newly discovered "truth." Comparing Emma and Hamlet to philosophers, MacIntyre makes a disheartening observation. Where one might rightly expect philosophers struggling with inadequate theories in the history of ideas to comprise a procession of Hamlets, we find instead a procession of Emmas: «Philosophers have customarily been Emmas and not Hamlets»[29] MacIntyre then segues into a critique of Descartes, who, if his descriptions of his own epistemological crisis are to be taken at face value,[30] should have been an exemplary Hamlet but became instead an exemplary Emma.[31]

Epistemological Crises begins with private crises over the failure of personal narratives about colleagues, friends, and lovers.[32] MacIntyre then applies the lessons learned about narrative in those personal settings to cultural narratives, to histories and philosophical arguments and to the role of traditions in organizing those narratives.[33] In the third section of the essay MacIntyre draws connections between the competing narratives about scientific revolutions defended by Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos on one hand, and the phenomena of traditions and ideologies on the other, to make two points. The first is to show how our acceptance of broader frameworks of narratives – here Kuhn's paradigms and Lakatos's research programmes exemplify the narratives of intellectual traditions – may condition our interpretation and assessment of any claim. The philosophy of science should reveal to us what MacIntyre later calls «the situatedness of all enquiry».[34]

The second point is to argue «that natural science can be a rational form of enquiry, if and only if the writing of a true dramatic narrative – that is, of history understood in a particular way – can be a rational activity».[35] Science can be rational only if it pursues truth, and the same thing is true of every kind of

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[28] *Ibidem*. [29] *ECDN*, p. 6.

[30] In *GPU*, MacIntyre interprets Descartes as crafting an argument against skepticism, rather than as recounting any personal epistemological crisis. See *GPU*, pp. 113-118.

[31] *ECDN*, pp. 8-10. [32] *Ibidem*, p. 3. [33] *Ibidem*, pp. 4-8.

[34] *Prologue: After Virtue after a Quarter of a Century*, in *After Virtue*, 3rd ed., p. xii.

[35] *ECDN*, p. 15.

enquiry. The rational structure of enquiry should teach us to reject the more radical claims of historicism.

To hold that histories and theories are peculiar sorts of narratives, as MacIntyre does, is to emphasize everything that is relative and tradition-bound in human enquiry. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*[36] MacIntyre makes this point most explicitly in a conclusion he draws from the historical narrative of the book.

The conclusion to which the argument so far has led is not only that it is out of the debates, conflicts, and enquiry of socially embodied, historically contingent traditions that contentions regarding practical rationality and justice are advanced, modified, abandoned, or replaced, but that there is no other way to engage in the formulation, elaboration, rational justification, and criticism of accounts of practical rationality and justice except from within some one particular tradition in conversation, cooperation, and conflict with others who inhabit the same tradition.[37]

Human enquiry occurs only within traditions. In the ordinary course of life we learn to be rational from our traditions; thus our rationality is constituted by tradition; it is initially «tradition-constituted».[38]

When individual adherents of traditions discover shortcomings in their traditional narratives and pass through epistemological crises to some sort of resolution, they produce new narratives, new ways of interpreting and judging their experience, and new ways of understanding the narratives, practices, and beliefs they had held prior to those challenges.[39] If the rationality of those who resolve an epistemological crisis changes the tradition, if their rationality reconstitutes the tradition, it becomes «tradition-constitutive». Thus in some places MacIntyre describes the enquiry guided by the rationality of traditions as «tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive enquiry».[40]

The goal of every tradition of enquiry is to produce true narratives about the world and our place in it, but the only means we have of testing our narratives is our experience of consistency between our narratives and the things they interpret and explain. Thus barring some challenge to our narratives sufficient to cause an epistemological crisis, we are unlikely to detect, much less correct any shortcomings in them. Nonetheless, because our narratives are interpretive accounts of our world, it may be possible for us, if we are both fortunate and attentive, to discover some ways that our narratives fall short of adequacy to their objects.[41]

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[36] See MacIntyre's comments on the need for this "sequel to *After Virtue*" in *AV*, p. 264.
[37] *WJWR*, p. 350.   [38] *Ibidem*, pp. 360, 361, 368.   [39] *Ibidem*, p. 355.
[40] *Ibidem*, pp. 9, 10, 354.   [41] *Ibidem*, p. 357.

1. 1. *The Rejection of Facts as Pre-theoretical, Tradition-Independent Data*

The object that our narratives interpret is the real world. Truth, therefore, cannot be defined in terms of the subjective consistency of a conceptual scheme that is in any way insulated from measurement by the real world.[42] Truth has to be defined in terms of a direct relationship between the mind and its objects in the real world.[43] Thus, MacIntyre contends, one of the requirements of any adequate theory of truth is that «it needs to characterize the kind of causal relationship that must hold between things and the mind's thought of them».[44]

Beginning with *After Virtue*, MacIntyre repeatedly argues that truth cannot be a correspondence between judgments and "facts."[45] He returns to this concern in *WJWR*,[46] in his Aquinas Lecture,[47] and in *Truth as a Good: A Reflection on* Fides et Ratio.[48] Like Aquinas, MacIntyre insists that the objects of the intellect are the real things in the world and not any subjective images of them.[49] Also like Aquinas, MacIntyre insists that truth is predicated of the conformity of human judgments to the realities that we encounter and judge.[50]

Truth cannot be a correspondence between narratives and facts, because facts are already narratives; facts are interpretations of experience that presuppose some larger narrative about the subject under examination. Comparing modern observations of stars and planets to ancient observations of chinks in the outermost celestial sphere, MacIntyre writes, «What each observer takes himself or herself to perceive is identified and has to be identified by theory-laden concepts».[51] Observation is not prior to theory; observation has an interdependent relationship with theory. «Theory is required to support observation, just as much as observation theory».[52] Far from being pre-theoretical objects of knowledge, facts depend on theory-laden concepts.

MacIntyre presents the problem of facts especially clearly in *Truth as a Good*. Truth cannot be a correspondence between mind and fact, because facts have a propositional structure that must be produced by the mind. «The fact that John has red hair» is not a «nonlinguistic item» existing prior to anyone's claim about the color of John's hair. It «cannot be identified independently of and

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[42] See MacIntyre's treatment of Crispin Wright's notion of "superassertability" in *Truth as a Good: A Reflection on Fides et Ratio*, in *Tasks*, cit., pp. 207-208.

[43] *Philosophy Recalled to Its Tasks*, in *Tasks*, cit., p. 185.

[44] *Truth as a Good*, cit., pp. 197-215 (p. 201).   [45] *AV*, pp. 79-81.

[46] *WJWR*, pp. 357-358.

[47] *First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee 1990. Reprinted in *Tasks*, cit., p. 175.

[48] *Truth as a Good*, cit., p. 200.

[49] T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 85, a. 2.

[50] Compare *Truth as a Good*, pp. 200-201, with *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 16, aa. 1-2; q. 85, a. 5.

[51] *AV*, p. 79.   [52] *Ibidem*, p. 81.

has no existence apart from the truth of the asserted sentence 'John has red hair.'»[53] Facts are constituted in the sentences that express them. «Facts, it has been rightly said, are shadows cast by sentences».[54]

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre complains that Francis Bacon had «enjoined his followers to abjure speculation and to collect facts,»[55] as if facts were prior to narrative and as if the collection of facts could precede the construction of narrative. By showing the interrelation between facts and narrative, MacIntyre shows that the criticism of a theory – a kind of narrative – must include a criticism of the facts mediated by that theory. MacIntyre illustrates the interrelations between impoverished facts and inadequate theories with the history of predictive social science.[56] That history begins with the rejection of Aristotle's account of human action.

Aristotle's account of practical rationality and human action combines anthropological considerations of human nature with psychological considerations of motives and practical reasoning, and moral considerations of the habits that enable a person to live well as a practical reasoner who pursues goods through action. When Aristotle's account was rejected in the eighteenth century, MacIntyre notes that social scientists, philosophers, and ethicists attempted to provide new explanatory narratives about human activities, with each group filtering the phenomena of human activity through its own theories. For social scientists, «The explanation of action is increasingly held to be a matter of laying bare the psychological and physical mechanisms which underlie action».[57] For philosophers, bridging the gap between mechanistic accounts of human behavior and intentional accounts of human action «becomes part of the permanent repertoire of philosophy».[58] Ethicists are left to study «notions of good or virtues» «detached» from «such notions as those of intention, purpose, [and] reason for action,»[59] which are essential to practical reasoning.

In the case of predictive social science, theory filters data in a very peculiar way; the phenomena of practical reasoning must be excluded from consideration. The facts about human activities may include only statistical data about outward behavior. MacIntyre summarizes the position of W. V. Quine:

[I]f there is to be a science of human behavior whose key expressions characterize that behavior in terms precise enough to provide us with genuine laws, those expressions must be formulated in a vocabulary which omits all reference to intentions, purposes, and reasons for actions.[60]

[53] *Truth as a Good*, cit., p. 200.   [54] *Ibidem*.   [55] *AV*, p. 79.
[56] Compare to MacIntyre's treatment of ideology in *The End of Ideology and the End of the End of Ideology*, in *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, Schocken Books, New York 1971, pp. 3-11 (pp. 5-7.   [57] *AV*, p. 82.   [58] *Ibidem*.   [59] *Ibidem*.
[60] *Ibidem*, p. 83. Compare to B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, 1971; reprinted, Hackett, Indianapolis 2002.

Quine would have us study the things that people do in a way that ignores people's «intentions, purposes, and reasons for actions».[61] In chapter eight of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre shows that the facts produced in relation to this kind of theory do not help social scientists to discover any genuine laws of human behavior. More importantly, the arguments of chapters seven and eight, taken together, show that the social sciences, no less than any other narrative tradition, are sorely afflicted by the kinds of ideological blindness that accompany the rationalities of traditions through history.

1. 2. *Practices*

No part of the argument of *After Virtue* illustrates the rationality of traditions more clearly than the account of practices in chapter fourteen. Practices, such as «the game of football, … chess … architecture … farming … the enquiries of physics, chemistry, and biology, … the work of the historian … painting and music,»[62] develop organically. People learn how to do these things. Some practitioners master them by current standards, and occasionally a few may bring new methods or new ways of understanding the practices into conventional use, so that the practices themselves are transformed. In good times, these transformations are progressive, so that standards rise, producing better games, more helpful and efficient buildings, more adequate science, more lifelike or more communicative painting, and more interesting music. In other times, these transformations may be partially destructive, as when one technology and its practices are lost when another takes its place. In some cases, these transformations may be almost entirely destructive, as when massive social disruptions, like plagues and wars, kill practitioners and destroy their works and their tools, so that whole practices are lost. The disquieting suggestion in the opening chapter of *After Virtue* and the historical narrative that follows it both exemplify this destructive transformation of practices.

Here the connection between traditions and practices becomes clear. Even the very best practitioners of any generation receive their practices from their predecessors and either maintain them, improve them, or damage them in their own work. Whether a practice will pass from one generation to another and whether the best, the worst, or the most mediocre practitioners of one generation will pass its practices on to the next are questions to be settled by the contingencies of history.

2. THE RATIONALITY OF TRADITIONS IN MACINTYRE'S RECENT WORK

The rationality of traditions remains MacIntyre's epistemological stance in his most recent work. In the books *God, Philosophy, Universities* and *Ethics in the*

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[61] *Ibidem.*   [62] *AV*, p. 187.

Conflicts of Modernity, MacIntyre continues to oppose any tradition-independent, objective standpoint for human enquiry. *God, Philosophy, Universities* presents an historical narrative of the Catholic intellectual tradition in which each generation does what it can with a tradition of enquiry that it has received in good or bad order from its predecessors. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* presents a theoretical narrative about human action in which the positions of various contending theorists are framed by particular intellectual cultures.

2. 1. *God, Philosophy, Universities (2009)*

Three particular passages in *God, Philosophy, Universities* help to illustrate the relationships between traditions and practices in rational enquiry. In the first, the contingencies of history come together to favor the voluntarist theologies of Scotus and Ockham over Thomas Aquinas's synthesis of Christian Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism, leading to a decline in the tradition. In the second, MacIntyre notes that institutions can stifle the practices they exist to support. In the third, the difficulty of reviving Thomism after the promulgation of *Aeterni Patris* is due in part to the difficulty of learning to interpret Aquinas on his own terms.

Chapter twelve, *After Aquinas: Scotus and Ockham*, begins with the marginalization of Aristotelian and Thomistic enquiry in the late 13th century. Condemnations of Aristotelian teachings, including some of Aquinas's, at Paris and at Oxford in 1277, made the philosophy and theology of St Thomas Aquinas dangerous. At the same time, the rise of John Duns Scotus, a Franciscan and one of Aquinas's critics, coupled with the influence of the Franciscans, left Aquinas in the margins. Consequently, it was Scotus and his successor, William of Ockham, whose work framed the questions for the generations that followed.

MacIntyre specifies three particular ways that Scotus disagrees with Aquinas. First, by asserting that the will is self-determining, Scotus obscures the psychology of action.[63] Second, by assigning distinct forms to the human body and to the human soul, Scotus makes the unity of the human person mysterious.[64] Third, Scotus took a different approach to the problem of individuation.[65] Stepping back from the particulars, MacIntyre finds bigger differences, «about the powers of natural reason and the division of labor between philosophers and theologians».[66] Scotus denies that human beings are directed by nature to any end beyond this life.

For the Thomist, the rise of Scotus and Ockham and the influence of voluntarist theologies in the following centuries mark the decline of scholasticism. This decline indicates, at least from a Thomistic perspective, that traditions

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[63] *GPU*, p. 99.   [64] *Ibidem*.   [65] *Ibidem*, pp. 99-100.
[66] *Ibidem*, p. 100.

do not always make progress, since in this case the Catholic intellectual tradition was harmed by changes that its leading practitioners took to be improvements.

Later in the book, MacIntyre directs our attention to the relationship between practices and institutions. In *After Virtue*, he had noted that institutions have troubled relationships with practices. Institutions, like chess clubs, professional associations, and universities, exist to support practices and to enable practitioners to pursue the goods internal to practices. Institutions fulfil their supportive role by pursuing goods external to practices, like prestige and wealth. Thus, MacIntyre argues, the virtues are necessary to help «practices … resist the corrupting power of institutions».[67] MacIntyre returns to this theme in *God, Philosophy, Universities*, when he remarks upon the corruption of the European universities in the early modern period.

Early modernity was a period of great intellectual conflict, but it was one in which the universities were no longer the kinds of places where masters might resolve such crises, they were for the most part, merely schools that prepared their students to take sides on those questions:

Where there was enforced conformity there was intellectual sterility and, since almost all universities were places of enforced conformity, universities ceased, with some notable but occasional exceptions, to be the places where intellectually fruitful and exciting enquiry took place, although they still, for most participants in such enquiry and debate, provided the initial education that enabled them to engage in the controversies of their age.[68]

Early modernity could have been a remarkable period for university life, but political realities, both ecclesiastical and secular, did not allow this to be. Where philosophy was taught in Catholic institutions, it «was no more than an arid restatement of older theses and arguments, a kind of teaching well designed to kill any impulse to philosophical questioning».[69] As modernity advanced beyond Hume, philosophical enquiry went one way and the life of the Christian faith went another. «There was … no dialogue between Catholic philosophers and the seminal thinkers of modern philosophy. Where philosophy flourished, Catholic faith was absent. Where the Catholic faith was sustained, philosophy failed to flourish».[70] Thus MacIntyre labels this part of his historical narrative *The Catholic Absence from and Return to Philosophy*.[71]

Practices, including the practices of enquiry, must be sustained by institutions, but they may also be corrupted by those same institutions. Universities, at their best, sustain the practices of intellectual enquiry, but history provides examples of universities failing in this essential part of their mission.

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[67] *AV*, p. 194.   [68] *GPU*, pp. 105-106.   [69] *Ibidem*, p. 133.
[70] *Ibidem*.   [71] Title of chapter 15, *GPU*, pp. 131-143.

A third example of the rationality of traditions appears in MacIntyre's account of the difficulties of the Thomistic renewal after *Aeterni Patris*. Pope Leo XIII summoned Catholic philosophers, theologians, and students to take up an astonishing task. They were «to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas,»[72] which few people had studied directly and extensively in many, many decades. Thomism was alien to the voluntarism that had ruled the Catholic intellectual climate since Scotus. Nonetheless, Catholic philosophy professors raised in that voluntarist culture were to prepare themselves to teach Thomism to their students.

The Thomistic renewal therefore demanded two interrelated tasks. First, scholars who were largely unfamiliar with the primary texts of Thomas Aquinas needed to gain access to them. This goal required «a return to the manuscript sources and the publication of well-edited texts and both scholarly and philosophical commentaries».[73] Second, professors who would teach the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas needed textbooks to get the main points of Thomistic doctrine across to their students.

A whole generation of Catholic professors and students took up the task that Pope Leo XIII had assigned them with textbooks of varying quality. In some cases students advanced from textbook Thomism, through scholarly Thomism to some recovery of the philosophical enquiries of Aquinas, and from there to writing better informed commentaries for professors and more helpful textbooks for students. In other cases, in far too many cases, the study of textbook Thomism became an insurmountable obstacle to the recovery of Thomistic enquiry. Pope St. Pius X's war on modernism, which does not appear in MacIntyre's narrative, certainly contributed to a reductive view of Thomism as a system of answers, rather than as a method of enquiry.[74]

2. 2. *What Next? (2009) and Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity (2016)*

Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity, even more clearly than *God, Philosophy, Universities*, presents human agents and their enquiries as examples of the rationality of traditions. The historically situated, tradition-constituted condition of human rationality and enquiry comes through theoretically in the fictional example of a woman who must learn how to choose among goods.[75] It comes through in another way in the arguments of real authors struggling with the

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[72] Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (English version), 31, http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html, accessed 6 June 2019.   [73] *GPU*, p. 153.

[74] I refer to the effort marked by the promulgations of *Lamentabili Sane* (1907), *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1914), and most particularly by the *24 Thomistic Theses* promulgated by the Sacred Congregation for Studies, 27 July, 1914.

[75] *ECM*, example introduced on p. 1.

questions addressed by the book. It comes through in a more direct way in MacIntyre's use of five real people to exemplify the theoretical conclusions of the book. The first is David Hume, whose failure as a practical reasoner MacIntyre reviews briefly in chapter two. The other four, Vasily Grossman, Sandra Day O'Connor, C. L. R. James, and Fr. Denis Faul appear in the narratives in chapter five.

These examinations of developments in the practical reasoning of real individuals are crucial to the overall project of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* for reasons he explained at a conference celebrating his eightieth birthday, at University College Dublin in 2009.[76] These biographical narratives justify the whole enterprise of Thomistic-Aristotelian moral enquiry by exemplifying its claims.[77]

These narratives therefore tell a very specific type of history about each subject, one in which their ways of judging and weighing ends and goods change or fail to change in light of the subject's experiences.

It is a kind of history in which the focus is on the success or failure as practical reasoners of particular agents who have to find their way through politically and morally difficult situations. Since, on Aquinas's view, rational deliberation requires shared deliberation in the company of others, it is a history, not of individuals as such, but of individuals in their social relationships. And since excellence in practical reasoning has to be learned, and since the key moments in such learning are those moments when agents become able to learn from their failures and misunderstandings, it is a kind of history that acknowledges, as Geuss[78] urges us to acknowledge, both the place that episodes of failure can have in a good life and the changes in our conceptions of our good that mark different stages in our education as practical reasoners.[79]

MacIntyre followed this prescription with three examples: Vasily Grossman, C. L. R. James, and Fr. Denis Faul.[80]

What is important in the cases of Grossman, James, and Fr. Faul is that each, through commitment to truthfulness and justice, was transformed. All three are exemplary agents because «Each developed a capacity for practical judgment and reasoning that numerous others with apparently the same educational background and moral formation failed to develop».[81] Grossman moved from a compliant Soviet fiction writer to a courageous witness against Soviet tyranny, who «spoke with a voice of unquestionable moral authori-

[76] A. C. MacIntyre, *Epilogue: What Next?*, cit.   [77] *Ibidem*, p. 482.

[78] Raymond Geuss presented a paper at the Dublin conference. R. Geuss, *Marxism and the* Ethos *of the Twentieth Century*, in F. O'Rourke (ed.), *What Happened In and To Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (in) 2013, pp. 221-243.

[79] A. C. MacIntyre, *Epilogue: What Next?*, cit., p. 483.   [80] *Ibidem*, pp. 484-485.

[81] *Ibidem*, p. 485.

ty».[82] James moved from a student of many things to a committed Trotsky-ist, and through criticism of Trotsky to an important theorist of Fourth International Marxism who likewise «became a unique voice of his age with a peculiar moral authority».[83] Fr. Faul moved from a conventional parish priest concerned for the wellbeing of his school students to an important mediating figure in the struggle for justice and peace in Northern Ireland.[84] MacIntyre followed his introduction of these narratives with a promise to include them in the project that became *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.[85]

In *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, we see these three narratives fully formed. They resist summary because their function turns on the whole constellation of details that illustrate the social setting and development of each subject's practical reasoning. Each one delivers on the promise MacIntyre made in his response to the Dublin conference, *Epilogue: What Next?* These narratives are not hagiographic; «such narratives are, if true to the facts, not edifying in any simple way, not a source of easy moral examples, even although exemplary narratives of admirable lives».[86] These are stories in which moral weakness and compromise coexist with the virtues that set these men apart.

The fourth narrative in chapter five likewise presents the virtues of an admirable, although imperfect person. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's narrative is not a story of transformation. MacIntyre praises her practical reasoning in her private life, in which she consistently favored the goods and needs of her family above the goods of professional success, suspending her legal career «to bring up her children as she wanted to,» and retiring from the Supreme Court of the United States at the age of seventy-five to be with her husband.[87] She is in this sense an excellent agent, because «She has more than most wanted what she has had good reason to want and has acted as she had good reason to act, if she were to get what she wanted».[88] She is an excellent agent, moreover, because she overcame real challenges to the kinds of success that she accomplished. She overcame prejudice against women in the workplace, particularly against women in the legal profession.

Here, however, MacIntyre's praise for O'Connor ceases. For in his estimation, O'Connor's experiences never lead her to question the "background narrative" through which she interprets the American experience: «It is a narrative one of whose presuppositions is that, whether or not a particular human being flourishes is up to them, but the social conditions required for human flourishing are those supplied by the American social order».[89] Examining

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[82] *Ibidem*, p. 484.
[83] *Ibidem*.
[84] *Ibidem*, pp. 484-485.
[85] *Ibidem*, p. 485.
[86] *ECM*, p. 311.
[87] *Ibidem*, p. 265.
[88] *Ibidem*.
[89] *Ibidem*, p. 266.

consistent patterns in O'Connor's judicial reasoning,[90] MacIntyre concludes that it follows the patterns of the dominant morality of modernity.[91] On further examination, MacIntyre concludes that she is a prisoner within her own political culture, insulated from an honest appraisal of the capitalist economic order «by her Burkean presuppositions».[92]

O'Connor's narrative provides a contemporary parallel to the example of David Hume, whom MacIntyre criticized in §2.2 of the book. David Hume, the author of the six volume work, *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, along with works in moral philosophy and the philosophy of mind, failed as an agent in much the same way as O'Connor. Hume fails as a practical reasoner because he never adequately questions his reasons for action. He never questions the conventions of his own cultural milieu, but instead takes the moral sentiments of his own community without question as universally normal, and projects them upon the world as universally normative. Nonetheless, MacIntyre denies that any of this «detracts from Hume's greatness as a moral philosopher … . It does, however, show the bearing that historical enquiry can have on philosophical debate».[93] History falsifies «Hume's claims about the universality of the moral sentiments, as he understands them».[94] In the final analysis, MacIntyre's critique of Hume appears much narrower here than it does in some of his other works.

History can undermine a theory. History can also justify a moral theory. How? If the narrative of Thomistic-Aristotelian moral enquiry, understood in terms of the rationality of traditions, is truthful, it should have predictive power. It should allow its practitioners to discover new things by predicting otherwise unexpected outcomes to its enquiries. In this respect, it is just like any other theory or narrative that demonstrates its progressive development through predictive power and reveals its weakness through predictive failure.[95] What MacIntyre prescribed in Dublin was essentially a test of the predictive power of Thomistic-Aristotelian moral philosophy. What does this theory predict?

MacIntyre's moral narrative predicts that excellence in practical reasoning, if it develops, develops out of the concrete relationships of real people in the real world, among their families, friends, schools, and communities. It develops in the real experiences of people suffering through conflicts, celebrating victories, enjoying privileged access to education and training, or striving against the odds to learn and develop in impoverished circumstances. It in-

[90] *Ibidem*, pp. 268-269. [91] *Ibidem*, p. 269. [92] *Ibidem*, p. 273.
[93] *Ibidem*, p. 85. [94] *Ibidem*.
[95] Cf. I. Lakatos, *Science and Pseudoscience*, http://www.lse.ac.uk/philosophy/science-and-pseudoscience-overview-and-transcript/, accessed 6 June 2019.

volves people making choices to do things differently, in pursuit of goals that are worth pursuing, by means that people take to be appropriate to reaching those goals while maintaining the relationships they value in their communities.

MacIntyre's Thomistic-Aristotelian approach to moral enquiry sees traditions as the outcomes of communities' pursuits of truths about what things are good and best to pursue as ends, truths about what qualities of character help or hinder our efforts to recognize what is good and best and to follow through on our judgments about these things, and truths about what kinds of activities and behaviors must be encouraged or prevented in order to develop those qualities of character in individuals that will help them to contribute to the community's pursuits of its common goods. MacIntyre's theory predicts, in short, that there is no skyhook discoverable by human reason[96] that can rescue us from the hard work of discovering, through our concrete experiences and the experiences of predecessors and contemporaries within our traditions, how to understand our world, our social lives, or our individual and common pursuits of practical goods.

How well do these predictions hold up? In the closing section of the book,[97] MacIntyre argues that narratives of the kind he has offered here do indeed exemplify the model of moral enquiry that he has advanced. The narratives of Grossman, James, O'Connor, and Faul are recognizably human stories. They present the extraordinary moral struggles of these four admirable people in a way that is not terribly different from the ordinary practical decision making of most people. Grossman, James, O'Connor, and Faul enter their scenes of moral conflict just like anyone we have ever met. They come with their own peculiar strengths and weaknesses, with their educations and social backgrounds and they face the particular, concrete opportunities, threats, and challenges presented to them by their social worlds. None of them discovers moral truth through the application of theory, as modern moral enquiry might suggest. All of them – even Grossman, who had spent decades subordinating truth to politics – became admirable precisely because they affirmed moral truths – truths that post-modernism cannot acknowledge as such – in the face of adversity.

Grossman, James, O'Connor, and Faul are merely human agents, in their lives they faced the same questions that MacIntyre raises in §1.1 of the book, «Did we or they desire what we or they had good reason to desire, given our circumstances, character, relationships, and past history?»[98] In their rational conceptualization of the goods they pursued, Grossman, James, O'Connor, and Faul exemplified the rationality of traditions. Of course, the same thing

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[96] Divine revelation is another matter.   [97] *ECM*, §5.6, "So what?".
[98] *Ibidem*, p. 2.

can be said of the main theorists of modern philosophy and of modern liberal individualist moral and political theory. Narratives of the practical reasoning of Descartes, Bacon, Gallileo, Kepler,[99] Newton, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, Pritchard, Moore, Ross, Hare, and Rawls would need to have the same qualities that characterize MacIntyre's narratives of Grossman, James, O'Connor, and Faul, the contrary theoretical claims of many of those authors notwithstanding. In this case, history does appear to justify the moral theory.

3. Conclusion

In *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity,* MacIntyre examines the role of narrative in the ways that we understand our desires and structure our practical reasoning. The account of narrative offered in this book is not new. It continues the same argument that MacIntyre initiated in the 1977 essay *Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science*, and reaffirms his commitment to the rationality of traditions, the epistemological stance that has informed all of his work since 1977.

The rationality of traditions is not merely retrospectively descriptive; it makes specific claims that can be tested by the phenomena that it predicts. MacIntyre's theory predicts that practical knowledge is gained through experience and that traditions therefore make invaluable contributions to the formation of independent practical reasoning.[100] The histories of astronomy, the physical sciences, philosophy, morality, and political life, as well as the biographies of the major figures in those histories, may all be interpreted, without adjusting the evidence on any Procrustean bed, to verify MacIntyre's theory. It is difficult to imagine a case that could falsify it.

If MacIntyre's theory is adequate, it is also prescriptive. If knowledge and wisdom about complex things like social life, morality, and government must be gained through experience, any effort to transform social life, morality, or government that puts novel theory ahead of time-tested practical wisdom must be eyed with grave suspicion. We should develop a prejudice against efforts to impose Utopian schemes and cultivate a predisposition to thwart them. At the same time a more Utopian society is certainly a worthy goal for political life. If MacIntyre is right, the most certain path to a more Utopian society requires the cultivation of the virtues, education, and shared political life.

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[99] In the cases of Galileo and Kepler, such a book has already been written: A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe*, Hutchinson, London 1959.

[100] Cf. A. C. MacIntyre, *How do We Become Independent Practical Reasoners? How do the Virtues Make this Possible?*, in *Dependent Rational Animals*, pp. 81-98.

ABSTRACT · Narrative and the Rationality of Traditions. Macintyre's Epistemological Stance · *This essay examines the epistemological stance, called "the rationality of traditions," that MacIntyre has taken in all of his philosophical work since the publication of* Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science *in 1977. The essay distinguishes the rationality of traditions from MacIntyre's substantive commitments to the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition, examines the connections between narrative and tradition in his philosophy, and shows that MacIntyre's latest books continue to utilize the rationality of traditions.*

KEYWORDS: *MacIntyre, Narrative, Rationality, Tradition, Epistemology.*