

University of Nevada, Reno

**Alasdair MacIntyre's Critique of Liberalism**  
*An Exegesis including Refutations to Three Liberal Counterarguments*

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by

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ABSTRACT: Alasdair MacIntyre provides a diagnosis of why liberalism may be doomed. In my first chapter I give an exegesis of Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of liberalism. In distilling MacIntyre's critique from the five volumes of his mature work I take myself to have made a genuine contribution. In the subsequent three chapters I focus on the writings of three prominent liberal theorists: Rorty, Rawls, & Raz. From their respective theories I construct, and then refute, three liberal counterarguments to MacIntyre's critique. I have attempted to show that MacIntyre's theory, and his critique, hold strong. I conclude that Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of liberalism ought to be given serious attention.

*Dedicated to the memory of my grandmother Lucy,  
who always devoted herself to the common goods of her family and local community,  
and who beautifully exemplified the virtues of acknowledged dependence.*

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## Key to References

The following abbreviations are used to refer to the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre

<i>AV</i>	<i>After Virtue</i> . Notre Dame UP, 1981.
<i>DRA</i>	<i>Dependent Rational Animals</i> . Carus, 1999.
<i>EP</i>	<i>Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays Vol II</i> . Cambridge UP, 2006.
<i>ECM</i>	<i>Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity</i> . Cambridge UP, 2016.
<i>TRV</i>	<i>Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry</i> . Notre Dame UP, 1990.
<i>TMR</i>	<i>The MacIntyre Reader</i> . Ed. Kelvin Knight. Notre Dame UP, 1998
<i>WJWR</i>	<i>Whose Justice, Which Rationality?</i> Notre Dame UP, 1988.

## Introduction

The Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has, throughout his long career, written philosophical literature spanning the realms of ethics, politics, science, and religion. Though the narrative of his academic contributions is one of significant shifting and evolution, throughout his mature works there has ever remained a deep and unabashed commitment to two central themes: On one hand, a critique of capitalism from a position which might be described as cultural (religious) traditionalism, and on the other hand, a critique of liberalism from the same position.<sup>1</sup>

Alasdair MacIntyre immigrated from his native Scotland to the United States in around 1969, and in bringing his unique and controversial critiques with him to the other side of the pond he may have been a herald of things to come. As I write this essay in early 2019, the United States has undergone tremendous political upheaval, especially in the wake of Donald Trump's election to US presidency two and a half years ago. In those two and a half years it seems that many of the assumptions of US liberalism have been readied for reexamination. In a country which has, at least ostensibly, always maintained a strong and fairly unanimous commitment to liberalism, there are now the stirrings of alternative political possibilities. Elements of what I would describe as the 'true left' and the 'true right' have now begun to enter into US politics. Even as a self-described socialist (Bernie Sanders) ran a strong campaign for the White House in 2016, thus signaling that socialist theory might finally find a place in mainstream US political

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<sup>1</sup> I follow MacIntyre in using the term "liberalism" in the philosophical sense to denote a theory of limited government which is generally complementary to capitalist economies (in this sense liberalism is to be counterposed with the other two major modern political ideologies: Fascism and Communism). This sense of liberalism encompasses both "progressive liberalism" (Democrats etc.) and "conservative liberalism" (Republicans etc.). Liberalism is a multifaceted theory with many different schools, but it has often emphasized individual autonomy and political viewpoint neutrality.

dialogue, so too the emergence of the alt-right into popular politics suggests that ethnic nationalism, and perhaps even militant totalitarianism, might also have claimed a place at the dinner table of US political discussion.

Both progressive and conservative liberals have reason to be fearful at this turn of events, but perhaps they ought not be overly surprised. At least, not if they have been reading a bit of MacIntyre. Decades ago MacIntyre began a presentation, analysis, and critique of modern liberalism, and at this project he continues today. His is a powerful assessment of the liberal situation, and an assessment that ends with a disturbing verdict: The modern liberal individualist establishment is one which has alienated citizens from one another, and from the common good; it has deprived citizens of the practices and traditions necessary to engage with one another in the group project of authentic human flourishing; and it has suppressed, through manipulative rhetoric and subtle coercion, citizens' capacity for systematic communal deliberation on the Good Life, and so also to determine what manner of flourishing particular communities ought to commit themselves. All this has left us with a society barren of community ethos, estranged from dwindling traditional civic associations, and trapped in a quagmire of incommensurable moral and political debates from which the supposedly viewpoint-neutral stance of liberal governance forbids structural emergence. Banality, relativism, pessimism, and nihilism seem to be the result: An emotionally noxious and intellectually stultifying situation which is apparently being opiated with hedonistic consumerism on one hand, and the vapid self-help quest for 'inner realization' on the other.

Alasdair MacIntyre has surveyed the situation and concluded that the liberal project is unsustainable. He has even picturesquely referred to the modern era as a 'new



dark age' with the qualification that "This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us from quite some time" (*AV* 262). MacIntyre urges thoughtful citizens to abandon liberalism and prescribes a 'Benedictine Option' in which citizens retreat into intermediate local communities in order to revivify the cultivation of virtues and common goods, and so hopefully weather the downfall of liberalism and so too ready themselves for what comes after.

In the current essay I will evaluate MacIntyre's critique of liberalism and attempt to determine whether or not his critique ought to convince the thoughtful reader. This essay will take place over the course of four chapters. In the first chapter, I will attempt to offer the reader a fairly exhaustive exegesis of MacIntyre's critique of modern liberalism, especially focusing in on the five books he has written in the mature phase of his thought, starting with *After Virtue* and including all subsequent texts. In the subsequent three chapters I will, for each of these chapters, employ a single comparative exegetical format. Each of these chapters will begin with a section in which I construct, from the work of a given liberal theorist (Rorty, Rawls, and Raz respectively) a potential counterargument to MacIntyre's critique. In the following sections of each chapter I will provide a response to the constructed counterargument on behalf of MacIntyre's theory. Each time I hope to vindicate MacIntyre's theory, and demonstrate the strength of his critique of liberalism.

## Chapter One: MacIntyre's Critique of Liberalism

### I: *After Virtue*

The first text written by MacIntyre in what I am referring to as the mature phase of his thought is *After Virtue*. This text contains the core of his presentation of a modern form of virtue ethics, as well as the major components of his critique of liberalism. Through the almost four decades since it was written, MacIntyre has in his subsequent work maintained a surprising consistency in his commitment to its central premises.

MacIntyre's commitment to virtue ethics, and his descriptions of some central concepts has remained unwavering. These core concepts in MacIntyre's overarching project include (a) a description of the social practices within which virtue originates and finds its primary purpose (b) the narrative conception of self (c) the traditions of rational enquiry within which practical reasoning about human flourishing must take place, and finally and most importantly for the current essay (d) the critique of modern liberal individualism which emerges from the aforementioned conceptual commitments.

Throughout this first chapter, I will focus on a description and analysis of MacIntyre's critique of liberalism.

MacIntyre begins *After Virtue* by presenting us with a definition of liberalism as he understands it. He writes that

On the *dominant* liberal view, government is to be neutral as between rival conceptions of the human good, yet in fact what liberalism promotes is a kind of institutional order that is inimical to the construction and sustaining of the types of communal relationship required for the best kind of human life. (*AV* XV)

I have emphasized MacIntyre's use of the modifier "dominant" in his characterization of the form of liberalism he seeks to critique. The phrase "dominant liberal view" is

somewhat ambiguous. I understand MacIntyre to be here admitting that it might be that some heterodox liberal doctrines are less vulnerable to his critique than is the one which currently defines the mainstream liberal status-quo. Nevertheless, I do believe that MacIntyre is committed to the position that his critique of liberalism is not merely a critique of one particular (albeit dominant) form of liberalism, but that it holds the capacity to more or less tidily assault and explode all forms of liberalism which may be appropriately characterized as such. In chapters two, three, and four of the present essay I will attempt to determine whether this is so.

Along with the critique of liberalism presented in *After Virtue* (and which forms the linchpin of all MacIntyre's subsequent works) MacIntyre also presents a critique of radical individualism. These two critiques are wedded and complementary, both forming the principle components of a greater critique of what MacIntyre consistently refers to as 'modern liberal individualism.' MacIntyre argues that liberalism is ideologically informed by a radical individualism which conceptualizes the self as an atomic entity ontologically distinct from the social roles within which it finds itself, and which is completely autonomous in its moral agency, bound only by those moral obligations which are, on one hand, natural and universal, and on the other hand, based on consent. MacIntyre refers to this individualist characterization of persons as a "democratization of moral agency" and writes that "This democratized self which has no necessary social content and no necessary social identity can then be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it *is* in and for itself nothing" (*AV* 32). MacIntyre decries this 'democratization of moral agency' and argues that it leads directly to the breakdown

in community ethos and a communal commitment to common goods. He writes that in a society dominated by this type of radical individualism

each of us is taught to see himself or herself as an autonomous moral agent; but each of us also becomes engaged by modes of practice, aesthetic or bureaucratic, which involve us in manipulative relationships with others. Seeking to protect the autonomy that we have learned to prize, we aspire ourselves *not* to be manipulated by others... we find no way open to us to do so except by directing towards others those very manipulative modes of relationship which each of us aspires to resist in our own case. (*AV* 68)

Hence MacIntyre characterizes the modern liberal world as one in which any notion of common good breaks down, and only individual goods are acknowledged; furthermore, the modern liberal world becomes a battleground in which citizens attempt to promote their own individual goods at the expense of other citizens' individual goods, ever struggling to maintain their own goods as conceived of as distinct from the goods of others. Liberal government, furthermore, can do nothing to ease the rampant tension and contention. The liberal commitment to a 'viewpoint-neutral' form of governance (or at least its ostensible commitment to the same) precludes the idea that some political body ought to intervene and promote one citizen's or group's characterization of goods as being most conducive to human flourishing. The liberal commitment to 'viewpoint-neutrality' also precludes the idea that political bodies ought to guide citizens in arriving at a consensus concerning which common goods ought to be pursued by the citizenry as a whole.

According to MacIntyre, in order to maintain this strained and contentious relationship between individualistic citizens, the liberal political apparatus relies on the 'effectiveness' of 'bureaucratic expertise' to manipulate citizens and force them to cooperate in cultivating the group (not common) goods of society, conceived of as the

mere sum of individual goods.<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre consistently characterizes ‘bureaucratic expertise’ as Weberian in nature. MacIntyre writes that “the whole concept of effectiveness is... inseparable from... the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behavior” and he argues that “effectiveness is a defining and definitive element of a way of life which competes for our allegiance with other alternative contemporary ways of life” (*AV* 74). Here, for the first time in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre suggests that liberalism may not be as ‘viewpoint-neutral’ as it presents itself as being (but more on this point in section II). MacIntyre’s central point is this: That ‘effectiveness’ and ‘managerial and bureaucratic expertise’ are key parts of a masquerade which in fact camouflages the wanton lust for, arbitrary exercise of, and maintenance of power held by the ruling (capitalist) elites of liberal society. MacIntyre argues that

There are thus two parts of the manager’s claims to justified authority. One concerns the existence of a domain of morally neutral fact about which the manager is to be an expert. The other concerns the law-like generalizations and their applications to particular cases derived from the study of this domain. (*AV* 77)

In considering the first part of the manager’s claim to authority, MacIntyre consistently denies that there are in fact such morally neutral facts (and in later writings he is consistent in suggesting that there are indeed no self-evident truths apprehended outside of prior theoretical commitments as embodied in particular traditions of rational enquiry). In considering the second part of the manager’s claim to authority, MacIntyre denies that the managerial elite can in fact demonstrate law-like generalizations in the realm of social science which can consistently produce reliable predictions about the movements of, and

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<sup>2</sup> An example of common goods: There are goods which come of participating in an orchestra, a worker’s union, or a philosophy seminar are unattainable if pursued individually, and cannot be reduced merely to the individual goods of being a musician, a worker, or a philosopher, and these common goods could not in any way be achieved outside of the community settings of an orchestra, union, or seminar.

developments within, complex social and economic structures. In as much as ‘effectiveness’ and ‘expertise’ are meant to justify authority within liberal society and ground a commitment to a liberal methodology founded on ‘viewpoint-neutrality’, they serve only to obfuscate the real foundation of rulership in liberal structures: the arbitrary exercise of power.

In MacIntyre’s Aristotelian theory of action, human activity must be “characterized with reference to the hierarchy of goods which provide the ends of human action” and understood in terms of facts about human flourishing and an objective characterization of the good life (*AV* 84). He bemoans the fact that from the point of view of modern liberal individualism “there are no facts about what is valuable. ‘Fact’ becomes value-free, ‘is’ becomes a stranger to ‘ought’ and explanation, as well as evaluation, changes its character as a result of this divorce between ‘is’ and ‘ought’” (*AV* 84). Within this paradigm of ‘value-free facts’ about human existence, MacIntyre suggests, liberalism provides an extremely impoverished conception of the good which is ultimately reducible to individual preference satisfaction (and further, liberalism unburdens itself of the responsibility for educating and guiding human preferences and desires towards that which humans have good reasons for preferring and desiring). It is important to again note that over-and-against the liberal commitment to ‘value-free facts’ MacIntyre suggests that genuine practical reasoning must always take place within a particular tradition of rational enquiry, and that facts are never apprehended prior to, and in isolation from, background theoretical commitments (but this point must be postponed for section II of this chapter). For the time being it will suffice to affirm that, for MacIntyre, the liberal commitment to the subjectivity of human flourishing enables

liberalism to covertly promote its far-from-neutral conception of the good which we shall soon confront (in section II).

Along with the myth of bureaucratic effectiveness, MacIntyre argues that liberalism is also supported by another myth that is crucial to the modern paradigm: the myth of universal human rights. He writes that “there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns” (*AV* 69). As opposed to the notion of universal human rights, MacIntyre stresses moral particularity: That moral obligations be understood as rooted in particular social contexts and roles. He writes that “all morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular and that the aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all particularity is an illusion” and that the modern emphasis of a “freedom of choice of values” would appear from the perspective of the traditional world as “the freedom of ghosts” (*AV* 126). Ultimately MacIntyre affirms an understanding of moral particularity by way of submitting a narrative conception of self: he submits that a given action (my example: rowing a boat) can only be properly understood by locating it within a particular narrative: to characterize said action in a particular narrative sense (taking pleasure in nature, exercising at the behest of one’s doctor, rushing to save a drowning child) is the only means by which the action is made intelligible (*AV* 206). So too for human lives generally: for MacIntyre we can only understand ourselves by locating ourselves within the narratives of families, communities, and cultural traditions. The inherently situated and encumbered quality of self means that certain obligations arise for us from our narrative contexts which are neither universal nor based in consent. Rights are, for MacIntyre, a means by which liberal individualists make claims on one another in regard

to individual goods, and in so doing liberals disregard the fact that individual goods never exist distinctly or in isolation from common goods. We shall pursue this line of thinking further in subsequent sections.

MacIntyre understands the contention which pervades liberal society to be due to the fact that multiple moral myths (bureaucratic expertise, rights, utility, social contract, etc.) all inform debate which is, because these values are incommensurable, ultimately unresolvable. MacIntyre understands these incommensurable moral myths to be fragmentary remains of what was originally a cohesive system of virtue ethics. MacIntyre submits a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics which emphasizes the practical teleological (but non-consequentialist) role that virtues play in sustaining group projects and common goods. I will provide a more thorough exploration of MacIntyre's notion of virtue in chapter II of the present essay, but for the time being it will be sufficient to point out that according to MacIntyre the original and primary value and purpose of virtues is that that of sustaining political communities understood as group projects of cultivating the common good. He argues that virtues perform this vital service in as much as they (a) help us cultivate the practices which yield 'internal' or intrinsic goods (b) guide group deliberation on and determination of the Good Life and (c) sustain the traditions of rational enquiry which are embodied in practices and political communities, the conception of such traditions being required by a commitment to the narrative conception of self. Where virtues break down, practices are pursued only for 'external goods' (money, prestige, etc.), group consensus on the good life is unattainable, and the traditions within which narrative selves are situated break down. This is, according to MacIntyre, the current state of the modern liberal individualist world.



MacIntyre argues that in a flourishing political community, a consensus on the good life leads to an objective standard of desert. However, MacIntyre laments that in our modern society, that is,

In a society where there is no longer a shared conception of the community's good as specified by the good for man, there can no longer either be any very substantial concept of what it is to contribute more or less to the achievement of that good. Hence notions of desert and of honor become detached from the context in which they were originally at home. Honor becomes nothing more than a badge of aristocratic status, and status itself, tied as it is now so securely to property, has very little to do with desert. Distributive justice cannot any longer be defined in terms of desert either. (*AV* 232)

MacIntyre draws our attention to the fact that modern liberal theory (his examples are those theories proposed by Rawls and Nozick) places no emphasis on the notion of desert (*AV* 249). On this point MacIntyre writes that

Individuals are thus in both accounts primary and society secondary, and the identification of individual interests is prior to, and independent of, the construction of any moral or social bonds between them. But we have already seen that the notion of desert is at home only in the context of a community whose primary bond is a shared understanding both of the good for a man and of the good of that community and where individuals identify their primary interests with reference to those goods. (*AV* 250)

This, according to MacIntyre, is one thing that distinguishes liberal theorists from ordinary citizens who themselves still maintain that desert is crucial to a proper understanding of justice. This, too, is given as the reason why so many citizens are unsatisfied with the current state of liberal politics. When ordinary citizens cry out for justice, it seems that they are often demanding that members of society be given what they deserve. Yet without consensus on the nature of virtues, and a conception of the good life for the human being as such as well as a particular community, it is impossible for citizens to determine precisely what desert consists in.

In modern liberal society honor goes to those who best maintain power through coercion on one hand, and on the other hand a skillfully manipulative implementation of the rhetorical myths of rights, utility, social contract, and bureaucratic expertise. More than anything else modern liberalism is marked by banality. The banality of modernity is pervasive but expressed very strongly in three ways among others. Firstly, law and virtue are unrelated (*AV* 251-252) and law is not only seen as being posited separately from morality but is characterized merely as a system of rules intended to protect individual goods and ‘rights’. Secondly, citizens seem to be continually deprived of that which they deserve, and honor is not a recognition of a contribution on the part of citizens to the common good but is rather simply a trophy attached to wealth and power. Thirdly, patriotism becomes impossible: When

the relationship of government to the moral community is put in question both by the changed nature of government and the lack of moral consensus in the society... Loyalty to my country, to my community—which remains unalterably a central virtue—becomes detached from obedience to the government which happens to rule me. (*AV* 254)

Fourthly and finally, due to the incommensurability of liberal values (rights vs. utility etc.) and thus the unresolvability of debate within the liberal sphere, political dialogue becomes wholly unphilosophical and increasingly demonstrates the characteristics of a shrill and emotivistic battle of wills. MacIntyre writes that “Modern politics is civil war carried on by other means” (*AV* 253). It should be unsurprising, then, that in the modern political climate increasing numbers of citizens are voicing a desire for alternative political structures, be they left-socialist or totalitarian.

Within liberal societies, then, this is the state of affairs: law is recognized as being merely coercive, honor and rulership are held by those who deserve neither, patriotism is

impossible, and political debate is a series of increasingly vicious grabs for power. Furthermore, citizenship itself is understood as being founded not on a common good, but merely the summation of individual goods. Likewise, citizens' conception of self is atomistic and distinct from any historical or traditional reference points, and thus identity is impoverished, and ordinary life is increasingly marked by loneliness and isolation. Finally, citizens' individual goods are reduced to the mere satisfaction of desires and preferences. Indeed, liberal government refuses to guide citizens in establishing desires and preferences that they have good reason for holding, even as capitalists actively exploit shallow and self-destructive desires and preferences for the sake of profit. In liberal society, then, the greatest dictators are citizens' own uncultivated desires, and in thrall to these infantile desires they become slaves to market forces. The 'internal' goods of traditional practices are increasingly unavailable, and so along with 'external' goods such as money and power, the infantile pleasures of hedonistic consumerism become the focus of individual lives. Liberalism, the very name of which denotes freedom, and which was indeed intended to liberate humankind, has rendered us a society of slaves.

## **II: *Whose Justice Which Rationality?***

In the first section of this chapter I made mention of MacIntyre's conception of traditions of rational enquiry, however *After Virtue* is itself rather brief in its exploration of tradition. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre repeatedly denied the existence of 'self-evident facts' but it is only in the second work of the mature phase of his thought, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, that MacIntyre gives a full explanation for why he denies such facts. As I have written in section I, MacIntyre argues that practical rationality can only take

place within the theoretical commitments of particular traditions of enquiry for the very reason that bare facts are never apprehended in isolation from prior, particular, theoretical conceptualizations of the world.

Most important to MacIntyre's conception of tradition as it pertains to practical rationality is that rational enquiry "is inseparable from the intellectual and social tradition in which it is embodied," and that although rational enquiry is generally founded on first principles, nevertheless

what justifies the first principles themselves, or rather the whole structure of theory of which they are a part, is the rational superiority of that particular structure to all previous attempts within that particular tradition to formulate such theories and principles; it is not a matter of those first principles being acceptable to all rational persons whatsoever. (*WJWR* 8)

Hence, in what I believe is an ultimately Hegelian methodology, MacIntyre stresses a conception of rational inquiry which is essentially historical.<sup>3</sup> Practical reasoning is not universal, but highly particular for MacIntyre. The claims made within any particular tradition are not meant to be convincing to all rational persons whatsoever but are convincing to a person only in as much as they find themselves situated within that tradition. Hence what I take to be the most crucial line of the text: "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" (*WJWR* 9). While a full exposition of *Whose Justice Which Rationality?* would take us too far afield from the central aim of the present essay, I would like to briefly note the points at which this text adds to MacIntyre's critique of liberalism.

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<sup>3</sup> It is hardly shocking that MacIntyre adopts a Hegelian methodology since his own tradition, Aristotelianism, originates in a figure who had no conception of history as such. Likewise, I would submit that MacIntyre's own Marxism (Hegelian in nature) is never too far removed from his mature projects and critiques.

In this text, MacIntyre characterizes early liberalism as an attempt to extricate rational inquiry from particular traditions, and to avail theorists and citizens of a universally applicable form of rationality. However, he concludes that “modern liberalism, born of antagonism to all traditions, transformed itself gradually into what is now clearly recognizable even by some of its adherents as one more tradition” (*WJWR* 10). Hence, what MacIntyre takes to be one of the primary goals of liberalism, to generate a universally appreciable rationality, has been in his estimation a failure. What then can be said of liberalism as a tradition? For MacIntyre, liberalism is not simply one more tradition among many: It is one which is highly deficient and impoverished in its notion of justice.

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre spoke of ‘external goods’ and ‘internal goods’ but in the current text he refers to what are essentially the same notions with the terms ‘goods of excellence’ and ‘goods of effectiveness.’ In so doing he both emphasizes the function of virtue ethics in his theory, and he also emphasizes the conviction that the methodology of ‘bureaucratic effectiveness’ which was described in *After Virtue* has become the prevailing means of justification in liberal society. There are two important points to be understood at this juncture.

Firstly, while the ‘goods of effectiveness’ (money, prestige, etc.) need not be located in a hierarchical ordering of goods, the ‘goods of excellence’ require just such a greater order. We should remember that internal goods, or ‘goods of excellence’ are acquired through particular practices, and therefore “If excellence is always the specific excellence of some particular form of activity, then desert in respect of excellence is presumably also correspondingly specific, and there will be a multiplicity of standards of

desert” (*WJWR* 33). This in turn means that it is difficult to appraise different goods of excellence—for example (my example), it will be impossible to evaluate and compare the goods of being a farmer with the goods of being a banker, and so too to determine which honors and rewards ought to be apportioned among these different kinds of activity.

MacIntyre writes that “Failure to provide some standard in terms of which relative achievement and relative desert can be appraised would leave the members of a community without the possibility of any overall shared standard of just apportionment and just recognition” (*WJWR* 33). This is exactly the state of affairs in liberal society as MacIntyre conceives of things. Here we see a likely cause for what I submit is a rampant feeling of injustice throughout modern society. MacIntyre argues that in order to remedy the situation what is called for is a form of community which would offer members a standard that would allow them to structure their common life

in terms of a form of activity whose specific goal was to integrate within itself, so far as possible, all those other forms of activity practiced by its members and so to create and sustain as its specific goal that form of life within which to the greatest possible degree the goods of each practice could be enjoyed as well as those goods which are the external rewards of excellence. (*WJWR* 33-34)

This form of activity which orders the diverse goods of a community is, for MacIntyre, none other than politics understood in an Aristotelian sense. Politics in this sense is meant to order various goods, and so too the honors and rewards associated with excellence, as well as to determine (through communal deliberation) the best life for human beings and thus how the political community ought to structure itself and so flourish. Outside of such a politics, the claims of justice made by those engaged in different practices will be incommensurable.

Secondly, the two types of goods, and the two conceptions of the good to which they adhere, produce two notions of justice. On one hand, for those who are primarily committed to the goods of effectiveness justice will be “primarily concerned with how far rival interests can be promoted and yet also reconciled and contained within a single order” (*WJWR* 39) and according to such a commitment those who ought to rule are those who can implement the bureaucratic expertise necessary for bringing about such a state of affairs. On the other hand, for those who are primarily committed to the goods of excellence, “Justice is a disposition to give to each person, including oneself, what that person deserves” (*WJWR* 39). For the former position, justice lacks content: it is nothing more than a disposition to obey the rules of reciprocity which allow individuals to cooperate and so derive individual goods from cooperation. The latter position, to repeat, is focused on a notion of desert which must itself be supported by a political consensus on the ordering of goods, in particular the common good and the Good Life as such.

The two positions which respectively emphasize the goods of effectiveness and the goods of excellence give way to two types of rationality, or two different conceptions of what it is to have good reasons for engaging in an activity. The former position (emphasizing effectiveness) understands the point of human activity to be preference-satisfaction, and it aims only at the individual goods which will promote such satisfaction and it envisions politics as a bargaining process between individuals. The latter position (emphasizing excellence) understands the point of human activity to be teleological, and it aims at the common goods which promote flourishing and envisions politics as a communal effort to sustain such common goods and flourishing.

The position which emphasizes the goods of effectiveness is, of course, liberalism. Born of a desire to free theory from tradition, liberalism now demonstrates all the qualities of a tradition which emphasizes individualism, individual goods, moral autonomy, bureaucratic expertise, rhetorical manipulation, economic and political bargaining, contractualism, and preference satisfaction as the core elements of its conception of the Good Life. All these values form parts of the liberal conception of the Good Life, but above all “The overriding good of liberalism is no more and no less than the continued sustenance of the liberal social and political order” (*WJWR* 345). Hence the tradition of liberalism is hardly value-neutral, and furthermore, all of these moral commitments are anything but universally recognizable as being appropriate foundations for human life and community. Liberalism is one tradition among many, one more tradition which makes claims about human flourishing and the good life which are coherent and convincing only to those already situated within it.

### **III: *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry***

The third book written in the mature phase of MacIntyre’s work is *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, and it can rightly be considered a sequel to, and extension of, *Whose Justice Which Rationality?* This slim volume introduces little that is new to MacIntyre’s overall project but aims at an application of the concepts developed in his first and second mature works to analyze three particular traditions: the ‘encyclopaedic’ tradition of liberalism, the ‘geneological’ tradition of Nietzsche, and the tradition of virtues which MacIntyre champions and which is essentially Aristotelian/Thomist. His main point in this text is to demonstrate that liberalism has been exploded by Nietzsche, and to submit that only the tradition of the virtues can rescue modern moral discourse from annihilation.



I wish to briefly note two important contributions made in this work to MacIntyre's critique of liberalism. First, MacIntyre emphasizes that although different traditions of inquiry are committed to unique and internal notions of rationality, nonetheless it is not the case (as MacIntyre understands Nietzsche to suggest) that the different notions of the good posited by each tradition are irreconcilable, or that traditions stand no chance of overcoming one another. MacIntyre argues that there are times when proponents of a tradition come to realize that their native tradition has happened upon problems for which their own tradition lacks the internal resources to overcome, and furthermore, that some rival tradition holds just such resources necessary for a solution. It is in this way that particular traditions can 'win' in contests of rationality, each one winning or losing *by standards internal to that tradition*.

The second contribution in this work is to affirm the success of Nietzsche's genealogical project of exploding liberalism's encyclopedic attempts at maintaining a value-neutral political theory. He argues that in pre-liberal traditions, moral rationality is both practical and particular, and accordingly

Shared moral precepts or rules... depend therefore for their authority upon there being a set of shared beliefs as to what is good and best for different types of human beings, just that kind of shared belief which is the mark of those communities of moral enquiry and practice within which alone, on the Thomistic view, human goods can be adequately identified and pursued. (*TRV* 193)

Lacking such a shared belief structure, as in the case of liberalism, there emerges a new kind of precept: One which is impersonal and unconditional in form. But such precepts lack practical normative force, and the theories which submit such precepts "can provide only ideological rationalizations, the rationalizations of modern deontology, modern consequentialism, and modern contractarianism" (*TRV* 194). Such theories are, according

to MacIntyre, profoundly vulnerable to Nietzsche's genealogical critique, and so in Nietzsche we could conceivably witness the conclusion and destruction not only of liberalism but also, perhaps, coherent moral discourse generally. While MacIntyre affirms that liberalism cannot be saved, he argues that through a return to virtue ethics, and a politics of common goods, moral discourse can once again be made both coherent and effective.

#### ***IV: Dependent Rational Animals***

In the fourth text written in MacIntyre's mature phase, *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre retracts his earlier position (in *After Virtue*) that, contrary to Aristotle's thought on the matter, a satisfactory virtue ethics can be sustained without reference to biology. In this work MacIntyre introduces two categories of virtues: the virtues of independent reasoning (justice, temperance, courage, etc.) and the virtues of acknowledged dependence (generosity, friendship, gratitude, etc.).<sup>4</sup> In the first section of this work MacIntyre explores human development and emphasizes the biological dependency which at all times characterizes human existence (not only in childhood, sickness, and old age, but also in the ever-present threat of temporary or permanent disablement). In the second section MacIntyre emphasizes the dependent and collective nature of rationality. He argues that human beings are very poor reasoners in isolation, and that effective practical reasoning can only take place in community. MacIntyre argues that without aid from co-reasoners, human beings are vulnerable to three rational fallibilities: (a) a delusional conception of one's own attributes and character, (b) an

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to submit that MacIntyre is here, in a classically Thomistic move, presenting us with his own conception of what are one hand the Aristotelian virtues, and on the other hand the Christian virtues.

attachment to infantile desires, and (c) unrealistic conceptions of one's future possibilities. Partners within communal deliberation help guide us to avoid these obstacles to practical reasoning (*DRA 70-74 & 82-98*). Having established the biologically and rationally dependent nature of human beings as such, in the third and final section MacIntyre suggests additions to his overarching political theory which focus on an acknowledgement of human dependency, and here he emphasizes the necessity of focusing political deliberation and practice on common goods. I will attempt to elucidate some key contributions that he makes in this third section, and I hope to show how here too we detect some important additions to his overall critique of liberalism.

The first of MacIntyre's theses which should be noted is that just as practical reasoning is necessarily reasoning together, there must be for that reason some foundational consensus among practical reasoners. He writes that

It is not that there cannot be rational disagreements about ends, but... if debate is not to be sterile, there must be at some further and more fundamental level at least partial agreement about those ends to which the achievement of the ends under debate would or would not be a means. (*DRA 107*)

MacIntyre identifies the proper location for such rational debate about means as that space where broad consensus about goods and ends is most appropriate: households, schools, workspaces, and practices at the local (or 'intermediate') level.

At this local level, in order for individuals to flourish, cultivation of common goods must be the focus, especially in as much as those goods relate to care. MacIntyre writes that

If I am to flourish to the full extent that is possible [then I must] have a reasonable expectation of receiving the attentive care needed when I am very young, old and ill, or injured. So each of us achieves our good only if and insofar as others make our good their good by helping us through periods of disability. (*DRA 108*)

He argues that participation in such a network of giving and receiving is not predicated on a calculated expectation of receiving proportionate to one's giving,

For to participate in this network [of giving and receiving] I have to understand that what I am called upon to give may be quite disproportionate to what I have received and that those whom I am called upon to give may well be those from whom I shall receive nothing. (*DRA* 108)

And further, that the flourishing of those who are least capable of giving, and most in need of care, “will be an important index of the flourishing of the whole community” (*DRA* 109). The most important point that MacIntyre emphasizes is that the common good cannot be reduced to the summation of individual goods, but neither are individual goods subordinated to common goods, and this is because “The individual in order not just to pursue, but even to define her or his good in concrete terms has first to recognize the goods of the community as goods that she or he must make her own” (*DRA* 109). Hence, MacIntyre insists that individual goods must be understood as arising out of, and buttressed by, common goods. To demonstrate this, he offers an example:

I will not be able to find a place, whether a larger or smaller place, for dramatic art in my own life... in a community in which the goods of theater are not given a certain priority in the allocation of communal resources. It is in and through political decisions about these priorities that we determine the range of possibilities open for the shaping of our individual lives. (*DRA* 141)

In other words, individual goods arise out of, and are available only through, common goods. In particular MacIntyre wishes to emphasize that individual goods are completely unsustainable outside the networks of uncalculated giving which form the foundation of common goods, and which sustain human beings in the development of their manifold capacities.

The folly of understanding individual goods as wholly distinct from common goods is a serious one for MacIntyre, and he seems to consider it to be the root of the evils of liberalism, and its economic analog, capitalism. MacIntyre states that

Market relationships can only be sustained by being embedded in certain types of local nonmarket relationship, relationships of uncalculated giving and receiving, if they are to contribute to overall flourishing, rather than, as they so often in fact do, undermine and corrupt communal ties. (*DRA* 117)

Here, as throughout his writings, we see that MacIntyre's critique of liberalism is never very far removed from what I think is best understood as a neo-Marxist critique of capitalism. The breakdown of civic virtue and community ethos which takes place when the emphasis on market relations is allowed to overshadow local networks of uncalculated giving is one of the gravest troubles caused by modern liberal individualism in MacIntyre's estimation.

MacIntyre argues that a proper estimation of the needs of citizens who are particularly dependent and vulnerable to harms, and least able to participate in communal deliberation, is crucial for understanding the common good. He writes that

our interests in how the needs of the disabled are adequately voiced and met is not a special interest, the interest of one particular group rather than of others, but rather the interest of the whole political society, an interest that is integral to their conception of their common good. (*DRA* 130)

And this is so due to the fact that all human beings, at various points throughout their lives, find themselves in various states of dependency and therefore in need of relationships of uncalculated giving and receiving. Hence the liberal conception of politics as a process of bargaining between autonomous individuals in pursuit of individual preference-satisfaction fails to properly conceive of and cultivate the foundations necessary for a thriving political community.

The common good, therefore, is founded on both group practices (sustained by collective deliberation and the virtues of independent reasoning) and also by networks of giving and receiving (sustained by uncalculated care and the virtues of acknowledged dependence). While the nation-state focuses on the former set of virtues, the family focuses on the latter. It is only in what MacIntyre refers to as “intermediate communities” (which take place in between the family and state levels) that both sets of virtues, and both kinds of relationships, can be cultivated. It is in this intermediate space that the common good is best pursued, and it is here that consensus on virtues, goods, and the nature of human flourishing is crucial. The nation-state, writes MacIntyre, is not a space wherein uncalculated care can be offered for the very reason that states “are governed through a series of compromises between a range of more or less conflicting economic and social interests. What weight is given to different interests varies with the political and economic bargaining power of each” and consequently “the distribution of goods by government in no way reflects a common mind arrived at through widespread shared deliberation” (*DRA* 131). Since nation-states are compromised in their capacity to arrive at a consensus on goods, and since the goods of the family originate in the goods of the community, it is at the intermediate level that the common good must be achieved.

MacIntyre writes that

Where the virtues of acknowledged dependence are practiced, there will have to be a common mind as to how responsibilities for and to dependent others are allocated and what standards of success or failure in discharging these responsibilities are appropriate. And, where the virtues of independent practical reasoning are practiced, such a common mind will have to emerge from shared deliberation, so that social agreement on responsibilities will not only be, but be seen to be rationally justified. (*DRA* 133)

Local, intermediate communities are then, according to MacIntyre, the appropriate place for communal deliberation on, and cultivation of, common goods. Liberalism, however, is an impediment to such intermediate flourishing. Why?

Firstly, as should be clear by now, MacIntyre understands liberalism to have historically emphasized the virtues of independent reasoning (especially in as much as they contribute to individual goods as well as external goods or the goods of effectiveness). Since liberalism has emphasized rights and autonomy, it has likewise neglected the importance of care and the response to dependency. The individualism inherent in liberalism is, for MacIntyre, a great barrier to sustaining the common good.

Secondly, we must again understand MacIntyre's critique of liberalism to have a Marxist pedigree. His concern is that liberalism as it has been historically implemented finds expression in capitalist market relations, and gross inequalities of wealth. He writes that for intermediate communities to be capable of sustaining the common good

Economically what matters is that there should be relatively small inequalities of income or wealth. For gross inequalities of income or wealth is by itself always liable to generate conflicts of interests and to obscure the possibility of understanding one's social relationships in terms of a common good. (*DRA* 144)

In a classically Marxist argument, MacIntyre seems to suggest that in the unnatural division of society into the civil sphere on one hand, and the political sphere on the other, the civil sphere is left vulnerable to exploitation by capital and that, in turn, the political sphere too (dependent as it is on the civil) in time comes to be controlled by capital. MacIntyre demands a reunification of the political and the civil; not, though, at the level of the state, but at the intermediate level of local communities.

MacIntyre consistently demands that economic considerations be subordinated to moral concerns, and as he concludes *Dependent Rational Animals* he apparently also concludes his critique of liberalism, and prepares himself for a more applied political theory of how an alternative society (one predicated on the common good) ought to be structured. This is the focus of his latest text, *Conflicts in the Ethics of Modernity*, but since the focus here shifts from the central topic of the current essay, I shall discuss it only briefly in the upcoming final section of this chapter.

**V: *Conflicts in the Ethics of Modernity***

MacIntyre's latest work, *Conflicts in the Ethics of Modernity*, is a fascinating work which circuitously meanders among a discussion of a variety of topics including Marxism, distributism, expressivism, free markets, and the biographies of several fascinating historical figures such as Oscar Wilde and C.L.R. James. What holds this work together is a continual return to the central theme of desire, and the relationship between desires and common goods.

Early in the work MacIntyre presents a notion of freedom which is at odds with the (largely negative) conception presented by mainstream liberalism. He writes that Neo-Aristotelians will agree with Nietzsche that "to be the kind of rational agent envisioned by [Aristotelians] is to live under certain constraints, that it involves a disciplining of one's desires and one's will" but whereas Nietzsche would conceive of such constraints as enslaving, the Neo-Aristotelian "will understand them as enabling. What they make possible is participation in those social relationships through which she has learned how to transform her dispositions, to improve her capacity for practical judgement, and to pursue common goods" (*ECM* 58). It should be obvious that



MacIntyre is here referring to participation in the practices and traditions which have been the foundation of his theory since *After Virtue*. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre wrote that the most important key to understanding the tradition of the virtues is the notion of “man-as-he-might-become-if-he-realized-his-telos” (*AV* 54). The point of the virtues is to bring about such a transformation, and the key to this transformation, in turn, is the transformation of desires.

A key problem with liberal theory is, in MacIntyre’s estimation, that it refuses to allow a place for government in the cultivation of virtue in, and the transformation of the desires of, citizens. In opposition to liberalism, MacIntyre submits that, in his Aristotelian conception,

Politics both as enquiry and as practice is concerned with the structure that government must have, if citizens are to become good human beings, good at achieving common and individual goods. Ethics both as enquiry and practice is concerned with the qualities of mind and character that agents must have if they are to be good both as citizens, ruling and being ruled, and as human beings. (*ECM* 178)

Hence politics and ethics are not distinct, and both, when practiced properly, are neither value-neutral nor approached from a perspective of moral autonomy, but instead aim at the communal cultivation of virtue in the citizen.

MacIntyre argues that much social breakdown, and much of the banality of modern existence, is a consequence of the primary aim of modern liberal individualism: Individual preference satisfaction. Further, liberalism is here characterized as a conviction that the proper role of governance is to assist citizens in attaining such preference satisfaction (especially in as much as it may do so without inhibiting other citizens’ capacity to fulfill their preferences). MacIntyre argues against this conviction

and writes that “To have it as one’s aim to make people happier, whether they have reason to be so or not, is... never justified. Unhappiness with this or that aspect of our condition is often better for us than happiness” but problematically liberals tend to think of agents as solely “directed toward the satisfaction of their desires” and liberals also tend to envision ideal political institutions as

providing for such individuals opportunities for preference satisfaction under institutional and Moral constraints, in competitive markets, in competitive political systems, in the formation of personal ties, that is as opportunities for the achievement of happiness... To be happy is to have made those choices which have resulted in satisfying, at least for the most part, one’s preference and one’s desires... The duty of benevolence... is to make others happy. (*ECM 200*)

Hence the liberal conception of human beings as rational actors aimed at their own preference satisfaction leaves citizens stranded with the highly irrational desires which tend to characterize uncultivated human existence.

The take-away here is that “man-as-he-is” (prior to achieving their telos) is a being largely enslaved by infantile desires for that which they have no good reason for desiring. It is only in attaining virtue through participation in practices, and through the cultivation of superior desires through communal deliberation among friends and local communities, that humans mature into skilled practical reasoners concerning goods and ends. Without such a mature practical rationality, citizens are enslaved by the rulers of states and markets in as much as such external dictators manipulate infantile desires (through political rhetoric or the commercialism upon which consumerism is predicated). The external dictators are those individuals who have made an unholy alliance with the first and foremost dictators of human beings: unevolved, infantile desires.

## Chapter Two: The Problem of Teleology

### I: Darwin, Rorty, and the Aimlessness of Nature

The first response to MacIntyre's critique of liberalism which I will address concerns teleology. MacIntyre's overall theory advances a teleological view of human nature. Liberal theorists might argue, however, that teleological thinking is irrational and outdated. Such theorists might argue that Darwin's description of biological progress, which is (broadly speaking) undoubtedly correct, mandates a rejection of teleological thinking. Furthermore, so the counterargument might go, any theory which fails to accept a realistic (and Darwinian) description of reality is to be dismissed. Any theory which denies the basic facts of biological reality is one that can be neither useful nor acceptable, and since Darwinian evolution is certainly a correct description of reality, a MacIntyrean position must demonstrate that MacIntyrean theory is *reconcilable* with this fact. In this section I will explore the work of Richard Rorty, focusing on his liberal critique of teleology. I will extrapolate from Rorty an anti-teleological counterargument with which a MacIntyrean position must wrestle if MacIntyre's overall theory, and thus his critique of liberalism, is to be maintained.

In *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999) Richard Rorty argues that Darwin's theory of biological evolution signaled the beginning of the end for teleological thinking amongst mainstream western intellectuals. Rorty argues that prior to Darwin, Platonic philosophy and Christian theology both rested firmly on teleological thinking of a dualistic type. According to traditional western thinkers, human beings, like all other creatures, have a purposiveness intrinsic to their essence, and in human beings this purposiveness (*telos*) is aimed in particular at contemplation of things profound and

divine. Moral normativity is predicated on this telos, and it is in as much as moral virtue guides human behavior towards accomplishment of its essential telos, and in as much as moral vice impedes accomplishment of the human telos, that the force of moral normativity applies. Christian thinkers such as Aquinas assumed, further, that a divine agent was the author of this telos. Rorty writes, however, that over and against this theotelological narrative of human origins and purposiveness, Darwin provided western thinkers with “the first detailed and plausible explanation of how both life and intelligence might have emerged from a meaningless swirl of corpuscles.”<sup>5</sup> According to Rorty, human teleology was thought to apply differently across classist and cultural demarcations, and so justified a hierarchical and ethnocentric moral and political stratification based on a vertical metaphysical chain of being which supposedly lead from the lowest beasts to the heights of divinity. Rorty goes on to claim that

After Darwin, however, it became possible to believe that nature is not leading up to anything—that nature has nothing in mind. This idea... Suggested further that humans have to dream up the point of human life, and cannot appeal to a nonhuman standard to determine whether they have chosen wisely... it became possible to think that the meaning of one human life may have little to do with the meaning of any other human life, while being none the worse for that. This latter thought enabled thinkers to disassociate the need for social cooperation... from the Greek question: What is the Good Life for Man? Such developments made it possible to see the aim of social organizations as freedom rather than virtue, and to see the virtues... As a collection of unrelated sorts of excellence.<sup>6</sup>

And so, according to Rorty, Darwin’s theory was the death knell for the teleological thinking which undergirded the traditional western commitment to the notion that the quality of different human lives was commensurable and could be judged according to a single criteria, and that a notion of the Good Life or human excellence qua the human

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<sup>5</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 264.

<sup>6</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 266.

being could be accorded the respect deserving of an objective, universal standard. Rorty sees both Friedrich Nietzsche and William James as extending Darwin's theory into the realm of moral normativity and progressing this theory towards its natural conclusion. "For notions like 'Reality' or 'Nature', Nietzsche and James substituted the biologicistic notion of the environment" and according to them, unlike the prior notions, it can rightly be said of the environment that "we owe it neither respect nor obedience. Our task is to master it."<sup>7</sup> Hence, according to Rorty, Darwin gives us good reason to think not only that nature aims at no final ends, but that it provides no grounds for moral norms whatsoever. Nature is, for Rorty and other liberal thinkers, unworthy of anything but prudential respect—sometimes an obstacle to, and sometimes a tool to achieve, a flourishing which is to be defined and qualified by individuals according to their own their desires, preferences, and purposes.

Rorty has aptly demonstrated how a breakdown in teleological thinking in the sciences leads directly to the 'emancipation' of the human will and an individualist conception of self: "When Darwin came along... It became possible to see deliberate *self-creation*, a conscious overcoming of the past, as a continuation of the biological story of animal species perpetually, albeit unconsciously, surpassing one another."<sup>8</sup> Rorty continues:

these developments also made it possible to believe that there are many different, but equally valuable, sorts of human life"<sup>9</sup> and further that "there is a potential infinity of equally valuable ways to lead a human life, and that these ways cannot be ranked in terms of degrees of excellence, but only in their contribution to the happiness of the persons who lead them."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 269.

<sup>8</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 265. (My emphasis)

<sup>9</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 266.

<sup>10</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 268.

Rorty has invoked the notion of romantic *self-creation* as an appropriate value for modern persons who have properly internalized Darwin's theory. If nature has no teleological purposes, then the goals to which a human being aims must be decided by those individuals as worthy based on the particular goals and aims of the individual. Human beings possess no fixed essence or telos, but rather are endowed with a kind of plasticity which it is theirs alone to make sense and use of. The individual themselves must decide the kind of life they wish to live and based on the individual's definition of what the Good Life will constitute for them, the definition of virtue (those behaviors and capacities which will further their progress towards this self-given goal) will vary wildly in comparison to the virtues as characterized by other human beings.

It is thus that Rorty understands liberalism to be a theory of human flourishing which emerges naturally from Darwin's antiteleological narrative of human biology. Nature provides us with no purposes. For Rorty and likeminded liberals the aims of human beings must be decided on by each on their own, and the accomplishment of human goals must ever be an act of *self-creation*. The accomplishment of a Good Life is an artistic achievement, and the life well lived is that which the individual who lives it finds beautiful and satisfying.

## **II: Practices, Common Goods, and the Narrative Conception of Self**

It is undoubtedly true that Darwin has provided us with an excellent narrative of how human life came to be, and I might also note that in pushing forward the science of biology he demonstrated many moral virtues: *Bravery* in challenging religious dogmas not least among them. How, then, is a thinker who holds to a MacIntyrean conception of

goods, ethics, and human nature to respond to the liberal charge that any teleological theory flies in the face of good reasons and common sense, and so must be discarded? Certainly not by denying Darwin's theory!

I have, in chapter one of the present essay, briefly described MacIntyre's conception of moral virtue, but I would now like to further elucidate his unique version of virtue ethics. Unlike classical and medieval thinkers, moral virtue is not for MacIntyre a predisposition to engage in activities which tend towards the accomplishment of a telos which is understood in terms of metaphysical essence. MacIntyre's teleology is not based in Aristotle's biological commitments, and he writes that "we have every reason to reject Aristotle's physical and biological science" (*AV* 179). In fact, MacIntyre attempts to present us with a type of virtue ethics which can be accepted without accepting any strong doctrines on biological essence or telos whatsoever.<sup>11</sup> Instead of being characterized in terms of essence and biological telos, MacIntyre submits a Darwin-friendly neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics which emphasizes the practical teleological (but non-consequentialist) role that virtues play in sustaining group projects and common goods. He argues that virtues perform this vital service in three primary modes.

Firstly, MacIntyre believes that virtues "enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices" (*AV* 191). MacIntyre uses the term 'internal' to denote intrinsic goods which, unlike 'external' goods such as money, wealth, and power, are not separable from or multiply realizable outside of a particular practice. MacIntyre uses the term 'practice' to denote a particular kind of human endeavor which results in internal

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<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre's original goal of presenting a biology-free virtue-ethics was slightly tempered in his *Dependent Rational Animals*, but the biological claims there are entirely limited to a conception of the human species as being characterized by dependency and vulnerability, and thus even here MacIntyre's theory does not demand any conception of the human species which is at odds with Darwinian biology.

goods. He never offers a hard and fast definition of what does and does not constitute a practice, but he tells us that “Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice... but the good of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is” (*AV* 187). MacIntyre suggests that there are unique internal goods within each practice which are unattainable outside of that practice. Virtues are necessary for receiving, cultivating, maintaining, and transmitting practices. A novice must practice diligence and wisdom in attaining competency in a practice; an initiate must practice justice in following the rules that pertain to a given practice; a master must practice temperance and self-discipline when maintaining a practice; an initiator must practice honesty and equity with students when instructing them in a practice. Without the continuation of such practices, only external goods are attainable.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, MacIntyre thinks that the virtues sustain the communal search for the Good Life. Above and beyond goods internal to practices, MacIntyre also believes that human life is aimed at the fulfillment of a quest: A quest “for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues” (*AV* 219).

MacIntyre writes that virtues

sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good... [the virtues] sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together. (*AV* 219)

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<sup>12</sup> Incidentally, were the tradition of virtues to break down, MacIntyre anticipates that external goods would generally be the ones emphasized and sought out: the goods of money, power, and prestige which are, in MacIntyre’s view, the very goods currently exalted in modern liberal (capitalist) society.



True to Aristotle's theory of the good, MacIntyre understands human life at its best to be a group project of continually qualifying, clarifying, and pursuing the best life for a particular community. Virtues sustain this group project.

Thirdly and lastly, MacIntyre thinks that virtues also sustain traditions of rational enquiry. MacIntyre understands practices to be the embodiments of such traditions, and he also understands any given community, if truly political in the Aristotelian sense, to likewise be an embodiment of such traditions. He writes that the lack of the appropriate virtues "corrupt traditions, just as they do those institutions and practices which derive their life from the traditions of which they are the contemporary embodiments" (*AV* 223). It seems to me that MacIntyre is, as is often the case, signaling to the capitalist tendency to 'corrupt' institutions by focusing them merely towards external goods. Here, however, we see that liberalism and capitalism are both the result and cause of a structural breakdown in virtue.

To reiterate: According to MacIntyre virtue plays a vital role in sustaining political communities understood as group projects of cultivating common goods. They do this in as much as they (a) help us cultivate the practices which yield internal goods (b) guide communal deliberation on and determination of the Good Life and (c) sustain the traditions of rational enquiry which are embodied in practices and political communities.

All of this, I hope, will be found to be a highly satisfying conception of moral virtue. It might be asked, however, in what way this characterization of virtue does not lend itself to a wholly consequentialist, and in fact antiteleological conception of human existence. The answer is that, on its own, MacIntyre's theory of moral virtue is not

sufficient to demonstrate much less vindicate his teleological thinking. The missing element in MacIntyre's theory which serves as the key to his uniquely modern teleology has only been briefly touched upon up until this point: The narrative conception of self.

In chapter one I briefly described MacIntyre's doctrine of the narrative self. There I asserted that the narrative conception of self is a product of MacIntyre's theory of action, and I wrote that according to MacIntyre we can only understand ourselves by locating ourselves within, and identifying ourselves through the *roles* we play within, the narratives of social 'settings': families, practices, communities, and traditions. As I wrote in the previous chapter, MacIntyre observes that the same brute actions can be characterized in different narrative ways: My earlier example was of person rowing a boat for the sake of recreation, exercise, or in order to save a drowning child. MacIntyre's example is of a man working on his garden in order to (a) enjoy gardening, (b) please his wife, or (c) take exercise for health. Each possible narrative description of the selfsame brute action yields a different and unique explanation of and way of understanding the behavior. Furthermore, each narrative characterization makes brute action comprehensible by locating it within a particular narrative setting: The settings of horticulture, domesticity, and healthcare respectively. MacIntyre argues that "We cannot, that is to say, characterize behavior independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others" (*AV* 206). MacIntyre notes that his use of the term 'setting' is inclusive of institutions, practices, and particular social relationships. He argues that not just actions, but individuals too are only understood by reference to settings as they are located in narrative histories: "without the setting and its

changes through time the history of the individual agent and his changes through time will be unintelligible” (AV 206-207). MacIntyre even goes so far as to claim that “There is no such thing as ‘behavior’, to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs and settings” and that “Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions” (AV 208). MacIntyre, therefore, boldly claims at numerous points that epics and narrative poetry gain their narrative form from the narrative quality of human life as it is actually experienced by agents. He even claims that the whole notion of moral accountability is located in the narrative experience of self: We are morally accountable in as much as we find ourselves located within narratives of which we are able to give an account.

We are now able to see how MacIntyre’s critique of radical liberal individualism is connected to his teleological ethics, for individualism of this kind is antithetical to the narrative conception of self:

we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives... we are always under constraints... Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others. (AV 213)

In further elaborating on the nature of this constraint MacIntyre writes that human beings “never start literally *ab initio*; they plunge *in medias res*, the beginnings of their story already made for them by what and who has gone before” and further that “just as they do not begin where they please, they cannot go on exactly as they please either; each character is constrained by the actions of others and by the social settings presupposed in his and their actions” (AV 215). It is here that we get to the core of MacIntyre’s teleology, for he says that the life of the narrative self invariably demonstrates

a certain teleological character. We live out our lives... in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us, some seem already foreclosed and others perhaps inevitable. There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a *telos*—or of a variety of ends or goals—towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present... like characters in a fictional narrative we do not know what will happen next, but nonetheless our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future. (*AV* 215-216)

Hence MacIntyre's teleology is not based on biological essences; it is founded on the phenomenology of life as it is experienced by the narrative self. In elucidating the full ramifications of the narrative conception of selfhood, MacIntyre writes that "the characters in a history are not a collection of persons, but the concept of a person is that of a character abstracted from a history" (*AV* 217) and further, that "personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of a narrative requires" (*AV* 218). This notion of the unity of character which is informed and required by a narrative conception of self, as we have seen, is in a sense directional: It is experienced as (a) demonstrating a certain thrownness from within narrative settings (b) being limited by those settings and (c) being directed towards a particular future. The narrative unity of human life is the key to conceptualizing a Good Life:

To ask 'What is the good life for me?' is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask 'What is the good for man?' is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. (*AV* 218-219)

The narrative self, then, experiences life as a quest, and crucial to this quest is pursuing and attaining the Good.

Because of the purposive and projected quality of the life of the narrative self, "Some conception of the good for man is required" and this good is to be found precisely at the point where MacIntyre's previously (limited) description of the virtues left off. As I

have demonstrated, MacIntyre has characterized the virtues as those capacities and attributes which yield goods: The goods internal to practices, communal deliberation, and traditions of rational enquiry. However, narrative existence seems to demand something more than this various assortment of goods, and the narrative teleology which human existence exhibits seems directed towards “looking for a conception of the good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of the good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues” (*AV* 219). Before the reader grows suspicious that MacIntyre holds a notion of fixed ends, he assures us that the narrative self’s life-as-quest

Is not at all that of a search for something already adequately characterized, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil. It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge... the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man. (*AV* 219)

Hence, we see that according to MacIntyre human life does indeed seem characterized by a certain kind of teleology. The narrative self is thrown into a historical progression of narrative settings of which it is not the author; it is hedged into particular courses of action the pursuit of which is required for intelligibility of action and self to maintain; and it is directed towards particular goals, perhaps most important of which is the quest for an overarching good through which other goods can be ordered.

I hope that this explication of MacIntyre’s modern teleology is satisfying to the reader who had previously suspected that any kind of teleological thinking must necessarily fly in the face of a Darwinian conception of reality. In this sense, then, I

believe that the anti-teleological counterargument which I have presented to MacIntyre's theoretical project, which I have crafted from the work of Richard Rorty, has been dealt with. The narrative, teleological situatedness of the self brings with it not only social, but also moral constraints. As I hope to have demonstrated already, the banal Kantian distinction between moral and prudential norms is alien to MacIntyre's virtue ethics: For MacIntyre moral normativity gains its force neither from metaphysical essences, nor from categorical imperatives. It is from virtues' capacity to sustain and enrich social practices, direct us in attaining and ordering various goods, and guide us in the quest for *the* good, that virtue gains its normative force.

Before concluding this chapter, however, I would like to applaud Rorty for having ascertained in the antiteleological thinking of enlightenment liberalism the seeds of the liberal ideal of romantic self-creation. It will be remembered that Rorty writes that "When Darwin came along... It became possible to see deliberate *self-creation*, a conscious overcoming of the past, as a continuation of the biological story of animal species perpetually, albeit unconsciously, surpassing one another."<sup>13</sup> While this notion of romantic self-creation is indeed one line of reasoning which might be developed from Darwin's theory, this is only the case if one takes Darwin to have exploded all forms of teleological thinking. MacIntyre, however, demonstrates that this is not the case. Further, according to MacIntyre's doctrine of the narrative conception of self, romantic self-creation is incoherent. Let us revisit again a crucial line from *After Virtue*:

we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives... we are always under constraints... Each of us being a main character

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<sup>13</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 265.

in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others. (*AV* 213)

Our life narratives are not ours to author as we will, and hence there is no self-creation, romantic or otherwise. Personal identity is merely a psychological and social construct required by the unity that characterizes a narrative conception of self, that narrative conception in turn being required for human action to be made intelligible. The self is primarily developed through communal deliberation, and such deliberation is itself situated within the settings of particular practices and traditions. Therefore, while my goal in this chapter has been to defend MacIntyre's teleology, and his overall project, against liberal counterargument, I hope to have turned the tables and demonstrated that it is liberalism itself which requires defense.

Liberal individualism and the liberal ideal of romantic self-creation fly in the face of a narrative conception of self. Along with MacIntyre I believe that the narrative conception of self to be highly satisfying in its capacity to demonstrate how human action is, and must be, made intelligible. Liberalism in general has much work to do if it is to maintain its commitment to self-creation. Incidentally, liberalism's notion of romantic self-creation, I would suggest, also informs much of the liberal's commitment to pluralism: The notion that each individual must generate for themselves a conception of the Good Life, that various conceptions of the good life are incommensurable, and that the strength of liberalism is its structural capacity to deal with this 'fact of pluralism.' It is to the issue of pluralism that I will now turn.

## Chapter Three: The Fact of Pluralism

### I: Rawls, Pluralism, and Overlapping Consensus

The second response to MacIntyre's critique of liberalism which I will address concerns the 'fact of pluralism,' especially as it is characterized by John Rawls. This is the notion that modernity is inevitably characterized by a plurality in normative commitments: That different citizens and groups of citizens in a modern society will inevitably hold to divergent convictions be they political, moral, or religious. MacIntyre, on the other hand, emphasizes that properly functioning political communities must maintain consensus on important normative commitments if such communities are to provide for human flourishing. In this sense MacIntyre *seems* to hold an antagonistic position towards pluralism. A serious problem for MacIntyre's position would be the accusation that his theory refuses to properly reckon with the fact of pluralism in as much as pluralism is an insurmountable obstacle to normative consensus. Any theory which denies the basic facts of societal reality is one that can be neither useful nor acceptable, and so if pluralism is indeed a fact of modernity, a MacIntyrean position must demonstrate either that pluralism is not a *permanent* fact or that MacIntyrean theory is *reconcilable* with this fact. In this section I will explore John Rawls' conception of pluralism and 'overlapping consensus' and extrapolate from his theory a counterargument with which a MacIntyrean position must wrestle if MacIntyre's overall critique of liberalism is to be maintained.

In "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus" (1987) Rawls describes the 'fact of pluralism' as an unavoidable and *permanent* aspect of modern society and has submitted the idea of an 'overlapping consensus' as a conception of justice which is appropriate for a pluralistic world. In his essay Rawls presents us with a few novel concepts which it is



important to define from the outset. Firstly, he argues that religious, political, and moral convictions as they are held by individuals are generally situated within, and expressions of, ‘general and comprehensive doctrines.’<sup>14</sup> He writes that

I think of a moral conception as general when it applies to a wide range of subjects of appraisal... and as comprehensive when it includes conceptions of what is of value in human life, ideals of personal virtue and character, and the like, that are to inform much of our conduct.<sup>15</sup>

Rawls worries that modern society is unavoidably such that different citizens in any given nation-state will adhere to differing, and often dramatically conflicting general and comprehensive doctrines. He writes that

This diversity of doctrines—the fact of pluralism—is not a mere historical condition that will soon pass away; it is, I believe, a permanent feature of the public culture of modern democracies. Under the political and social conditions secured by the basic rights and liberties historically associated with these regimes, the diversity of views will persist and may increase.<sup>16</sup>

And Rawls further suggests that statist oppression is the single and highly undesirable remedy to the fact of pluralism. In addition to the fact and permanence of pluralism, Rawls also submits that “a comprehensive doctrine, whenever widely, if not universally, shared in society, tends to become oppressive and stifling”.<sup>17</sup> Hence in Rawls’ view, general and comprehensive doctrines (be they religious or philosophical) are not only unfit to serve as foundations for a modern democratic conception of justice, but further,

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<sup>14</sup> In the following section I shall attempt to convince my reader that Rawls’ notion of ‘general and comprehensive doctrines’ is analogous to MacIntyre’s notion of ‘traditions of rational enquiry’ (and my own suspicion is that the latter notion finds its inspirational philosophical origination in the former and may be considered a reactionary reframing thereof).

<sup>15</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 3.

<sup>16</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 4.

<sup>17</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 4.

rigid adherence to such doctrines is always potentially antagonistic to the freedom of thought and deliberation which are crucial to democratic institutions.<sup>18</sup>

Rawls' rejection of the notion that general and comprehensive doctrines may serve as foundations for a modern democratic theory of justice is intimately caught up in his conception of modern democracies as spaces of mutual political recognition, spaces wherein equal weight is given to contending voices within the sphere of democratic deliberation. Rawls writes that

the public role of a mutually recognized political conception of justice is to specify a point of view from which all citizens can examine before one another whether or not their political institutions are just. It enables them to do this by citing what are recognized among them as valid and sufficient reasons singled out by that conception itself. Questions of political justice can be discussed on the same basis by all citizens [regardless of which general and comprehensive doctrines they subscribe to].<sup>19</sup>

Rawls argues that general and comprehensive doctrines “include conceptions of what is of value in human life [and] ideals of personal virtue and character that are to inform our thought and conduct as a whole” and he further asserts that “Their doctrines of free institutions rest in large part on ideals and values that are not generally, or perhaps even widely, shared in a democratic society” and thus they cannot serve as a “practicable public basis” for a shared understanding of justice in modern, pluralistic democracies.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly Rawls fears that were a conception of justice to be founded on any particular general and comprehensive doctrines, the capacity for modern democracies to be

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<sup>18</sup> Note that Rawls includes not only religious confessions (Catholicism, Protestantism, etc.) but also normative theories (Kantianism, utilitarianism, etc.) under the heading of “general and comprehensive doctrines.”

<sup>19</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 6.

<sup>20</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 6.

enriched by minority voices would be compromised, and the very democratic nature of such institutions would be invalidated.

Rawls assured his reader, though, that general and comprehensive doctrines are not required in order to provide modern democracies with a satisfactory conception of justice. Instead, Rawls argues that all citizens who find themselves situated within liberal democratic traditions have intimate and innate access to “a fund of implicitly shared fundamental ideas and principles” and that “these ideas and principles can be elaborated into a political conception of justice, which we hope can gain the support of an overlapping consensus.”<sup>21</sup> According to Rawls liberalism itself, value-neutral in regards to particular notions of the Good Life as held by competing general and comprehensive doctrines, provides citizens with the elements necessary for consensus on the basic nature of justice. In a liberal society, individual citizens are free to adhere to their doctrinal convictions in the quiet spaces of their own private lives, even as their public lives are guided by a purely liberal (value-neutral) notion of justice.

## **II: The MacIntyrean Response to the Fact of Pluralism**

### *I: Refuting Rawls*

I will now attempt to craft a MacIntyrean response to Rawls, and a satisfying way that a MacIntyrean position can cope with the supposed ‘fact of pluralism.’ As a preliminary move I will begin by analyzing Rawls’ notion of justice (especially in regard to desert and rights), and then move towards the fact of pluralism proper. Preliminarily, I assert that Rawls’ liberal notion of justice is at odds with the considered moral judgements of ordinary practical reasoners. As I have shown early in this essay, MacIntyre argues just

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<sup>21</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 6.

this point: That a value-neutral liberalism deprives citizens of a substantive notion of desert, and thus a compelling conception of justice. While cerebral philosophers such as Rawls and Nozick seem completely comfortable with a theory of justice detached from desert, this may from the perspective of ordinary practical reasoners merely demonstrate the abnormality of these individuals, and the alienating quality of the academic liberal tradition that they represent.<sup>22</sup>

Firstly, I submit that the notion of ‘overlapping consensus’ yields an impoverished notion of justice. As we saw in chapter one of the present essay, MacIntyre argues that it matters a great deal whether a society emphasizes the ‘goods of effectiveness’ (money, prestige, etc.) or the ‘goods of excellence’ (goods internal to practices and dependent on virtue). He further asserts that it is the latter type of goods which are dependent on a non-liberal notion of justice for their proper cultivation and ordering. We will remember that MacIntyre writes that “If excellence is always the specific excellence of some particular form of activity, then desert in respect of excellence is presumably also correspondingly specific, and there will be a multiplicity of standards of desert” and that “Failure to provide some standard in terms of which relative achievement and relative desert can be appraised would leave the members of a community without the possibility of any overall shared standard of just apportionment and just recognition” (*WJWR* 33). Hence, a failure to provide a society with a standard by which excellence (and virtue) is to be ordered will also result in a failure on the part of

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<sup>22</sup> In no way do I tend this as an ad hominem argument against liberal theorists. I mean only to suggest that the liberal theories proposed by such theorists as Rawls and Nozick must seem bizarre from the perspective of ordinary human beings, in as much as these theorists present a notion of justice in alienation from desert. It is undoubtedly the case that MacIntyre writes with the ordinary, proletarian person at the forefront of his conception of human existence, and I think this is one of his greatest merits.

that society to provide citizens with a common understanding of desert in regards to activities and practices which yield the goods of excellence. Citizens will find it impossible to agree upon how different activities which produce the goods of excellence ought to be honored, and so also, they will not be able to agree on which citizens are deserving of particular honors. Hence it is reasonable to assume that the goods of excellence will be undervalued generally, and a liberal society would emphasize instead the goods of effectiveness. The notion of desert in such a liberal society will lack substantive content and will merely correspond to obedience to the rules of cooperation and reciprocity; so too honors will be awarded mainly to the goods of expertise (money etc.) and will be disconnected from any satisfying notion of desert as conceived of in terms of excellence and virtue. The goods of excellence can only be ordered within particular general and comprehensive doctrines (traditions of rational enquiry). Outside of such doctrines, only the goods of expertise can be properly reckoned. So, when Rawls describes liberalism as offering a notion of justice separable from such doctrines or traditions, he is offering us a conception of liberalism which will be inevitably fixated on money, power, prestige, reciprocity, and cooperation, to the exclusion of a whole other range of goods (particularly common goods and the goods of excellence) which liberalism will find it impossible to order and honor appropriately.

Secondly, I submit that Rawls (and likeminded liberal theorists) make overly bold and highly contentious empirical claims in regard to both metaethics and a proper conception of rationality. Let me start by addressing Rawls' claim that a liberal theory of justice, one founded on an overlapping consensus, would avail itself of self-evident facts. He writes that a proper application of liberal justice would be one in which citizens

limit [themselves] to the shared methods of, and the public knowledge available to, common sense, and the procedures and conclusions of science... It is these shared methods and this common knowledge that allows us to speak of *public* reason.<sup>23</sup>

MacIntyre, as we have seen, is deeply suspicious of such a notion of (tradition independent) common sense and public reason. As we have seen he rejects the notion of self-evident, pre-theoretical facts, writing that “facts, like telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were a seventeenth-century invention” (*WJWR* 357). As we have seen, too, MacIntyre argues that practical reasoning is founded on first principles, and such principles, as well as the theoretical commitments upon which they stand, are located within particular traditions of rational enquiry (general and comprehensive doctrines).

What are some of the first principles that Rawls avails himself to in his presentation of overlapping consensus? First and foremost is a liberal commitment to the notion of universal human rights. Rawls writes that a liberal conception of political justice “protects the familiar basic rights and assigns them a special priority; it also includes measures to ensure that all persons in society have sufficient material means to make effective use of such rights.”<sup>24</sup> Rawls, then, argues that the liberal notion of justice is predicated on the endorsement of such ‘familiar basic rights’ (universal human rights) and that this predication “removes from the political agenda the most divisive issues, pervasive uncertainty and serious contention about which must undermine the bases of social cooperation.”<sup>25</sup> Rawls argues that priority ought to be given to these rights against “claims of the general good and of perfectionist values.”<sup>26</sup> So when Rawls refers to a

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<sup>23</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 8.

<sup>24</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 17.

<sup>25</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 17.

<sup>26</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 18.

“fund of implicitly shared fundamental ideas and principles”<sup>27</sup> he is really referring to rights-claims. So, Rawls, and I believe many other liberal theorists, would base the whole notion of an overlapping consensus (or analogous notions of liberal political cohesion amidst the fact of pluralism) on rights. In fact, rights-claims are the basis of the liberal conception of justice as Rawls understands it.

Unfortunately for such liberal theorists, MacIntyre consistently and explicitly denies the existence of any such universal human rights, which is surprising considering that Rawls assumes rights are self-evident to all rational persons as such. MacIntyre writes that his use of the term ‘rights’ refers to

those rights which are alleged to belong to human beings as such and which are cited as a reason for holding that people ought not to be interfered with in their pursuit of life, liberty and happiness... they are supposed to attach equally to all individuals, whatever their sex, race, religion, talents or deserts. (*AV* 69)

Considering that MacIntyre’s overall theory is one which is deeply enmeshed in notions of narrative, situatedness, and moral encumbrance, his rejection of universal rights is hardly surprising. MacIntyre argues that the existence of universal human rights are taken by liberals to be self-evident, but he counters that “there are no self-evident truths” and furthermore that “there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns” (*AV* 69). MacIntyre is profoundly skeptical of the fact that, as he sees things, rights-theories are always ultimately based on moral intuitions. He cites Ronald Dworkin as a failed proponent of rights-theory, and MacIntyre says of him that he

concedes that the existence of such rights cannot be demonstrated, but remarks on this point simply that it does not follow from the fact that a statement cannot be demonstrated that it is not true... Which is true, but could equally be used to defend claims about unicorns and witches. (*AV* 70)

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<sup>27</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 6.

All of this, of course, flies in the face of Rawls' liberal conception of justice.

Rawls writes that the foremost set of assumptions underlying his theory of overlapping consensus are “assumptions contained in what I shall call a reasonable moral psychology,”<sup>28</sup> by which he appears to mean a psychology which is receptive to rights-talk. He intends that such a psychology be locatable outside of any general and comprehensive doctrine, and so to be compelling to all rational persons regardless of their doctrinal/traditional commitments. I submit that Rawls, like many other liberals, has overestimated the degree to which consensus can be achieved outside of particular traditions of rational enquiry. In truth, liberalism turns out to be one more example of such a tradition: Liberalism is itself a general and comprehensive doctrine the likes of which Rawls and other liberals have attempted to detach from theories of justice. Like any other tradition, or general and comprehensive doctrine, liberalism has its own core values which are compelling only in as much as one is already situated within this tradition. Not least among these core liberal values is a commitment to universal human rights. Rawls assumes that citizens, regardless of doctrinal/traditional commitments, are already receptive to rights talk, and find such talk compelling. In effect, Rawls assumes that citizens are already liberals before forming an overlapping consensus—he puts the cart before the horse! Furthermore, Rawls acts as if a ‘liberal psychology’ were identical to a ‘rational psychology’ as such. This is not only a highly contentious claim, but seems also to be painfully ethnocentric. Rawls, like so many other liberals, seems blind to his own doctrinal situatedness.

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<sup>28</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” 22.



## *II: Authentic Pluralism*

I have attempted to argue that MacIntyre has given us the tools to dismantle the kind of liberal project submitted by Rawls: A project which consists in coping with the ‘fact of pluralism’ by situating a conception of justice outside of particular traditions of rational enquiry. One might ask, though, whether MacIntyre can overcome, or deal with, the fact of pluralism in a more satisfactory manner. In regard to the question of overcoming pluralism, I would suggest that MacIntyre cannot, nor does he even intend to, overcome the fact of pluralism as it manifests within nation-states. Additionally, for the MacIntyrean position as I understand it, the fact of pluralism is not the least bit problematic when it occurs between different intermediate communities of the type described in his *Dependent Rational Animals* and elsewhere— those local communities which would form the central units of a MacIntyrean society. That neighboring intermediate communities would hold to different traditions of rational enquiry is not at all troubling, and this is not only acceptable from a MacIntyrean account but seems to be a desirable state of affairs. In this sense MacIntyre’s theory can be understood as a celebration of pluralism amongst different communities.

A more serious question remains: How can a MacIntyrean position respond to the fact of pluralism as it may occur *within* intermediate communities? In fact, MacIntyre’s theory can cope with a limited variety of internal pluralism. MacIntyre has at many points denied the charge that his is a theory based in traditionalistic nostalgia, and I agree that MacIntyre’s theory does not demand that an attempt be made to reverse the course of history and return to a pre-modern state of affairs. MacIntyre’s implicit (Marxist) Hegelianism would inform him of the futility of any such attempts at historic reversal. If

pluralism is indeed a fact of modernity, then it is a fact that must be dealt with as such. I believe that Rawls is correct at least in this sense: The fact of a certain kind of pluralism does indeed seem to be a permanent feature of the modern world. I would disagree, however, with his assertion that there is anything completely new and exceptional in this state of affairs. A certain (limited) kind of pluralism seems to have always been present in traditions of rational enquiry as characterized by MacIntyre.

One might counter, though, that I have only commented on MacIntyre's capacity to cope with a *limited* type of pluralism within intermediate communities, but that I have not yet qualified what type of limitations on pluralism are here being envisioned. One might further question whether or not pluralism can be limited in any sense, even within intermediate communities, and if so, *how*. Furthermore, one might wonder whether this allowance for pluralism within intermediate communities and traditions is merely a concession to liberalism, or whether there are good reasons internal to the MacIntyrean position to desire and cultivate disagreements about goods and ends. I will do my best to offer satisfactory answers to these excellent questions.

Before I address the MacIntyrean understanding of (and endorsement of) limited pluralism, I will first speak briefly about the importance of limited consensus, and specifically characterize the type of limitation I am referring to. Let us revisit a statement from MacIntyre where he writes that within communal deliberation

It is not that there cannot be rational disagreements about ends, but... if debate is not to be sterile, there must be at some further and more fundamental level at least partial agreement about those ends to which the achievement of the ends under debate would or would not be a means. (*DRA* 107)

Within intermediate communities, and within traditions of rational enquiry, there may be a great deal of disagreement and debate about many issues, so long as there is at least partial agreement on core theoretical commitments.<sup>29</sup> Agreement on core values is crucial first and foremost in order that human lives may be and remain coherent. As we saw in chapter two of this essay, a narrative conception of self brings with it an understanding of intrinsic situatedness for human beings which is not only moral but epistemic. MacIntyre writes that “the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part” (*AV* 222). So partial agreement on primary values within particular communities and traditions is a requirement for members to maintain a coherent sense of self. In fact, a modern understanding of freedom as a state of complete pluralism, that is complete “freedom of choice of values” (complete independence from any doctrinal/traditional commitments) would from the perspective of traditional persons “appear more like the freedom of ghosts” (*AV* 127). It is in this sense that MacIntyre speaks of “the inescapably historically and socially context-bound character which any substantive set of principles of rationality, whether theoretical or practical, is bound to have” (*WJWR* 4). So absolute pluralism (complete lack of agreement on goods and values) makes no sense from the perspective of a narrative conception of self and would lead to a breakdown in practical rationality.

We will remember that partial agreement on core values is important in order to achieve some form of consensus on common goods, and this consensus is particularly

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<sup>29</sup> It could be countered that Rawls is himself submitting a set of such core theoretical commitments which might form the bases for collective deliberation, but his (liberal) commitments would (from a MacIntyrian position) appear too impoverished for such purposes, especially in as much as Rawls’ theory lacks a robust notion of desert.

important in light of the fact that individual goods are not isolate from common goods. Hence consensus on core values, especially in regard to common goods, is crucial for human flourishing. Part of this flourishing, as we have seen, is constituted by communal deliberation on goods and virtues. However, one cannot properly and fully enter into such communal deliberation without endorsing certain core values. According to MacIntyre, “It is only because and when a certain range of moral commitments is shared... That not only shared deliberation, but shared critical enquiry concerning that deliberation and the way of life of which it is a part, becomes possible” (*DRA* 161). For MacIntyre it follows that “Moral commitment to these virtues and to the common good is not an external constraint upon, but a condition of enquiry and criticism” (*DRA* 162). So a shared consensus on certain basic commitments within a community and tradition is necessary in order to fully enter into deliberation and argumentation. A common moral language, and a common set of moral and ideological commitments, is the foundation of a robust dialogue and debate on how lives and communities ought to be.

Let me further note that this kind of shared understanding of core values and goods is not to be understood as doctrinal in the sense of requiring an intellectual subservience to ideological authorities. The MacIntyrean understanding of practical reasoning as it necessarily occurs within traditional/doctrinal frameworks is entirely quotidian. The consensus is embodied in

an understanding that may or may not be articulated at the level of theory, but that will be embodied in and presupposed by the way in which immediate practical questions receive answers in actions. This type of shared understanding is one familiar to most of us in a variety of local social contexts. We rely on it in many of the everyday enterprises of family and household life, in schools, in neighborhoods, in parishes, on farms, in fishing crews and in other workplaces, and, that is to say, in all those practices and projects in which immediate decision-

making has to presuppose rationally justifiable answers to such questions as ‘How does my good relate to the good of others engaged in this enterprise?’ (TMR 247-248)

Hence, we see why intermediate communities are the spaces where at least partial consensus on basic goods and values ought to be expected: Because there must occur in these spaces such a consensus in order for practices and group projects to go well.

So far, I have shown why a certain kind of consensus is crucial for intermediate communities and traditions of enquiry; I have shown to what extent pluralism is natural within such spaces; and I have shown why a certain kind of consensus is important in intermediate communities. What of *dissent*? Does the MacIntyrean have good reason for *cultivating* a limited, though fairly robust, pluralism within intermediate communities? Must there be much communal debate and disagreement concerning goods and values? The answer to these questions is yes.

The patriarch of MacIntyre’s own tradition of rational enquiry, Aristotle, asserted (according to MacIntyre) that conflict and pluralism was problematic within a polis and was characterized by Aristotle as something to be avoided. Nonetheless, MacIntyre (true to his position that a living tradition is one that evolves according to its own internal standards of enquiry) rejects this aspect of Aristotle’s theory. MacIntyre applauds Sophocles’ presentation of the bitter facts of life: That conflict and the tragedy that results therefrom is a permanent aspect of human existence. MacIntyre writes that “The absence of [Aristotle’s] view of the centrality of opposition and conflict in human life conceals from Aristotle also one important source of human learning about and one important milieu of human practices of the virtues” (AV 163). MacIntyre further writes that if Aristotle had grasped this “Sophoclean insight” he would further have understood that “it

is through conflict and sometimes only through conflict that we learn what our ends and purposes are” (AV 164). Hence, MacIntyre understands conflict, and a sense of limited pluralism, to be an educating force which motivates organic evolution within traditions of enquiry.

In fact, MacIntyre seems to think that liberals, on the whole, have an extremely narrow and superficial view of traditions of rational enquiry, and the dynamism and (tempered) plurality which rightly exists within them. He writes that in describing and analyzing such traditions

We are apt to be misled here by the ideological uses to which the concept of a tradition has been put by conservative political theorists. Characteristically such theorists have followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. Both contrasts obfuscate. For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what has hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic. Moreover when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose. So when an institution—a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital—is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good forming is or what good medicine is. Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always already dying or dead. (AV 221-222)

I believe the preceding quote is specular in its demonstration of the dynamism of traditions of rational enquiry as MacIntyre understands them. Further, it shows that MacIntyre’s theory has the capacity to face the fact of pluralism even *within* particular intermediate communities as they embody particular traditions of rational enquiry. Therefore, from a MacIntyrean perspective, not only is the fact of pluralism to be acknowledged, but it is both tolerable and natural within intermediate communities, in as much as such pluralism can coexist with an intelligible notion of self and goods.

Although it is true that a great deal of contention might, and indeed must exist within an intermediate community or tradition, nonetheless in order for communal deliberation to be fruitful (and contrary to John Stuart Mill's assertions in *On Liberty*) certain views are to be excluded. MacIntyre's example is the denial of the historicity of the holocaust, and he asserts that "this is an opinion that ought not to be tolerated in any local community, and to tolerate it is a form of vice, and... those who express it ought to be silenced" (*EP* 220). The mode of silencing that MacIntyre suggests is to exclude those who voice such views from decision-making deliberation, and also from positions within education. While it is always up for debate, according to MacIntyre, which views ought to be silenced, it is through exclusion from public discourse that such silencing is to take place. Just as base-line consensus concerning common goods is a natural aspect of cooperative life between those who interact with one another in local practices, so too is such exclusionary silencing a natural and commonplace occurrence. This is the way which, according to MacIntyre's characterization of traditions of rational enquiry, the fact of pluralism has been dealt with in the past, and in this rather quotidian way we can expect intermediate communities to continue to cope with the fact of pluralism in modernity.

So far, we have seen that not only is the fact of pluralism anticipated and well dealt with in MacIntyre's theory, we have seen that it does not necessarily serve as an obstacle to arriving at a basic consensus concerning common goods and values within intermediate communities if communal deliberation be allowed to take place organically. I would like to conclude this chapter by submitting an even stronger claim: Not only is

the fact of pluralism tolerable in MacIntyrean communities and traditions, it is actually to be *celebrated*. MacIntyre writes that

it is in important part through disagreement and conflict that the common life of [intermediate communities] is enriched. For it is only through disagreement and conflict, only through aiming at conclusions that emerge from being tested by the most powerful counter-arguments available, that such groups are able to embody in their shared lives the rational pursuit and achievement of the relevant goods. (EP 207)

And it is thusly that MacIntyre can speak of the “goods of conflict” (EP 207). While Aristotle himself could not conceive of these goods of conflicts, MacIntyre has surpassed and improved upon the Aristotelian tradition by affirming these goods, and he has done so in a way which demonstrates how traditions of rational enquiry constitute dynamic dialectical spaces, ever striving towards greater heights of excellence and growing organically towards better versions of themselves.

In this chapter I have constructed a counterargument from Rawls’ which suggests that MacIntyre’s theory must either overcome or allow for the fact of pluralism. I have chosen the latter option. MacIntyre’s theory is in no way at odds with pluralism among intermediate communities and traditions (within nation-states), and the theory even allows for wide pluralism within intermediate communities and traditions. Though there must be limited foundational consensus on core theoretical and ethical commitments, this is not necessitated by ideology, but is required by the practical nature of local practice and projects of cultivating common goods. Nonetheless, intermediate communities and traditions of enquiry as characterized by MacIntyre are spaces of fruitful disagreement and debate, and this conflict is not only tolerated but celebrated within a MacIntyrean framework.



It is because there is limited foundational consensus within these communities and traditions that conflict can give rise to genuine goods. This is to be contrasted with the incommensurability of debate within liberal spaces as MacIntyre characterizes them. There, radical pluralism, subjectivism, and individualism have deprived participants in public debate of any agreement on what might constitute a successful argument. And since in the mind of many liberal theorists, Rawls among them, liberal government must be value-neutral, there seems to be no higher-order rescue from the intractability and incommensurability which plagues debate within liberal communities. But are liberals such as Rawls correct in insisting that liberalism be necessarily value-neutral and anti-perfectionist? It is to this set of issues that I now turn.

## Chapter Four: Liberal Perfectionism

### I: Raz, Autonomy, and Liberal Perfectionism

The third and final response to MacIntyre's critique of liberalism which I will construct and address concerns the possibility of a liberal pluralism, especially as that possibility is presented by Joseph Raz. This response would submit that MacIntyre's critique of liberalism is only compelling in as much as liberalism is taken to be necessarily committed to a value-neutral theory of politics. Such a liberal counterargument might claim that while many liberal theories are indeed marked by a commitment to value-neutrality, liberalism is itself a broader theory that can allow for the type of perfectionism that MacIntyre deems necessary for flourishing political communities. If liberalism is not necessarily synonymous with value-neutrality, and if liberal theory can allow for perfectionism, this might suggest that MacIntyre's critique of liberalism is only partially compelling. It might be the case that MacIntyre's critique of liberalism really only applies to certain (albeit dominant) strains of liberalism but is unsuccessful in completely demolishing liberal theory in its broadest sense. In order to determine whether this response to MacIntyre's critique is successful I will first present an exposition of Raz' theory of liberal perfectionism, and then I will attempt to determine if MacIntyre's theory can be reconciled with perfectionist liberalism.

In his book *The Morality of Freedom* (1986) Joseph Raz engages in three interconnected projects which are important for our present consideration: (a) he attempts to refute anti-perfectionist liberalism, (b) he affirms autonomy to be a central component of the liberal conception of the Good Life, (c) he presents his own theory of liberal perfectionism. I will spend some time exploring each of these projects.

Firstly, Raz rejects the possibility of liberal political neutrality. He aims specifically at John Rawls' theory, and much of his critique of Rawls is complementary to my own. Raz, agreeing with Thomas Nagel, affirms that Rawls' theory fails to maintain value-neutrality. Following Nagel, Raz argues that Rawls' theory suffers from an "individualist bias" and he quotes Nagel as asserting that the primary goods established by Rawls' theory are "not equally valuable in pursuit of all conceptions of the good" but are, in their application, more useful in satisfying individualistic preferences.<sup>30</sup> Raz goes on to present the notion of *moral welfarism*: The position that there are no valid ideal-regarding principles, and that only want-regarding principles provide normative force. Raz describes Rawls' theory, and kindred liberal theories of value-neutrality, as examples not of moral welfarism but of the weaker *political welfarism*: This is the stance that some ideal-regarding principles may be valid but must be excluded from political deliberation.<sup>31</sup> Raz argues that "political welfarism is not neutral between ideals of the good since it clearly favours moral welfarism above all other views."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Raz argues, the possibility of ideal-regarding principles seriously undermine the notion that the satisfaction of want is inherently good, much less that want-satisfaction forms the proper goal of liberal political systems. All of this, clearly, is perfectly in line with MacIntyre's critique of liberalism. The problem for MacIntyre arises, however, in that Raz intends not to critique but to vindicate liberalism as a theory founded upon ideal-regarding principles of a highly compelling sort.

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<sup>30</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 119.

<sup>31</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 138-139.

<sup>32</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 140.

Next, Raz describes the ideal-regarding principles which he endorses: these principles are founded on the ideal of *personal autonomy*. While Raz admits that it is probably true that no single “political principle has commanded the respect of all liberals... the liberal tradition [nonetheless] displays a considerable degree of unity and continuity.”<sup>33</sup> It is a variegated commitment to personal autonomy that Raz identifies as the guiding light and unifying feature of the liberal tradition as a whole. Raz identifies autonomy as the liberal ideal *par excellence*. Raz does not attempt to convince his reader of the universality of this value: He readily admits that “autonomy is in part a social ideal.”<sup>34</sup> Raz understands liberal theory to be, in its best form, a description of limitations on government in service to the ideal of autonomy. Autonomy is, for Raz, the free choice of which life goals an individual will pursue. He writes that “The autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life” and he asserts that autonomy is “an essential ingredient of individual well-being.”<sup>35</sup> According to Raz, the primary condition necessary for autonomy is that many different options in lifestyles, and life goals, be available to an individual. He emphasizes the qualification that only morally acceptable options should be considered necessary: “Autonomy is valuable only if exercised in pursuit of the good. The ideal of autonomy requires only the availability of morally acceptable options.”<sup>36</sup> Raz affirms that “Autonomy is a distinct ideal”<sup>37</sup> and in no way can be supposed or supported by a value-neutral political theory.

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<sup>33</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 378.

<sup>35</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 369.

<sup>36</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 381.

<sup>37</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 395.

Finally, Raz submits his own theory of liberal perfectionism. Raz suggests that it was due to the mistaken belief that commitments to autonomy and value-neutrality are mutually necessitated that the latter commitment came into high regard among many liberals. Hence Raz rejects the notion that liberalism is necessarily an anti-perfectionist theory of government. Having endorsed the notion that liberal theory is committed to a particular (general and comprehensive) notion of the Good Life, Raz asserts that perfectionist liberalism “regards personal autonomy as an essential ingredient of the good life, and regards... autonomy as one of the most important moral principles.”<sup>38</sup> So value-neutrality is in fact a distorted elaboration on the original liberal project of limiting government coercion. Raz considers the original limits on coercion to have been implemented in the name of the perfectionist commitment to autonomy.

Raz is particularly interested in reviewing and reinterpreting John Stuart Mill’s ‘harm principle.’<sup>39</sup> According to Raz this principle is often thought to be founded on the notion that coercion is an intrinsic evil, and it is thusly too often understood as justifying and endorsing anti-perfectionist commitments. Raz reinterprets Mill’s harm principle to understand the notion of harm to cover governmental failure to provide citizens with the conditions necessary for autonomy. It is because liberal government embodies a particular notion of the Good Life (to which autonomy is central) that it is charged with the perfectionist duty to provide for the conditions of autonomy. In service to this ideal coercion is justifiable.

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<sup>38</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 415.

<sup>39</sup> Raz writes that principle states that “the only justification for coercively interfering with a person is to prevent him from harming others” but notes that he means to address the “somewhat wider principle which regards the prevention of harm to anyone (himself included) as the only justifiable ground for coercive interference with a person.” (Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 412)

The conditions of autonomy are positive freedoms, and for Raz such positive freedoms only gain their value from autonomy's value. Autonomy itself, however, is only valuable in as much as it is implemented in making morally valuable life choices. Since the autonomy principle is only instrumentally valuable to the grander project of liberal perfectionism, commitment to autonomy is in no way contrary to the position that liberal political bodies ought to guide citizens morally. Raz writes that his argument "maintains that it is the function of governments to promote morality."<sup>40</sup> According to Raz' assessment

Coercion is used to ensure compliance with the law. If the law reflects autonomy-based duties then failure to comply harms others and the harm principle is satisfied [hence] the autonomy principle is a perfectionist principle... the autonomy principle permits and even requires governments to create morally valuable opportunities, and to eliminate repugnant ones.<sup>41</sup>

Even though liberalism is committed to perfectionist provision of the conditions of autonomy (a satisfactory provision of a sufficient variety of life options) Raz notes that (a) liberal government need not provide for any *particular* life option, but only a goodly variety and (b) liberal government need not provide for morally unacceptable life options. Within these bounds, perfectionism within liberal institutions can be quite sweeping. Raz writes that his understanding of liberal theory "is consistent with many perfectionist politics of the kind required by any moral theory which values autonomy highly."<sup>42</sup> Hence Raz understands liberal theory to be mainly a caveat and limitation on government coercion: Government coercion is only justifiable in establishing the conditions of autonomy. Raz asserts that in his theory "It is in the deciding which options to encourage

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<sup>40</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 415.

<sup>41</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 417.

<sup>42</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 418.

more than others that perfectionist considerations dominate.”<sup>43</sup> Coercion may be used to promote morally valuable life-options, but not in the suppression of morally repugnant life-options, for the reason that the presence of such repugnant options does not constitute a constraint on citizens’ autonomy.

Nonetheless, more or less any perfectionist policy is acceptably ‘liberal’ if, according to Raz, such policies do not resort to coercion except in maintaining the conditions of autonomy. Raz advises that liberal governments use non-coercive tactics to discourage morally repugnant life options. Gesturing to the kind of coercion-limited (soft) perfectionism that his theory allows for, Raz writes of the justifiable and desirable perfectionist creation of a *public culture*

which maintains and encourages the cultivation of certain tastes and the undertaking of certain pursuits. A public culture which inculcates respect for the environment, and for its transformation at the hands of past generations, and which cultivates agreeable design and good taste in landscaping and urban planning, while not positively required as a condition of autonomy, is consistent with it.<sup>44</sup>

Hence by using its resources to generate morally valuable life options and cultivating a public culture which encourages citizens to choose such options, even as it simultaneously discourages morally repugnant life options (by depriving those options of its resources and support) liberal perfectionist government bodies can be quite effective in promoting and encouraging particular notions of the Good Life.

## **II: MacIntyre as Perfectionist Liberal**

*I: MacIntyre’s Insistence on a Neutral State*

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<sup>43</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 418.

<sup>44</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 420.

Raz' notion of perfectionist liberalism opens up new possibilities for interpreting MacIntyre. If we allow for the notion of such a perfectionism, it becomes possible for us to understand MacIntyre's critique of liberalism as taking place within liberal theory. If the attempt is made to understand MacIntyre as a heterodox, perfectionist liberal, it must certainly be granted that he is far to the economic left, and ultimately at odds with most forms of liberal theory as they are given expression in modern liberal societies. Especially in as much as modern liberalism is wedded to capitalism, MacIntyre remains its staunch opponent. Nonetheless, taken in its broadest (perfectionist) sense, liberalism might be a theory which encompasses even MacIntyre's unique position. Indeed, throughout MacIntyre's writings there are brief, subtle indications that his theory might indeed represent a highly unorthodox, anti-capitalist, economically left-wing, culturally conservative, perfectionist school of liberalism.

I wish to first concentrate on the liberal critique of the state, and the doctrine of limits on state power. Let me note that despite Raz' endorsement of the theoretical possibility of a highly perfectionist type of liberalism, he nonetheless admits that *practically* speaking the modern liberal nation-state is not in an excellent position to effect extensive perfectionist programs. Raz writes that national governments are generally vulnerable to "the dangers of corruption, of bureaucratic distortions and insensitivities, of fallibility in judgement, and uncertainty of purpose, and... the insufficiency and the distortion of the information reaching the central organs of government."<sup>45</sup> Given these practical considerations Raz concludes that "a balanced view of the shortcomings of governments will lead to much more extensive freedom from

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<sup>45</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 427.



governmental action than is entailed by the doctrine of autonomy-based freedom” and that

The extended freedom from governmental action is based on the practical inability of governments to discharge their duty to serve the freedom of their subjects... In most cases there is no other body nor any other social process which can achieve what government action fails to, that is the existence of a full capacity for autonomy to all members of a community.<sup>46</sup>

So, despite Raz’s understanding of liberalism as a perfectionist theory, he nonetheless prescribes familiar liberal inhibitions of that perfectionism—not due to a desire for formal and structural value-neutrality, but out of a practical acknowledgement of the flaws and limitations of actually effecting perfectionist policies across nations.

Perhaps shockingly, not only does MacIntyre completely agree with Raz in this regard, but actually goes much farther in lambasting the nation-state as being absolutely incapable of effective and beneficial perfectionist programs. MacIntyre writes that, despite the desirability of moral consensus and perfectionism in intermediate political bodies “the modern state is indeed totally unfitted to act as moral educator of any community” (*AV* 195). He writes that

Nothing in my argument suggests, let alone implies, any good grounds for rejecting certain forms of government as necessary and legitimate; what the argument does entail is that the modern state is not such a form of government... This does not mean that there are not many tasks only to be performed in and through government which still require performing: the rule of law, so far as it is possible in a modern state, has to be vindicated, injustice and unwarranted suffering have to be dealt with, generosity has to be exercised, and liberty has to be defended, in ways that are sometimes only possible through the use of governmental institutions. (*AV* 255)

To repeat, intermediate local communities are, for MacIntyre, the appropriate place for perfectionism, and he emphasizes that

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<sup>46</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 428-429.

there is always tension and sometimes conflict between the demands of state and market on the one hand and the requirements of rational local community on the other. Those who value rational local communal enterprise are therefore wise to order their relationships with state and market so that, as far as possible, they remain able to draw upon those resources that can only be secured from state and market, while preserving their own sufficiency, their self-reliance, and their freedom from constraint by either. They must treat the agencies of the state with unremitting suspicion. So by a very different route we have arrived at very much the same conclusion as that reached both by classical liberals and by modern liberals: the state must not be allowed to impose any one particular conception of the human good or identify one such conception with its own interests and causes. It must afford tolerance to a diversity of standpoints... it cannot generally be trusted to promote any worthwhile set of values, including those of autonomy and liberty... Whoever is to draw the line between those points of view concerning the human good whose expression is to be tolerated and those points of view whose expression is not to be tolerated, it should not be the agencies of the state [and in regards to state neutrality] Even although that neutrality is never real, it is an important fiction, and those of us who recognized its importance as well as its fictional character will agree with liberals in upholding a certain range of civil liberties. (*EP* 213-214)

So MacIntyre, at last, admits that his theory is a strange bedfellow to Rawls' theory: Both endorse value-neutrality in the nation-state. For MacIntyre, however, this is (a) merely an endorsement of an ostensible and superficial neutrality and (b) does not extend to other political bodies. Again, MacIntyre's emphasis is on local intermediate communities. However, we may apply Raz's notion of liberal perfectionism to these intermediate communities. If Raz is correct that perfectionism within such communities does not necessarily render them un-liberal, granted they maintain the principle of autonomy, then it becomes more and more difficult to establish firmly that MacIntyre's theory is wholly outside the liberal tradition in its widest sense. Raz and MacIntyre can in fact be seen as affirming one another's theories from different angles: MacIntyre endorses even more strongly Raz's suspicions concerning the nation-state, and Raz presents a notion of liberal perfectionism which seems to allow us to consider MacIntyre's ideal intermediate

community as being within the purview of liberalism. This latter point, though, is only true if it can be shown that MacIntyre's theory is reconcilable with the principle of autonomy.

## *II: MacIntyre and Autonomy*

Raz has argued that it is not value-neutrality, but autonomy, that truly forms the moral core of liberal theory. Raz writes that "Autonomy is an ideal of self-creation"<sup>47</sup> and that "Autonomy is opposed to a life of coerced choices."<sup>48</sup> In the second chapter of the present essay I addressed MacIntyre's narrative conception of self, and there I asserted that romantic self-creation in its most radical sense is at odds with MacIntyre's narrative understanding of self. I argued that MacIntyre's theory postulates a self which (a) demonstrates a certain thrownness from within narrative settings (b) is limited by those settings and (c) is directed towards a particular future by its narrative trajectory. I would like to again affirm this position that the narrative self is at odds with radical romantic self-creation.

It is possible, however, to understand Raz's notion of autonomy as being not so radical as many liberal conceptions of self-creation. Raz has, after all, qualified his endorsement of autonomy as being only instrumentally valuable in that it allows for individuals to make morally valuable life choices, and provided for a perfectionist liberal political bodies' right to encourage morally valuable life options and discourage morally repugnant life options. This is an important qualification in Raz's conception of self-

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<sup>47</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 370.

<sup>48</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 371.

creation, and one that seems to bring Raz's theory closer to reconciliation with MacIntyre's.

The question now stands: Does MacIntyre's theory actually endorse some form of autonomy along Razian lines? I believe an argument can be made that MacIntyre does indeed affirm the value of some such form of autonomy. At various points, in brief and subtle ways, MacIntyre does indeed acknowledge the importance of individuals choosing for themselves which goods to pursue in co-authoring a successful life narrative for themselves. He writes that

the good of each particular individual is more than the common good. And there are of course common goods other than the goods of the overall community: the goods of families and of other groups, the goods of a variety of practices. Each individual as an independent practical reasoner has to answer the question of what place it is best that each of those goods should have in her or his life. (*DRA* 109)

Elsewhere MacIntyre emphasizes that one vitally important application of the virtues of independent reasoning is choosing for oneself the profession that one will pursue. He gives a hypothetical example of a father who, in order to provide for his family, has had to abandon his aspirations for a particular career. In MacIntyre's scenario the father

now projects his fantasies concerning the career that he might have had on to one of his children. He allows his passionate wish that that child should become what he could not become to blind him to his child's need to become independent. And that child, already exercising her or his powers as an independent practical reasoner, has identified excellent reasons for not pursuing such a career. (*DRA* 104)

MacIntyre writes that

If the child, however, were to do what her or his parents demand, she or he would fail in two closely related ways. She or he would show her or himself to be defective in the virtues of independent practical reasoning. And she or he would make a serious mistake about what they in fact owe to others. (*DRA* 104)

This seems to be a clear case of MacIntyre endorsing the importance of something suspiciously close to Raz's notion of autonomy: The ability to freely choose for oneself the style of life one will pursue.

Furthermore, although MacIntyre emphasizes that according to the narrative conception of self, we first and primarily understand ourselves by the *roles* that we inhabit in particular narrative settings, MacIntyre nevertheless cautions against absolute identification with such roles. MacIntyre writes that it is vital to any flourishing social structure that there be "a real possibility for milieus in which reflective critical questioning of standards hitherto taken for granted takes place" and that such critical questioning requires individuals to "stand back from and reconsider their engagement with the established role-structures" (*EP* 192). Interestingly, MacIntyre characterizes 'modern liberal individualism' as exhibiting a social compartmentalization in which persons exhibit a fragmented social existence in which they intermittently identify with various roles (professional, domestic, etc.) while losing any sense of a continuity of moral norms or ways of being which apply across these different roles. Once again referring to milieus in which reflective critical questioning of standards takes place (and I believe here he is gesturing to his ideal intermediate community) he writes that "Such milieus would provide agents with... a substantive identity independent of their roles and as having responsibilities that do not derive from those roles" (*EP* 199). Here again, in as much as MacIntyre warns against allowing one's sense of self to be subsumed completely by one's narrative roles, MacIntyre seems to be affirming the value of some sort of autonomy.

MacIntyre's virtues of independent reasoning apparently lead those who exhibit these virtues to choose for themselves which ways of life they will pursue, and further, protect them from completely identifying with their social roles, and instead, maintain the capacity to critique the role-structures within which they find themselves. I find it difficult to understand how his characterization of independent reasoning is completely at odds with Raz's notion of autonomy. Even given MacIntyre's emphasis on the thrown, situated quality of the narrative self—that many options are not open to it, and that authentic choice must take place within the standards established by the particular practices, traditions, communities, and other narrative settings within which one finds oneself—MacIntyre nonetheless seems to endorse some type of autonomy as a crucial element to the Good Life.

### *III: MacIntyre as Marxist*

I have shown that MacIntyre affirms the value of practical independent reasoning, and I have suggested that part of his conception thereof includes what can loosely be identified with a liberal conception of autonomy (particularly the sort of autonomy characterized by Joseph Raz). Are we now at a position to identify MacIntyre's theory as liberal in the broadest sense? Perhaps. Much rests on the relative value given to autonomy. At certain points Raz suggests that autonomy is merely one component in the liberal notion of human flourishing. He writes, for example, that "Autonomy is a constituent element of the good life."<sup>49</sup> However, in reviewing Raz's overall theory, it is clear to me that according to his view autonomy is not merely one constituent element of the good life: It is the core component thereof. Standing in agreement with H.L.A. Hart, Raz writes that

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<sup>49</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 408.

the principle of autonomy “sets a limit on the means allowed in pursuit of moral ideals.”<sup>50</sup> Hence autonomy is taken by Raz as trumping other ideals. It is preeminent in weight in Raz’s theory, and it is this aspect which places Raz’s theory firmly in the liberal camp. In fact, while Raz’s theory does technically allow for a wide variety of perfectionist policies, granted the principles of autonomy are endorsed, in reality most of his examples of perfectionism are limited to the perfectionist promotion of autonomy. For Raz, the Good Life is one in which autonomy is given the pride of place.

I want to argue that this is not clearly the case for MacIntyre. If Raz is correct in describing the foundational liberal commitment to be an overriding affirmation of personal autonomy as the *key element* of the Good Life, and the trumping consideration in issues of justice, then it is not clear to me that MacIntyre can be considered a liberal after all. While MacIntyre does indeed affirm the importance of something resembling autonomy in the life well lived, he does not appear to understand it as being the most important component of the Good Life.

Raz writes that his own theory presents a “doctrine of freedom, the core of which is the promotion of the conditions of autonomy.”<sup>51</sup> Raz then understands liberal theory as resting on a notion of liberty as positive freedom. On the other hand, MacIntyre seems to emphasize a different (Marxist) conception of freedom. In concluding an important essay dedicated to the common good MacIntyre writes that

We are now in a position to understand better what it is that makes some types of social relationship oppressive. Some measure of inequality—it must not be too large—is not necessarily oppressive. And that some people rather than others should exercise power through political office is not necessarily a mark of

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<sup>50</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 420.

<sup>51</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 420.

oppression. What is always oppressive is any form of social relationship that denies to those who participate in it the possibility of the kind of learning from each other about the nature of their common good that can issue in socially transformative action. (TMR 250)

Hence MacIntyre does not seem to hold to a liberal conception of freedom: He affirms neither negative nor positive freedom to be the most important political consideration, or the best characterization of liberty, and as we have seen, he dismisses the possibility of universal rights as holding the pride of place either. For MacIntyre, the most important element of the Good Life is not autonomy, but *socially transformative action*.

In the final analysis action and labor have always been at the heart of MacIntyre's theory.<sup>52</sup> His mature theory began with a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics which identified the original purpose of virtue to be the cultivation of 'practices' by which, I suspect, he primarily meant crafts.<sup>53</sup> He continued on to present a narrative conception of self which was founded on a particular theory of action: A narrative theory of action which

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<sup>52</sup> MacIntyre's early writings were explicitly Marxist, and though in his mature phase he made some middling attempt to distance himself from doctrinal Marxism proper, it is clear to me that he never strayed far from his original ideological commitments. I understand Marxism to be the one constant throughout MacIntyre's long career: Marx's critique of capitalism forms the pole star for MacIntyre's long and winding quest for truth. It appears to be the central element of his life narrative, if I may be so bold.

<sup>53</sup> I employ the term "craft" in the widest possible sense and somewhat rhetorically (in the way used when describing religion as "priestcraft" or politics as "statecraft"). Nonetheless, I do believe that MacIntyre is presenting us with a genealogy of virtue rooted in the earliest (and most literal) crafts, and that these productive and reproductive crafts are always at the forefront of his mind when thinking about practices. When he first gives his definition of practices, he gives three examples, two of which are literal crafts: Architecture and farming (AV 187). He elsewhere praises Aquinas "as someone who understood philosophical activity as that of a craft and indeed of the chief of the crafts" (TRV 127) and he even seems to use the term "craft" as synonymous with "practice" when he says that "A craft in good order has to be embodied in a tradition in good order. And to be adequately initiated into a craft is to be adequately initiated into a tradition" (TRV 128). Especially when referring to the power of practices to (virtuously) transform desires, he speaks of practices as primarily a set of literal crafts through which both the worker and the world are transformed. On this point he is particularly concerned that both industrial proletarianization and capitalism "tend to deprive workers of those forms of practice through which they can discover conceptions of a good and of virtues adequate to the moral needs of resistance" (TMR 232) and here I again understand MacIntyre to be locating his notion of practices primarily in literal crafts. In fact, it is in as much as other forms of craft (philosophy etc.) are similar to literal productive and reproductive crafts that they can be understood as practices.



emphasizes practices as the foremost narrative settings within which human action, and by extension human lives, are to be properly understood. Hence MacIntyre's teleology is rooted in his understanding of socially transformative action (unalienated labor) as the core of human freedom and the Good Life. It is from Marx, I believe, not Aristotle, that MacIntyre's notion of *telos* directly emerges.<sup>54</sup> He writes of this *telos* that

It is the *telos* of some form of what Marx in the first thesis calls *objective* activity... Objective activity is activity in which the end or aim of the activity is such that by making that end their own individuals are able to achieve something of universal worth embodied in some particular form of practice through cooperation with other such individuals... Practices whose activity can be thus characterized stand in sharp contrast to the practical life of civil society. It is a contrast which is best expressed in Aristotelian rather than in Hegelian terms. (TMR 225)

This objective activity is, of course, labor as world transformation, and this, not autonomy, stands at the heart of MacIntyre's notion of liberty. It stands, too, at the heart of his notion of the Good Life: Transformative labor is of the highest value for MacIntyre, and in this sense he might not be a liberal after all. While MacIntyre seems to emphasize some sort of distributist structure as best sustaining the Marxist ideal of objective activity, it is this activity, and not autonomy, which is, in the end, the highest ideal in MacIntyre's theory.

The liberal-like commitment to state-neutrality is, in MacIntyre's theory, only a practical method of ensuring that intermediate communities may be sustained in order that traditional practices may continue therein. Likewise, the liberal-like commitment to autonomy is, indeed, of value to MacIntyre: But its greatest value may be that critical, independent thinking is crucial for a flourishing proletariat in order that it may all the

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<sup>54</sup> I do not mean to detract from MacIntyre's claims to Aristotelian pedigree, but I do wish to emphasize that his is more specifically a Marxist Aristotelianism.

better pursue objective activity. It is no coincidence that in the above-quoted hypothetical scenario drawn by MacIntyre of the controlling father (which seems to be the clearest demonstration of MacIntyre's commitment to autonomy) the scenario focused on the choice of *work*. Autonomy seems to be most important for MacIntyre because it ensures that individuals best fitted to a particular type of labor carry it out. Autonomy, for him, means finding the craft one is best suited for. Again, and again, MacIntyre's notion of freedom seems to circle back around to the notion that it is labor, unalienated labor, which is truly liberating, and of the highest value in life. Labor and craft are the roots of virtue, labor and craft are the foundations of intermediate communities and traditions of rational enquiry, labor and craft are the milieus in which liberty and the Good Life are to be fruitfully pursued.

## Conclusion

In this essay we have covered considerable ground. In the first chapter I surveyed MacIntyre's critique of liberalism. There I discussed the five texts written in MacIntyre's mature phase, and I attempted to dislodge and elucidate the critique of liberalism which is present in these works, but which is interwoven with several other projects. In discussing *After Virtue* I emphasized that the core of MacIntyre's theory involves (a) practices (b) the narrative conception of self and (c) traditions of rational enquiry. Together these concepts form the basic starting point of MacIntyre's critique of liberalism, an exegesis of which I attempted to succinctly present. In exploring MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* I focused on MacIntyre's notion of traditions of rational enquiry, and how this concept informs MacIntyre's suspicions of supposedly self-evident truths and so too value-neutrality. In inspecting MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals* I aimed to demonstrate MacIntyre's emphatic position that individual goods are not isolate from, but predicated upon, common goods, and thus that liberalism fails in its individualistic conception of human flourishing. Finally, I briefly surveyed MacIntyre's *Conflicts in the Ethics of Modernity* in order to gesture to MacIntyre's aspirations for a post-liberal, perfectionist order centered on intermediate communities and traditions of rational enquiry.

In my second chapter I used the work of Richard Rorty to construct a counterargument to MacIntyre's critique. This counterargument stated that MacIntyre's theory is teleological, and so presents an irrational worldview, and so can be safely dismissed. I overcame this counterargument by showing that MacIntyre's virtue ethics is rooted in a reasonable view of virtue's role in social practices, and that MacIntyre's

teleology is based on a narrative conception of self. MacIntyre's theory is viable, and so his critique of liberalism should be taken as posing a serious challenge.

In my third chapter I used the work of John Rawls to construct another counterargument to MacIntyre's critique. This counterargument stated that MacIntyre's theory denies the fact of pluralism, and so presents an unrealistic worldview, and so can be safely dismissed. I overcame this counterargument by showing that MacIntyre's theory fully accepts the fact of pluralism. His theory embraces unconditional pluralism between neighboring communities within a given nation and allows for limited though fairly robust pluralism within intermediate communities. Provided that partial consensus is held on core values and primary theoretical commitments (as naturally and inevitably occurs within flourishing communal practices), intermediate communities can be places of fruitful deliberation and disagreement. In as much as such disagreement yields the goods of conflict and encourages progress within traditions of rational enquiry, pluralism is actually desirable according to MacIntyre's theory.

In my fourth chapter I used the work of Joseph Raz to construct a final counterargument to MacIntyre's critique. This counterargument stated that MacIntyre's theory is only compelling in as much as liberalism is considered synonymous with political value-neutrality and anti-perfectionism but that his theory fails to refute perfectionist liberalism, and perhaps even represents some form of heterodox liberalism. I admitted the strength of this third counterargument, and I affirmed two ways that MacIntyre could be reasonably construed as a liberal: (1) he embraces (ostensibly) neutral states and (2) he seems to embrace some form of autonomy. Nonetheless, I hesitated to identify MacIntyre as fully liberal in as much as his theory does not make

autonomy the trumping consideration in issues of perfectionism. Neither does MacIntyre's theory give pride of place to either negative or positive freedoms. Instead, MacIntyre's theory seems to more easily align with a Marxist focus on the supreme value of craft, labor, and collective action.

Ultimately, MacIntyre's theory is wholly focused on the realm of crafts, whether agrarian, domestic, manual, industrial, aesthetic, or intellectual. Human beings, each of who is a member of multiple craft cultures, are narrative selves ontologically and ethically situated within crafts and craft histories. Crafts are rooted within traditions of rational enquiry, and these traditions are expressed in practices, narrative settings, and intermediate communities. MacIntyre's theory emphasizes the notion that virtue arises out of crafts and this for the reason that virtue is required for productivity, solidarity, and continuity within these crafts. Virtue, when present in crafts coteries, also effects productivity, solidarity, and continuity within intermediate communities which make vital constructive use of virtue as they engage in communal deliberation and an ordering of goods.

The principle purpose of politics is to promote virtue and fruitful communal deliberation within intermediate communities. Intermediate communities must be insulated by the corrupting effects of markets and states in order to maintain the virtue commitments and relations necessary for community flourishing. State-neutrality is a noble lie in that it helps provide moral and cultural insulation to intermediate communities. Despite rejecting state perfectionism, MacIntyre affirms a local perfectionism which is quite robust and well beyond any notion of autonomy-focused liberal perfectionism. Hence, MacIntyre probably exists beyond the pale of even the

broadest conception of liberalism. Autonomy is valuable primarily in that it, along with the other virtues of independent reasoning, helps to make us good crafts persons.

Autonomy is not the most important element in the Good Life, but its value is subordinate to the value of crafts and labor. There is no romantic self-creation: We do not craft ourselves. *We are crafted by our crafts.*

Nonetheless MacIntyre's theory is neither communitarian nor collectivist.

MacIntyre rejects the communitarian attempt to "infuse the politics of the state with the values and modes of participation in local community" or to "suppose that there is anything good about local community as such" (*DRA* 142). It is only in as much as local communities display virtue, and so flourish as dynamic and fruitful craft spaces, that such communities are valuable. MacIntyre is particularly anxious to distance himself from any volkish political commitments, and in doing so he expresses worries that one obvious alternative to a now (arguably) failed liberalism is a volkish state. Distinguishing his ideal of the intermediate community (polis) from a volkish society, he writes that "A polis is always, potentially or actually, a society of rational enquiry, or self-scrutiny. The bonds of a *Volk* by contrast are prerational and nonrational" (*TMR* 241). Having rejected a communitarian notion of the state as a genuine bearer of common goods, he writes that

The counterpart to the nation-state thus misconceived as itself a community is a misconception of its citizens as constituting a *Volk*, a type of collectivity whose bonds are simultaneously to extend to the entire body of citizens and yet to be as binding as the ties of kinship and locality. In a modern, large scale nation-state no such collectivity is possible and the pretense that it is always an ideological disguise for sinister realities. (*DRA* 132)

The troubling warning is this: That in the face of the liberal breakdown of an integral sense of local community ethos and the communal bonds of common goods, an

alternative may presently be sought in a volkish nation-state. Even an autonomy-focused perfectionist liberalism seems ill-suited to human ontology, and so unsatisfying to ordinary citizens who will may soon seek some alternative—or perhaps the time of volkish strong-men states is already upon us.

MacIntyre's theory presents us with a different alternative to liberalism: A world composed of intermediate communities made up of craft coterie that embody traditions of rational enquiry and that are dedicated to cultivating common goods through virtue-informed craft practices. Such a society seems well suited to narrative selves which are primarily situated within craft traditions and histories. Such a society, too, would provide genuinely that which volkish regimes can only prestidigitate. To many modern theorists liberalism seems to be deeply flawed, and to many modern citizens liberalism seems to be profoundly unsatisfying. It may be that we have entered an age in which the primary choices are between volk and polis. If this is so, Alasdair MacIntyre has given us good reason, I believe, to choose the latter.

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