



After Ethics: Bringing Transcendence to Alasdair MacIntyre's Concept of Tradition

Rev. Joseph Scolaro

In the past half-century, Alasdair MacIntyre has introduced a groundbreaking new perspective in the field of virtue ethics with his philosophical history and emphasis on tradition. Many believe, however, that his arguments fail to provide a foundation for the coherent ethical theory he seeks to build. One possible reason for this failure is that as much as he looks to Aristotle for a figure who was able to engage in fruitful ethical debate, he does not account for the profound changes which have occurred since his time, above all in the modern presumption that the human mind can transcend the boundaries of the universe and grasp the truth of reality. This paper will therefore argue that by integrating a sense of the transcendent with MacIntyre's philosophical project, particularly with his theory of tradition, one can find a more successful path to meaningful ethical enquiry.

Alasdair MacIntyre, in his groundbreaking work *After Virtue*, makes sweeping claims regarding modern philosophy. Tracing its history over the past centuries, he finds the whole school of thought woefully inadequate in providing an ethical or moral code worthy of a rational agent. He argues that modern philosophy went astray from its very inception, and its current inability to achieve its intended goals testifies to this fact. And while Nietzsche unveiled this failure in the nineteenth century, MacIntyre comes to the fore in the twentieth to present humanity with its options: Aristotle or Nietzsche—a return to Aristotelian virtue or an acceptance of the Nietzschean will to power. It is a stark choice, but it is one he claims rational agents must make in the now postmodern world.

Is it that simple though? While it is true MacIntyre highlights Aristotle's method more than his particular conclusions, in offering Aristotle as the primary representative for an alternative option to the modern approach, he and his arguments can take on a nostalgic air. As compared to the postmodern groundlessness we find ourselves in, the coherent world of the Greek *polis* can be made to look all too attractive. Generations of the past that knew their place in the cosmos, that did not doubt right and wrong, that understood the narrative arc of their lives, can become a cause

of envy for those looking for meaning and purpose. It cannot be denied that the scheme of virtue ethics did provide individuals with a meaningful method of reaching some degree of shared ethical conclusions, and yet, in trying to appropriate such a scheme, the question arises—how different is the mindset of our world today? While, as MacIntyre himself points out, there still remains a desire to give impersonal and universal grounding for our moral conclusions, in a globalized world where cultures are meeting and mixing on a grand scale, any rational agent cannot help but be disillusioned of ever finding such a grounding. Local traditions, no matter how confidently held, become small when juxtaposed with other local traditions. How can MacIntyre's virtue ethics then, built on a sense of locality, or at least the relative particularity of a tradition, offer sufficient justification to those who live in the global culture that surrounds them?

Perhaps we need to do exactly what MacIntyre implies in the title *After Virtue*. Rather than just going back to virtue, and rather than stagnating in the relativism born of modern philosophy, we need to recover the good of virtue, keep the gains of modernity, and move forward in a new way. This is not inconsistent with MacIntyre's position, which emphasizes how traditions are engaged in a constant dialogue with the past in the hopes of making progress in the future. To do so, however, one aspect of the postmodern world must be considered, an aspect MacIntyre does not, according to this paper, take sufficient account of—transcendence. What was largely absent from ancient philosophy, while being omnipresent in modern philosophy, is the sense that it is possible to reach objective and universal conclusions about reality. It is relatively new to think that one can transcend the boundaries of the world we live in and understand it. MacIntyre sees evidence of this in the emotivist desire to still present personal moral views as objective, and yet he does not bring this element into his positive project. In outlining MacIntyre's project, therefore, this paper will integrate that sense of transcendence in order to strengthen its applicability to the postmodern world.

MACINTYRE'S HISTORICAL PATH TO VIRTUE

In recognizing that humanity has gone off track in its ability to come to moral conclusions, MacIntyre retraces the history of philosophy to try and rediscover that trajectory which was once rationally coherent. He looks back first to heroic societies, particularly using the representative example of Homeric Greece.¹ What is remarkable about those societies is that the moral order and the social order were largely indistinguishable. That which someone ought to do and the virtues by which one excelled were primarily defined by one's role within society. And not just in a negative

sense of constraint, but also in the positive sense that a person would not have an identity without some role to play. A soldier, for example, knew in a strong sense the virtues he needed to achieve excellence (courage, strength, temperance) and the narrative shape his life should take (victory or death in battle). Reinforced by the imagery of heroic epics which were passed down, each life had its own narrative defined by the net of relations and obligations which gave it substance, and there was no freedom from that unless one forfeited his very identity.

The moral outlook of these heroic societies, whether they truly existed or not, was enshrined in such epics and became the point of reference for subsequent generations.² This became a matter of conflict, however, as the perspective of these generations was expanded, particularly with the family or clan unit finding itself part of the much bigger context of the *polis*. The moral standards that were handed down could no longer account for the new, larger worldview. MacIntyre writes:

For Homeric man there could be no standard external to those embodied in the structures of his own community to which appeal could be made; for Athenian man, the matter is more complex. His understanding of the virtues does provide him with standards by which he can question the life of his own community and enquire whether this or that practice or policy is just.³

As will be shown, this becomes a recurrent challenge in morality: as horizons expand, prior standards become inconsistent and insufficient for the questions that arise. Faced with a larger society, and more than that, a society engaged in commerce with other societies, individuals were forced to question why their standards and ways of life were superior to others. The virtues became more than just the excellences necessary to fulfill a particular role, but excellences as such.

This then becomes the battlefield on which Socrates and Plato engage with the Sophists. In this battle, at least according to most introductory philosophy classes, Socrates is portrayed as the hero of true knowledge facing down the relativistic Sophists who are willing to call black white and white black if it serves them. Frederick Copleston, in his *History of Philosophy*, presents an interesting alternative explanation. Finding themselves in this time of greater intercultural exchange, the Sophists were a natural development, as they sought to make sense of each society holding its own customs and norms to be the ideal. He writes:

From what has been said, it is clear that Sophism does not deserve any sweeping condemnation. By turning the attention of thinkers to man himself, the thinking and willing subject, it served as a transition stage to the great Platonic-Aristotelian achievement. In affording a means

of training and instruction, it fulfilled a necessary task in the political life of Greece, while its Panhellenistic tendencies stand to its credit. And even its skeptical and relativistic tendencies, which were, after all, largely the result of the breakdown of the older philosophy on the one hand, and of a wider experience of human life on the other, at least contributed to the raising of problems, even if Sophism itself was unable to solve these problems.⁴

Sophists attempted to make sense of this wider experience, though without success, and it was only in the advances of Plato and Aristotle that a synthesis could be reached that did not sacrifice an openness to objective truth. MacIntyre writes of this new approach:

To engage in intellectual enquiry is then not simply to advance theses and to give one's rational allegiance to those theses which so far withstand refutation; it is to understand the movement from thesis to thesis as a movement toward a kind of *logos* which will disclose how things are, not relative to some point of view, but as such.⁵

MacIntyre sees this openness to truth then as exemplary, inasmuch as he takes it to serve as the basis for his positive project. For what he emphasizes in Aristotle is not his ability to reach objective truth, but his method in which there is an openness to the possibility that a society can advance toward reaching objective truth. He writes:

Implicit in the rationality of such enquiry there is indeed a conception of final truth, that is to say, a relationship of the mind to its objects which would be wholly adequate in respect of the capacities of the mind. But any conception of that state as one in which the mind could by its own power know itself as thus adequately informed is ruled out.⁶

His model of enquiry provides for attempts to reach an objective truth, while recognizing it is beyond the grasp of the human mind. Therefore, "The good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is."⁷ The good life and the attendant virtues are not simply static but take shape based on the contingent factors of one's community. Virtues cannot begin to be described without some reliance on social and moral context.⁸ A dialectic therefore arises within the human narrative, whereby an individual as well as a society, through the pursuit of goods internal to practices,⁹ thrive and advance on the road of virtue without necessarily having a discrete knowledge of the ideal form of that virtue. Ethics is not a matter of divining ultimate truths, but building toward a truth that exists and yet is ultimately unreachable, something only relative to which we can judge progress.

MAKING THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY TRANSCENDENT WITH ROMANO GUARDINI

Stepping back from MacIntyre's narrative so far, we see that, with all its philosophical rigor, it nevertheless seems to limit the role of religious context in its arguments. Romano Guardini becomes a valuable interlocutor, therefore, as his work *The End of the Modern World* offers a parallel history which brings together religious thought and philosophy. Essential to his approach is the argument that in classical Greece there was a dynamic interplay between religious and philosophical thought. He describes how the breadth of mythology had been the primary way in which man had made sense of his place in the universe. Constantly changing, organically growing and developing new forms, it "symbolized for him the complexity of the universe and of the life of man therein."¹⁰ In time, however, "these mythological foundations were cut off from classical religious sentiment, as the latter allied itself with the aims of philosophy and ethics."¹¹ Religious sentiment was no longer tied to myth, but rather philosophical thought, and religious convictions came to be defined in the spirit of each new philosophy.

What was remarkable about these philosophies, however, was their "flexibility and absence of dogmatism."¹² Guardini argues that at the root of society at this time, there was an inability to transcend the universe. Everything, including the gods, was the universe, the *cosmos*, and the possibility of comprehending it as an external observer was absent. Each school could therefore present an equally valid approach to reality, and philosophers would explore these avenues to grow in knowledge of the possible explanations for the world. Without any sense of reaching true knowledge of the world as a whole, all conclusions become partial and provisional. MacIntyre's argument, in highlighting Aristotle's fundamental openness to the truth, is consistent with this understanding, as, according to Aristotle's method, there can be no dogmatic belief in a certain truth as such. Even Plato, who might be considered as having some concept of transcendent truth in the theory of forms, at least in MacIntyre's and Guardini's eyes, does not claim to have objective certainty.¹³ In the classical world, human beings are engaged in a dialectic to approach the truth, and there is a constant revisiting and reworking in light of this conversation.

Entering this context, therefore, the Judeo-Christian concept of God was revolutionary, as it entailed a transcendent creator who was beyond the universe and did not belong to it.¹⁴ Building upon God's revelatory action, man was able to stand beyond the world as an agent capable of comprehending the whole of reality. Guardini points to the *summae* of

the Middle Ages as symbolic of the immense desire to integrate faith with empirical experience of the world to create a broader synthesis.¹⁵ Man was given a firm place in reality, with a sense of direction given by God. In MacIntyre's terms, the narrative shape of human life was no longer built on local custom, or even Aristotelian dialectic, but concrete and transcendent truth. MacIntyre himself writes of how the Middle Ages saw a transformation whereby the human *telos* or end became something beyond this life, and the path to reach it became a life within an idealized order, though he points out that the concrete particulars of that order were rarely consistent from author to author.¹⁶

Interestingly enough, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz comes to a conclusion that supports the historical narrative thus far, writing, "A religion is: a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."¹⁷ According to him, religion is the foundational view of reality which gives morality force in a society. Applied to MacIntyre's narrative, the nature of the transformation in ethics becomes clear with the recognition that the religious context of each age profoundly influences the philosophical and moral outlook. Beginning in the heroic age, in the very narrow world of a clan or small community, the local epics and myths were all that could offer a coherent understanding of how to live. As cultures interacted on a larger scale in the classical age, the multiplicity of religious beliefs created doubt in that overarching story provided by myth. Philosophers therefore engaged in an open dialogue that sought to grow closer to the truth of how to live, though a truth fundamentally beyond reach, as they were still working within a system outside of which one could not stand and understand the whole. The belief in a creator God, who was wholly other and beyond the cosmos, was then revolutionary as it became possible to see the world as comprehensible. Particularly proceeding from a revealed truth, it became possible to find a transcendent foundation for how one should live. Morality became more than a matter of striving each day to discern and grow in the good life as fostered by a particular cultural context, but growing in the good life in an absolute sense. Geertz again supports this conclusion, "Religion, by fusing ethos and world view, gives to a set of social values what they perhaps most need to be coercive: an appearance of objectivity."¹⁸

MODERN PHILOSOPHY'S FAILURE AND THE NEED FOR TRANSCENDENCE

Having deepened MacIntyre's account of healthy ethics with the inclusion of religious influence, the next step is to see where MacIntyre believes things went wrong. For him, the primary red flag of modern moral thought is that its disagreements are for the most part irreconcilable. He writes of three characteristics of those engaged in these disagreements: 1) they rely on conceptually incommensurate arguments which are internally valid and yet seem to be chosen arbitrarily, 2) in spite of this they purport to be of an impersonal and rational nature, 3) they have a wide variety of historical origins.¹⁹ In other words, arguments are built on incommensurable premises from varied schools of thought, all with the façade of objective and impersonal grounds, yet with an underlying awareness that these grounds are arbitrarily chosen.

From this pathology, MacIntyre rather works backward in time, beginning a process of philosophical genealogy to try and reach the cause. He looks first for that cause in the ideology of emotivism.²⁰ By definition, emotivism claims all evaluative and moral judgments are only expressions of preference. When someone says, "This is good," he really means, "I approve of this." Such an understanding would explain the fact that value statements no longer have an absolute weight. He then goes deeper though, arguing that with the unmooring of philosophical language, relationships have become manipulative in that individuals still use the expression with the belief that it gives stronger weight to their arguments. As much as "good," seems to have been emptied of meaning, it is still being used to give objective and impersonal grounding to an idea through the use of foundational concepts from different philosophical schools. He believes a rupture in the use of language, therefore, has led to this dissolution of meaningful dialogue.²¹

That rupture, MacIntyre contends, is the Enlightenment project, wherein something was lost and thus doomed the project to failure. Beginning with Descartes, there was an attempt to set reality free from any prejudices or authority. Human reason alone was sufficient, in the mind of these philosophers, to capture the nature of the universe. Yet in trying to justify the morality they had inherited from their Judeo-Christian past, they were unsuccessful. Kant relied on the categorical imperative, Hume looked to the passions, and Kierkegaard believed the ethical life was a matter of fundamental choice. In the end, none could justify the basic tenets of morality (not killing, stealing, lying, etc.). He writes:

Hence the eighteenth-century moral philosophers engaged in what was an inevitably unsuccessful project; for they did indeed attempt to find a rational basis for their moral beliefs in a particular understanding of human nature, while inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a conception of human nature on the other which had been expressly designed to be discrepant with each other.²²

What they lacked, according to MacIntyre, was the concept of a *telos* or end for human life. MacIntyre writes, “Ethics is the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from [man-as-he-happens-to-be] to [man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature].”²³ Ethics, right and wrong, only makes sense if human life is a narrative with a goal. Without this, the only way to justify moral standards becomes a variety of “pseudo-concepts” like rights and utility, which are incommensurable standards with no metaphysical foundation.²⁴ They are still used though, in the emotivist manner, to give objective value to moral norms that are expressions of the arbitrary will.

Reflecting on MacIntyre’s diagnosis, many parallels can be drawn with the Greek world, as there is again an expansion of horizons for which the received traditions were no longer sufficient. Guardini further complements this conclusion, noting that the Enlightenment’s awareness of space and time as infinite expanses minimized the importance of humanity, writing, “Gone was the beginning and the end, the limit and the center . . . even as this new world view affirmed a freedom of space it denied to human existence its own proper place.”²⁵ Particularly in the West, the Christian understanding of man as the center of the universe seemed to no longer be enough. Therefore, as in the end of the age of myth, philosophy took the place of theology, but in this instance there was still the drive to find moral truths with the same substantial justifications as those given by transcendent faith. So while MacIntyre writes with the understanding that a recovery of virtue ethics is key to any progress, this still falls short in resolving that desire for substantial justifications. The religious character of “pseudo-concepts” like utility and rights points to the need for a transcendent foundation which accounts for the broadened horizons of the modern age. As Geertz emphasized, religious or foundational metaphysical principles are necessary to give objectivity to moral norms. Where to look though? Especially in the now postmodern world, where religions that make absolute claims are lined up in a similar way to ancient philosophies, where can humanity turn?

TRADITION AND TRANSCENDENT ETHICS IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

Bringing together MacIntyre's tradition-based ethics of the ancient world and the modern longing for transcendence, a path forward into the post-modern world becomes possible. Looking back to the time of Aristotle, what was remarkable was the realization that though there were many possible options, there could still be a truth relative to which progress was possible. A tradition, according to MacIntyre, became and should be today a dialogue extended through time that serves as a context for such progress. When a society functions with that openness to the truth, individuals can judge with prudence what is necessary for human thriving, what is necessary to achieve the human *telos*, and strive to grow in an understanding of the good life. Modern philosophy jettisoned that necessary aspect of progress toward a goal. It is insufficient, however, to just return to that purely immanent sense of virtue. The *telos* now cannot be a matter of thriving on this earth, but a thriving which has an absolute value and must therefore be built on transcendent principles (perhaps a distinction between ethics and morality can be helpful here, wherein ethics is immanent and morality transcendent). The modern world, while recognizing this need, must then accept that any claim to absolute truth is founded on a commitment of faith. Commitments to a metaphysical foundation for reality ultimately rely on the belief that the human mind can transcend and comprehend the universe, which is a theological claim.

Josef Pieper's study of tradition, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, offers the tools necessary for this advance. He writes of how the passing down of the *traditum*, that which is transmitted, is essential to any tradition, and it takes on the structure of belief, in that there is a reliance on the authority of the transmitter.²⁶ In a revealed religion, the *traditum* is the revealed truth of reality as a coherent whole which is accepted and used as the framework for all knowledge. Extending Pieper's argument, non-revealed traditions, on the other hand, pass on a less dogmatic tradition. A worldview is handed on, but rather than being unquestioned, each generation engages with what is received based on its experience. Rather than integrating a sacrosanct truth, a secular society examines that which it receives and refines it. Much like the Aristotelian concept of searching for the good life, the received part of reality is constantly developing with society, being a universal that is constantly refined relative to the particular. A tradition thus becomes the handed on outline of metaphysical commitments within which a society engages in rational discourse.

The outline of metaphysical commitments can therefore be found on two planes. When it comes to ethical norms—that which leads to thriving on this earth—a secular cultural tradition can be sufficient to reach shared conclusions. Individuals that are willing to define what thriving is on an immanent level, can engage in a dialogue through which all can approach that goal. When it comes to giving a foundation for that goal which makes judgments moral and universal, a tradition which relies on revealed truth is necessary, as it would require a grasp of the truth as such which is beyond natural human capability. Not inconsistent with MacIntyre's conclusions, what becomes evident then is that all moral discourse must take place within the context of a tradition. A culture with its own customs and manner of living becomes the arena in which individuals work together to grow in an understanding of what a good life looks like. On a global level, it is only large-scale metaphysical or religious traditions that offer absolute foundations. This could be atheism and materialism or Christianity or Buddhism, but there must be some surrender to a transcendent concept which is not scientifically provable in that it goes beyond humanity and includes humanity.

MacIntyre's philosophical conclusions therefore account for half of the story. His concept of virtue ethics is able to rescue the realm in which individuals can discourse regarding human thriving. Guardini's evaluation adds, however, the second half, the element of transcendence which can transform a tradition from local and limited to universal and absolute. The challenge this presents for philosophy today, however, is that it must recognize the distinction between immanent and transcendent. What is hopeful about this distinction is that if we settle for pursuing ethical conclusions, a society of peoples with a variety of religious convictions can still discourse meaningfully regarding what leads to ordinary human flourishing. What is revolutionary, however, is that it precludes a secular society from making absolutist determinations, unless it is willing to recognize its ungrounding metaphysical convictions. Brad Gregory comes to a similar conclusion, through very different means, in his book *The Unintended Reformation*:

Unsecularizing the academy would require, of course, an intellectual openness on the part of scholars and scientists sufficient to end the long-standing modern charade in which naturalism has been assumed to be demonstrated, evident, self-evident, ideologically neutral, or something arrived at on the basis of impartial inquiry. It would require all academics—not only those with religious commitments—to acknowledge their metaphysical beliefs as beliefs rather than to keep

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pretending that naturalist beliefs are something more or skeptical beliefs are something else.²⁷

Moving forward into the postmodern world, this distinction provides the greatest hope for a society that still seeks ethical and moral truth through meaningful discourse.

Notes

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 121–30.

2. *Ibid.*, 131.

3. *Ibid.*, 133.

4. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, *Greece and Rome: From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 85.

5. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 78.

6. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 360–61.

7. *Ibid.*, 219.

8. *Ibid.*, 186.

9. MacIntyre uses the expression “goods internal to practices,” in a technical sense. The goods internal to a practice such as chess would be strategic ability and patience. External goods would be the rewards of victory like fame or money. Practices through which internal goods are sought become the arena in which virtues can be pursued.

10. Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI, 1998), 4.

11. *Ibid.*, 5.

12. *Ibid.*

13. “The *Republic* is therefore to be understood as presenting, not a completed theory of forms, but rather a program for constructing such a theory” (MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 82). He would further see Aristotle as the heir who continues that project: “The *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* are, on the view that I am taking, to be understood as sequels to the *Republic* in which the *archē*, whose adequate characteristics Plato could not provide, is specified in such a way that it can provide the ultimate *telos* of practical activity and the justification and specification of the virtues, including justice (MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 85). Robert Krieg summarizes an address by Guardini: “Plato must have had an ‘overwhelming experience of truth,’ for his commitment to it is evident. . . . These writings also convey Plato’s awareness of the irony of the quest. . . . Guardini noted that Socrates and all truth-seekers are ironically conscious of how far they remain from the truth, and, hence, may seemingly bear a resemblance to the Sophists” (*Romano Guardini: A Precursor of Vatican II* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997], 191–92).

14. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 7. Some might argue that this idea of a transcendent God was a wider development. Peter Watson, in *The Great Divide* (New York: Harper, 2012), references Karl Jaspers's idea of an Axial Age and holds that a spiritual change occurred across many cultures in the first century BC which "was cemented around a new kind of deity, or religious/ethical entity, which (or who) was essentially ineffable, unknowable, hidden, abstract, transcendent and wholly 'other'" (357). A valuable question to ask would be whether these wholly other entities were posited, not unlike Plato's forms, and thus still a matter of uncertainty, or revealed and therefore possessing a transcendent justification.

15. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 15.

16. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 175–76.

17. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Perseus, 1973), 90

18. *Ibid.*, 131.

19. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 8–10.

20. *Ibid.*, 11–22.

21. *Ibid.*, 1–5. MacIntyre compares the rupture to Arthur Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

22. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 55.

23. *Ibid.*, 52.

24. *Ibid.*, 71.

25. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 33.

26. Josef Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), 9–18.

27. Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 386.