

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition.* Alasdair MacIntyre. University of Notre Dame Press, 1990. Reviewed by Michael J. Quirk, Bellerose, New York

The philosophical war between moral relativists and moral universalists has been going on for over two millennia, and it shows no sign of abating. The conceptual weapons used in this fight have changed over the years, but the battle lines remain stable: there are those who insist upon universal, necessary moral truths, present to human reason as such, from which an objective system of moral law can be deduced; and there are those who claim that moral truths, indeed all truths, are the ultimately arbitrary expression of an individual's or a culture's non-rational preferences or desires. The course of the battle has by now become entirely predictable. The universalists will accuse the relativists of a preserved indifference to the manifest truths of reason and a tendency toward amorality, and the relativists will reply that all the universalists have succeeded in doing is begging the question, elevating *their* partisan prejudices into norms supposedly binding upon everyone. Each party to this dispute ends up by rejecting any common ground upon which it might be settled. The inevitable result: deadlock.

Alasdair MacIntyre has been trying to break this deadlock for over a decade: his previous books *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* are equally hostile to both universalist absolutism and radical relativism. It is impossible to pigeonhole him into any prevailing political category. He explicitly rejects "modern systematic politics, whether liberal, conservative, radical, or socialist", on the grounds that no modern political ideology has made enough room for tradition-bearing communities, which alone can support morally worthy lives. More than any other English-speaking philosopher, he has stressed the indispensability of tradition in shaping both the form and the content of moral discourse and social practice, and has forcefully argued that the poverty of liberal individualism stems from its substitution of the market and the morally-neutral state for tradition-structured social and economic relationships.

Yet his "traditionalism" is antithetical to that of conservatives such as Allen Bloom and William Bennett. For MacIntyre, it is misleading to depict traditions as storehouses of disinterested truths rather than as *loci* of intense intramural debate. Tradition is not a museum, as today's conservatives suppose, nor is it the dead weight of the past, as some liberals or radicals might judge, but rather the dynamic context in which all our words and deeds become meaningful. Thus tradition, properly understood, is the means whereby relativism is overcome without recourse to false necessities and fictional universal truths. By leading lives rooted in

traditions of rational enquiry, we can avoid the twin perils of modernity: the dogmatic arrogance that our own moral convictions are at bottom shared by every human being, and the rootless cynicism bred by the belief that all appeals to morality are groundless and self-serving.

In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre contends that most modern moral philosophy, especially since the Enlightenment, has exemplified dogmatic arrogance: it has been universalistic, or "encyclopedic", in its ambitions and presumptions. "Encyclopedia", as a genre of enquiry, assumes that the fundamental truths of a discipline, whether mathematics, science, philosophy, or theology, are available to anyone and everyone at the onset of enquiry. These evident "first principles" are universal, timeless truths apprehended and validated by reason-as-such, quite distinct from the deliverances of tradition. Thus the ability to know that lying, stealing, or promise-breaking are wrong is present in each and every one of us, prior to all training and enculturation, and the justification of such moral precepts is independent of our ties to specific religious, moral, or political communities.

Many modern moralists endorsed the encyclopedic conception of moral enquiry, and instead of converging upon a single set of first principles from which particular moral truths could be derived, they spawned many radically different sets of first principles and consequently many incommensurable moral theories. The proliferation of rival moral philosophies prompted Friedrich Nietzsche to wonder whether the whole philosophical enterprise, the search for "universal truths," was not a deceitful, ideological charade. Nietzsche "genealogized" moral philosophy: by chronicling what he took to be the resentful, manipulative psychology that gave rise to it, he portrayed "encyclopedic" knowledge and moral philosophy as the ploy of weak-yet-willful individuals, who hide their efforts at control and domination under the cloak of objectivity. Nietzsche's attack on moral philosophy eventually became an attack on objectivity itself: "truth", for Nietzsche, is the supreme fiction, a by-product of the arbitrary surgings of Will-to-Power. His more recent heirs, such as Foucault, extended and refined his genealogies. They claimed that to portray knowledge-claims as contingent episodes in human history is to unmask their pretense to objectivity and to show them for what they really are: manifestations of power and domination.

From an encyclopedists' perspective, genealogists are mad, denying the very possibility of rational discourse. From a genealogist's perspective, encyclopedists are phonies and fools, blind to all the failed attempts at establishing universal systems of truths, yet doggedly affirming that their truth is the only truth. Is there any way out of this impasse? MacIntyre believes that there is. Alongside encyclopedia and genealogy, there exists an older, quite persistent form of tradition-centered moral enquiry, whose roots extend back to Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine, and which, in MacIntyre's view, received its fullest expression in the *Summa Theologiae*

of St. Thomas Aquinas. Against all forms of encyclopedia, traditionalists insist that the first principles of morality are *not* immediately present to all enquirers at the start of enquiry; one can arrive at an adequate understanding of morality only if one *already* holds certain beliefs and possesses certain character traits the moral and intellectual virtues. One's inquiry into the Good always presupposes a background of convictions and habits: the Enlightenment ideal of searching for the truth with a "clean slate", without reliance upon authorities or sages, divorced from the social and personal shaping of the self, is deeply mistaken. Against all forms of genealogy, traditionalists maintain that inquiry does advance toward more adequate formulations of objective truths: the genealogical rush to dismiss rationality as willful mystification is premature.

Much of *Three Rival Versions* is devoted to an historical narrative of the way in which Thomas Aquinas synthesized the Greek metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle with the demands of Augustine's theology. When Aristotle's works were rediscovered in the 12th century and introduced into the curriculum at the university of Paris, where Thomas taught, the strains between the Judeo-Christian and Greek traditions became painfully evident. Yet Thomas saw through these differences to a hidden, underlying affinity, and used each tradition to remedy the defects of the other. The picture that emerges in Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* is the Aristotelian one of Human Beings as part of nature, able to know nature on its own terms, and able to extrapolate their knowledge of human nature into a moral system which guides us to virtue and thus happiness. Yet neither our knowledge of nature, nor our comprehension of our true end, is satisfactorily captured by a completely secular outlook: nature ineluctably points beyond itself to God as its author, and the quest for perfect happiness cannot be completed in this imperfect life. So in Thomas's *Summa* Augustine's theology complements and enhances Aristotle's metaphysics and ethics, just as it is itself complemented and enhanced by Aristotle's insights.

Thomas's achievement, for MacIntyre, was to show that, unlike encyclopedia and genealogy, tradition-centered moral inquiry can progress toward more adequate approximations of the truth. Traditions generate their own internal conflicts, and square-off against rival traditions: but, as was the case with Thomas, the skilled adherent of a tradition can overcome these challenges by *reformulating* his or her own tradition, incorporating the advantages of its competitors, avoiding their incoherences and inadequacies, *and* showing how these failures are unavoidable on the rival's own terms of success. By contrast, encyclopedists cannot admit that reason was a (tradition-bound) history, and tend to lapse into despair when their search for universally-valid moral principles does not command universal agreement. And genealogists, who nurture this despair, and rejoice in reason's impotence,

cannot make minimal sense of their own convictions and their role in shaping their selves.

MacIntyre's final chapter considers the fate of the modern university in light of his musings upon tradition, encyclopedia, and genealogy. Having detached itself from any substantive ties to particular religious communities, the modern university was from the start enthusiastically committed to the encyclopedic view of knowledge and inquiry. But as the fortunes of encyclopedia waned, so too did the university: the humanities and the social sciences could never find the grounds for universal consensus that the encyclopedic mode of inquiry promised, and they seemed more and more to be forums for sheer, arbitrary opinion. Although conservatives like Bloom and Bennett notice and deplore this fragmentation of the curriculum and rightly seek to transform it into something more coherent and rational, MacIntyre dismisses their "Great Books" approach as one more brand of ideological mystification. "Western Civilization" does not present us with one canon and one way of reading it: there are and always have been many rival lists of "Great Books" and many more systematic ways of interpreting them. Their presenting the curriculum as a conduit of "universal human values", or of "the legacy of the West", as if these notions were clear and uncontested, is yet another version of encyclopedia, expressly designed to forestall any radical questioning of the *status quo*. From MacIntyre's perspective, conservative academics may be justified in accusing many of their "politically correct" leftist colleagues of having abandoned rational inquiry for political grandstanding, but they themselves are doing precisely the same thing under the cloak of "scholarly objectivity". The only way the dire situation plaguing the university can be overcome is to *admit* that there are rival, incompatible traditions of thought, which necessarily view each other as not simply false but unintelligible, and to reconstrue education as an initiation into the radical conflict of these traditions.

MacIntyre is a splendid narrative historian. His tales of such diverse figures as Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Foucault, and Nietzsche, not to mention Dante, Flaubert, and Paul DeMan, are far more illuminating than those told by most historians of philosophy, precisely because *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* is a history with a distinctive partisan point of view. Nevertheless there are notable gaps and shortcomings in this book. MacIntyre tends to equate "tradition" with the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, more accurately, with his own, highly idiosyncratic construal of it. In doing so, he perhaps glosses over even more fundamental intellectual battles than those that rage between Thomism, Genealogy, and Encyclopedia. There are many Aristotelian traditionalists who would dispute MacIntyre's claim that Thomas's synthesis of Aristotle and Augustine is superior to Aristotle alone; parallel claims might be made by Augustinian purists. Present-day Jewish, Islamic, and Eastern

religious traditions are inappropriately left out of MacIntyre's picture altogether.

Furthermore, MacIntyre is lamentably unclear about the ultimate role that authority plays in tradition. On the one hand, he portrays living traditions as capable of genuine progress, often involving substantial revision and reform. Yet in keeping with his conviction that philosophy demands the deference of "apprentices" toward the judgement of the wise, he insists that authorities need to ensure that radical dissent does not upset the integrity of the tradition. These aspects of MacIntyre's traditionalism seem difficult to reconcile. If traditions sometimes lapse into incoherence or sterility, as MacIntyre claims, it is reasonable to expect that they will demand internal critics who will challenge not only some basic precepts of the *status quo* but occasionally the authority of those who legitimate and insist upon them. So, despite MacIntyre's sizable achievement in this book and its predecessors, he has yet to offer his audience a convincing account of both the role *and* the limitations of authority in moral traditions.

*How Should I Live? Philosophical Conversations About Moral Life.* Randolph M. Feezell and Curtis L. Hancock. New York: Paragon House, 1991. Reviewed by William T. Mehl, University of Kansas.

In their book, *How Should I Live?*, Randolph M. Feezell and Curtis L. Hancock present, as their subtitle explains, a set of philosophical conversations about moral life, and indeed, these dialogues about ethical theory cover most of the basic questions that people ask about living a moral life. Involved here are a lively, interesting group of characters on a university-sponsored backpacking expedition, who discuss ethics every night after the day's hike.

The main participants are six men and four women. The men are a philosophy professor who leads the discussions, one of the guides who is a Recreation Studies student and Christian fundamentalist, a conservative businessman who has attended several summer philosophical conferences and is very interested in the work of Mortimer Adler, another younger businessman who is sympathetic to an ethics of self-interest and espouses Ayn Rand's philosophical views, a (black) government employee interested in politics, and a mysterious friend and former graduate school colleague of the professor who lives in the mountains and appears periodically to castigate philosophy in general and ethics in particular. The women are a Unitarian minister who is interested in environmental issues and feminism, a mother of four who is not particularly philosophical,

the other guide who is a student in Exercise Science and an athletic outdoorswoman, and a woman who works in the public school system and is pursuing a PhD in Educational Administration.

In eight dialogues these people consider the nature of ethics, and ethics in relation to religion, relativism, self-interest, consequences, persons, virtues, and female voices. The primary characters are joined in the discussion on virtue by two Jesuit priests, appropriately fishing at the group's destination, Lost Lake. The discussion on female voices revolves around Carol Gilligan's work and occurs after the hiking expedition at the university's faculty club between the Unitarian minister and her friend, a female Women's Studies professor, and the philosophy professor and his friend, a male Political Science professor. A post-expedition party provides the scene for the epilogue where the question, 'Is Ethics Worthwhile?', is considered.

Each conversation is followed by clarifying quotations on that particular topic from moral philosophy, a list of key terms and concepts to focus understanding of the topic, and discussion questions. These study aids provide the impetus for systematic thinking about the issues raised in the dialogues.

There are several general and positive points I want to make about this book regarding its use as an introductory text. The thought-provoking introduction to the student contains several examples of problems requiring moral and nonmoral value judgments along with an ethics questionnaire concerning the nature of ethical thinking which can be used for initial discussion in order to ascertain students' presuppositions about morality and ethical theory. There is in-depth coverage of each topic especially, again, regarding the basic questions people ask about living a moral life. And, we see that real people are actually interested in living a good life and in thinking carefully about ethics. It becomes clear that an exploration of ethics is a rational effort, which includes many different, important perspectives, and many undeniably significant notions, all of which are part of making sense of our moral experience. We can see that ethical inquiry begins with wonder, that it can be conducted Socratically, and that reaching any sort of philosophical understanding is definitely a cooperative rather than an adversarial endeavor. Set in this positive framework, the authors present the basics for understanding ethics lucidly, in down-to-earth, non-technical language. This is an excellent explanatory groundwork for making sense of ethical theory, with enough open-endedness to allow students to add their own views and concerns and thus to continue a fruitful philosophical dialogue.

The discussion of virtue ethics and female voices is indeed laudatory. In the former there are critical considerations of Hume's fact/value

distinction and of the modern notion of the 'moral point of view', which, the Jesuit priests argue, is dependent on a notion of what the good is for human life, as transmitted in Western culture in the Judeo-Christian tradition. These points do indeed demand philosophical consideration.

However, the profound importance of female voices in ethics is not, I think, made adequately clear. The very stating of the attitude of the male political science professor in this way—"I haven't taken the time to read Gilligan or any of the other feminists who have been doing work in political and moral theory. I wonder whether it's worth the effort. I'm not sure that feminism will be a sustainable intellectual project, at least in some of the more extreme forms it takes. It seem rather faddish." (191)—seems to legitimate such attitudes and devalue the feminist project. Now, said professor is "perfectly open to persuasion" (192), and the conversation ends with his stating that he will actually "see what these feminists are talking about" (206), but I wonder whether the aura of disdain on his part is too strong. It is one thing if the first quote here is just a realistic reflection of an actual attitude on the part of some toward feminism, as it is no doubt intended as the professor exemplifies Gilligan's justice perspective by espousing a Hobbesian contractual view of ethics and politics, but quite another if setting this tone too much (perhaps unconsciously) devalues, and even nullifies, an attempt to understand a traditionally devalued ethical perspective.

Further, the philosophy professor attempts to relate Gilligan's care perspective to the ethical tradition: "...the emphasis on context, on the *particular* nature of moral situations, has long been emphasized in the history of moral philosophy. Aristotle emphasizes that a judgment of practical reason...is highly contextual. ...I see Gilligan's emphasis on care and context as fitting quite nicely into the tradition of virtue ethics"; and, "any ethical theory that emphasizes the application of a very general principle to every specific situation would have to emphasize the particularities of context. ...Act utilitarianism emphasizes the particularities of situations in just this way" (204). Now, this is correct of course; I especially agree that Gilligan's feminist perspective is more a virtue perspective than anything else, but Aristotle, and the ethical tradition, is certainly not interested in *women's experience* in relation to understanding anything, including morality and ethics. Ending the dialogue with this relating of Gilligan's work, as the feminist perspective, to the tradition of philosophical ethics—which can be seen of course as cooptation of feminism by the patriarchal tradition because the view here seems to be that feminism just does not say anything of new importance—misses the point I think of listening to female voices in ethics.

The point is the problem of patriarchy in western civilization and this problem is not broached. Patriarchy is grounded in a patriarchal conceptual scheme which holds the qualities traditionally identified as male as opposed to qualities traditionally identified as female—reason as opposed to feeling and justice as opposed to care are examples of such normative dualisms which are applicable here—to be the standards of value and the superior qualities; these male qualities ground men's power and domination in the world. There are of course people who have no power in the patriarchy, who are left out and oppressed on the grounds of sex, race, and class—there is also the domination of nature here—and such exclusion and oppression are legitimated by the many facets of patriarchy; and, traditional ethics, philosophical and religious, must be explored in order to ascertain how much it is a part of such legitimation.<sup>1</sup> Feminist ethics, even though there is no general theoretical agreement among feminist philosophers about exactly what such an ethics is, does address the problem of rethinking traditional ethics in order to correct male bias and the exclusion and subordination of women.<sup>2</sup> When the problem of patriarchy is made clear—and it needs to be made clear in relation to the consideration of any feminist criticism—I do not see how the feminist critique of philosophy in general and ethics in particular can be considered an unsustainable intellectual project, or how the problems it broaches can be seen as adequately addressed by the philosophical tradition. Indeed, if the moral perspective of women is not seriously considered, then we do not and cannot understand human moral experience, and thus we do not and cannot have an adequate understanding of ethics.

Now, the dialogue concerning ethics and female voices can certainly be profitably used to initiate an exploration of the above notions; just so, I think, again, that this book covers, or will initiate, the basic questions that people ask about living a moral life. Indeed, *Why Should I Be Moral?*, is an assessable, intelligent, engaging, and stimulating text for introductory ethics courses.

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<sup>1</sup> On the nature of patriarchy and the resultant exploitation, see for example: Karen J. Warren. "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections." *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987): 3-20.

<sup>2</sup> See: Alison Jaggar. "Feminist Ethics: Some Issues for the Nineties." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 20 (1989): 91-107.