Alasdair MacIntyre's Political Liberalism

After Virtue by Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues by Alasdair MacIntyre (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

Alasdair MacIntyre is known as one of the foremost critics of liberalism, both liberal theory and liberal practice. As an alternative to the utilitarianism and relativism of liberal moral theory, MacIntyre has proposed virtue-ethics and "tradition-constituted rationality." As an alternative to the individualism and bureaucratization of liberal moral practice, MacIntyre has proposed the practices and politics of local community. MacIntyre has presented his anti-liberal moral and political vision in his trilogy, *After Virtue, Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* , and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* , in later works such as *Dependent Rational Animals* , and in numerous articles, lectures, and interviews; and he has done so with a brilliance, erudition, and sophistication unmatched by his liberal opponents. Yet, as I shall attempt to show in this article, MacIntyre's moral theory contains internal contradictions that render its practical application of small-scale, tradition-constituted communities defective. MacIntyre's political prescription is built upon an incoherent notion of the state, is insufficiently political, and fosters the political liberalism he so vehemently opposes. Since MacIntyre's magnificent trilogy, though rich in moral theory, does not contain much in the way of sustained political theory, to substantiate my

critique of MacIntyre's political philosophy, I shall examine his lesser-known *Dependent Rational Animals* , as well as some of his lectures on politics.

Acknowledging Dependence: A Prologue to Politics

In *Dependent Rational Animals* , MacIntyre brings his thinking down, as it were, from the meta-ethical and meta-theoretical level of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* , with its dialectical-historical presentation of tradition-constituted rationality in general and Thomistic-constituted rationality in particular, to a much more concrete ethical and theoretical level. Essentially, he offers us a revised account of the virtues, one quite different from what we find in *After Virtue*, for it is now biologically, as well as Aristotelianly and Thomistically, informed. Most importantly, MacIntyre provides, for the first time, a description of the particular social and political forms that best sustain and promote these virtues. In the context of answering the question "Why human beings need the virtues?" MacIntyre provides us with his first extended treatment of a politics adequate to virtue-needing human beings, or "dependent rational animals." What is particularly noteworthy about *Dependent Rational Animals* is its absence of any treatment of tradition, and when one notes that this absence coincides with the concrete discussion of particular moral norms and ideal political structures, one wonders if the reason for the absence is a substantive change in MacIntyre's thinking, or simply the effect of a change in philosophical focus. In any event, we note the absence of theological matters in *Dependent Rational Animals* like in other works, but it is a particularly notable absence here, since the work involves, not a formal, abstract, meta-ethical discussion of the generic structure of the good, or a historical comparison of moral traditions, but a content-rich, concrete, normative account of the specific virtues of human flourishing.

MacIntyre asks the question: "What difference to moral philosophy would it make, if we were to treat the facts of vulnerability and affliction and the related facts of dependence as

central to the human condition?"[1] This is a variation on MacIntyre's consistent condemnation of the Enlightenment's conception of man the autonomous and independent "individual," with its placing of the highest moral imperative precisely on the *emancipation* of man from vulnerability and affliction. For the Enlightenment, these latter are eminently remedial defects, not, as MacIntyre claims, ineradicable aspects of the human condition. The difference an affirmative answer to the question makes is the recognition of an essential defect in the Aristotelian conception of virtue, that rational agency requires the "virtues of acknowledged dependence" in addition to the virtues of the independent rational agent.

MacIntyre asks a second question: "What type of social relationship and what type of the common good are required, if a social group is to be one in and through which both the virtues of rational independence and the virtues of acknowledged dependence are sustained and transmitted?" [2] To understand his answer to this question, we must first examine what MacIntyre means by the virtues of acknowledged dependence. In order for human beings to flourish, they need to understand themselves as practical reasoners about goods, and they come to learn this identity as reasoners, as well as the particular goods about which they reason, from arguing about them with others; this is an example of our intrinsic dependence. To learn "how to stand back in some measure from our present desires, so as to be able to evaluate them," and to "imagine realistically alternative possible futures," is required to become an independent practical reasoner, but this learning itself requires the presence and occasional intervention of others. In fact, our very identities depend upon our being recognized by others: "I can be said truly to know who and what I am, only because there are others who can be said truly to know who and what I am." Recognizing this is a prerequisite for gaining the virtues of acknowledged dependence: "Acknowledgment of dependence is the key to independence." Accurate knowledge of one's good first requires accurate knowledge of one's self, and this can only occur "in consequence of those social relationships

which on occasion provide badly needed correction for our own judgments."[3]

MacIntyre's discussion of the "social relationships of giving and receiving" is similar to his discussion of "practices" in *After Virtue*. The social relationships of giving and receiving that allow for self-knowledge and knowledge of one's good are also indispensable to achieve this good. Once these relationships are institutionalized, however, they become bound up with "unequal distributions" and "established hierarchies" of power, and so there is always a possibility of corruption in social relationships that can "frustrate us in our movement towards our goods."[4] As MacIntyre notes in his discussion of practices in *After Virtue*, institutions, though prone to corruption, must exist to keep practices in existence. In *After Virtue,* MacIntyre argues that practices can remain immune from institutional corruption as long as the goods of effectiveness required to sustain institutions are subordinated to the goods of excellence that are internal to practices and required for human flourishing. In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre gives the same argument but in different language: "The worst outcome is when the rules that enjoin giving and receiving have been substantially subordinated to or otherwise made to serve the purposes of power, the best when a distribution of power has been achieved which allows power to serve the ends to which the rules of giving and receiving are directed."[5]

This contrast of the two kinds of subordination is important, for it is one of two fundamental ideas in MacIntyre's analysis and evaluation of the "social relationships" of the modern state. The second fundamental idea is the common good. Practical reasoning is "reasoning together with others," and in order to reason together effectively about the means to certain goods, there needs to be agreement on these goods themselves. Our reasoning is only as good as the others with whom we reason, since reasoning is an essentially social activity: "The good of each cannot be pursued without also pursuing the good of all those who participate in those relationships." MacIntyre defends this eminently non-

liberal view of the human good by emphasizing our radical dependence upon others at certain stages of our lives. If others did not "make our good their good" at certain vulnerable times in our lives, such as infancy, childhood, illness, and old age, then we would have either never survived, or survived only with a severely attenuated capacity for the virtues and activities of independent practical reasoning. If I am to have a reasonable expectation of receiving this care when I need it, which I must if I am to trust in the possibility of my becoming an independent practical reasoner, then I must be prepared to give this care to others, and in an unconditional manner. [6] Thus, in a flourishing community, one in which there are vibrant networks of giving and receiving, and where the virtues of acknowledged dependence are in abundance, one can make the goods of the community one's own. These networks and virtues, although not reducible to rules, require them, else there be a lack of mutual trust in others' fulfillment of responsibilities and deficiency in fulfilling these responsibilities and deliberating about them. The set of precepts that include both the necessary rules and enjoinments of the acts of the virtues that the common good requires is what MacIntyre identifies as the natural law. [7]

Macintyre suggests how diametrically opposed his conceptions of the common good, social relationships, and practical reasoning are to those which underlie modern liberal culture, conceptions that suggest that "good" is no more morally significant than the satisfaction of desire. In the modern "market-based" culture, the only unchosen constraints we can accept on our behavior and commitments are those dictated by a rationality guided by the self-interested motive of preference maximization. Other commitments and responsibilities may exist, but since they are chosen with regard to our "affections" and "sympathies" only, they are not fully rational. Whether we care for the radically dependent unborn baby, for example, is not a rational or moral issue—it cannot be, since there is only one person capable of calculated self-interest in the relationship—it is a matter of mere emotional attachment. MacIntyre argues that this is a false

dichotomy, since "[a]ffective and sympathetic ties are always more then a matter of affection and sympathy." Affection and sympathy are things that we *owe* to others, to children and parents, for example, and therefore are inexorably bound up with "norms of giving and receiving." Thus for MacIntyre, market relationships of rational, calculative self-interest are not evil in themselves; they only need to be attached to relationships of giving and receiving if they are not to corrupt human flourishing and the common good. Social practice must provide the context for both aspects of human behavior or they become prone to vice.[8] The virtue that is the bridge between affectivity and intelligence with regard to social relationships is "just generosity." This virtue directs one to give to others, even those outside one's recognized community, with a willingness to give an amount disproportionate to what one hopes to receive. This virtue enables *misericordia,* in which one feels others' suffering as if it were one's own.[9]

The Politics of Tradition

Politics for MacIntyre is essentially the securing of the common good, which is "found in the activity of communal learning through which we together become able to order goods, both in our individual lives and in the political society."[10] As this quote exemplifies, a primary feature of MacIntyre's political thought is its focus on the necessary *conditions* for, as distinct from the particular *content* or *values* inherent in, the practice of politics. In *After Virtue,* MacIntyre articulated a "contentless" definition of the good life for man: "We have then arrived at a provisional conclusion about the good life for man: 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."[11] Continuing this formalistic, "meta-political" mode of description, MacIntyre portrays political structures in a similar manner to how he portrays traditions of inquiry, as institutions of communal learning; thus, he evaluates the former as he does the latter, in

terms of their capacity to sustain rational argument about, and enable the securing of, internal goods and virtues.

In *Dependent Rational Animals* and "Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good," MacIntyre lays out six conditions that political structures must satisfy to enable men to learn about and achieve their individual and common goods. Three of the conditions have to do with *achieving* the good, and three with *learning* the good. The first of the three conditions relating to achieving the good is the requirement that politics "afford expression to the political decision-making of independent reasoners on all those matters on which it is important that the members of a political community be able to come through shared rational deliberation to a common mind." The second is that the norms of justice involve the virtue of just generosity, aiming at securing the desert and needs of independent and dependent citizens respectively. The third is the provision that all citizens engage in communal deliberation about the norms of justice, including the establishment of "proxies" to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.[12] We note here the great emphasis MacIntyre places on the participation by *all* citizens in political activity, for an essential aspect of the common good is that it be a good acknowledged by all via a "common mind"; it is vital that this acknowledgment come as a result of community-wide rational deliberation.

The first of the three conditions for a justifiable political order in which men can learn about the good, both their own and that of the community as a whole, is the communal recognition of and obedience to the natural law, and a "shared understanding of goods, virtues, and rules." In another essay, MacIntyre defines the natural law as "the exceptionless precepts . . . which, insofar as we are rational, we recognize as indispensable in every society and in every situation for the achievement of our goods and of our final good, because they direct us toward and partially define our common good."[13] It is important to note here that MacIntyre sees universal agreement on a particular and authoritative conception of the good as an indispensable condition for both knowing and achieving personal and common goods. The second condition for

an acceptable political order is its size: "a relatively small-scale society whose relationships are not deformed by compartmentalization."[14] Compartmentalization is not simply the differentiation of social roles and institutions, for this dynamic attends any healthy political order, even small-scale ones, but the differentiation of *virtues, norms, and goods* according to each social role and institution. The result is the disintegration of the individual, who must aim at conflicting goods, follow contradictory norms, and adopt irreconcilable virtues; it also leads to the disintegration of society, since after compartmentalization, no purview is available for ordering the various goods of the differing institutions to the good of society as a whole, which is the very purpose of politics. MacIntyre writes,

> Within each sphere such individuals conform to the requirements imposed on their role within that sphere and there is no milieu available to them in which they are able, together with others, to step back from those roles and those requirements and to scrutinize themselves and the structure of their society from some external standpoint with any practical effect. [15]

For MacIntyre, compartmentalization is the inevitable concomitant of large-scale political structures, whose complexity and scope preclude the "face-to-face encounters and conversations of local community."[16] The communal ordering of all internal goods and practices to the common good is, for MacIntyre, the essence of politics, and this is itself a "practice": "Such a form of community is by its nature political, that is to say, constituted by a type of practice through which other types of practice are ordered, so that individuals may direct themselves towards what is best for them and for the community." [17] Indeed, politics is the highest of practices, since it "affords the best opportunity for the exercise of our rational powers." [18] A justifiable political order must not only permit but also actively facilitate the engagement by all its citizens in *terminable* rational inquiry and debate about the justification of those political structures. The activity of

inquiry and debate about how to organize and integrate personal and institutional goods and practices with the common good is essentially constitutive of politics itself: "Suppose however that there were a culture with the following conception of political community: political community exists for the sake of the creation and sustaining of that form of communal life into which the goods of each particular practice may be integrated so that both each individual and the community as a whole may lead a life informed by these goods." [19]

Modern political structures preclude deliberative forums for the attainment of a common mind that could rationally integrate private and lesser common goods to a comprehensive common good all could share. Moreover, and this is the third and final condition for a rationally justified politics, the "large-scale so-called free market economies" [20] that are inherent in modern political structures prevent citizens from freely pursuing and securing their common good. Because of the unjust inequality in wealth and power they inevitably produce, and the individualistic *ethos* that they presuppose, endless conflict "between rival conceptions of the common good" is the citizens' inescapable lot.

To MacIntyre's mind, not even one of these six conditions for an acceptable political order is met by the modern nation-state. His radical critique of the modern political order separates MacIntyre's political thought from that of John Rawls and Jacques Maritain, who both accept the nation-state as not only a possible locus but as the *primary* locus for a genuinely moral and rational political activity. Rawls and Maritain, notwithstanding their radically disparate conceptions of the nature and purpose of political activity and their differing assessments of this activity as it is presently practiced in modern secular democracies, are in complete agreement about one point: the essential legitimacy of the fundamental structures undergirding modern political activity, including its most fundamental institution, the nation-state. MacIntyre, on the other hand, does not simply reject, as does Rawls, certain explanative theories and justifications of modern politics, nor does he reject modern political practice insofar as it

fails to live up to its basic Christian principles, as in Maritain. Rather, he rejects modern politics altogether, in both theory and practice: "Modern systematic politics, whether liberal, conservative, radical, or socialist, simply has to be rejected from a standpoint that owes genuine allegiance to the tradition of the virtues; for modern politics itself expresses in its institutional forms a systematic rejection of that tradition." [21] For MacIntyre, liberalism's claim to provide, in virtue of its ostensibly neutral stance toward particular conceptions of the human good, the most free, and hence best possible milieu for individuals to determine, pursue, and secure their own particular conceptions of the human good is false. Liberal social orders do indeed promote and even impose a particular conception of the good, and it is one that enslaves rather than liberates. Since, for MacIntyre, the nation-state is the fundamental institution undergirding all modern Western social orders, the judgment he makes about the latter applies to the former.

We can examine the reasons for MacIntyre's assessment of liberalism in general in terms of his six-fold criteria for legitimate politics in particular, evaluating the nation-state's capacity to enable the learning, on the one hand, and the achievement, on the other, of both personal and common goods. We begin with the former. MacIntyre writes, "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." [22] This is the heart of MacIntyre's critique of the nation-state, for it exemplifies his understanding of moral learning as a social practice and his understanding of social practice as essentially an activity of learning. The politics of the nation-state is not a social *practice*, not a *craft,* for it is missing what all well-ordered practices possess, the means of learning about and attaining one's good. Yet, not every non-practice is oppressive, for as MacIntyre points out, all practices rely upon institutions, which are defined as non-practices, for their existence and sustenance. What is oppressive about the institution of the nation

state is that it *pretends to be a practice*. Since it is not actually a practice it cannot afford its participants the knowledge and possession of internal goods of excellence constitutive of human flourishing. However, since it must pretend to be a practice, or else lose both its status as a *political* structure and the allegiance of its citizens, most of whom, more or less, seek to live a political life aspiring to goods higher and more common than the instrumental and self-interested goods of effectiveness, it must exclude from public discussion any philosophical arguments that could expose its true nature. And insofar as it succeeds at this cover-up, as it were, it prevents the practice of communal deliberation and argument about the justification of its own political activity, one of the constituent goods of human flourishing and an essential feature of any authentic politics: [23]

> What is lacking in modern political societies is any type of institutional arena in which plain persons—neither engaged in academic pursuits nor professionals of the political life—are able to engage together in systematic reasoned debate, designed to arrive at a rationally well-founded common mind on how to answer questions about the relationship of politics to the claims of rival and alternative ways of life, each with its own conception of the virtues and of the common good. . . . What we have instead is a politics from whose agendas enquiry concerning the nature of that politics has been excluded, a politics thereby protected from perceptions of its own exclusions and limitations. [24]

As we discussed earlier, practices must be governed by a "shared understanding of goods, virtues, and rules," and any political practice must be governed by the precepts of the natural law, which "direct us toward and partially define our common good."[25] However, the nation-state, because of its great size, complexity, and "ramshackle" nature, precludes any shared understanding among citizens other than a mutual commitment to individual self-interest and pragmatic tolerance. Moreover, it justifies its political authority not by arguments showing that its

norms conform to the precepts of the natural law, for this would be oppressive and unjust to anyone who denies the existence, let alone political authority, of the natural law, but by arguments showing that it enables individuals to attain individualistic, self-chosen goods. The problem with this mode of justification is that the absence on the nation-state level of any semblance of a shared understanding of moral reality prevents the possibility of the kind of public discussion in which citizens could evaluate whether the activity of the modern state is indeed justified in its activity an its rationale for this activity: "What the modes of justification employed in and on behalf of the activities of state and market cannot give expression to are the values that inform just those ongoing argumentative conversations through which members of local communities try to achieve the goods and their good." [26]

Further, the absence of natural-law norms governing its activities guarantees that the state's activity will not be conducive to human flourishing. But if neither the precepts of the natural law nor any shared substantive values can be authoritative upon the nation-state, by what authority does it govern its citizens, and itself? "It is central to the life of the modern state that from its point of view there can be no appeal to anything beyond its sovereign authority. When positive law and the natural law conflict, there is no appeal beyond positive law." [27] Of course, this is a highly questionable justification for political authority, for it is self-referential. Yet, MacIntyre does not counsel revolt against the nation state, even though he considers it indubitably unjust and an unjustifiable oppressor. His purpose is to unmask, not to eliminate; not "to reform the dominant order, but to find ways for local communities to survive by sustaining a life of the common good against the distinguishing forces of the nation-state and the market." [28]

In fact, for MacIntyre the state should not be eliminated, for it supplies indispensable goods and services for both individuals and communities, such as the rule of law, public justice, relief of suffering, and protection of liberty. [29] However, it has potential for great evil, especially when its representatives speak and act as if it were something it is not, a genuine political entity embodying

the common good and operating with a rational and moral purpose determined by a deliberative common mind. MacIntyre articulates here the morally ambiguous nature of the nation-state:

> The importance of the good of public security, without which none of our local communities could achieve our common goods, must not be allowed to obscure the fact that our shared public goods of the modern nation-state, are not the common goods of a genuine nation-wide community and, when the nation-state masquerades as the guardian of such a common good, the outcome is bound to be either ludicrous or disastrous or both. In a modern, large-scale nation-state no such collectivity is possible and the pretense that it is, is always an ideological disguise for sinister realities. I conclude that insofar as the nation-state provides necessary and important public goods, these must not be confused with the type of common good for which communal recognition is required by the virtues of acknowledged dependence, and that insofar as the rhetoric of the nation-state presents it as the provider of something that is indeed, in this stronger sense a common good, that rhetoric is a purveyor of dangerous fictions. [30]

In a lecture entitled, "Natural Law Against the Nation-State: Or the Possibility of the Common Good against the Actuality of the Public Interest," MacIntyre portrays the nation-state as essentially a "common-interest," as opposed to a "common-good" organization, meaning that, although it can have a shared aim, it is one necessarily constituted by a summing of individual aims. The common-good organization, however, "can *only* be pursued by those individuals who are acting as parts of some communal whole," and who "understand their individual good as partly constituted by a good . . . characterizable independently and of and antecedently to the characterization of their particular individual good." [31] The nation-state is structured in terms of a common-interest organization and cannot be otherwise, for its size, complexity, and impersonality preclude shared deliberation about goods, and the intimate knowledge of and trust in other

persons that allows each citizen to see another's good as one's own. Therefore, attempting to embody a common good in a common-interest structure is bound to fail.

Trying to turn the public-interest organization of the nation state into the common-good organization of a political community is the misguided project of the communitarian. The problem with the communitarian proposal is twofold. It rightly advocates a robustly moral political community based upon a shared culture and particular conception of the good, but it wrongly deems this community an unconditional good in itself; it is only good when it fosters the virtues. Secondly, it exaggerates the possible scope for such a community. The communitarian is blind to the fact that a political community exercising shared deliberation can only exist on a level more local and modest scale than the nation-state, and that the attempt to embody moral community on the nation-state level only leads to greater tyranny, as liberals recognize. The communitarian would empower the nation-state with not just a moral justification but also a moral imperative to implement its inherently amoral and apolitical, self-aggrandizing power. The state, though not an immoral agent in itself, would thus become immoral by being charged with a moral responsibility it cannot execute, since it translates, by it very nature, any matter of moral import into its own non-moral vocabulary: "The contention underlying it is that *whatever* the grounds concerning goods may be upon which certain policies are supported or principles chosen, the political expression of that support and those choices will in the context of the modern state have to be understood in terms of preferences and interests. [32]

Thus the communitarian project mistakenly perceives a moral, rational agent where there is only an amoral, irrational animal. This animal can be tamed and trained, perhaps, but never humanized; it can be tolerated, but only insofar as it serves those truly human moral communities that depend upon its bureaucratic largess. In a famous passage, MacIntyre provides a sardonic yet sober account of the state:

> The modern nation-state, in whatever guise, is a dangerous and unmanageable institution, presenting itself on the one hand as a bureaucratic supplier of goods and services, which is always about to, but never actually does, give its clients value for money, and on the other as a repository of sacred values, which from time to time invites one to lay down one's life on its behalf. As I have remarked elsewhere, it is like being asked to die for the telephone company. [33]

The communitarian's non-individualistic conception of the common good is more in line with MacIntyre's thinking than the liberal's, yet its conception of political community is still inadequate, for it is not a "community of political learning and enquiry participation in which it is necessary for individuals to discover what their individual and common goods are." [34] The communitarian's approach to the state, on the other hand, has less in common with MacIntyre's than the liberal approach. A liberal would agree with MacIntyre's statement that the modern state is "grotesquely unfitted to be the protagonist of any substantive conception of the human good" [35]—however, for an entirely different reason. The liberal advocates a morally and ideologically neutral state because he values, above all, the moral and rational autonomy of the individual, which he judges to be severely compromised by *any* political structure, not just the state embodying a "substantive practical agreement upon some strong conception of the human good." [36] MacIntyre, on the contrary, sees rational and moral autonomy as *requiring* a political community united on a particular and strong conception of the good. Since the nation-state can never embody such a community, political community must be sought elsewhere.

MacIntyre's view of the nation-state can be distinguished from the liberal's in another important respect. According to the liberal historical narrative, the nation-state was originally created to stabilize and prevent any possible reoccurrence of the "wars of religion." Thus, its *raison d'etre*, then and now, is to prevent the development of any political community united in particularist

doctrines, for the sake of preserving the rational and moral autonomy of the individual and securing the political peace and stability of society. MacIntyre would agree that the nation-state poses a great threat to particularist political communities, but far from celebrating this feature as a positive good, he regrets it as a most tragic flaw. Although he would prefer the nation-state to stay within its role of promoting the public interest, of providing the institutional and instrumental goods without which local political communities cannot exist and thrive, he is convinced that it cannot help itself, as it were. In a kind of third-way alternative to communitarianism and liberalism, MacIntyre prescribes neither a morally particularistic nor a morally neutral state: "The contemporary state is not and cannot be evaluatively neutral, and secondarily . . . it is just because of the ways in which the state is not evaluatively neutral that it cannot generally be trusted to promote any worthwhile set of values, including those of autonomy and liberty." [37] The liberal demands state neutrality towards *particular* goods as a requirement for its securing and protecting the *universal* goods of autonomy and liberty; however, according to MacIntyre, such state neutrality is impossible: "The activities of government are such that they are not in their effects neutral between ways of life, but undermine some and promote others."[38] Therefore, since the state is an "ineliminable feature of the contemporary landscape," [39] since it cannot be evaluatively neutral, and since its evaluations are bound to cause harm, the prudent course of action is to make it as evaluatively neutral as possible. Here, MacIntyre endorses a version of the political "noble lie": "Even although the neutrality is never real, it is an important fiction, and those of us who recognize its importance as well as its fictional character will agree with liberals in upholding a certain range of civil liberties." [40]

We have explained why MacIntyre advocates the morally neutral state in theory, but what still needs explaining is why he judges the morally neutral state impossible in practice. MacIntyre never answers this question directly, but he does provide an indirect answer in his understanding of the nature of societal

reality in general. He writes, "Every political and social order embodies and gives expression to an ordering of different human goods and therefore also embodies and gives expression to some particular conception of the human good." [41] MacIntyre applies this principle in his unmasking of liberalism's duplicitous establishment of the "particular good" of "no particular good" as the non-negotiable basis of political order, excluding, or at least marginalizing, any other possible political ordering for the state and for sub-state social and political institutions centered upon other possible particular goods. Since, as MacIntyre avers, all social and political orders inevitably propose a particular ordering of social and political goods, even an ordering based upon the maximization of the freedom of individuals to order social and political goods themselves without political interference presupposes and embodies a particular conception of the good; state neutrality in this regard is impossible. In sum, if state neutrality is both impossible and disastrous, then the best we can do is neutralize the state by limiting its size and scope, charging it with politically minimal tasks such as providing the material, non-moral institutional goods that enable the craft communities of virtuous acknowledged dependence to do the real political work.

MacIntyre's Politics: Practically Liberal

Virtually all contemporary political philosophers, despite their significant disagreements, are unified in one fundamental way: they all support the political order of the liberal democratic state. As we have seen, however, Alasdair MacIntyre rejects it *tout court*. For MacIntyre, the nation-state is not a possible locus for genuine political activity. MacIntyre's basic argument is that since a morally based political order requires a tradition-homogenous citizenry, and since the nation-state is necessarily comprised of a tradition-heterogeneous citizenry, the nation-state cannot embody a morally based politics. Insofar as it attempts to do so, the result can only be tyranny, force, and fraud, and the attenuation of morally based political activity on the sub-state level. Insofar as sub-state political communities attempt to em-

body their authentic politics on the state-level, the result can only be the perversion of that politics, as MacIntyre's pithy remark suggests: "Those who make the conquest of state power their aim are always in the end conquered by it." [42]

Yet when we examine MacIntyre's rationale for rejecting state-based politics, questions arise to which MacIntyre provides no clear or coherent answers: why precisely is the nation-state incompatible with genuine political activity? In certain places, MacIntyre explains it in quantitative terms, its great size precluding it from embodying a consensus on a particular tradition of rationality and conception of the good; but in other places, he speaks in qualitative terms, suggesting that it is the state's complex, bureaucratic structure that prevents it from performing genuine political activity. If size is not the essential problem, then could the state embody genuine political activity in the event of a nation-wide consensus on a particular conception of the good? If a nation-wide consensus is too much to ask, could a state embody good politics if its size and scope were small enough to procure a consensus, but still larger than the local communities MacIntyre prescribes? If the problem is not only quantity but also quality, could the state's essential structure be reformed to enable genuine political activity? Or is there something essentially and irredeemably anti-political about the state, regardless of accidental differences like size, scope, and complexity? Is the *modern* nation state intrinsically anti-political, or is the state *qua* state such? Is the political model of the nation-state *necessarily* bound up with the errors and defects of modern, post-Enlightenment thought and culture? And if the state is irredeemable, why exactly is that the case?

In my assessment, MacIntyre does not provide a philosophically adequate and coherent answer to any of these questions. For example, his judgment that the state cannot embody a genuine politics is based upon his notion of the state's incapacity to embody conceptions of the good. But upon examination, this notion is confusing. On the one hand, MacIntyre insists that the state *should not* embody a conception of the good, but on the

other, he admits that the state *cannot help but* embody some particular conception of the good:

> Even though that neutrality is never real, it is an important fiction, and those of us who recognize its importance as well as its fictional character will agree with liberals in upholding a certain range of civil liberties. . . . For the contemporary state could not adopt a point of view on the human good as its own without to a significant degree distorting, degrading and discrediting that point of view. It would put those values to the service of its own political and economic power and so degrade and discredit them. [43]

If the state is as amoral a structure as MacIntyre claims it to be, it is not clear why its "neutrality is never real"; for why could the desired neutrality not be produced in an essentially moral-neutral structure? If state neutrality cannot be produced, does that not indicate that the state is not an essentially amoral entity? If the state's complexity and bureaucracy render it impervious to being infused with moral substance, then how could it ever manage to behave in the morally non-neutral manner MacIntyre claims it inevitably does? Why not at least try to shape the state's non-neutrality in accordance with a true conception of the good, perhaps by working to lessen its size and complexity to make it more amenable to moral influence and embodiment; one could begin with the state's more modest embodiments, such as local and municipal governments. It does not seem reasonable simply to leave a potentially harmful source of immense power to its own anarchic whims without any attempt to direct it to moral good. If the explanation for the morally-biased character of the state is that it is a necessarily *immoral* bias, then one must conclude that the state is *irredeemably evil*. This severe judgment requires both an adequate philosophical explanation and historical demonstration, which MacIntyre does not provide.

Keith Breen, Ronald Beiner, and Thomas Hibbs have made strong arguments that MacIntyre's notion of the state is problem-

atic. The state, as MacIntyre admits, is necessary for the existence and sustaining of MacIntyrean communities of the common good, but these authors argue that unless the state also embodies a politics of the common good, MacIntyrean communities cannot survive. There needs to be some political entity with ultimate custodianship of the common good , without which there can be no politics of the virtues of acknowledged dependence, and only some form of state that can fulfill this role. As Breen points out, MacIntyre confusedly characterizes the state as both irredeemably evil and non-political, and yet capable of some good political activity: "The state supposedly subverts all values and yet he praises the 'Americans with Disabilities Act' for removing obstacles to 'humane goals.'"[44] What this reveals is that, for MacIntyre, the state *can* be a bearer of ethical value, at least sometimes. However, if it is sometimes capable of genuine As moral activity, then it is not irredeemably evil, as MacIntyre suggests in other places. Breen notes, "Whether states corrupt values is a matter of contingent fact, not theoretical generalization." [45] In other words, it is not clear why, if the state's moral corruption is only a contingent phenomenon, it could not be reformed.

Another problematic aspect of MacIntyre's view of the state can be seen in the counsel he offers to members of traditional communities regarding the proper way to deal with the state and state functionaries. Because the state is a non-moral and self-serving entity disguising itself as a moral and selfless one, MacIntyre advises to have as little dealings with it as possible. We cannot shun the state completely, however, because it provides goods of effectiveness necessary for the existence and sustenance of traditionalist communities, such as economic resources and security from domestic and foreign violence. Thus, traditionalist communities must "Take from the modern state and modern corporations no more than what one really needs." [46] The upshot of MacIntyre's counsel is, ironically, that traditionalists should adopt the self-serving, calculative attitude of state functionaries. Breen notes: "Far from attaining unified lives, virtuous practitioners must maintain a stark duality of mind, oriented to local

excellence but the canniest of tacticians in their tussles with state functionaries."[47] The result of such moral schizophrenia can only be a less robust and integral practice of the virtues of acknowledged dependence.

These two examples are symptomatic of a fundamental incoherency in MacIntyre's notion of the state: "At heart here is a basic contradiction, the wish for a minimalist state that will, through some miracle, fulfill the goals of social democratic welfarism. Collaboration is decried whilst being recommended."[48] If the state *can* act as a moral agent for the political good, even if most of the time it does not, then it cannot be characterized as simply evil, even if it is a necessary evil. Instead of counseling calculative cunning and withdrawal, which would be the proper attitude to adopt only when dealing with something irredeemable, why not encourage the attempt to transform the state into a location for a politics of the common good? Limiting the scope of his political vision to non- and sub-state social entities would only make sense if it were *a priori* impossible to extend it any further, but MacIntyre has given us no adequate reason to think it is impossible. Breen sees a kind of hypocrisy in MacIntyre's thinking, a result, he surmises, of his extreme hostility to the modern state in virtue of its historical dominance by liberalism. But the liberal dominance of the state, pernicious as the effects of this dominance might be, is at least consistent with liberalism's socially transformative goals. MacIntyre's error it to conflates *state* politics with *liberal* politics, but he provides no adequate reason to think that the connection is a *necessary* one, even though it has been an *historical* one. In short, for Breen there is nothing incompatible about a *state* politics of the virtues of acknowledged dependence. Breen's critique is powerful, and as we shall soon see, it is incompatible with MacIntyre's political ideal *not* to involve the state in a politics of virtue.

An Unpolitical Politics

One might argue that while MacIntyre's rejection of the possibility of a state politics of the common good is unnecessary, it is, at

least understandable. Though a more extended area for genuine moral political activity would be better than a less extended one, the rejection of a state politics is an acceptable price to pay to prevent the immoral—but perhaps not inevitably so—nation-states of contemporary Europe and America from corrupting nascent communities of virtue too weak to defend themselves. However, the price might be higher than just the loss of the possibility of a greater scope for political activity. As I will argue, the price is the loss of any political good whatsoever. MacIntyre is so careful not to implicate his communities of virtue in the political machinations of the state that he renders them *non-political* and hence vulnerable to those very machinations he seeks to avoid. If the state is as politically powerful as MacIntyre suggests, and if this political power will inevitably be used for evil, then why not equip sub-state communities with some measure of political power to defend themselves, and to ensure they receive the political goods they need, such as freedom from external and internal oppression and violence? Yet, if we examine carefully the constitution of the MacIntyrean political community, it is incapable of providing these goods—for it is not really a *political* constitution at all.

If Breen is correct in his claim that the modern state is capable of becoming a genuinely political entity, then MacIntyre's small-scale political communities should share some of its political features, such as the authority of law. Yet, because MacIntyre rejects the political nature of the state, he rejects any state-like political features in his ideal political communities, and one is left wondering how genuinely political these communities really are:

> The unavoidable question is: What's political about MacIntyre's "politics of local community"? . . . he writes that a community is "political" insofar as "it is constituted by a type of practice through which other types of practice are ordered." He calls this a polis. But the Greek polis embodied concepts of law, authority, and citizenship—notions seemingly absent from the local communities that MacIntyre is calling political. [49]

Even though it would seem that communities require law, authority, and citizenship to be genuine political bodes, nowhere does MacIntyre describe his ideal political communities as affording the privileges of citizenship, possessing representative authority, or having any framework of coercive law. The latter is the most significant, since, at least for Aristotle and Aquinas, law is an essential component of any political entity. The state in MacIntyre's view, however, is the only institution empowered to make and execute law; but, as Hibbs points out, even if local communities were permitted the power to make laws, how could they compete with the enormous law-making power of the state?

Within the confines of the nation-state with its invasive and seemingly omnipresent legal apparatus, what sort of legislative self-determination can a local community have? Even if it decides how to allocate resources and enact local laws, its police force is still fundamentally committed to enforcing the law of the nation and its economy is largely dependent on the national and increasingly the international economy. [50]

MacIntyre expects his local communities of virtue to order and rank goods and practices for individual community members, but their freedom to do so is at the behest of a dangerous and practically omnipotent state. MacIntyre makes no provision to equip these communities with the political *sovereignty* to enact such orderings with any level of self-sufficiency and autonomy from the state. [51]

In short, because MacIntyre's political communities are insufficiently political, they cannot guarantee the accomplishment of the moral goods MacIntyre desires of them. Without possessing the power of law and sovereign self-rule, they can neither effectively order the practices and goods within their dominions, nor order the "practice of practices" that is politics itself. Rather, it is the law-making and law-enforcing state, the only institution invested with actual *political* power, that ultimately orders these by default, and, according to MacIntyre, its overarching "ordering" of the goods, practices, and communities under its dominion is inevitably disordered. Beiner pointedly remarks: "The problem here, of course, is that MacIntyre is left

with no possible site for overarching *political* community compatible with the basic condition of modernity—he offers Aristotelianism without a polis." [52]

Paradoxically, the political impotence of the MacIntyrean community can be traced to the political impotence MacIntyre imputes to the modern state. If the state is, in reality, *not* politically impotent, for it does indeed embody a conception of the good, however mistaken, and because this conception of the good inevitably wields an architectonic political influence over all the institutions under its purview, due to the power of law and its monopoly of coercive power, for MacIntyre to counsel moral communities to simply reject the state, or at most, to adopt a self-serving, utilitarian relationship with it, is to ensure only that the state will have its political way, as it were, with these communities. Since the state's conception of the good is a false one, then no community, regardless of the vehemence with which it rejects this false conception of the good, can hope to remain immune from its influence. The only recourse against a state gone bad, as it were, would be either to attempt to reform it, or to protect one's community through the counter-use of effective political power; however, neither of these does MacIntyre's political vision endorse or make possible. As Breen points out, MacIntyre's refusal to grant to the nation-state the capacity of moral activity threatens the moral capacity of those institutions to which he does:

> The state, like any other institution, cannot but embody values. Living in a *network of networks* means the character of the nation-state (liberal, socialist, or fascist) determines to a real extent what can go on in its constituent towns and villages. Consequently, liberty and the ability to act persist only when secured on *every* level of political and social organization. And this suggests, too, that MacIntyre and his liberal opponents are similarly wrong to exclude ethos from national and supranational political structures, it being an ethos of a highly specific sort that sustains freedom and sets boundaries to what can and cannot be done in the name of the common good. [53]

We have argued that while MacIntyre may desire the social conditions for the thriving of Thomistic-constituted communities, he does not effectively prescribe these conditions. In rejecting the consolidation of any conception of the good within the social structure of the state, MacIntyre sustains an otherwise reformable tyrannical liberal state, he secures the political impotence of just those moral communities that could transform this tyranny into a moral force for good, and he prevents the tradition-homogenous communities of virtue from preserving their moral integrity, self-sufficiency, and political autonomy. Jonathan Chaplin summarizes the problem with MacIntyre's rejection of a normative state: "It [The MacIntyrean ideal community] is parasitic upon the existence of a 'regime,' a democratic political community. It lacks an account of the nature and normative purpose of the state as the institutional context which alone makes political advocacy, whether agonistic or consensual, possible in the first place." [54]

MacIntyre's Political Liberalism

Breen claims that "no theoretical obstacles prevent him [MacIntyre] from recognizing that a prime way to render the state less harmful is to transform it from within." [55] As I will argue, however, there *is* a theoretical obstacle to MacIntyre's prescribing the inner transformation of the state. MacIntyre's main critique of liberalism is its inherent dishonesty. Claiming in theory to be neutral of any particular tradition in order that it may facilitate the freedom of all, in practice it is a particular tradition that severely limits the freedom of others. Claiming in theory to secure a culture, public square, and political order open to all traditions because embodying, recognizing, and confessing none, in practice it permits nothing but its own particular conception of the good to be embodied, recognized, and confessed as authoritative in culture, public debate, and law. MacIntyre's primary strategy against liberalism is to expose its dishonesty. By successfully narrating the tradition liberalism denies itself to be, by unmasking the existence and revealing the incoherence of the

liberal conception of the good, and by showing that its tradition and conception of the good has been embodied socially, culturally, economically, and politically in the modern nation-states of the west to the detriment of the freedom and moral integrity of their inhabitants, MacIntyre demonstrates the need to search for a non-liberal alternative, both in theory and in practice.

MacIntyre presents his model of the tradition-homogenous community as the best possible practical alternative to liberalism, but is it truly the best? As we shall see, there is even doubt as to whether it is even a genuine alternative to liberalism at all. On the surface, there is a superficial similarity between liberalism and MacIntyreanism in that they both restrict the extent of the consolidation of their beliefs within social structures. However, the differing extent of their social restrictions, and especially the radically different rationales they employ for such restrictions, reveals the similarity to be only superficial. MacIntyre rejects the consolidation of his beliefs within the political structure of the state and the large-scale social structure of the nation not because he rejects the social embodiment of conceptions of the good, but because he judges that the level of tradition-homogenous consensus required for such social embodiment, and hence genuine moral and political activity, *cannot* exist within the institution of the modern state and within the large-scale social structure of the nation as a whole. The liberal, however, rejects the consolidation of beliefs within *all* social structures, being unwilling even to consolidate them within small-scale social structures, because he considers social consensus on any particular conception of the good to be both undesirable and impossible. For the liberal, *any* social embodiment of a particular conception of the good is more of a threat than a help to the individual's exercise of the freedom to choose and live out a conception of the good on the overwhelmingly more important individual level. MacIntyre, on the contrary, endorses without hesitation the social embodiment of conceptions of the good because he judges that the ability to choose and live out a conception of the good *requires* the good's social embodiment, and the individual's active participation in

that social embodiment.

However, notwithstanding their considerable differences in scope and rationale, both liberalism and MacIntyreanism are identical in their rejection of *large-scale* social embodiment of conceptions of the good, either within the institution of the state or in the culture at large. It is, of course, quite clear why *liberalism* rejects social embodiment of conceptions of the good; it comports with its overall procedural and non-metaphysical logic. However, it is not clear why MacIntyreanism rejects is, for it does not seem to comport with the overall logic of its moral theory. Regardless of the fact that liberal conceptions of the good happen to be, against the explicit logic of liberalism, socially embodied on a large-scale level in virtually all of the contemporary western nation-states, and embodied to such an extent as to exclude other social embodiments, these *de facto* social embodiments do not square with its theoretically individualist and epistemologically skeptical theory. Its unwillingness to admit this discrepancy is problematic, but at least its *explicit* prescription of the social *disembodiment* of all particular conceptions of the good is consistent with its overall theory. One would not expect someone denying an interpretation of the good as inherently social, as encountered, learned, and embraced only through social relationships, naturally to desire that conceptions of the good actually *be* socially embodied. The pertinent question, then, is not why liberalism endorses the social restriction of conceptions of the good, but why *MacIntyre* does. Is it logical for MacIntyre to limit his aspirations for the social embodiment of conceptions of the good to small-scale communities with virtually no political power? Is it consistent with his overall theory to reject large-scale social embodiment within the culture-at-large and the state?

If one believes a particular, socially embodied conception of the good to be *true*, and the practices in accord with this good to be alone capable of perfecting human beings, then would it not be consistent with this belief to desire this conception of the good to have the widest extent of social embodiment possible? The liberal, who at best would plead ignorance of any knowledge of the "true"

conception of the good, at second best, would deny that anyone knows which conception of the good is true, and at worst, that the good even exists at all, should logically desire that any particular conception of the good attain as little social embodiment as possible. To be consistent, he should desire either no social embodiment at all, or at least an equality of social embodiments of the good in a social structure in which no conception of the good could ever gain societal advantage over another. MacIntyre, however, recognizes not only the existence of one, true conception of the good, but also the necessity of socially embodied traditions of rationality for the discovery and attainment of this human good. Moreover, he identifies the Thomistic tradition of rationality as the embodiment of this one, true good, and affirms the necessity of participating in the socially embodied practices of this tradition for the effective discovery and fullest attainment of the human good. The logic of MacIntyre's truth commitments would seem to dictate a desire for at least the necessary social conditions for the thriving and multiplying of Thomistic-constituted small-scale communities.

However, to remain consistent with his commitment to Thomistic-constituted rationality, one could argue that MacIntyre should desire more than merely the thriving and multiplying of Thomistic communities; he should desire that these communities thrive and multiply *more* than other traditions and attain *more* social embodiment than communities embodying other traditions. For MacIntyre, all traditions except the Thomistic tradition are rationally deficient to some extent, and hence incapable of completely fulfilling the moral desires of their adherents. Does it not follow that for the sake of the individual and common goods, these defective traditions should, in an ideal world, have as little social embodiment as possible? Similarly, should the MacIntyrean Thomist not desire a *large-scale* social embodiment of the Thomistic tradition as the ideal? Moreover, in the light of Breen's solid argument that there is no good reason not to grant the state a capacity for some genuine ethical activity, especially since small-scale ethical communities suffer in the absence of a morally good

state, one must ask why a large-scale social embodiment of a tradition should not include embodiment in the state. In short, it is not clear how MacIntyre's rejection of both large-scale social and political embodiment of the Thomistic tradition is consistent with either his general theory of tradition-constituted rationality or his particular judgment of the superiority of the Thomistic tradition, and it would seem that MacIntyre fails to prescribe the necessary social conditions for the thriving of the tradition he judges to be true.

The ultimate irony is that MacIntyre's theory succeeds to some extent in prescribing the social conditions for *liberalism* to thrive, and not only to thrive, but also to attain social and political dominance. Catherine Pickstock, in a remarkably insightful passage, illuminates how MacIntyre's political ideal, as well as any political program aiming at merely local social embodiment, can serve only to sustain a *liberal* social order:

> There are unresolved problems about the pure communitarian celebration of the resistance exercised by the local organic community. First, how does one distinguish it from a kind of liberalism to a higher power in which the freely choosing subjects are not individuals but organic collectivities? Secondly, while these organic localities may be characterized by practices oriented towards substantive value-laded goals, it is difficult to see how this will be true for a confederation of such groups. Will not their collectively agreed-upon goals be extremely minimal and, indeed, given the degree of divergence, will not the only binding glue be pragmatist and contractualist in character? One may say that that if one is applying the principle of subsidiarity, that this does not matter, but if the only common language is after all liberal, then the universalism intrinsic to liberalism will tend to reassert itself, and press once more towards centralization, even if this remains concealed. The spaces of communitarian association in the local societies will tend, therefore, to become *more carnivalesque* spaces, where people can "play" at having substantive creative and pre-modern freedoms. [56]

Liberalism in its desire to secure and preserve the autonomous exercise of individual rationality, eschews the social embodiment of conceptions of the good and the communal participation in traditions of rationality that alone enables and sustains human rationality. The resulting political program is, as Pickstock describes, a pragmatist and contractualist state charged with the task of neutrally managing the essentially irrational desires and actions of individuals. Since the social accumulation of similar thoughts, desires, and actions can lead to the unjust exclusion or oppression of dissimilar ones, the state must be ever vigilant in rooting out such social accumulations. But one can ask how different, in practice, MacIntyre's political program is from the liberal one just described.

One could argue that MacIntyre, in his desire to secure and preserve the autonomous exercise of *communal* rationality, eschews the kind of large-scale social embodiment of conceptions of the good and *large-scale* communal participation in traditions of rationality that alone enable and sustain traditions of rationality. The resulting political program is, as Pickstock puts it, "liberalism to a higher order," for the same pragmatist and contractualist state ends up getting endorsed in the MacIntyrean social order to prevent the social accumulation of similar desires and actions, except now on the part of local *communities*. The state in the MacIntyrean social order is as bereft of a substantive conception of the good as in the liberal one, and must manage the essentially irrational, "extra-traditional" activity of *traditions*, as opposed to individuals. I say "irrational" because the activity of the traditional community as a whole, which may be more or less rational in itself in virtue of the rationality of its internal *telos,* is, in this view, irrational in its actions *in relation to other traditional communities and to the greater social arena as a whole*; for, in MacIntyre's ideal politics, there can be no overarching rational *telos* to order the traditions to each other and to the good of the social whole.

The key insight of Pickstock is that the "universalism intrinsic to liberalism will tend to reassert itself." MacIntyre's political

program deprives "extra-communal" social space of tradition-constituted rationality, a particular conception of the good, an exclusive belief, a specific *telos*. However, it is this *tradition-bereft* social-space, and it alone, that must *contain* the *tradition-constituted* social space of the various communities, for, not being a community itself committed to any particular conception of the good, it is thus in the unique political position to manage them all; and it will do so the only way it knows how, pragmatically and contractually, based upon its *universal* purview, "neutral," and "above the fray." But this universalism and neutrality is, as MacIntyre insists, a fiction. The neutral management of the ostensibly, substantively empty social space—the modern state's dishonest description of itself—has only ever served to mask the domination by itself, a substantively based community with a particular conception of the good, over all other communities. Why should this sort of liberalism, inherent in the tradition-bereft social order of atomized *individuals*, be essentially different from the liberalism inherent in the tradition-constituted social order of the now "socially atomized" *traditions*? Chaplin makes the point that neutrality in politics is just another word for liberalism:

> Specifically, I shall argue that just as liberals necessarily and legitimately seek to realize an authentically liberal pluralism, so Christians necessarily and legitimately seek an authentically Christian pluralism. "Christian pluralism" is not only not a contradiction in terms but is an essential aspiration for an authentically Christian political perspective. If Christians merely seek a neutral pluralism, they risk lapsing into the language—for them inauthentic—of secular liberalism. [57]

Breen criticizes MacIntyre for condemning liberalism in one context but endorsing it, at least implicitly, in another: "Ready to damn liberals for having consolidated their beliefs within social structures, he seems curiously unaware that this is the honest goal of most serious political standpoints, his own included." [58] MacIntyre charges liberals with denying their substantive moral

and political commitments, and the practical ramifications of these commitments, but it seems that MacIntyre himself denies the political ramifications of his own commitments. In the light of MacIntyre's understanding of rationality as tradition-constituted, should the ultimate *telos* of MacIntyre's political theory not be the transformation of *all* social space into a tradition-constituted, communal forum for ethical deliberation about the human good? Yet MacIntyre relegates any social space more extensive than a small-scale community to the barren land of individualistic, "traditionless" irrationality, ruled over by the anarchic whims of an essentially irrational state whose "universal" conception of the good—individualistic autonomy—poses a formidable threat to the particular conceptions of the good embodied in the communities it rules: "The paradox, then, is that while MacIntyre rightly believes the whole of human life to the proper subject of ethical deliberation and rejects all claims to administrative neutrality, his partisanship for communal politics relinquishes these gains." [59]

Tradition-Constituted Pluralism

A political project that relegates a great part of the social space to the custodianship of an irrational, amoral ruler is antithetical to a moral project that seeks to order society to a common good, and to embody rational moral activity to the fullest social extent possible. However, as I will argue, the contradiction between MacIntyre's political and moral theory is only an apparent one. It is, in fact, quite compatible with MacIntyre's overall theory of tradition-constituted rationality. Surprisingly enough, there seems to be an implicit acceptance in MacIntyre's moral theory of the "interminable moral disagreement" that he explicitly condemns. Both John Rawls [60] and Jacques Maritain [61] hold a similar interpretation of the "fact of pluralism," one in which the lack of moral, philosophical, and theological unity in Western liberal democracies is an unchangeable sociological reality; this interpretation is then incorporated into their political theories and political prescriptions. We have seen that MacIntyre accepts the fact of

pluralism as well, but rejects any attempt to build a morally grounded political order upon it, insisting instead that only tradition-homogenous communities within the larger pluralistic environment can embody genuine moral and political activity. However, far from indicating an attitude of resentment or tragic necessity towards the fact of pluralism, MacIntyre's political program indicates the very opposite. A possible conclusion one could draw from MacIntyre's suggestion of the undesirability and even impossibility of large-scale, tradition-homogenous political activity is that large-scale political disunity is somehow necessary for the thriving of traditions of rationality. If political disunity, in the MacIntyrean view, implies moral disunity, then moral disunity would appear to be indispensable for the thriving of traditions of rationality and the rationality of individuals. If this conclusion is true, then MacIntyre, in both his moral theory and ideal political prescription, would implicitly endorse the "interminable moral disagreement" he explicitly condemns.

There does seem to be a paradox at the heart of MacIntyre's moral theory. Although unified agreement is the ultimate *desideratum* of a tradition, in its narrative, history, practices, institutions, authorities, conception of the good, internal goods, philosophical concepts, rational criteria, core beliefs, moral habits, etc., a certain amount of disagreement, both within and without the tradition, is necessary to obtain and preserve this unity. We have seen that the development of tradition requires the event of an epistemological crisis, which necessarily involves confrontation with an opposing tradition in the careful comparison with which the present inadequacy or adequacy of one's own tradition is discovered. Moreover, a tradition cannot progress unless it confronts *itself* as well as other traditions, that is, unless it contrasts its present formulation and embodiment with past formulations and embodiments to show both continuity and development, and thus to present a coherent narrative of its history. A tradition is inherently conflictive, since it is, essentially, an embodied argument: "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."[62] Because a well-ordered tradition must always be open to further development, revision, and even defeat, and because such openness to change requires the existence of conflicting traditions, then disunity or conflict between traditions cannot be an inherent evil; indeed, it is an indispensable good, for the integrity of traditions requires it. As Levy points out, for MacIntyre, "[c]onflict, both internal to traditions and between them, is a necessary element in rationality and in rational progress, not, a contingent and regrettable feature of certain societies."[63]

Nevertheless, the primary characteristic of a well-ordered tradition, for MacIntyre, is unity and agreement, not conflict. If a plurality of traditions is good, it is only an instrumental good, a good of effectiveness, always in subordination to any tradition's primary internal good of excellence, the *truth*. MacIntyre is insistent that his theory of tradition-constituted rationality, although fully cognizant of the contingent, historical, and social-situatedness of all human knowledge, is ultimately non-relativistic, for it affirms that the attainment of unchangeable, objective truth about reality is possible. Yet, there is still a tension: to obtain the knowledge that one has attained truth, that one's mind has become adequate to some aspect of reality, it would seem that there must exist rival claimants to truth with which the one who claims to know the truth must contend. MacIntyre writes,

> It may seem to be, but it is not paradoxical, to conclude that the discovery that it is possible for our own particular moral standpoint to be rationally defeated by some rival standpoint is a necessary condition for arriving at a rational vindication of our own point of view. For the strongest indication that any point of view can receive is that is has so far survived encounters with as wide as possible a variety of other and rival standpoints without suffering such defeat . . . . [64]

It is obvious that because human fallibility, passion, bias,

rivalry, etc., are inextricable aspects of humanity, a pluralism of rival accounts of moral reality will always exist in the world. Both MacIntyre and the Enlightenment are in full agreement on this point. What MacIntyre criticizes the Enlightenment for is not its acceptance of human fallibility and moral disagreement, but its exploitation of these truths about human nature by creating a social order that insures only its worst possible moral consequence: the inability of individuals to discover and obtain their true good. It does this by depriving individuals of unified, socially embodied, authoritative traditions of rationality the participation in the practices of which alone enable tradition-dependent rational animals to know the truth and possess the good. Yet MacIntyre's alternative to Enlightenment politics also serves to deprive individuals of traditions of rationality to some extent, because it disables these traditions from the capacity to stand up, as it were, to a tradition-destroying state, so as to infuse *all* of social reality, not just local communities, with tradition-constituted rationality. However, it appears that MacIntyre's alternative to Enlightenment *morality* would have a similar effect as well.

Neil Levy expresses how MacIntyre's endorsement of inter-traditional pluralism is really an endorsement of intra-traditional pluralism:

> In order to refute relativism, MacIntyre finds himself importing more and more of the pluralism of modern culture into his account of the rational tradition, until it is no longer clear which is the more riven by conflict. The very pluralism which, MacIntyre believes, threatens to undermine the rationality of our moral judgments turns out to be a necessary ingredient of the supposedly unified traditions MacIntyre wished to vindicate. [65]

If a state of conflictive pluralism *between* traditions is necessary for the occurrence of the epistemological crises that enable traditions to discover whether or not they can justify their adherents' claims to truth, then perhaps a state of conflictive pluralist *within* a tradition is also necessary for individuals to

discover whether or not the goods, practices, and authorities they presently desire, participate in, and obey are adequate. But how is this conception of tradition essentially different from the moral consciousness of the liberal, tradition-independent "individual," perpetually skeptical of the truth of his own beliefs, the claims of others to moral authority, and the existence of an unambiguous, universal, and objective "good"? Obviously, this is not the moral consciousness that MacIntyre desires. However, if a certain level of questioning and self-doubt is necessary for the justification of a tradition in relation to other traditions, then it would seem to be also necessary for the justification of the individual's initial and continuing allegiance to a tradition.

J. B. Schneewind argues that MacIntyre's requirement that individuals constantly question their given social identities even within their own tradition is, for all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from the liberal, socially skeptical attitude that MacIntyrean communities are supposed to counteract:

> MacIntyre envisages communities whose key feature is that their members will not have any deep doubts about their socially given identities and therefore will not have to make decisions about them. . . . By rejecting fixed inherited social identities and the bad faith involved in treating the cultural as the natural, MacIntyre has incorporated into his ethic two closely related principles of that liberal modern morality he so detests. I do not think his communities, if they were to exist in a world as crowded and communicative as ours, could resist the dialectical consequences of having MacIntyre's theory as their own self-understanding. [66]

Even though MacIntyre rejects the liberal, tradition-independent view of rationality, endorsing the necessity of obedience to and dependence upon authoritative texts, practices, personages, and institutions, these particular authorities, as well as the tradition as a whole, nevertheless, must remain open to constant rational evaluation and criticism by members of other traditions, as well as by those already accepting these authorities. Of course,

MacIntyre would remind us that the "reason" doing the evaluating and criticizing is by no means tradition-independent, as its very capacity to evaluate and criticize is dependent upon continual obedience to the authorities under its investigation; nevertheless, there is a similarity here between the Enlightenment and MacIntyre in the overall attitude towards authority. For both, authority is in the end *subject to reason*. Terry Pinkard writes, "The 'authority of tradition' is itself subject to assessment by reason, even if the capacities for good reason are not capacities that can be exercised outside of some appeal to such authority." [67]

In sum, there seems to be an irresolvable tension in MacIntyre's overall theory of tradition-constituted rationality. While traditions are required for rationality, they must be under constant rational surveillance for any signs of irrationality. While a tradition may claim to be exclusively true, it requires the assistance of other traditions, even "false" ones, to do so, and it must be ready to renounce its truth claims if it is judged to be unable to survive dialectical argument. While unified agreement is ostensibly the greatest internal good of a tradition, conflictive pluralism seems to be just as important, and possibly even an internal good in itself. Levy expresses well the tensions in MacIntyre's theory:

> In order for a tradition to be able justifiably to hold sway over the entire field, it is necessary that it does not hold sway over the entire field. In order for a tradition to establish its superiority over its rivals, it is necessary for it to enter into dialogue with them, and be transformed by them. In order for a tradition to progress, it needs the arguments thrown at it by, and the alien perspectives of, rivals. . . . In order for us to be able to conclude that a unified culture with a widely agreed upon social and cosmological order is necessary for rational enquiry, it is necessary for the social field to be riven by deep and fundamental divisions. [68]

The last point of Levy's is especially significant for our present discussion because it connects the tension in MacIntyre's moral theory to the tension in his political prescription. The primary

target of MacIntyre's critique of Enlightenment liberalism and the contemporary social and political order is its "interminable moral disagreement," the "pluralism which threatens to submerge us all." However, when one carefully examines the alternative moral theory and practical model MacIntyre gives us, it is not evident that pluralism and moral disagreement themselves are the enemy; it is only a certain *kind* of pluralism and moral disagreement that MacIntyre condemns. The conflictive and pluralistic character of the post-Enlightenment social order is not the problem, for if we could move the locus of the conflict and the source of the pluralism from individuals *qua* individuals to individuals *qua* members of traditions, and from individuals organized irrationally and non-teleologically by state-bureaucratic and market forces to individuals organized rationally and teleologically by the practices of genuine moral communities, then such conflict and pluralism would be good. Far from requiring a "unified culture with a widely agreed upon social and cosmological order" in order to thrive, it would seem that the political ideal that follows logically from the normative pluralism inherent in MacIntyre's theory of tradition-constituted rationality could even exist in a non-pluralistic and tradition-homogenous culture and order. For, not only would a large-scale, tradition-homogenous community preclude the level of conflictive pluralism necessary for the small-scale, tradition-homogenous communities within it to develop rationally, but a similar moral stunting would be caused by the small-scale tradition-homogenous communities themselves. Levy writes, "The unified practice, rooted in a small, relatively homogenous community—the practices that it remains, officially, MacIntyre's task to defend and promote—turn out on his own arguments to be inhospitable environments for the development of those resources that would allow practices to flourish, to develop, to justify themselves rationally, and so to be worthy of their hegemony." [69]

If we take the specific example of MacIntyre's own tradition of Thomism, we can see this paradox in its most extreme and ironical form. The rational development of the tradition of

Augustinian Thomism reached a high-point in the thirteenth century, the century, of course, of St. Thomas Aquinas. This was the century that also witnessed the high point of the development of the unified religious civilization known as Christendom. Not only did there exist at this time in Europe a multitude of small-scale tradition-homogenous Thomistic communities, but also a large-scale homogenously Catholic community unifying the smaller ones. Notwithstanding the considerable strife within and between these communities, MacIntyre would be the first to admit that there was none of the "interminable moral disagreement" and "pluralism which threatens to submerge us all" now found in post-medieval society. Moreover, the political theology of the Thomist tradition certainly does not endorse moral or political pluralism by any means. On the contrary, the traditional Catholic political ideal, which has remain unchanged even unto modern times, is a *large-scale* morally and religiously unified state under the moral and spiritual authority of the Catholic Church, that is, Christendom.[70] In short, traditional Catholicism and Thomism appear to recommend a social order conducive for the flourishing of human rationality quite different from the one MacIntyre recommends. Pinkard writes,

> Given MacIntyre's own social-practice account of reason, for his argument against modernity to work and for Thomism to defeat modernity the social wholes that are necessary for Thomist reasoning to be successful would themselves have to be reconstructed—and there is simply no reason to think that is possible. For it to be possible, the kind of pluralism that gives rise to the problems of incommensurability would itself have to be overcome, and everything MacIntyre says seems to constitute an argument to the effect that it cannot, that pluralism is a necessary, even rationally required component of the modern world. [71]

In conclusion, MacIntyre's project does not appear as anti-liberal and anti-modern as it claims to be. Like liberalism, its political prescription endorses, and his moral theory requires, a

social order wherein no particular conception of the good prevails on a large-scale level. Both MacIntyreanism and liberalism limit the state's activity to tradition-neutral, pragmatic management of inter-traditional and inter-individual moral conflict respectively. Both consider a morally conflictive social order a good thing because necessary for human flourishing and the fullest exercise of human rationality. Alasdair MacIntyre is arguably the most sophisticated and trenchant philosophical critic of liberalism alive today; yet if my analysis is correct, even he cannot manage to portray a coherent alternative to the liberal political order.

There are several explanations and conclusions one could offer and draw from this fact, but allow me to suggest just one. Since it is quite doubtful that the reason for MacIntyre's difficulty in overcoming liberalism is a deficiency of philosophical sophistication and rigor, then perhaps the problem isn't philosophical at all. If the Thomist tradition is the true tradition, and if the ideal political order can only be described coherently and persuasively with *all* the resources of this tradition, including its theological resources, what MacIntyre might be able to provide, if he were only to put some theology into his philosophical arsenal, is an effective refutation of any non-Thomistic attempt to prescribe a model of the ideal political order. What a theologically informed, MacIntyrean-Thomist ideal political prescription would actually look like, and how it could be effectively implemented in the present day, is a task yet to be accomplished, but I think that any philosopher attempting to execute it must first admit his inadequacy to go it alone, and then call on the help of the theologians: "Without bad will, political philosophy cannot refuse to consider revelation's insight into political things when politics does not solve its own problems in its own terms about its own subject matter."[72]

Thaddeus J. Kozinski
Our Lady Seat of Wisdom Academy

NOTES

1. Alasdair MacIntyre , *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 4.

2. *Ibid.*, 9.

3. *Ibid.*, 68-95.

4. *Ibid.*, 102-03.

5. *Ibid.*, 103.

6. *Ibid.*, 107-09.

7. *Ibid.*, 110-11.

8. *Ibid.*, 116-18.

9. *Ibid.*, 122-25.

10. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good," in *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 243.

11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 219.

12. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* , 129-30. MacIntyre's outline of the ideal political order, although a secular, naturalistic, and philosophical presentation, is similar in essentials to the Catholic conception of the "preferential option for the poor," defined in Pope Paul VI's pastoral letter *Octogesima Adveniens* 23 (1971) as "the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society." MacIntyre's position differs from Catholic teaching in that the latter does not exclude the state as a locus for and an agent of the implementation of its principles, while the former does. For MacIntyre, the state is, at best, a necessarily evil, not to be deputed with any moral responsibilities.

13. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Natural Law as Subversive: The Case of Aquinas," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 68.

14. MacIntyre, "Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good," 249.

15. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Social Structures and Their Threats to Moral Agency," in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays,* Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 197.

16. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* , 142.
17. *Ibid.*, 241.
18. *Ibid.*, 243.
19. MacIntyre, "Practical Rationalities as Forms of Social Structure," 123.
20. *Ibid.*, 249.
21. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* , 255.
22. MacIntyre, "Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good," 250.
23. *Ibid.*, 236-37.
24. *Ibid.*, 239.
25. MacIntyre, "Natural Law as Subversive: The Case of Aquinas," 68.
26. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Toleration and the Goods of Conflict," in *The Politics of Toleration in Modern Life* , ed. Susan Mendus (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 142.
27. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Natural Law against the Nation-State: Or the Possibility of the Common Good against the Actuality of the Public Interest," (unpublished lectures) from *Laws, Goods, and Virtues: Medieval Resources for Modern Conflicts*, the 1994 Agnes Cuming Lectures in Philosophy, delivered at University College, Dublin, March 1-3, 1994, 43.
28. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Spectre of Communitarianism," *Radical Philosophy* 70 (1995), 35; quoted in Kelvin Knight, "Revolutionary Aristotelianism," in I. Hampsher-Monk and J. Stanyer, eds, *Contemporary Political Studies* , vol 2 (Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom, 1996), 894.
29. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* , 237.
30. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* , 132-33.
31. MacIntyre, "Natural Law against the Nation State," 27.
32. *Ibid.*," 29.
33. Alasdair MacIntyre, "A Partial Response to My Critics," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, John Horton and Susan Mendus, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 303.
34. MacIntyre, "Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,"

246.

35. MacIntyre, "Natural Law against the Nation State," 29.

36. MacIntyre, "A Partial Response to My Critics," 303.

37. MacIntyre, "Toleration and the Goods of Conflict," 143.

38. MacIntyre, "Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good," 238.

39. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 133.

40. MacIntyre, "Toleration and the Goods of Conflict," 144.

41. MacIntyre, "Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good," 247.

42. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 1995), xv.

43. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Toleration and the Goods of Conflict," 143.

44. Keith Breen, "The State, Compartmentalization and the Turn to Local Community: A Critique of the Political Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre," *The European Legacy* 10, no. 5 (2005): 494.

45. Keith Breen, "Alasdair MacIntyre and the Hope for a Politics of Virtuous Acknowledged Dependence," *Contemporary Political Theory* 1 (2002): 196.

46. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Virtues of Practice Against the Efficiency of Institutions" in *Laws, Goods, and Virtues: Medieval Resources for Modern Conflicts*, 77.

47. Breen, "Alasdair MacIntyre and the Hope for a Politics of Virtuous Acknowledged Dependence," 198.

48. *Ibid.*, 197.

49. Ronald Beiner, "Community versus Citizenship: MacIntyre's Revolt against the Modern State," *Critical Review* 14, no. 4 (2000): 477, footnote 22.

50. Thomas Hibbs, "MacIntyre, Aquinas, and Politics," *The Review of Politics* 66, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 366.

51. *Ibid.*, 369.

52. Beiner, "Community versus Citizenship," 474.

53. Breen, "Alasdair MacIntyre and the Hope for a Politics of Virtuous Acknowledged Dependence," 197.

54. Jonathan Chaplin, "Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Di-

versity: From 'Liberal Pluralism' to 'Christian Pluralism'," *Christian Scholar's Review* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2006), 163.

55. Breen, "Alasdair MacIntyre and the Hope for a Politics of Virtuous Acknowledged Dependence," 198.

56. Catherine Pickstock, "Liturgy, Art, and Politics," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 2 (April 2000), 171.

57. Chaplin, "Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity," 145.

58. Breen, "Alasdair MacIntyre and the Hope for a Politics of Virtuous Acknowledged Dependence," 193.

59. Breen, "The State, Compartmentalization, and the Turn to Local Community," 497.

60. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

61. See Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1998 [1951]).

62. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* , 222.

63. Neil Levy, "Stepping into the Present: MacIntyre's Modernity," *Social Theory and Practice* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1999), 479.

64. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism," *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Ethics (1999), 3.

65. Levy, "Stepping into the Present," 472.

66. J. B. Schneewind, "Virtue, Narrative, and Community," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 11 (November 1982): 663.

67. Terry Pinkard, "MacIntyre's Critique of Modernity," in *Alasdair MacIntyre* , ed. Mark Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 194.

68. Levy, "Stepping into the Present," 482.

69. Ibid., 484.

70. Articulating the Catholic Church's political ideal of the Catholic confessional state, Peter Kwasniewski writes, "The Catholic state is the natural, organic outcome of the Faith itself when it is fully lived by a people. As Hittinger reminds us, *Gaudium et Spes* §43 invites the laity to make it a matter of conscience that "the divine law is impressed on the affairs of the earthly city," *ut lex*

divina in civitatis terrenae vita inscribatur . When this is done consistently on a broad scale, the normal, proper result is a Catholic society, culture, and state. The Church and her faith will be, for the majority of citizens, the point of reference for understanding themselves and the world, the framework of their daily lives, customs, arts, letters, festivities, rituals. She will be the dominant presence in the life of the individual as in the life of the community. This has never ceased to be the ideal towards which the Church strives. In an address to the Tenth International Congress of Historical Sciences in Rome in 1955, Pius XII stated: "[W]hile the Church and State have known hours and years of conflict, there were also from the time of Constantine the Great until the contemporary era and even recently, tranquil periods, often quite long ones, during which they collaborated with full understanding in the education of the same people. The Church does not hide the fact that she considers such collaboration normal, and that she regards the unity of the people in the true religion and the unanimity of action between herself and the State as ideal" (Peter Kwasniewski, "Basic Notes on the Catholic State," unpublished lecture notes, April 2006).

71. Pinkard, "MacIntyre's Critique of Modernity," 195.

72. James V. Schall, *Roman Catholic Political Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 157.