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MacIntyre and Lindbeck on Tradition

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2017

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MacIntyre and Lindbeck on Tradition

David Trener, *Alasdair MacIntyre, George Lindbeck,
and the Nature of Tradition*
[*Alasdair MacIntyre, George Lindbeck i natura tradycji*],
Pickwick Publications, Kindle Edition, 2014, pages 288

The philosophical work of Alasdair MacIntyre has inspired an enormous amount of secondary and critical literature in philosophy, ethics, theology, political and educational studies. A relatively recent example of such literature is David Trener's book *Alasdair MacIntyre, George Lindbeck, and the Nature of Tradition*. The author looks for the possible ways of "justifying belief in comprehensive metaphysical system" drawing on the philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre. There are four particular aspects in which the author claims to make a special contribution. Firstly, he shows the links between the early and later stages in MacIntyre's philosophical journey. He also refines the concepts of tradition and tradition-constituted rationality, which are central to MacIntyre's philosophical position with the help of the theologian George Lindbeck's account of doctrine. Then he evaluates Lindbeck's explanation of the superiority of one doctrine to another. And finally, he argues for the need to supplement Lindbeck's concept of the nature of religion with MacIntyre's concept of tradition-constituted rationality in order to redeem it from the charge of relativism.

As mentioned, one of Trener's aims is to demonstrate the complementarity of Alasdair MacIntyre's and George Lindbeck's thought. For this purpose he employs the notion of "hermeneutic

framework,” which allows to interpret experience and guide action in consistency with MacIntyre’s tradition or Lindbeck’s interpretative medium. However, I will refrain from evaluating the part of Trener’s account referring to George Lindbeck, as it is out of the scope of my present interest, and I will focus solely on the author’s engagement with MacIntyre.

What I find especially illuminating in Trener’s account is his remark that MacIntyre raises the problem of the grounds of justification of metaphysical belief already in his early writings, but finds an adequate response to it only in his mature work. Therefore, there is a trajectory of consistent concern running throughout the whole of MacIntyre’s *oeuvre*. Trener points out that in the 1950’s MacIntyre’s strives to synthesize Marxism and Christianity, both understood as rational myths or comprehensive metaphysical positions, i.e. metaphysical presuppositions regarding human nature, human purpose and human potentiality, providing the ground for ethical standpoints and community life. Trener argues that MacIntyre’s subsequent epistemological crisis—the rejection first of Christianity and then of Marxism—was caused by his inability to find a rational justification of these two comprehensive metaphysical systems. This last statement is well grounded, since MacIntyre intimates it himself in the interview with Giovanna Borradori¹, as well as in the article “Three Perspectives on Marxism: 1953, 1968, 1995.”²

Trener also turns the reader’s attention to an important shift in MacIntyre’s position, marked by the book *A Short History of Ethics* from 1966 and a new preface to its second edition in 1998, which was first used in the Polish translation in 1995.³ It is significant because in the preface to the second edition MacIntyre offered a significant self-correction and clarification of his original position, claiming that his approach in 1966 had not been consistently relativistic, as he had implied the superiority of the Aristotelian position. Trener, on the

¹ A. MacIntyre, “An Interview with Giovanna Borradori”, in: *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. K. Knight, Notre Dame (IN) 1998, p. 257.

² A. MacIntyre, “Three Perspectives on Marxism: 1953, 1968, 1995”, in: A. MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays*, vol. 2, New York 2006, pp. 152–153.

³ A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, Second edition, London 1998, First published in 1967.

other hand, holds that *A Short History of Ethics* is clearly relativistic.⁴ He seems to be right, as MacIntyre sums up this book with the claim that the study of the history of ethics teaches us the historicity of moral concepts and thereby enables us “to be liberated from any false absolutist claims.”⁵ Tenery characterises the mature phase in MacIntyre’s philosophy as consisting of three interrelated enterprises: reconstruction of a coherent ethics, reconstruction of an account of human nature, and construction of an account of rational justification.⁶

Achieving coherence means perceiving human life as a whole in the pursuit of an ultimate telos in the community sharing the same concept of the good. This process involves, as closely interrelated, the concepts of virtue, practice and tradition. MacIntyre adopts this Aristotelian perspective in *After Virtue*. Tenery offers a challenge to this position, pointing out that the shift in MacIntyre’s standpoint may be viewed as a result of his personal preference, and not of rational argumentation. However, MacIntyre himself admits that at this stage a systematic account of rationality is presupposed but not stated explicitly and promises to provide this account in his subsequent book.⁷

Accordingly, as Tenery claims, the rational arguments are provided in MacIntyre’s later works, notably in *Dependent Rational Animals*. The most important novelty in the latter book is the endorsement of anchoring the account of virtues and of human telos in the biological nature of man (roughly “Aristotle’s metaphysical biology”), which finally allows MacIntyre to overcome the problem of relativism, not resolved in his earlier work. An inherent element of this nature is vulnerability and dependence on others, which enlarges the picture to encompass the communities and mutual relationships of care.

One more step to be taken is justification of the presupposition of the superiority of Aristotelianism. This, on Tenery’s reading, is done in the book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, which argues for the rationality of the tradition. The crucial point in the development of

⁴ D. Tenery, *Alasdair MacIntyre, George Lindbeck, and the Nature of Tradition* Kindle Edition, Kindle Location 1227.

⁵ A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, op. cit., s. 269.

⁶ D. Tenery, *Alasdair MacIntyre, George Lindbeck, and the Nature of Tradition*, op. cit., Kindle Location 1713.

⁷ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Third edition, Notre Dame (IN) 2007, p. 260.

a tradition is the phase of epistemological crisis, which requires a new explanatory narrative, reconstructing, not annihilating the identity of the tradition. MacIntyre once again confronts the challenge of relativism and perspectivism. Relativism is refuted on the grounds that a tradition may discover the inadequacy of its own standards of justification. Perspectivism, on MacIntyre's view, being alien to all traditions is thereby excluded from rational debate.

Discussing the issue of alleged MacIntyre's relativism, Tenery holds that if rejection of objectivism necessarily leads to relativism, then MacIntyre is a relativist. However, as Tenery asserts, *tertium datur*, and it is MacIntyre's position. It consists of a series of criteria of truth, such as warranted assertability, i.e. consistency of a judgement with the standards elaborated within the tradition, its ability to withstand subsequent challenge, and the robust response of the tradition to epistemological crisis. Therefore each tradition must retain its openness to challenge, and it is possible to ascertain the superiority of one tradition over another depending on how well they meet their mutual challenges.

All in all, Tenery provides a very lucid presentation of MacIntyre's concept, with a clear focus on the question of the justification of a comprehensive metaphysical system. It also contains an interesting idea of refining and elaborating MacIntyre's approach with the help of Lindbeck's schema. However, this exposition also needs to be supplemented.

Granted, Alasdair MacIntyre is such a prolific writer that it is almost impossible to take into account all his works while discussing his thought, but the aspect which is missing from Tenery's analysis is arguably rather important. The omission concerns what Thaddeus J. Kozinski called the theological turn in MacIntyre's thought, culminating in his book *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*.⁸ Kozinski calls it a work "after philosophy," meaning that the ultimate foundation of a metaphysical belief has been transferred by MacIntyre from the sphere

⁸ A. MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*, Lanham 2009. The book itself is listed in Tenery's bibliography, but there are no references to it in his text. See also: T.J. Kozinski, "After Philosophy", *Modern Age*, Fall 2010, p. 316.

of philosophical reason to that of theological faith.⁹ He quotes MacIntyre, who, following the Papal encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, claims that faith helps us to discern our pre-philosophical prejudices. “Reason therefore needs Christian faith, if it is to do its own work well.”¹⁰ Adam Chmielewski detects this “theological turn” already in the earlier account of absolute and definite knowledge in *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues*, following Aquinas’s expression *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, and in MacIntyre’s response to the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*.¹¹

However, to complicate matters further, MacIntyre himself claims that his philosophical position, albeit theistic, is secular in its content and that his reassertion of Catholic Christianity was preceded by his purely philosophical rediscovery of Aristotelianism.¹² He even resorts to John Paul II’s *Fides et ratio* to reaffirm the secular character of philosophical enquiry.¹³ This aspect should have been mentioned by Tenery, particularly in view of the fact that he finds a counterpart to MacIntyre’s philosophy in Lindbeck’s theology, thereby operating on the borderline between reason and faith.

The abovementioned controversy is an illustrative example of the notorious difficulties in interpreting MacIntyre. Tenery has obviously made a significant contribution to solving some of these interpretative problems.

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⁹ See also: A. Chmielewski, “Wprowadzenie. Filozofia moralności Alasdaira MacIntyre’a”, in: A. MacIntyre, *Dziedzictwo cnoty. Studium z teorii moralności*, transl. A. Chmielewski, Warszawa 1996, p. LII.

¹⁰ A. MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, op. cit., p. 152.

¹¹ A. MacIntyre, *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues*, Milwaukee (WI) 1990; A. MacIntyre, “The Splendor of the Truth”, *Thomist: a Speculative Quarterly Review* 1994, vol. 58(2), p. 171ff; A. Chmielewski, “Wprowadzenie. Filozofia moralności Alasdaira MacIntyre’a”, in: A. MacIntyre, *Dziedzictwo cnoty. Studium z teorii moralności*, op. cit., p. L.

¹² A. MacIntyre, *An Interview with Giovanna Borradori*, op. cit., p. 266.

¹³ L. Kavanagh, “Interview: Alasdair MacIntyre, University of Notre Dame”, *Expositions* 2012, vol. 6(2), p. 3.