

---

be proved that a woman's identity was not yoked to childbearing during the 15th and 16th centuries, how can Macfarlane explain away the fact that recent studies have shown that maternity is generally regarded as the mark of "true womanhood" in England today? Perhaps there has been massive backsliding somewhere between the 16th century and now; perhaps England is unique in having moved away from rather than toward modernity. More likely, Macfarlane has pushed his thesis just a little too far, and, in misreading the present, has also distorted the past.

—John R. Gillis, '88

---

**WHOSE JUSTICE?  
WHICH RATIONALITY?**  
by Alasdair MacIntyre  
Univ. of Notre Dame, 1988  
410 pp. \$22.95

When Alasdair MacIntyre's last book, *After Virtue*, appeared in 1981, it was immediately recognized as a significant critique of liberal individualism, the foundation of Western moral thought for at least the last two centuries. MacIntyre, a philosopher at Vanderbilt University, charged that this moral tradition has consistently failed to provide a framework for evaluating competing moral claims. Affirming a variety of moral beliefs and practices (hence embraced by liberals and conservatives alike), it does not put forth a unified standard of conduct. As a result, the remnants of now defunct premodern beliefs and habits, the "simulacra" of older ethical traditions, guide moral actions.

All this, MacIntyre concluded, has made for a "moral calamity," expressing itself in nihilism or in ad hoc decision-making strategies. But what was to be done? MacIntyre proposed that the internal logic and tacit cultural assumptions of a specific moral tradition could alone offer a foundation for judging various moral claims. Yet in order to choose one traditional system of rationality over others, one must support one's choice with an account of the historical and cultural contexts in which various types of rationality originate and function.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre sets out to do precisely that, and he begins by making clear what he means by tradition. It is not, we learn, one long and essentially undifferentiated continuum.

---

MacIntyre defines it, specifically, as a temporally extended argument through which fundamental moral agreements are expressed, and that persists or is destroyed by internal criticism or historical assault. The four Western *traditions* he focuses on are the Aristotelian, the Augustinian, the Thomistic, and the Scottish Enlightenment.

Within the first of these traditions (which, like most others, was an amalgam of practices and beliefs, literary and religious as well as more strictly philosophical), justice was the balancing of the competing claims described by the poet Homer: on one hand, *arete*, or excellence for its own sake; on the other, success in a rule-governed contest. *Arete* was what made individual achievement possible, while justice-as-success was bound up with the realization of social goals. The ancient Greek *polis* incorporated both notions into its ideal of the good life.

Practical reason, as Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) conceived of it, determined both how to act when “good” was the goal *and* how to provide reasons for actions so that the goals of rival participants in a moral activity, or contest, could be realized. The skills of practical reason were first acquired by modeling one’s actions on the behavior of those already initiated into the moral practices of a just community. What was learned in this way were moral habits, which were then honed by repeated application of rules to a specific range of actions.

The widening Hellenistic and Roman worlds that succeeded the *polis* required a new moral tradition. As MacIntyre shows, this was to be a theologically broadened conception of justice embracing all rational beings under a single natural law. Judaic and early Christian teachings, combined with the ethical principles of the Stoics, helped shape the new thinking. The apostle Paul (A.D. 5?–67?), for example, found the claims of divine revelation compatible with natural law and applicable to all people, not merely to those of a specific community. But without the love of Christ, he taught, the Platonic form of justice was insufficient to bring about moral behavior. Extending this view, Bishop Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354–430) argued that only a reorientation of the individual’s will, assisted by divine grace, could achieve the true end of man, citizenship in the republic founded and ruled by Christ, the City of God.

The third tradition MacIntyre discusses is the Thomistic theology of the High Middle Ages. Benefiting from the recovery of certain long-lost Aristotelian texts, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) forged a powerful intellectual synthesis of Augustine’s psychology and Aristotle’s practical reason. Specifically, the Dominican monk used Augustine’s concept of will to interpret Aristotle’s arguments about the rational conclusion of deliberation: Since the will is free, Aquinas asserted, it is open to alternative contingent judgments. Aquinas, however, adhered strictly to the Augustinian position in arguing that the supreme good for human beings was the contemplation of God.

The road leading to our current moral disarray began, MacIntyre ar-

*David Hume**Thomas Aquinas*

gues, with the last tradition that he considers, the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century. This philosophical tradition emerged at a time when the Scots were working to keep their institutions free from English cultural and intellectual imperialism. Combining Dutch Calvinism (with its powerful admixture of Augustinian thought) with the Aristotelian notion of first principles in the sciences, the moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) claimed that people's actions have moral worth when they are governed by reason rather than by interest, advantage, or the passions, as some contemporary English philosophers held. At the same time, however, he accepted the view of the English empiricist, the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), that the passions are the springs of action and are not of themselves bad. Doing so, Hutcheson opened the way for a morality of sentiment, a breach into which his fellow countryman, David Hume (1711–1776), easily moved.

Although born and educated in Scotland, Hume was, at least until late in life, an ardent Anglophile who not only abandoned Edinburgh for Bristol but also repudiated his youthful Calvinism for 18th-century English aristocratic notions of ultimate worth—political moderation and “pride in houses and other such possessions, and in one's place within a hierarchy.” In the England of Hume's day, MacIntyre notes, law and justice had “as their distinctive function the protection of the propertied.” Taking the ethos of this hierarchically ordered society for granted, Hume could dismiss the lingering metaphysical or religious concerns with highest good or first principles. “All probable reasoning,” Hume argued, “is a species of sensation.” Furthermore: “When I am convinced of any principle 'tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me.”

As long as the various passions (pride, hatred, love) were tethered to fixed social objects (property, family, hierarchy), the empiricist philosophy

---

of “ideas”—that is, ideas as products of sensation—could produce a coherent moral tradition. But as political and economic change replaced England’s relatively static aristocratic order with a more fluid egalitarian arrangement, the coherence was gradually lost. England, and indeed the rest of the modernizing Western world, acquired “unphilosophical” cultures in which individuals were free “to express and implement preferences.” Lacking any single notion of ultimate good, liberal individualism led inevitably to moral eclecticism, and the pursuit of justice became a strictly legal concern. As MacIntyre ruefully observes, “Lawyers, not philosophers, are the clergy of liberalism.”

•

MacIntyre’s presentation of the philosophical reasoning behind several key Western moral traditions is a labor of careful explication. He not only demonstrates that rationality is a mode of inquiry that originates and develops in a specific community; he helps us understand how rationality works as a tradition’s ongoing creative reformulation of beliefs and institutions in response to concrete historical conditions. All this is of considerable value.

But MacIntyre’s thesis invites challenge on both historical and logical grounds. First, for all his interest in history, MacIntyre offers no philosophy of history to account for the breakdown of the specific traditions he discusses. Does Scottish moral philosophy founder because of the growing availability of private property, as Marxists might claim, or is the Augustinian-Aristotelian synthesis conceptually fragile, as rationalists think? Second, traditions are not spread out side by side, but bound up with one another, and bound up in a way that defies explanation if they are, as MacIntyre insists, comprehensible only from within. Third, it is naive, or at least wishful thinking, on MacIntyre’s part to suppose that a tradition can be brought to life without accounting for the effects of historical distance.

Most troubling of all, however, is a seam of irony that runs through MacIntyre’s entire argument: He attacks modern liberalism while at the same time profiting from its disinterested stance. Despite his strong preference for Thomism, MacIntyre refuses to station himself within that or any other tradition. He remains conceptually disaffiliated. And so while his diagnosis of what ails recent moral philosophy is brilliant, his manner of philosophizing from nostalgia ultimately proves unsatisfactory.

—*Edith Wyschogrod, '87*