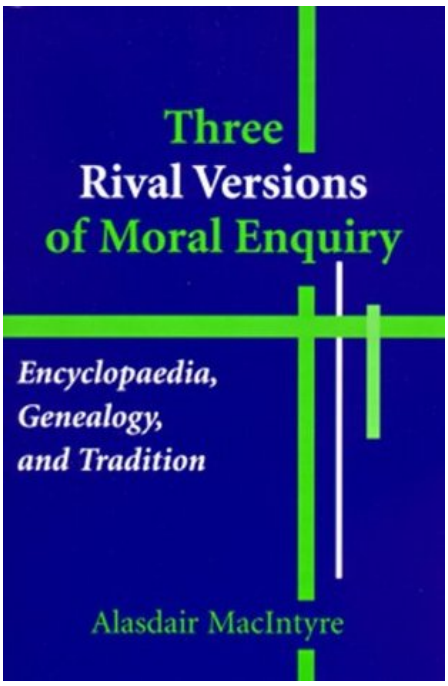

Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition

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Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition Alasdair MacIntyre Alasdair MacIntyre—whom *Newsweek* has called "one of the foremost moral philosophers in the English-speaking world"—here presents his 1988 Gifford Lectures as an expansion of his earlier work *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* He begins by considering the cultural and philosophical distance dividing Lord Gifford's late nineteenth-century world from our own. The outlook of that earlier world, MacIntyre claims, was definitively articulated in the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Brittanica*, which conceived of moral enquiry as both providing insight into and continuing the rational progress of mankind into ever greater enlightenment. MacIntyre compares that conception of moral enquiry to two rival conceptions also formulated in the late nineteenth century: that of Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* and that expressed in the encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII Aeterni Patris.

The lectures focus on Aquinas's integration of Augustinian and Aristotelian modes of enquiry, the inability of the encyclopaedists' standpoint to withstand Thomistic or genealogical criticism, and the problems confronting the contemporary post-Nietzschean genealogist. MacIntyre concludes by considering the implications for education in universities and colleges.

Alasdair MacIntyre is research professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of numerous books, including *After Virtue*, *A Short History of Ethics*, and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, all published by the University of Notre Dame Press.

Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition Details

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From Reader Review Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition for online ebook

Ted Newell says

Lays out three different visions of scholarship which stem from three different visions of life; ties philosophical basic commitments to an ethic. Fantastic. Reading it was a peak moment of 2003.

Tyler says

I would only recommend reading this book if your Ethics professor assigns it to you. Like many philosophers, MacIntyre feels he has to present the whole history of philosophy before telling you what he thinks. So, by the time you get to the meat of his argument, you're practically overwhelmed with information. Also, like many philosophers, MacIntyre likes to use common words with his own quirky definitions, which doesn't help make things more clear.

Don't read this book before bed, and be prepared to reread large portions of it. Also, I'd recommend twelve-minute naps after each chapter to allow your brain to sort things out before moving on to the next chunk of philosophical dark matter.

That said, I actually found the ideas quite useful and somewhat interesting. I wouldn't read it again if given the option, but I'm not sorry I was forced to.

Leabelle says

MacIntyre points out that there has never been an agreement on Metanarrative at any time in the history of Western Philosophy.

Joe says

A Brief Note on Nietzschean Genealogy and How it Relates to MacIntyre's Project

The thing that impressed me most with MacIntyre’s great work (the so-called 'Trilogy' of "After Virtue", then "Whose Justice?, Which Rationality?", and finally, this book, "Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition") is his discussion of the importance of ‘coherence’ in a Tradition. By ‘coherence’ I mean (and I believe he means something like this too) that those adept in the philosophical basis of any tradition, though they cannot answer everything, can agree on what the fundamental questions are and how one methodologically proceeds to attempt to answer them within a given tradition. ...Philosophical coherence, it seems, even in this limited methodological sense, demands that the modern world must (somehow) become one, that is to say, it must have only one Tradition. I would add that since MacIntyre maintains that there can be, and indeed must be, many differences of opinion between adherents of a tradition, that it follows that this 'Trilogy' must not be understood as a call for a single World State or

society. A successfully universal world-tradition will have many different 'flavors' amongst many different peoples and polities.

The previous book in this Trilogy was titled "Whose Justice? Which Rationality?" And oh God! Those are indeed the questions today since there are so many incommensurable philosophical and religious traditions... But if there can be no adequate understanding between rival theories, as MacIntyre is often in that earlier book at pains to show, then - what? Well, then one wonders exactly how we fragmented late moderns can choose the Aristotelian-Thomist Tradition (as MacIntyre certainly wants) except by a Nietzschean act of Will. It would still seem that one cannot initially base practical activity (or lived choices) upon mere theory. Just as Plato wrote a Prelude to the Law (I am, of course, alluding to the late dialogue, "The Laws") that was itself not merely a law, and Hegel wrote a Preface to his "Phenomenology" that was not, and could not possibly be, entirely phenomenological, - so too one suspects that MacIntyre is here forced to write a 'preamble' to a 'hegemonic' Thomist Tradition that is not fully Thomist.

I understand these remarks, btw, to be more a comment on the inability of philosophical theory, any philosophical theory, to radically ground itself than a specific criticism of the position of MacIntyre. No theory can ever radically ground itself; thus one always proceeds to theory 'X', certainly in the beginning, in a non-'X' manner. ...Always. And with those comments I perhaps reveal myself to be an adherent (I hope a very skeptical adherent) of the 'postmodern tradition' (a genuine existing Contradictio in terminis, if you can believe that there is such a thing!) that our author herein designates as Genealogy. And our postmodern genealogists have pitched their tents precisely here, - on the question of origins. At the beginning of anything one always finds something else...

The Traditions that our author delineates in this book ("Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry") are Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition. Each of these three traditions also, for purposes of explication, has a designated 'proof' text: they are, respectively, the fabled Ninth Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Nietzsche's "Zur Genealogie der Moral", and Pope Leo XIII' encyclical 'Aeterni Patris'. I honestly found comparing these three specific positions a bit curious. What MacIntyre designates as Encyclopaedia (Liberalism) and Tradition (Catholicism) have produced societies in which one can live and they have also produced great civilizations. Genealogy can certainly never do either. It is, at bottom, only a critical method, a surgeons scalpel, a weapon. Encyclopaedia and Tradition can legitimately be judged 'good or bad' and 'true or false'. Regarding genealogy, like the scalpel or the weapon, one can only enquire whether or not it has been used appropriately...

Now, I do not mean to admit by this that Nietzsche is, or intends to be, merely a critic. What MacIntyre designates here as 'Genealogy' Nietzsche considered to be only part of the 'No-Saying' critical part of his work. Zarathustra was intended to be the 'Yes-Saying' affirmative part of his work. (Regarding that, see his "Ecce Homo", the section entitled 'Beyond Good and Evil'.) The 'Yes-Saying' part of Nietzsche's work MacIntyre entirely ignores. I suspect that our author found it both useful and pleasant to use genealogy as a stick to beat 'Encyclopaedia' about the head and then use 'Tradition' to show the glaring inadequacies of genealogy as a tradition that could successfully form a world in which we all could live. But again, for Nietzsche, genealogical critique was, and could only be, but half the story. In MacIntyre's defense one should add that since virtually all of postmodern criticism has almost entirely ignored Zarathustra (and its purport) that therefore MacIntyre was justified to do so too insofar as this book is intended as a critique of both our miserable postmodernity and its liberal pretensions.

Traditional Catholicism, modern Liberalism (and also its would-be transformative avatar, Socialism) are above all (or in the case of socialism, one day could be) societies that have both norms and ideals. One applies these norms to approach the ideal; and, when necessary, one revises norms in light of the ideal. This

is progress within a tradition. But what happens when incommensurable traditions come into conflict? That is the question MacIntyre intends to answer in this book. 'Really-existing' Postmodernism has become, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, little more than a 'narrative system' (i.e., a way to speak about and navigate through) the several incommensurable traditions that in fact divide our secular world. Our author is admirably striving to put an end to that seemingly permanent division.

MacIntyre is, to his credit, entirely a Universalist. (As is every genuine philosopher.) There were ever only two possibilities for him: Socialism and Christianity. He eventually, after a a long process, decided upon Christianity. So why is the Gigantomachia (battle of the giants) that is enacted within this book engaged without the participation of Marxism (and its dialectic) as one of the antagonists? I suppose we will never know. Perhaps he feared that the Universalism of both the Church and Marxism would militate against his desired result? (Probably, he thinks that there is no Marxist moral tradition that is entirely distinct from liberalism and therefore it would be inappropriate in this study.) Yes, (for our author) Marxism and Christianity have many similarities. In his much earlier "Marxism and Christianity" we learn that both "Marxism and Christianity rescue individual lives from the insignificance of finitude" and this gives them reason to hope. He later says in this same early book that "Liberalism by contrast simply abandons the virtue of hope. For liberals the future has become the present enlarged."

After MacIntyre's acceptance of Christianity the main targets of his mature work has been both liberalism and postmodernism, with Marxism (for our author, the only other possibility) usually (but not always) ignored. So then, is postmodernism to be considered merely the déjà vu of liberalism? I for one don't think this can be consistently maintained. For instance, Christianity, liberalism and marxism all promise a better future. Yes, it is certainly true that liberalism merely promises an improved liberalism while both Christianity and Marxism promise a transformative future. But postmodernity promises nothing (and delivers it too!). It is the decadence of a liberalism that can no longer even hope to meaningfully change itself. Now, genealogy counters this promise of a 'better future' with the supposed discovery of a 'different past'. That is to say, the genealogist knows that he can trump any promised future with a new vision (i.e., a new narrative) of the past. And, of course, this new vision (as mere story) is always immediately available to everyone.

This is what makes genealogy so insidious an enemy. The various progressive positions have to eventually make actual improvements in the world; even Christianity (which technically promises a better future only in the next life) had many apocalyptic movements demanding a better life now. But the genealogists can create different narratives regarding the origins of any religion, regime, or revolution, and eventually, in the midst of some crisis, a story will grow in popularity and then (perhaps) go forth and change the world. Of course, this is what Nietzsche expected of his 'Zarathustra'. The different pasts 'discovered' (or invented) by genealogy erode the master narrative(s) of the dominant tradition(s) and thereby allow his 'Zarathustrian' world to rise.

Or so Nietzsche hoped. But the genealogy of the overwhelming majority of postmoderns derives mostly from Foucault, not Nietzsche. The difference between them is the difference between psychology and history. Nietzschean 'Psychology' is based on what he considers to be the facts of human nature. Having understood (to his own satisfaction) the inevitabilities of human nature, Nietzsche can display that serene confidence in his 'Zarathustra' that has so amazed and mystified commentators of all stripes. But again, the present postmodern understanding of genealogy has actually become an amalgam of Foucault, deconstruction and triumphal constructivism. Like liberalism, this road only leads (at best) to supposedly improved versions of itself. So it is this 'really existing' genealogy that MacIntyre intends herein to show can never lead to a world in which all could live. And of course he does so quite successfully.

This is a brilliant conclusion to a magnificent trilogy. I recently found time to revisit them. It is easily one of

the best philosophical performances written in my lifetime. MacIntyre should be very proud. This review intended to focus merely on his treatment of genealogy and how said treatment might relate to his overall project of writing a history of moral inquiry itself.

Bob says

Imagine attending a lecture series and having the lecturer introduce his lecture with the statement that he will be unable to meet the guidelines of the donor who established the lecture series. This is what MacIntyre does in this text version of his Gifford Lectures and he does so to set up the premise of his lectures: that the aim of Gifford and the encyclopedists of his era to have a rationally established moral discourse is unattainable on Gifford's terms. He does this by contrasting this with two rival versions of moral enquiry that show the fallacy of this approach. The first is Nietzsche's genealogy of morals approach which shows that rationally established morality systems are just pretenses to a power game. The other, and more neglected system, is that of Thomist ethics. MacIntyre explores how these actually represent the engagement of two conflicting systems--Aristotelian and Augustinian systems and that the accomplishment of Aquinas was to deeply understand each and to see the places where each answered to problems in the other.

I think MacIntyre's most trenchant observations and proposals come in the final chapter where he deals with the genre of lecture, the lack of real moral discourse in the university world and what might be done going forward. Instead of the foreclosure of moral discourse which characterizes the contemporary university in his view, he argues for a twenty first century version of the University of Paris where conflicting versions of moral discourse are engaged in a form of constrained conflict, where advocates of each argue rigorously for their own version and against rival versions while using this give an take to constantly re-assess one's own position. It appears that what MacIntyre looks for is some form of new synthesis similar to Thomist ethics to arise out of this process.

What I think MacIntyre has described are the intellectual and moral fault lines in our society. What troubles me is whether inside the university or outside, there are those with both the moral and intellectual virtues and motivations necessary for the kind of engagement he envisions.

Mary Fisher says

This easily is the most important book I have read. It made me so aware of how important epistemic humility is as we seek to follow Jesus, loving God with all my heart mind and soul. I wish it were required reading for every University student in every discipline and tradition.

Steven Rodriguez says

Few books have been as foundational and formative for me as this one. Whenever I return to it, I am amazed at the depth and breadth of MacIntyre's project. Required reading for anyone who wants to do faithful Christian thinking today.

Jonathan says

Rebind

Ali says

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Marina E says

This book is a phenomenal contribution not only to the comparative study of morality but also in envisioning the university as a place to expose rival standpoints in a way that creates less dogmatism and preconceptions. His critiques of modern education and his vision for a better alternative are amazing. A must-read!

Gene Bales says

I have always had much admiration for the intellectual acuity and insight of Alasdair MacIntyre. But I thought this work was the best of his that I have so far read. The three rival versions at first seem like an odd choice: the intellectual and moral assumptions of the editors of the 9th edition of the Encylopedia Britannica, Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals, and the papal encyclical establishing Thomism as a perennial philosophy in the Catholic Church. But the way MacIntyre reads through these very different traditions is absolutely intriguing. It gave me much to think about, especially reinforcing my conviction that a university or college education should make possible discussion between and among the various disciplines. That does not happen all that much, but it should. Without this, our education system produces utterly narrow minds, which are unsuited to address the difficult moral and political, not to mention intellectual, questions of our age.

Mac says

If you like MacIntyre, this is a must-read.
