MacIntyre, Narrative Rationality and Faith

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1. Introduction

This paper seeks to spell out the consequences of Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of rationality for the debate between faith and reason. In the modern period, commitment to authority came to be understood as a hindrance to the discovery of truth. Understanding rationality as tradition-constituted, however, puts that assumption into question. Traditions of enquiry are the bearers of rational resources; it is impossible for inquirers to perform rational work outside some tradition of enquiry. A tradition's formative texts and its rational resources occupy a place of authority in the practice of critical reflection. The reintroduction of the notion that commitment to authority can be rational has important consequences for the debate between faith and reason: critical reasoning and acceptance of authority are not antithetical. Rather, reason depends on authority for resources to perform its task. This paper thus argues that the apparent conflict modern philosophers of religion attribute to committed faith and critical reflection dissolves once rationality is understood as tradition-constituted.

Understanding rationality as constituted by traditions of enquiry avoids the complaint that commitment to authority entails a pluralism that cannot *rationally* be eliminated.[1] To see why this is so, it is necessary to attend to a particular feature of traditions of enquiry. Using their standards of rationality, traditions progress as they solve the problems that are inherent within their point of view. If the adherents of a tradition cannot solve a problem using their rational resources, then the tradition lapses into a state of epistemological crisis. At this point, it is uncertain whether the epistemological crisis will be solved. If its adherents are unable to do so, the tradition's truth-claims concerning the nature of the transcendent have been falsified. Its point of view can thereby be ruled out and ineliminable pluralism is therefore not entailed in tradition-constituted rationality. Moreover, it may be that its crisis can be solved using the resources of another tradition of enquiry. In this case a "conversion" from one tradition to another can be understood as a movement toward greater intelligibility, not an irrational choice. If, however, a religious tradition is able to

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overcome its epistemological crisis, then its truth claims have been proved justified in this case. Since it is possible that religious traditions of enquiry might fail, it is neither the case that the truth-claims are always justified nor is it the case that conversion from one tradition to the other is always irrational.

2. Tradition-Constituted Rationality

MacIntyre defines a tradition as an argument extended through time concerning authoritative texts and voices. These texts and voices constitute a given. Accepting the authority of the texts and voices provides a point of departure for debate *and* it provides the rational resources necessary for that debate to go on and to go further. In the course of the argument, fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict:

> Those with critics and enemies *external* to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those *internal*, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.[2]

These two kinds of argumentative conflict bring about a progression in the tradition of enquiry. Traditions progress as adherents debate among themselves (these debates are internal and interpretative) and with adherents of rival traditions (these are external and apologetical).

The tradition develops as adherents amend and modify their beliefs and practices such that in their newer form they can explain and transcend the limitations of their previous version. Mere change in beliefs and practices is not sufficient to qualify as a progression since one can imagine a motion without direction. Adherents must therefore formulate, and later reformulate, theoretical and practical goals for their tradition to guide their practice of enquiry such that a certain continuity of directedness emerges.[3] These goals will include beliefs concerning what truth is and how truth and rationality are connected. They may be reformulated as the tradition moves through its successive stages since, though central, they are part of the tradition's conceptual scheme. As a consequence of this progression, traditions of enquiry have rational narratives that can be told.

The narrative development of a tradition has three distinct phases. In the first phase, the authoritative texts and voices are not systematically questioned. Although historically contingent, they constitute a given; they provide the shared, accepted background by which the community engages in its corporate life. At some point, however, some limitation, incoherence

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or resourcelessness within the beliefs and practices of the tradition may come to light. Perhaps the texts are susceptible to alternative and mutually incompatible interpretations. New possibilities for beliefs and practices that cannot yet be evaluated may open up through contact with another tradition of enquiry[4].

The response of the adherents to the recognition of internal inadequacies will depend on the ability of adherents to reason and on their inventiveness with their standards of rationality. The reformulation will, in other words, depend on the skill and wisdom of the tradition's practitioners. These factors determine the possible range of outcomes in the reformulation of beliefs and practices. Since the tradition is an argument concerning how to understand and embody certain texts and voices, the reformulation will at the very least involve a revaluation and a reinterpretation of those authorities. This remains the case even if that authority derives from their relationship to the divine, as it does in religious traditions. Although the sacred authority will be exempt from repudiation, its utterances will necessarily be reinterpreted.

The third phase is one in which a response to the previously recognized inadequacies has resulted in a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations.[5] Reformulation should not be thought of in purely intellectual terms. Beliefs are expressed in and through rituals and ritual dramas, clothing, the architecture of houses, the way villages are laid-out, and of course by other actions. It may be, for example, that one stops eating meat because one has become convinced that raising animals for food harms the environment.[6]

This process of identifying and overcoming limitations repeats itself as the tradition progresses towards its *telos*. The stage-like narrative of a tradition's development should be distinguished from two types of change in beliefs. First, it is not a gradual transformation of beliefs in which every belief is systematically and deliberately questioned. Each successive stage is distinct from its predecessor. It might be helpful to think of the development as steps instead of a ramp with a constant slope, or as increasingly larger coins placed on top of each other indicating the progressive growth of the tradition. Second, it is not an abrupt change of all beliefs in which no continuity of beliefs can be discerned. Descartes mistakenly believed himself to have accomplished a complete revolution in thought, but, as has been pointed out, doubting requires at the very least the rich resources of language.[7] The movement through stages is therefore neither a gradual process, since it has distinct stages, nor is it an instance of total conversion, since some set of core beliefs must survive the development in order for the tradition to be in one sense the same.[8]

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3. Against Foundationalism and the Enlightenment

Rationality, then, is best understood historically. Conceptions of rationality, even this, have a story. A given stage within a tradition can only be understood, and can only be justified, in light of what has gone before. The stage-like development of traditions demonstrates the ability of the tradition's own conception of rationality to solve problems and thus the continuously developing narrative becomes the testing ground or laboratory, to use scientific language for that tradition's conception of rationality. Each new stage is justified retrospectively by reference to the previous stage. As the tradition progresses, it becomes less and less vulnerable as it overcomes more and more of its limitations and inadequacies. Its *continued* success constitutes its justification.[9]

Tradition-constituted rationality thus presents an alternative to Cartesian and other foundational conceptions of rationality. Foundationalism is a thesis concerning how beliefs are justified. On this view there are two classes of beliefs. One class of beliefs is justified by reference to the other class of beliefs, foundations or basic beliefs, which function as infinite-regress terminators. For Descartes, foundational beliefs needed to be clear and distinct to the thinking self. Other foundationalists have suggested that sensory impressions might serve as foundations. Common to all forms of foundationalism is that authority is not a legitimate justification for the foundation because it will not stop the regress.

On a MacIntyrean conception of rationality, however, the entire body of theory, including core beliefs and practices, requires *historical* justification through the progression of the tradition. Beliefs and practices are justified insofar as they have vindicated themselves as superior to their historical predecessors. For the foundationalist, justification can only amount to a synchronic, linear reference to other beliefs. Justification is the movement from the upper layers of belief to the foundations. Foundations terminate the infinite regress that would otherwise occur. If rationality is understood in narrative terms, however, justification is not only a matter of synchronically referring to other beliefs and practices, but also diachronically referring to the traditions own intellectual narrative. Foundationalists have had no convincing answer to the most fundamental question it raises: Why this particular set of basic beliefs? Hume, of course, realized that no answer could be given.

Tradition-constituted rationality therefore stands against the modern rejection of authority. The rationality embodied by traditions of enquiry presupposes the authority of its formative texts whereas modernity casts off authority and pits authority against rationality. To come to understand rationality as tradition-constituted is to come to understand rational justification as a human activity that relies on the resources of the tradition

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for its performance. To justify a certain way of doing things, deriving one's ethics, for example, from the Sermon on the Mount, requires the ability to tell the intellectual story of one's tradition successfully. What counts as a successful narrative differs, of course, from tradition to tradition just as what counts as true and rational differs. The practice of reasoning, everyday ordinary thinking, is always-already tradition-constituted. In theological traditions, the acceptance of authoritative texts has been understood as faith. On this view, then, critical reasoning can be understood as faith seeking understanding.

4. The Epistemological Crisis

This seems to raise a worry. If in fact each tradition begins from some contingent point and from there pursues its own path of progression, will there not in the end be a multiplicity of rival traditions each with its own particular core convictions, idiosyncratic history and conception of truth? This is what the relativist has concluded and it would be the inescapable conclusion if traditions could not be falsified. But they can! They are falsified when they fail to overcome an epistemological crisis.

Recall that in the second phase of a tradition's development, inadequacies and limitations have been identified, but no resolution has yet been found. What if, given the resources of the tradition, no successful reformulation can be found? It may happen to any tradition-constituted enquiry that *by its own standards* it ceases to make progress. Its methods of enquiry become sterile: that is, they are no longer able to settle debates and as a result conflicts may multiply over rival answers to key questions. The methods of enquiry, hitherto employed and trusted, may even disclose new inadequacies and incoherences. It becomes apparent that the established fabric of beliefs and practices simply has insufficient resources to deal with the tradition's problems. This is the mark of an epistemological crisis.

The solution must meet three requirements. First, the new and radically enriched conceptual scheme must provide a solution to the problems that could not previously be solved in any coherent way, otherwise it was not an epistemological crisis. Second, from its new vantage-point it must be able to explain why the tradition had become sterile and incoherent. Third, it must exhibit some fundamental continuity with the beliefs and practices that previously defined the tradition of enquiry.

The solution to an epistemological crisis is radically different from the kind of solution that moves a tradition from the second to the third phase of its development. The inherent resources in the tradition determine the latter, but the solution to an epistemological crisis is in no way derivable

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from internal resources. The solution to a genuine epistemological crisis requires the invention or discovery of new concepts and the framing of some new type or types of theory. The point is that the solution to an epistemological crisis achieves what could not have been achieved previously by innovating and adds what are essentially new resources to the tradition.[10]

If a tradition passes through an epistemological crisis successfully, its adherents are able to retell the narrative of the tradition in a more insightful way. The adherents are now able to identify in what sense their radically enriched schema is in continuity with the older, more limited one. Thus they are able to tell their tradition's story in such a way that it explains how the tradition has survived the crisis, how it is presently flourishing and its continued directedness towards its *telos*. The solution provides a vantage-point from which the tradition's adherents are able to explain why the previous version failed, and had to fail just where it did. Moreover, the adherents are also able to identify more accurately that structure of justification which underpins whatever claims to truth are made within it.[11] In other words, the tradition's standards of justification and its theory of rationality have been clarified *and justified* by the conceptual innovation that brought about the resolution of the epistemological crisis.

Every tradition of enquiry faces the possibility of falling into a state of epistemological crisis as it employs its own standards of rationality to solve its problems, but traditions do not always survive their crises once they have fallen into this state. Due to the innovative nature of the solution to epistemological crises, the narrative of a tradition is by nature unpredictable at this point. It is therefore never possible to determine beforehand whether a tradition is going to decay and disappear, or whether it will overcome its limitations and be vindicated for that moment in time. It is also part of the nature of traditions that their adherents cannot know in advance, whatever their own convictions or pretensions may be, how and in what condition their tradition will emerge from such conflicts and encounters.[12] To put the point crudely, it is impossible to predict a winner before the race.

Attempts to solve the crisis may fail as adherents of the tradition are unable to overcome sterility and as new limitations come to light. No solutions that satisfy the three criteria of resolution, explanation, and continuity may emerge. In such a case, the tradition's claim to truth can no longer be sustained, and it is falsified *according to its own standards of rationality*. The adherents themselves are unable to solve their tradition's problems with the resources available to them and the tradition is judged false by standards internal to it. It is possible that the adherents might find a solution to their epistemological crisis within a rival tradition. This

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possibility involves the difficulty of recognizing rival conceptual schemes. The important point is that a solution taken from a rival tradition fulfils all but the third criterion for success. In this scenario, the *rival* tradition's truth claim has been vindicated.

Not all adherents, of course, will acknowledge defeat. Even in the sciences, some adherents of a scientific research programme may refuse to acknowledge defeat. Galileo's heliocentric cosmology defeated the geocentric cosmology of medieval physicists. Yet some medieval physicists continued to deny that their impetus theory had fallen into a state of epistemological crisis from which it could not recover. Galileo, and later Newton, provided a theory that did overcome the limitations of impetus theory and that explained why impetus theory could not have avoided falling into a state of epistemological crisis thus depriving it of its claim to truth. But a question emerges here: Is it ever rational to reject one set of authorities and to accept another? Is it ever rational to convert, or must conversion be understood as a leap of faith?

5. Asymmetry and the Rationality of Conversion

Charles Taylor's comments on the asymmetry between a defeated and a victorious tradition are helpful here.[13] It is possible to construct a narrative such that the passage or movement from one to the other can be understood as an increase in intelligibility of a particular phenomenon. If an epistemological crisis can be understood and overcome from one tradition's point of view but not from the other, then there is an asymmetrical relation between them. Given this relationship, the transition from one tradition to the other is a gain in knowledge even when the shared criteria are not enough.

The issue here is making judgments about comparisons. It is more than making comparisons about facts. It includes facts, but goes on to make comparative judgments about the other tradition: comparisons about comparisons, as it were. In adopting one tradition over the other, it is possible to make better sense of the facts *and of the other tradition's (failed) attempts to explain these facts*, than if the opposite were the case. Taylor says that the decisive arguments are transitional, concerning what each theory has to say about the other and about the passage from its rival to itself, and this takes us beyond the traditional way of conceiving validation.[14] Central to avoiding the fideist claim that conversion cannot be rational, traditions are defeated when adherents finally die off or when they are manipulated into abandoning their point of view, is to insist on comparative accounts of rival traditions. The rationally inferior tradition will not be able to explain its rival's successful account of the inferior tradition. What may look like a stand-off when two independent, closed

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theories are confronted with the facts turns out to be conclusively [subject to judgment] in reason when you consider the transition.[15] Comparing comparisons forces one to read the transition as a gain. The transition from one tradition to the other is therefore not arbitrary and thus conversion is rational in this instance because the movement can be identified as the overcoming of an error.

This leaves open the question of when adherents of one tradition of enquiry should abandon their tradition and adopt another. This question cannot be answered by constructing some algorithm for theory choice. Rather, it is a matter of practical rationality, or more theologically put, a matter of discernment. Until it becomes clear that a tradition has been falsified by its own standards of rationality, it will remain a matter of practical rationality to continue to work within the tradition.

6. Conclusion

Once foundationalism is rejected, as it is when rationality is understood as tradition-constituted, it is possible to reconstruct the relationship between reasoning and commitment to authority. They are not antithetical. Reasoning relies on the resources of authority to do its work and there is no form of reasoning outside of some tradition of enquiry. This does not mean that fideist conclusions should be drawn. Theological traditions do falter and conversion can under certain circumstances be understood as a gain in intelligibility.

1 The worry is that a return to authority would also entail a return to religious wars. I do not have the space to calm those anxieties, but showing that radical pluralism is not the necessary outcome of a return to authority, in my judgment, goes some distance.

2 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12. Emphasis added.

3 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 116.

4 This possible occurrence through which a tradition may move from the first to the second phase presents its own set of complications. It has been argued by Donald Davidson and others that we could never know radically different or incommensurable conceptual schemes to exist, making contact with a rival community embodying an incommensurable tradition impossible. See Donald Davidson, On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973–74): 5–20. MacIntyre argues against Davidson's thesis, but I will not discuss the argument for lack of space. The crux of MacIntyre's argument is that translation is a two step process in which one must first learn the language of the rival tradition as a second first language and only then can areas of untranslatability be identified.

5 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 355.

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6 The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals report that farm animals in the United States produce 86,600 pounds of excrement every second, the equivalent of 130 times the entire population of the world.

7 MacIntyre is critical of Descartes and Kuhn on this point in that they both make the mistake of supposing that a person or a community can move through a complete revolution in thought such that all is new. See MacIntyre, Epistemological Crisis, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science, *The Monist* 60 (1977): 453–72.

8 Nancey Murphy has noted the similarity between MacIntyre's conception of the development of traditions of enquiry and Imre Lakatos's conception of the development of scientific research programmes. Both conceptions incorporate the historical element of growth by stages and both have criteria for what progress might amount to. See Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion and Ethics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), chap. 3.

9 It is possible that a response will at some future point come to be understood as having created more trouble than it was worth. Such a conclusion, however, can only be arrived at through hindsight.

10 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 362–363. Examples are plentiful. MacIntyre mentions that John Henry Newman provided a paradigmatic example of the first centuries of theological thought, which resulted in the doctrine of the Trinity. The epistemological crisis solved by Niels Bohr's theory of the internal structure of the atom would be an example from physics. Within science, each of the changes from Aristotelian to Newtonian to Einsteinian science was brought about by an epistemological crisis. Marxism faced an epistemological crisis as its predictions concerning the plight of the working class in a capitalist society were not fulfilled. The transition into modernity could be understood as a response to an epistemological crisis.

11 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 363.

12 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 327.

13 Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). See especially Explanation and Practical Reason, pp. 34–60.

14 Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments,* 44.

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