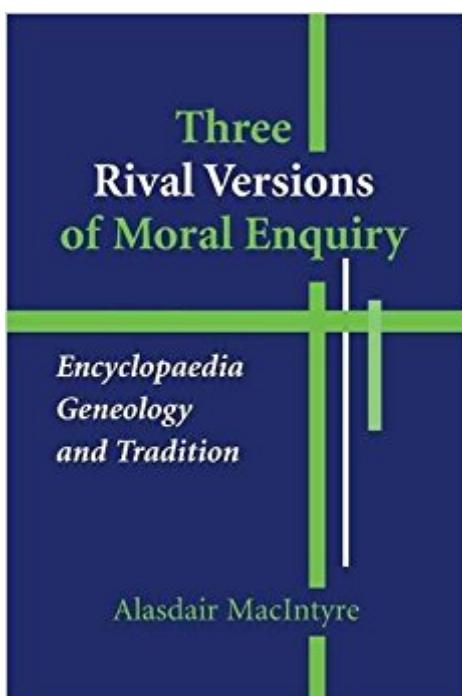


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# Three Rival Versions Of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, And Tradition



## Synopsis

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 Britannica*, 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.

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## Customer Reviews

MacIntyre argues that philosophy in general and ethics in particular cannot proceed by means of reasoning from neutral, self-evident facts accepted by all rational persons. Many late Victorian

intellectuals believed exactly that, confusing the customs of their time with universal truths. MacIntyre makes little effort to conceal his scorn for this view. Nietzsche and his 20th-century disciples, including Foucault and Deleuze, emphasized force and radical conflict rather than consensus; and though MacIntyre displays more respect for these genealogists (as he terms them) than for the encyclopedists, he does not follow in their path. Instead, he calls for a revival of Thomism. Aquinas combined the best features of Aristotle and Augustine into a synthesis that for MacIntyre has yet to be equaled. The author's careful exposition extends and develops his *After Virtue* ( LJ 9/15/81) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* ( LJ 3/15/88). Highly recommended.- David Gordon, Bowling Green State Univ., OhioCopyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"MacIntyre's project, here as elsewhere, is to put up a fight against philosophical relativism. . . . The current form is the 'incommensurability,' so-called, of differing standpoints or conceptual schemes. Mr. MacIntyre claims that different schools of philosophy must differ fundamentally about what counts as a rational way to settle intellectual differences. Reading between the lines, one can see that he has in mind nationalities as well as thinkers, and literary criticism as well as academic philosophy. More explicitly, he labels and discusses three significantly different standpoints: the encyclopedic, the genealogical and the traditional. . . . [T]he chapters on the development of Christian philosophy between Augustine and Duns Scotus are very interesting indeed. . . . [MacIntyre] must be the past, present, future, and all-time philosophical historians' historian of philosophy." — The New York Times Book Review "This book deepens and defends MacIntyre's claim that genuinely rational enquiry requires membership in a particular type of moral community. He offers the most persuasive recent restatement of the Thomist position on the relation of metaphysics to morality." — Richard Rorty

It is not often that a book of moral philosophy provides both a deep education in the history and content of thought, and a concrete set of alternatives to transform modern living. In this book, MacIntyre argues that the three supposedly incommensurable approaches to moral life that are left on the table in modern moral philosophy ought to be acknowledged. The battle between the three approaches is too often papered over. A better method would be to acknowledge to students that the Universities themselves are at war over these approaches, and are in fact an arena for this conflict, rather than an equal and uninvolved home for all ways of thinking. He is right. Any student of philosophy recognizes quickly that the instructors are speaking within incommensurable theories,

speaking past one another. This book explains why, and does not attempt to provide a solution, other than to recognize that a war is going on. A Thomist like MacIntyre argues that a child must be brought up within the traditions of the truth as preparation to learn the truth. Yet modern science and the 19th century encyclopedists argue that truth is progressive. And Nietzsche argues that an exposition of truth is merely the will to state the truth as seen by the person, a form of the will to power. These incommensurable approaches can only be the source of conflict in learning. To win, MacIntyre argues, would require one to transcend the others by explaining the problems of the other modes of thinking, solving those problems for the other mode, and moving the debate on. None have as yet triumphed, although MacIntyre holds out hope for Thomistic arguments, based in Aristotle and moving from there. His discussion of the Augustine/Aristotle debates of the 14th Century Parisian university is riveting (OK, I admit it, I am exaggerating). This is a difficult but worthwhile compendium of lectures, informative and educational. A reader will understand modern philosophy better as a byproduct of reading this book.

This is an excellent justification of Thomistic philosophy as over against two important modern trends in our culture: the encyclopedic/scientific approach, and the Genealogical approach of Nietzsche which has influenced such modern philosophers as Foucault.

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's 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 surgeon's 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 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 *avant-garde* 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.

In these lectures, he fills in the gap between Aristotle and Aquinas by incorporating St. Agustine. Lectures 4, 5 and 6 are for me the best sequel to "After Virtue." In them he argues how Agustine "Christianizes" Plato (my term), Aquinas "Christianizes" Aristotle and incorporates Agustine, and how Dante provides the artistic illustration of the Thomistic drama for the Summa. Worth buying and reading, but start with "After Virtue," and if you are still interested about MacIntyre's Thomistic criticism of modern rationalism and society, buy "Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry." Read up on the Gifford Lectures first in Wiki so that you understand the context for this book.

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