

Macintyre's Tensions: between anti-liberal foundationalism and anti-foundationalist liberalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues through a close reading of Alasdair Macintyre's works on justice and rationality that his reflections on the matter, despite their initial anti-liberal and foundationalist intent, have led him to endorse something close to an anti-foundationalist liberal position like that emerging from the works of neo-pragmatists philosophers such Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam and John Rawls.

This is a position that regards rationality as internal to traditions, without taking this as a reason for thinking that we are irrationally trapped within the boundaries traced by the norms and standards of *our own* traditions. Instead, it regards us as able to transcend those boundaries through a conversational and fallibilistic use of reason, which makes us ready to revise our conceptual and evaluative horizons through open confrontation with *other* traditions.

In order to illustrate this contention, the paper will have to disentangle the irresolvable and overlapping tensions between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist inclinations, and between anti-liberal and liberal ones, that deeply permeate his thought.

0. Introduction

In this paper I shall show how the reflections on rationality and justice that Alasdair Macintyre has been presenting over the last twenty years or so since the publication of *After Virtue* have eventually led him, despite their initial anti-liberal and foundationalist intent, to endorse something close to an anti-foundationalist liberal position like that emerging from the works of neo-pragmatists philosophers such Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam and John Rawls. This position regards rationality as internal to traditions, without taking this as a reason for thinking that we are irrationally trapped within the boundaries traced by the norms and standards of *our own* traditions. Instead, it regards us as able to transcend those boundaries through a conversational and fallibilistic use of reason, which makes us ready to revise our conceptual and evaluative horizons through open confrontation with *other* traditions. That is to say, a position that regards liberal reasonableness, centred on a commitment to what Rawls calls 'the principle of reciprocity', as the virtue enabling us to overcome the possible defects and limitations of ethnocentric rationality.

I take it that Macintyre would still regard himself as being neither an anti-foundationalist without reserve, nor especially a liberal; in fact the principal targets of his investigations into rationality and justice still seem to be anti-foundationalism

and liberalism. Yet this should not prevent us from seeing anti-foundational liberalism as the ultimate outcome of his reflections, because not only do these fail to match his foundationalist and anti-liberal expectations but, moreover, they are imbued throughout their development, and especially more recently, with more or less explicit anti-foundationalist and liberal elements. Indeed, irresolvable and overlapping tensions between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist inclinations, and between anti-liberal and liberal ones, turn out to deeply permeate his thought. The best way to proceed to prove my contention is to focus on Macintyre's attempt to overcome what he takes to be the relativist predicament, trying to disentangle the import of what he actually says rationality to consist of from what he believes his conception of rationality would enable us to account for. We will see in fact that although Macintyre's idea of the pitfalls of the relativist predicament, and thus of an adequate conception of rationality, points towards a metaphysical and conservative framework of thought, his positive account of the character of rational enquiry, despite of what he might think, converges substantially with Rawls, Rorty and Putnam's ethnocentrism and their allegiance to a liberal conception of rationality as reasonableness, as readiness to listen to others regarded as free and equal persons, and willingness to propose and abide by fair terms of cooperation. Yet, before looking at his most recent reflections on relativism and truth it is expedient to begin by showing the weakness of the main contentions and arguments advanced in *After Virtue*, the work in which Macintyre's anti-liberal anti-anti-foundationalist stance has been first systematically presented and where it is most manifest.

1. *After Virtue: a conservative solution to the failure of foundationalism*

After Virtue starts with the following thought experiment:

Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on the scientists. Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all that they possess are fragments... Nonetheless all these fragments are reembodyed in a set of practices which go under the name of the revived names of physics, chemistry and biology... Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in a proper sense at all... In such a culture men would use expressions such as 'neutrino', 'mass', 'specific gravity...but many of the beliefs presupposed by the use of these expressions would have been lost and there would appear to be an element of arbitrariness and even of choice in their application which would appear very

surprising to us. What would appear to be rival and competing premises for which no further argument could be given would abound. Subjectivist theories of science would appear and would be criticized by those who held that the notion of truth embodied in what they took to be science was incompatible with subjectivism.(1)

The main contention of the book is that 'in the actual world in which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world.'(2) Symptoms of this moral disorder in the contemporary Western world would be two contrasting characteristics of our moral and political debates. The first is their 'interminability', due to 'the conceptual incommensurability of the rival arguments', which makes any such debate 'a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion', 'a clash of antagonist wills', and any commitment to a particular position a matter of 'disquieting private arbitrariness.' The second, contrasting, characteristic is that, despite their incommensurability, these arguments 'purport to be impersonal arguments', they use expressions which 'purport to appeal to objective standards', thus suggesting 'that the practice of moral argument in our culture expresses at least an inspiration to be or become rational in this area of our lives.'(3) This latter characteristic, according to Macintyre, would point to the existence of a past world in which moral and political debate was rationally settable and terminable. The former would show instead that in the contemporary world 'all grasp of any objective and impersonal criteria has been lost.'(4)

Macintyre's principal intent in *After Virtue* is to trace the history of this 'moral decline', to individuate the equivalent catastrophic event of his thought experiment that in the real world has disrupted and caused the loss of unity and objectivity of moral and political discourse and has brought about all those anti-foundationalist conceptions, like emotivism (the particular target of his criticisms(5)), that make incommensurability and rational interminability characteristics of all normative discourse, whose eliminability cannot be *a priori* guaranteed. His conviction is that this is a history that developed through three main distinct stages:

a first at which evaluative and more especially moral theory and practice embody genuine objective and impersonal standards which provide rational justification for particular policies, actions and judgments, and which themselves in turn are susceptible of rational justification; a second stage at which there are unsuccessful attempts to maintain the objectivity and impersonality of moral judgments, but during which the project of providing rational justifications by means of and for the standards continuously breaks down; and a third stage at which theories of an emotivist kind secure wide implicit acceptance because a general implicit recognition in practice that claims to objectivity and impersonality cannot be made good.(6)

These then are the main claims to establishing which the reflections contained in *After Virtue* are devoted: there was a time and a culture in which moral theory and practice were regulated by rationally justified objective and impersonal standards of rationality; something happened in the course of human history that caused the disappearance of the necessary social and conceptual preconditions for the knowledge of those standards and thus of moral truth, and consequently caused the rise of anti-foundationalist theories and practices; that disappearance and the consequent appearance of those relativist theories and practices represents “a grave cultural loss.”

It is my conviction that Macintyre’s arguments fail in all three respects. The principal reason is that those arguments stand on a metaphysical conception of moral objectivity of which he never shows the viability. In particular, Macintyre fails to show the objectivity of the moral discourse of the lost culture in a sense of ‘objectivity’ which is not available to anti-foundationalists to appeal to, and which thus could justify his contention that an emotivist culture, like the one he believes the liberal one to be, would be in a state of grave moral disorder in comparison with certain pre-Enlightenment cultures. I therefore think that, if Macintyre wishes to make his contention good, he should not resort to epistemological arguments, but rather to moral and political ones. I think, that is, that the only way to take his opposition to the moral discourse of contemporary Western culture seriously is to read behind his epistemologically couched considerations a moral and political opposition to liberal culture. But, as we shall see, it is exactly when we try to get hold of the content of his moral and political stance that the tensions in Macintyre’s thought come to the fore and reach irremediable intensity. In order to illustrate this let us start by seeing what, according to Macintyre, are the key episodes in social history which provoked the loss of the conceptual and social preconditions for the objectivity and impersonality of moral judgements, and thus brought about contemporary anti-foundationalist theories and practices.

These he believes to be ‘episodes in the history of philosophy.’ It has been the breakdown of the eighteenth-century empiricist and rationalist foundationalist attempts at grounding morality - either on passions (like Hume) or on reason (like Kant) - which had been perceived first by Kierkegaard, and then most perspicuously by Nietzsche, that, according to Macintyre, ‘provided the historical background of our emotivist culture.’⁽⁷⁾ The crucial point for Macintyre is that those attempts at grounding morality failed, not because of the inability of their promoters to reach the right conception of human nature and formulate sound arguments, but because they were ‘*bound* to fail.’ Macintyre believes that all those eighteenth-century philosophers deprived themselves of the necessary precondition for their success, as ‘they all rejected *any* teleological view of human nature, *any* view of man as having an essence which defines his *true* end.’ It is this elimination of any notion of ‘man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*’ - ‘joint effect of the secular rejection of both Protestant and Catholic theology and the scientific and

philosophical rejection of Aristotelianism'(8) - that is the catastrophic event that would have provoked the disappearance and forgetfulness of the preconditions for moral objectivity, and consequently the degeneration of contemporary moral thought and practices.

According to Macintyre, in fact, objectivity in ethics is possible only within the Aristotelian and theological teleological scheme of moral reasoning and practice based on a functional conception of a human being as having an essential purpose, function or *telos*, and on the consequent contrast between 'man-as-he-happens-to-be' and 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature.' This is because 'the whole point of ethics - both as a theoretical and practical discipline - is to enable man to pass from his present state to his *true* ends'(9), and because it is only once we know what these *true* ends are, what the *essential* purpose of human beings is, that 'evaluative statements can be called true or false in precisely the way in which all other factual statements can be so called.'(10) For to call *x* good is simply to say 'that it is the kind of *x* which someone would choose who wanted an *x* for the purpose for which *x*'s are *characteristically* wanted'(11), and knowing the *essential* purpose of human beings we would know what they are *characteristically* wanted for, and thus when an evaluative statement would be true, in exactly the same way that we would know when a factual statement is.

The eighteenth-century philosophers' project of finding a rational basis for their moral beliefs and practices therefore *had* to fail, because, by abandoning *any* functional conception of human nature and *any* account of human *telos*, they opened an unbridgeable gap between moral injunctions and human nature, thereby depriving themselves of the only justificatory ground for moral rules and precepts.(12) That gap is the same one that modern philosophers themselves started, beginning with Hume, to observe separating factual from normative statements. The conviction that there is no deriving 'ought' conclusions from 'is' premises became indeed characteristic of their (and then our) moral philosophies, thus constituting for Macintyre 'an epitaph to their entire project.'(13)

I do agree that the recognition of the 'is-ought' divide was the ultimate fatal blow inflicted on Enlightenment foundationalism. But there is a crucial question which Macintyre remains constantly blind to: Did not the recognition of that divide show the bankruptcy of Aristotelian and theological teleology too? From a different angle: Were not those eighteenth-century foundationalist attempts, of which Macintyre so accurately shows the unavoidable failure, the last desperate attempts to save the conviction in, and the practices of, moral objectivity after the bankruptcy of Aristotelian and theological teleology?

In order to appreciate why we should answer these questions in the affirmative, and thus why Macintyre's main contention that the Enlightenment's loss of the precondition of moral objectivity is a grave cultural and moral loss does not stand up to close scrutiny, we need to stress a crucial, and by now familiar, distinction which Macintyre regularly ignores. The distinction we need to have clear is that

between an externalist way of understanding the Humean “no ‘ought’ from ‘is’ thesis” and an internalist way. The former way of intending it is the sense in which anti-foundationalists believe that thesis to be true and in which it constitutes the epitaph to foundationalism. In this sense the thesis reads as claiming that no normative judgements can be derived from *metaphysical* facts; that is, that there is no metaphysical grounding for normativity. Read in this way the Humean thesis constitutes an epitaph to Aristotelian and theological teleology too, since those kinds of teleology were metaphysical ones. Yet, what we need to consider is that anti-foundationalism is only against *foundational* teleology and not against teleology *per se*. Anti-foundationalists do not deny that we can derive normative judgements from factual statements, that ‘we can call evaluative statements true or false in precisely the way in which all other factual statements can be so called’, once we speak from within a particular ethnocentric conception of the human nature and human *telos*. When read in this internalist/ethnocentric way anti-foundationalists believe the no ‘ought’ from ‘is’ thesis to be false. In fact, as Rorty and Putnam have showed us, anti-foundationalism does not need to abandon any notion of ‘truth’ but only metaphysical (externalist) ones. So, equally it does not need to abandon any notion of ‘human nature’ and of ‘human *telos*’, but can instead retain them with clear conscience once they are intended as referring to a particular ethnocentric conception of ‘the function of human beings’ as opposed to a metaphysical one. Once such a particular conception ‘of the purpose for which *x*’s (human beings) are *characteristically* wanted’ is in place, of course, we can confidently call true or false our moral judgements, for we possess a criterion of moral truth; but this objectivity of the moral discourse remains ethnocentric, because the purpose we think of as being characteristic of human beings is not *metaphysically* characteristic of them, but only expresses what we think, from our ungrounded set of always revisable values and beliefs, a life worth living consist of.

The point I want to make, then, is that in order for Macintyre’s argument for the loss of moral objectivity in an anti-foundationalist culture to work he has to be referring to a metaphysical sense of objectivity, and therefore to a metaphysical sense of teleology, as this is the only sense of teleology that could support metaphysical objectivity and that could not be accounted for by an anti-foundationalist culture.⁽¹⁴⁾ Yet, this sense of objectivity is exactly the same one that the eighteenth-century empiricist and rationalist philosophers attempted, but failed to restore in their moral beliefs and practices after they recognised the failure of the Aristotelian and theological attempts to guarantee it.

Of course, Macintyre does not believe in the bankruptcy of Aristotelian and theological metaphysical teleology, nor does he believe in the impossibility of metaphysical objectivity. But he never argues for these convictions. He never gives an example of *really* true Aristotelian or theological teleology, the only Aristotelian and theological teleology that could guarantee to a culture a moral order based on metaphysically objective and impersonal standards. He never even shows us how to

arrive at a *true* Aristotelian or theological teleology could ever be possible; indeed he never shows us how metaphysical objectivity, and thus metaphysical theology in general, is possible. His only argument for the possibility of metaphysical objectivity consists in the mere statement of the reference of our moral claims to objective and impersonal standards (what Macintyre regards as the second characteristic of contemporary moral discourse). Though, as Rorty and Putnam again have shown us, the objectivity and impersonality of our normative standards does not need to point beyond the whole of our beliefs and values, beyond practice *tout court*, but only beyond our *actual* beliefs, values and practices; and, therefore, does not need to speak for metaphysical objectivity, the one Macintyre must stick to if he wants to make good his case for the moral degeneration of contemporary culture.⁽¹⁵⁾ Besides, it would not even work for Macintyre to specify that when he is saying that people refer to impersonal and objective standards he is meaning that they *intend* to refer to metaphysically impersonal and objective standards, that is, it will not do to say that our moral discourse is still couched in foundational terms. (This is actually what Macintyre seems to be claiming - and indeed it is what he should be claiming if he wants to make his contention against anti-foundationalism good - unaware that he is contradicting in this way his central claim that contemporary culture is an emotivist one). This specification does not work either because of the consideration, crucial for the working of our normative notions, that to think that *x* is the case does not entail that it is really the case that *x* and, *a fortiori*, that *to think* that there is a metaphysical truth does not entail that there *is really* such a kind of truth. Though, this circular entailment is the only argument that Macintyre in *After Virtue* puts forward for metaphysical truth; and the same circularity, of course, we find in his assertion of the possibility of Aristotelian and theological metaphysical teleology. He just assumes it without offering any argument; and from this unjustified assumption he then goes on to accuse modern and contemporary philosophers of obscurantism for having abolished teleological thought, when what they actually did was simply to recognise the unviability of Aristotelian and theological attempts at grounding moral discourse.

His overall argument seems then to boil down to the reasoning that, since only the *objective* truth of a certain conception of the human *telos* would guarantee the *true* objectivity of our moral claims, we should think in teleological terms if we do not want to condemn our moral discourses and lives to the nightmarish relativist situation of his thought-experiment; which is plainly a *non-sequitur* as, it not only overlooks the difference between foundational and anti-foundational teleology, but, in particular, takes for granted the possibility of realising the former, and thus the conviction that anti-foundationalism condemns us to a 'disquieting arbitrariness', to a disquieting relativism. Because of this metaphysical persuasion I believe that Macintyre fails to consider the idea that the abandonment of Aristotelian and theological teleological conceptions of the good came about exactly for the same reason that urged Nietzsche to abandon any foundationalist attempt altogether,

namely, that any attempt to ground our theories and practices on metaphysics had proved to go nowhere and thus to be only hypocritical attempts to eternalise, and sometimes justify the imposition of, one's own contingent practices. That is, Macintyre fails to realise that his notion of '*telos*' belongs to the same family of 'moral fictions' to which he relegates all the central notions of Enlightenment foundationalism, like those of 'rights' and 'utility', since like those notions it 'purports to provide us with an objective and impersonal criterion but it does not.'⁽¹⁶⁾ If we come to realise this we may then confidently say, with Macintyre himself, that 'Nietzsche's negative proposal to raze to the ground the [foundationalist] structures of inherited moral belief and argument...has a certain plausibility', *because*, 'the initial rejection of the moral tradition to which Aristotle's teaching about the virtues is central' *did not, pace* Macintyre, turn out 'to be misconceived and mistaken.'⁽¹⁷⁾

Of course, once again, Macintyre does not believe the Nietzschean rejection of metaphysical thought to be plausible. However, we are now in a position to see how the reasons for his anti-anti-foundationalist conviction must lie in the fact that he thinks that the plausibility of anti-foundationalism would be a 'terrible'⁽¹⁸⁾ and 'disquieting'⁽¹⁹⁾ prospect, and not in an argument showing the correctness of foundationalism. It is, thus, by looking at the reasons behind these distressed remarks that we can come to a better understanding of the main motivations for his overall argument against the moral discourse of post-Enlightenment societies.

One of these reasons is the familiar and typical foundationalist belief that by dropping metaphysical thought we deprive our judgements of their normative authority. This is the belief behind his conviction that only a metaphysical teleological scheme of thought could guarantee objectivity and impersonality to our moral and evaluative judgements. This conviction takes us to the irresolvable conflict between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism; and Macintyre never offers us an argument for the plausibility of foundationalist objectivity. It was actually by digging behind his foundationalist persuasion that we came to see how it stands on the belief of the *undesirability* of anti-foundationalism.

What then are the ultimate reasons for thinking anti-foundationalism is a 'terrible' and 'disquieting' scenario? These are, although embedded in metaphysical and epistemological considerations and convictions, moral and political reasons. Indeed, very interestingly, they re-propose both the main reason behind post-Nietzscheans and neo-Kantians criticisms of anti-foundational liberalism and the main reason behind Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor's communitarians opposition to liberalism. That is, Macintyre shares both the metaphysical assumption, common to post-Nietzscheans anti-liberal anti-foundationalists such as Michael Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, and neo-Kantians liberal foundationalist such as Karl-Otto Apel, Jürgen Habermas and Alan Gewirth, that ethnocentrism jeopardises the realisation of the liberal project,

thereby condemning us to a situation of oppressive social relations, and the conservative communitarian stance common to Sandel and Taylor.

That the arguments of *After Virtue* stand on the former belief (which will keep a central position still in his later reflections) is made clear when Macintyre expresses his conviction that 'the key to the social content of emotivism' is 'the fact that emotivism entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations.'⁽²⁰⁾ His conviction here is that the prospect of an anti-foundationalist culture is a disquieting one because such a culture would not be able to abide by Kant's liberal precept to treat each other as ends and not as means to one's own ends. Yet, we should ask: what does to treat someone as an end really mean? Macintyre himself gives us no possible better answer:

To treat someone else as an end is to offer them what I take to be good reasons for acting in one way rather than another, but to leave it to them to evaluate those reasons. It is to be unwilling to influence another except by reasons which that other he or she judges to be good.⁽²¹⁾

But then, why should the anti-foundationalist not be able to offer people what she considers the best reasons supporting her beliefs and courses of action? And, in particular, why should she not be able to leave people free to be 'their own judges'? Indeed there is no reason why anti-foundationalists should not. No reason why the absence of a neutral standard of rationality should prevent one from respecting someone's freedom, inducing her instead "to seek to make him or her an instrument of my purposes by adducing whatever influences or considerations will in fact be effective on this or that occasion."⁽²²⁾

Macintyre here thinks, as he has written in a later paper, that "the argument against the tyrant and the argument against relativized predicates of truth and justification require the same premises"⁽²³⁾, thus showing that he shares with post-Nietzschean and neo-Kantian critics of anti-foundational liberalism the assumption that a proper defence of freedom and equality depends on the realization of foundationalism.⁽²⁴⁾ Yet Rorty and Putnam have shown at length that there is nothing preventing anti-foundationalists to be liberals, that they are not impeded in overcoming a situation of *deaf* assertion and counter-assertion where all that matters is to succeed in imposing one's own will over others, that they can indeed overcome such a situation through the exercise of the virtue of reasonableness, that the only impediments to liberal behaviour and the only threats to liberal institutions are moral and political and not epistemological ones, that tyrants cannot be defeated by rational argument at all because they hold different moral premises, and that the only defences we may ever possess against them are all those possible concrete moral, political and practical initiatives of resistance we may find necessary and available to endorse on different concrete occasions. Plato, *pace* Macintyre, was once again *wrong*:⁽²⁵⁾ foundational philosophy is of no help to the defence

and improvement of our practices, and consequently anti-foundationalism is not an impediment or menace to them.(26)

Indeed, it is foundationalism to represent a much more serious impediment and a threat to the respect of freedom and equality, as it tends far too easily to hide conservative and authoritarian conceptions and practices of the worthwhile life under its rhetoric of truth. And just such a conservative and authoritarian political stance - which seems to stand in blatant contradiction to the previous foundationalist intent of defending the liberal injunction of treating the others as ends in themselves - is the other motivation behind Macintyre's teleological criticisms of anti-foundationalism, and behind his conviction that the realisation of an anti-foundationalist culture is a *terrible* and *disquieting* prospect.

This political stance is given clear expression throughout the book, but it is particularly manifest in the belief that liberalism is the social counterpart of anti-foundationalism - a belief that, as I have just noted, seems to be the opposite of the assumption behind his seemingly liberal fear that an anti-foundationalist culture is doomed to manipulative social relations, i.e. that a fuller respect of freedom and equality depends on the realisation of foundationalism. Macintyre believes in fact that "the democratization of moral agency", the fact that "it is in the self and not in the social roles or practices that moral agency has to be located"(27) is a direct consequence of the anti-foundationalist conviction that "the self lacks any rational criteria", which may result in the further conviction that "everything may be criticized from whatever standpoint the self has adopted, including the self's choice of standpoint to adopt"(28), and thus in the idea that "it is in this capacity of the self to evade any necessary identification with any particular contingent state of affairs that...[must be] seen the essence of moral agency."(29) It is this democratisation, which liberals see as precondition for the full respect of freedom and equality, the aspect of anti-foundationalism that Macintyre disapproves and fears as terrible and disquieting.

Thus, he is distressed that anti-foundationalist autonomy from any *necessary* identification with any particular state of affairs

is celebrated historically for the most part not as loss, but as self-congratulatory gain, as the emergence of the individual freed on the one hand from the social bonds of those constraining hierarchies which the modern world rejected at its birth and on the other hand from what modernity has taken to be the superstitions of teleology.(30)

He is concerned that,

What I have described in terms of a loss of traditional structure and content was seen by the most articulate of their [emotivists'] philosophical spokesmen as the achievement by the self of its proper autonomy. The self had been liberated from

all those outmoded forms of social organization which had imprisoned it simultaneously within a belief in a theistic and teleological world order and within those hierarchical structures which attempted to legitimate themselves as part of such a world order.(31)

Macintyre is distressed by this liberation from metaphysical authorities and their social embodiment because he regards as terrible and disquieting the fact that “the peculiarly modern self, the emotivist self, in acquiring sovereignty in its own realm lost its traditional boundaries provided by a social identity and a view of human life as ordered to a given end.”(32) He is preoccupied then because he holds the communitarian metaphysical belief that we possess a *true* nature and that there are *true* goals for our lives, which we should be true to, set for us once for all by the inherited practices and conceptions of the society that we happen to inhabit. This is the reason why he praises traditional metaphysical teleological societies: because in these societies individuals are aware that “[they are] someone’s son or daughter, someone else’s cousin or uncle; [that they are] a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; [that they] belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation”(33); because in these societies individuals understand that

these are not characteristics that belong to human beings accidentally, to be stripped away in order to discover ‘the real me’. *They are part of my substance, defining partially at least and sometimes wholly my obligations and my duties.* Individuals inherit a particular space within an interlocking set of social relationships; lacking that space, they are nobody, or at best a stranger or an outcast.(34)

Macintyre is then worried by the criticisms of metaphysical thought because he is still attached to the foundationalist conviction that if we drop foundational teleology we lose the possibility of appealing to any *telos* at all, thus depriving our life of any point, of any goal worth living for; we lose our inherited conception of ourselves and our place in society, thus breaking into pieces our identity.

However just as anti-foundationalism does not corrode normativity but only internalise the source of normative authority from the God’s eye point of view to particular ethnocentric sets of values and beliefs, it also does not withdraw sense from the evaluative activity of projecting and prioritising the ends and goals of our life, nor does it corrode our personal and social identity. Anti-foundationalists are against *metaphysical* teleology, not against teleology *per se*. From the anti-foundationalist standpoint we can still place the ends of our lives in hierarchical order, we can still posit overarching goals for our lives, and we can still hold views of our personal and social identity with clear conscience. What anti-foundationalists deny is that those hierarchies, those ultimate goals, and those identities, are carved once and for all for us in a *noumenal* reality beyond possible revision. For anti-

foundationalists, realising that there is no limit antecedently given to us which we should absolutely abide by is liberating indeed, as this means for them that we are now free to change that ordering and prioritising of ends, and thus the shape of our self and our (private and public) life, as we regard most appropriate ‘by reasons which *we* judge to be good.’ That is, for anti-foundationalists anti-foundationalism enables us to be ‘our own judges’, exactly as Macintyre praises Kant for wishing human beings to be; it enables us to respect more fully the equality and freedom of our human fellows. It would seem, then, that if Macintyre wishes to stick to Kant’s liberal injunction he should embrace an anti-foundationalist conception after all.

However, a straightforward reading of Macintyre’s overall argument opens itself to us, which could make us see how the two political motivations behind Macintyre’s contention of the moral degeneration of post-Enlightenment culture – the defence of both Kant’s liberal injunction and the communitarian conservative relationship between individual and society –, instead of contradicting each other and standing on opposite assumptions, would square perfectly with each other. We may, in fact, read Macintyre as thinking that the fuller realisation of freedom and equality, and thus of a society free from oppressive behaviour and arbitrary abuses of power, is possible only from within a traditional theistic and Aristotelian foundationalist conception of morality, and that contemporary liberalism would instead betray those values because it presupposes an anti-foundationalist conception of rationality. We may, that is, read Macintyre as thinking that there is a difference between a *genuine* liberalism, which stands on teleological metaphysical grounds, and a fake one, standing on relativist ones.

This is presumably the correct reading of Macintyre’s argument. Though, this *genuine* liberalism would ultimately dissolve into familiar conservative and authoritarian communitarian politics. In fact, the praise of Aristotelian and theistic cultures, once divested of its metaphysical motivation, which we have seen Macintyre never succeeds in arguing for, ultimately boils down to the praise of the moral, political and social conditions that the metaphysical teleology of those cultures enables to realise. These are conditions of moral, political and social stability, the conditions of a society where everyone knows her place in it and in the world, and thus where there is no uncertainty about what everyone’s duties and rights are and about what actions are required to perform these duties and rights(35); a society where there are no situations of conflict which cannot be rationally settled by reference to well defined authoritative standards, and thus where normative judgements are called true or false in the same way as factual statements are. They are the conditions of a society where the voice of these (allegedly metaphysical) objective and impersonal standards, of the ends that would confer a *true* sense to our human life and a *true* content to our identity, are not “interpreted and misinterpreted in terms of the pluralism which *threatens* to submerge us all”(36), as “all too easily” happens instead in contemporary liberal societies which “lack of any clear consensus” about evaluative, moral and political

matters.(37) And these, whatever their actual content might be, are undoubtedly conservative and authoritarian conditions.

Hence, from an anti-foundationalist standpoint, the resort to teleology turns out to be a conservative solution to the failure of foundationalism to come up with a neutral framework of rationality that could guarantee the existence of a correct resolution to the disagreements between different moral and conceptual traditions. Consequently, the key episodes in the history of the alleged degeneration of Western moral discourse that Macintyre traces for us turn out to be, not philosophical and conceptual episodes, but rather moral, political and social ones. They ultimately amount to the disappearance of the kind of closed, conservative and authoritarian societies we have just described, plausibly as the result of the encounter and clash of different conflicting and incommensurable closed cultures and traditions of the same kind; exactly those episodes that eventually made Enlightenment philosophers realise that if they wanted to show the superiority of one such culture over the others they had to resort to arguments which did not presuppose the validity of one theological or Aristotelian metaphysics amongst others.

Yet again, this reading of Macintyre as a conservative foundationalist, which for the most part of the book seems to be the most appropriate, does not fit with all that Macintyre says. This reading ultimately crumbles when Macintyre moves on to consider the limitations of Aristotelian teleology (and, I take it, theological teleology too) which he thinks need to be overcome in order to give an adequate account of moral discourse. In fact, at this point Macintyre mentions just those two characteristics of Aristotelianism (as well as of theology) that make it a foundationalist anti-liberal position: that is, its metaphysical biology and the absence of an appreciation of conflict as a key source of learning and as a milieu for the exercise of virtues.(38)

This goes against any anti-liberal foundationalist reading, for once we drop the metaphysical back up from Aristotelian and theistic teleology, and once we recognise the importance of conflict and critical reflection within ourselves and our societies for our societies' and our own cultural enhancement, and thus we recognise that we are not trapped within the boundaries of our initial communitarian conceptual and moral horizons - as Macintyre in an exemplary way does by noticing that "the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities...does not entail that the self has to accept the moral limitations of the particularity of those forms of community"(39) - then we have transformed a foundationalist and conservative communitarian position into the anti-foundationalist liberal one that we have depicted in the previous chapters. Namely, a position that regards our identity and our conceptions of the good as initially shaped by the community in which we grow up, but, nonetheless, as always susceptible to all the revisions that we may consider appropriate by our personal contingent points of view and by the contingent points of view of a

community dedicated to full respect for the freedom and equality of its members; and that, yet, does not regard this contingency as a menace either for normativity or for liberalism.

We thus find ourselves facing again the irremediable tension between a liberal and an anti-liberal outlook, to which now it is added that between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. The latter tension indeed becomes more and more intense and occupies a more central place in Macintyre's reflections following *After Virtue*, now particularly focused on the issue of relativism. It is in this attempt to resolve this latter tension that Macintyre is eventually pushed more and more towards an anti-foundationalist liberal position. It is to consider this attempt that I shall now turn.

2. Whose Justice? Which Rationality?: Reasonableness as a liberal solution to the failure of foundationalism

Macintyre is led to focus his attention on the issue of relativism because he comes to realise, as he writes in the postscript to the second edition of *After Virtue*, that nothing he said in his teleological account of morality “goes any way to show that a situation could not arise in which it proved possible to discover no rational way to settle the disagreement between two different moral and epistemological traditions, so that positive grounds for a relativistic thesis would emerge.”⁽⁴⁰⁾ That is, Macintyre comes to acknowledge what we have previously noted, that he never advanced arguments in support of his belief in the possibility of metaphysical teleology and metaphysical objectivity, and thus in support of his belief in the epistemological confusion of an anti-foundationalist culture as it is manifested in the characteristic interminability of contemporary public moral debate between rival arguments. It is in order to offer such an argument against this anti-foundationalist predicament of rational incommensurability that he turns his attention to the issue of relativism, as he identifies that predicament with that of relativism.

Yet, we will see that his attempt is bound to fail from the outset because of an irremediable tension within his thought. This tension is the result of an increasing anti-metaphysical awareness on Macintyre's part. We know he has always rejected the Enlightenment foundationalist attempts. Though, in *After Virtue* he was still confident in his opposition to the post-Nietzschean rejection of *all* foundational philosophy on the assumption of the possibility of metaphysical teleology. Now this confidence seems to have definitely crumbled. Macintyre seems to have realised that to abandon the metaphysical biology behind Aristotelian (and theistic) teleology means to abandon metaphysical thought altogether; to be left with an anti-foundationalist (internist) conception of teleology like the one I have depicted

above. That is, Macintyre finally seems to have taken on board the pragmatist lesson shared by Rorty and Putnam, that, if within a particular teleological conception evaluative judgements can be called true and false exactly like factual statements can be so called, there cannot be metaphysical arguments which will guarantee the truth of a particular teleological conception over the others. However, although holding this anti-foundationalist conviction, he still maintains an opposition to the predicament of the incommensurability of rival practices and traditions and of the interminability of the debate between such incommensurable practices and traditions, which he identifies with relativism. This opposition causes the irremediable tension by which Macintyre's later thought is torn. Macintyre, in fact, aims to find a way out from the relativist predicament while keeping hold of an anti-foundationalist perspective, without realising that that predicament is the unavoidable consequence of that perspective. Macintyre, that is, tries to find a balance between anti-foundationalism and anti-relativism, without realising that the relativism he has in mind is not the corrosive 'anything-goes' one against which Rorty and Putnam argue, but innocuously is anti-foundationalism itself. He thus finds himself torn between anti-foundationalism and anti-anti-foundationalism. And, as we will see, it is in trying to resolve this tension that, despite what he thinks, he is eventually led to embrace anti-foundational liberalism, as he comes to realise that the only way to resolve the impasse within reason, the impasse between different traditions and practices of rationality, remaining within an anti-foundationalist standpoint, is to abandon epistemology for ethics, to embrace a full blooded anti-foundationalism and replace foundational rationality for liberal reasonableness; although, of course, he does not quite put things like that.

We can take as the starting point for our clarification the way in which in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Macintyre presents the tension between anti-foundationalism and anti-relativism, to the solution of which most part of that book was dedicated. In the introductory chapter we are presented with the following question:

Is there some mode of understanding which could find no place in the Enlightenment's vision of the world by means of which the conceptual and theoretical resources can be provided for reuniting conviction concerning such matters as justice on the one hand and rational enquiry and justification on the other?(41)

The Enlightenment's vision is the familiar foundationalist one which aimed "to provide for debate in public realm standards and methods of rational justification by which alternative courses of action in every sphere of life could be adjudged just or unjust, rational or irrational, enlightened or unenlightened,...[which aimed] to appeal to principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all those social and cultural particularities which the Enlightenment thinkers took

to be the mere accidental clothing of reason in particular times and places.”(42) The idea was ‘to displace authority and tradition with reason’. Though, Macintyre remarks, the increasing inability to agree as to what reason commanded, “as to what precisely those principles were which would be found undeniable by all rational persons”, contributed to the increasing lack of trust towards the possibility to attain the Enlightenment’s ‘ideal of rational justification.’ This failure of the Enlightenment foundationalist project brought about “the inability within our culture to unite conviction and rational justification.”(43) “We thus inhabit in a culture”, concludes Macintyre, “in which an inability to arrive at agreed rationally justifiable conclusions on the nature of justice and practical rationality coexists with appeals by contending social groups to sets of rival and conflicting convictions unsupported by rational justification.”(44) Questions concerning justice and rationality have thus become a matter “not for rational enquiry, but rather for the assertion and counterassertion of alternative and incompatible sets of premises.”(45)

This is the same state of confusion that in *After Virtue* Macintyre attributes to contemporary liberal moral debate; and he still believes in the association between anti-foundationalism -he would say relativism- and liberalism. He still believes that “a liberal order is one in which...debate is necessarily barren...and nonrational persuasion displaces rational argument”, “since no overall theory of human good is to be regarded as justified.”(46) But, now, he has a different idea of the ways and resources that can enable us to restore moral order, “to rationally resolve the difference between rival and incompatible traditions”(47), and “substituting, for a politics in which the exercise of power is unmediated by rationality, a politics in which the exercise of power is both mediated and tempered by appeal to standards of rational justification independent of the particularism of the contending parties.”(48) These resources, as before, we need to recover from the obscurantism of the Enlightenment reaction against tradition. But now, instead of consisting of a return to conservative metaphysical teleology, they lie in

a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition.(49)

I do think that this conception of rationality really represents that alternative mode of understanding capable of resolving the post-Enlightenment tension between tradition and reason, between anti-foundationalism and anti-relativism, without falling back on the metaphysical and conservative aspects of the classical Aristotelian and theological teleological scheme. But I also think that Macintyre has not succeeded in eliminating completely these aspects from his thought. These

aspects still retain a place in his thought in what Macintyre hopes to get from his tradition-embodied conception of rationality. That is, I think there is a discrepancy, of which Macintyre is unaware, between what his conception of rationality amounts to and what is implied by his idea of the relativist predicament that that conception is supposed to enable us to resolve. In particular, I do not think that his tradition-embodied conception of rationality is the conception of rationality needed for what Macintyre intends as the *rational* resolution of the difference between rival and incompatible traditions and for a politics in which the exercise of power is both mediated and tempered by appeal to *neutral* standards of *rational* justification. I think that Macintyre, without realising it, would like to have a metaphysical (and conservative) notion of rationality and truth after all, while all he actually says about rationality does not point beyond an anti-foundationalist liberal conception.

In order to illustrate my contention, and thus to evaluate Macintyre's project of overcoming the impasse within reason, we need to see exactly what is involved in both his description of the "tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive" rationality and in the sense of rationality needed in order to resolve the situation of assertion and counterassertion which Macintyre feels must be resolved, and thinks his tradition-embodied rationality can resolve, and see if they match.

Let us start from the latter point. What does Macintyre intend for "rationality" when he speaks of "*rational* resolution of difference", of "*rational* mediation of power", and of "reuniting conviction and *rational* enquiry and justification"? What does he mean for "*rational* justification"? What does he think an adequate account of rationality should account for? What does Macintyre think the relativist predicament to be overcome consists of?

He regards his tradition-embodied conception of rationality to give the resources for overcoming just those situations of impasse between conflicting traditions facing each other through the assertion and counterassertion of their rival standpoints that an anti-foundationalist account of rationality such as Rorty's and Putnam's regards as a possible outcome of any confrontation between different traditions. Thus, although Macintyre acknowledges "the *de facto* ineliminability of fundamental disagreement between persons of different standpoints all of whom appear equally capable of rational judgement"⁽⁵⁰⁾, he is also keen to specify that from this fact

it does not follow, as we might suppose if we did concede the last word to relativism, that we are thereby condemned to or imprisoned within our own particular standpoint, able to controvert that of others only by appealing to standards which already presuppose the standpoint of our own prejudice.⁽⁵¹⁾

It does not follow "that all fundamental rational justification can only be internal to, and relative to the standards of, each particular standpoint"⁽⁵²⁾, that "each standpoint is locked into its own mode of rational justification and into the conceptual scheme to which that mode gives expression."⁽⁵³⁾ "On fundamental

matters”, he says, “the existence of continuing disagreements should not lead us to suppose that there are not adequate resources available for the rational resolution of such disagreements.”(54)

It is true that these passages, *by themselves*, are not enough to present a different conception of rationality from the anti-foundationalist one as presented by Rorty and Putnam, as this also acknowledges that when we encounter people with whom it does not seem possible to reach a point of agreement we are not necessarily relegated to an encounter of *deaf* assertion and counterassertion; that situations of radical disagreement do not prevent us from trying to listen better to the others, to understand or even to learn from them, and eventually end up with a point of agreement even different from our initial starting points. However, while anti-foundationalists think that these considerations convey nothing more than a conception of rationality as a moral attitude we may, or may not, choose to have before situations of disagreement, the attitude recommended by liberals of trying for a *de facto* resolution of disagreement respecting each others freedom and equality, Macintyre seems to be willing to give us something more, a *de jure* guarantee of a possible resolution to fundamental disagreements ‘that is not internal to, and relative to the standards of one’s own particular standpoint.’(55)

This is made apparent, for example, when in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* he moves on to explain the sense in which “the relativist challenge rests upon a denial that rational debate between and rational choice among rival traditions is possible.”(56) There he asserts that this denial amounts to the conclusion that

if the only available standards of rationality are those made available by and within traditions, then no issue between contending traditions is rationally decidable. To assert or to conclude this rather than that can be rational relative to the standards of some particular tradition but not rational *as such*. There can be no rationality *as such*.(57)

Passages like this sound like a direct critic of any position like Putnam’s and Rorty’s that internalises the normative vocabulary of the different particular concrete traditions; and, accordingly, it sounds like a critic of any anti-metaphysical position. For, if a resolution or moderation of a disagreement between incompatible standpoints needs to be independent from what the particular conflicting standpoints regard as a rational resolution and a rational moderation by the standards of rationality internal to themselves, in order to be legitimately considered as rational, as Macintyre seems to be asserting, then the concept of rationality becomes barely distinguishable from that pointed out to us by metaphysics and the Enlightenment’s aversion towards tradition.

We find this same metaphysical intent when Macintyre, as he did in *After Virtue*, points out to the relativist that “the protagonists of those standpoints which generate large and systematic disagreements...are never themselves relativist”(58), since

“their claims are of a kind which require unqualified justification...they are claims to *truth*.”(59) This time, though, Macintyre tries to explain exactly what is involved in making truth claims, and how this would go against the relativist predicament of the interminability of fundamental disagreements. Making a claim to truth for Macintyre involves two things. First, “it commits those who uphold it to a non-relativist conception of rational justification, to a belief that there must be somehow or other adequate standards of rational justification, which are not the standards internal to this or that standpoint, but are the standards of rational justification *as such*. Secondly, just because this is so, making a claim to truth opens up the possibility that the claim may fail”(60), and this would go directly against the relativist, as she (the relativist) (allegedly) believes that

just because the standards to which the partisans of each [standpoint] appeal are to a significant degree internal to each standpoint, any possibility of something that could be recognised as a refutation of one's standpoint by that of another is precluded... But when one notices that the claim made by each contending party is a claim to truth, this inference is put in question.(61)

Here, once again, positions of the sort of Putnam's internalism and Rorty's ethnocentrism, which hold a conception of rational justification for which there are not standards of rational justification *as such* but only standards internal to this or that standpoint, and thus hold that there cannot be a non-prejudicial confrontation between fundamentally different standpoints, are identified with relativism. It is true that just as these positions do not entail that ‘we are trapped in solipsistic hells’, ‘trapped within our monad or our language’(62), they also do not close up the possibility that the claims to truth made on the basis of those standards internal to our tradition may fail, and that something could be recognised as a refutation of our standpoint. In fact, the debate that has involved Rorty and Putnam in the last twenty years or so I believe has shown us that it is possible to advance an anti-foundationalism that accepts and regards as extremely important the idea of reforms of our thoughts and practices, and that this acceptance is closely related to the recognition of the ideal, transcending, character of truth, and of normativity in general. But it also has shown us that this transcendence does not point towards a notion of truth *as such*, independent of any standpoint. From their anti-foundationalist perspective the transcendence of truth is equivalent to its irreducibility, a characteristic shared with all normative notions, and expressed by the cautionary use we make of such notions when we say, for instance, that a belief is wholly justified but not true. But this irreducibility and this cautionary use does not point beyond *all* justification, *all* traditions of justification. Even if “truth is independent of justification here and now, [it is] not independent of *all* justification”(63) maintained Putnam. And, similarly, for Rorty “the entire force of the cautionary use of ‘true’ is just to point out that we can never exclude the

possibility that some better audience might exist, or come to exist, to whom a belief that is justifiable to us would not be justifiable”(64); “that somebody may come up with a better idea...that there is always room for improved belief, since new evidence, or new hypotheses, or a whole new vocabulary, may come along.”(65)

Though, Macintyre seems instead to mean the independence of truth from justification in a metaphysical sense. Thus, for example, his contention against Putnam’s theory of truth as idealisation of rational justification is that, from his internalist position according to which each contending tradition in fundamental disagreement has internal to itself its own mode of rational justification, “what constitutes an idealisation of rational justification will also be specific and idiosyncratic to the standpoint of that particular tradition”(66), and that, therefore, Putnam’s idealisation cannot guarantee a resolution of fundamental disagreement, but would propose again such disagreement within itself. Putnam’s ‘idealisation of rational justification’ would not be an adequate account of rationality because it “has never been given an adequate content”, a content that would tell us when we have reached that ultimate perspective-free terminus of enquiry.

However, Putnam never intended to give us such a metaphysical content; he just wanted to account for the possibility of normative authority once denied the project of placing that authority on metaphysical grounds outside all traditions. As Rorty noticed from his ethnocentric perspective, “idealized rational acceptability” can mean nothing else other than “rational acceptability to an ideal community”, and “given that no such community is going to have a God’s-Eye view, this ideal community cannot be anything more than *us* at our best.” And this means that, although truth is not reducible to the standards of rationality of any single tradition, there is no possibility of so detaching truth from rational justification so as to be able to use “true” transcending the particularisms of ‘*any* merely local standpoints’. For pragmatists this transcendence would deprive the notion of truth of the context for its application. For Macintyre, instead, the opposite is true: “where there is no possibility of thus transcending such limitations, there is no application for the notion of truth.”(67)

Where Macintyre’s metaphysical interpretation of truth’s independence from rational justification within a tradition is made most manifest is in the description of the conception of truth that he thinks is needed in order “to block the inference from the fact about fundamental disagreement to the relativist’s conclusion.” This is, in fact, the Aristotelian conception of truth as *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*, interpreted in a way which is very much reminiscent of the conception of truth presupposed by Williams’ ‘absolute conception of the world’, and Nagel’s ‘view from nowhere.’(68) “It is towards this condition of enquiry (*adaequatio intellectus ad rem*)”, says Macintyre in fact,

that the mind moves in its enquiries, its *telos* provided by its conception of the achievement of just such a relation of adequacy to *what is*. A mind which has

achieved such a relationship will have overcome those limitations of perspective and of cognitive resources which previously restricted it to judgements as to *what seems to be the case* here and now under the limitations of some particular local set of circumstances.(69)

The metaphysical reading of truth's transcendence is made explicit when, after having recognised that "what impressed the relativist's attention, [the *de facto* ineliminability of fundamental disagreement] is important", Macintyre gives the following formulation of our initial problem of finding a resolution to the post-enlightenment tension between anti-foundationalism and anti-relativism:

Is it possible to bring into coherent relationship, and, if so, how, a recognition that all rational justification of particular moral standpoints is internal to those standpoints, and an elucidation of the claim to truth universally or almost universally advanced -implicitly or explicitly- by the protagonists of each of those standpoints, a claim which involves appeal to rational justification *as such*, that is, to some mode of justification which transcends the limitations of particular standpoints?(70)

By continuously referring to rationality *as such* we can confidently say that, while the anti-foundationalists, not excluding the *de facto* possibility of reaching a solution for fundamental disagreements, deny any *a priori* guarantee for the possibility of such a solution, Macintyre seems to be willing to furnish the basis for just such an *a priori* guarantee, and thus to identify with its denial the relativist predicament. That is, the conception of rationality which Macintyre refers to when he tells us what we need to defend our thought and practices against relativism - namely, the *rational* resolution of disagreements, the *rational* mediation of the politics of power and the reunion of conviction and *rational* justification- seems to be exactly that of a neutral framework of thought independent of the contingency and particularisms of the local traditions we inhabit, which very much reminds us of the Enlightenment's vision of rationality whose high expectations leads to the sort of relativism that is really to be feared. This is the radical relativism of the 'anything goes' kind and not the internalisation of normativity to our practices of justification operated by Rorty and Putnam, which indeed only can save us from corrosive scepticism once the metaphysical framework of thought has been abandoned.

Yet, this very same conception of rationality and framework of thought is the one that in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Macintyre claims to have been denying throughout the book. Thus, he says, for example, that the conclusion of his discussion of rationality embodied in tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive enquiry is that "it is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources

sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions”(71); that “we have learned that we cannot ask and answer those questions [questions about justice and rationality] from a standpoint external to all tradition, that the resources of adequate rationality are made available to us only in and through traditions.”(72) He also claims, contradicting his previous identification of liberalism with anti-foundationalism, that the failure of the project of liberalism,

the fact that liberalism does not provide a neutral-tradition-independent ground from which a verdict may be passed upon the rival claims of conflicting traditions in respect of practical rationality and justice, but turns itself to be just one more such tradition...provides the strongest reason that we can actually have for asserting that there is no such neutral ground that there is no place for appeals to a practical-rationality-as-such or a justice-as-such to which all rational persons would by their very rationality be compelled to give their allegiance. There is instead only the practical-rationality-of-this-or-that-tradition and the justice-of-this-or-that-tradition.(73)

Besides, although he believes that “implicit in the rationality of [our] enquiry there is indeed a conception of a final truth, that is to say, a relationship of the mind to its objects which would be wholly adequate in respect of the capacities of that mind”, he acknowledges that

any conception of that state as one in which the mind could by its own powers know itself as thus adequately informed is ruled out; The Absolute Knowledge of the Hegelian system is from this tradition-constituted standpoint a chimaera. No one at any stage can ever rule out the future possibility of their present beliefs and judgements being shown to be inadequate in a variety of ways.(74)

This last passage is in open contradiction to his metaphysical reading of the transcendence of truth. In fact it makes of this transcendence as much a criterionless idealisation as that in the terms of which Putnam and Rorty construe the irreducibility typical of all normative notions, thus acknowledging that it never makes us step outside the contingency of traditions towards a point of view from which we could settle *de jure* all kind of disagreement.

In order to release this tension between a foundationalist reaction to the anti-foundationalist impasse within reason - which Macintyre *identifies* with relativism and liberalism - and an allegiance to anti-foundationalism itself - which at other times he instead *opposes* to liberalism - it is necessary to consider the exact nature of the resources that his tradition-embodied conception of rationality offers us as a means for overcoming the relativist predicament, and to distinguish what those resources entail from what he regards as the requirement for any adequate account of rationality. We will thus be able to appreciate the real import of his defence of

tradition-embodied rationality, that is, a defence of a self-critical, fallibilistic, and conversable attitude open to the suggestions and insights of other conflicting traditions as key for the reform and enhancement of our intellectual and practical traditions.

Macintyre presents to us the resources that he believes his tradition-embodied conception rationality offers us against relativism by considering a particular kind of occurrence which he thinks is ignored by relativists, that of "epistemological crisis." This is that kind of critical situation that a particular tradition, with its own distinctive theses and arguments, but also problems and difficulties in terms of whose resolution its progress should be measured by, might encounter in the course of its development; a situation in which that tradition "appears by its own standards, to have degenerated"(75), and "by its own standards of progress, to have ceased to make progress"(76), so that, "at a certain point in the history of such attempts to deal with such problems it can become plain that they are not only persistent, but intractable, and irremediably so."(77) "Characteristically at this stage contradictions appear that cannot be resolved within the particular tradition's own conceptual framework."(78) "All attempts to deploy the imaginative and inventive resources which the adherents of the tradition can provide may flounder."(79) "And what the adherents of such a tradition may have to learn is that they lack the resources to explain its own failing condition."(80)

For Macintyre a solution to these situations of epistemological crisis requires,

the invention or discovery of new concepts and the framing of some new types of theory which meet three highly exacting requirements: First, this in some ways radically new and conceptually enriched scheme...must furnish a resolution to the problems which had previously proved intractable. Second, it must also provide an explanation of just what it was that rendered the tradition, before it had acquired these new resources, sterile or incoherent or both. And third, these first two tasks must be carried out in a way which exhibits continuity of the new conceptual and theoretical structures with the shared belief in terms of which the tradition of enquiry had been defined up to this point.(81)

And an important role in the overcoming of these crises he regards to be played by the other, previously conflicting, traditions.

For the adherents of a tradition which is now in this state of fundamental and radical crisis may at this point encounter in a new way the claims of some particular rival tradition... When they have understood the beliefs of the alien tradition, they may find themselves compelled to recognise that within this other tradition it is possible to construct from the concepts and theories peculiar to it what they were unable to provide from their own conceptual and theoretical resources, a cogent and illuminating explanation -cogent and illuminating, that is, *by their own*

standards- of why their own intellectual tradition had been unable to solve its problems.(82)

Macintyre's main contention is that the dynamic of the occurrence and resolution of epistemological crises proves that "a tradition can be rationally discredited by and in the light of appeal to *its very own* standards of rationality"(83), and that this would show that relativism flounders, because the fact that a tradition can vindicate its rational superiority over its rivals "is the possibility which the relativist challenge has failed to envisage."(84)

Yet, we should ask: is it true that relativism, as conceived of by Macintyre -as the thesis that we can apply the normative vocabulary only within a particular tradition-, fails to envisage the possibility that the resolution of epistemological crisis show us, i.e. that a tradition can vindicate its rational superiority over its rivals?

The only way in which such relativism - which coincides with anti-foundationalism- would not be able to show the rational superiority of one tradition over another is in the foundational sense of 'rational superiority' that refers to an *a priori* neutral framework of rationality. But, does the argument from epistemological crises point to this framework and thus refute the kind of internalisation of truth and rationality within the different contingent tradition operated by Rorty and Putnam? Or does it not rather only point out that 'we can never exclude the possibility that some better *us* might exist', as Rorty would say, 'since new evidence, or new hypotheses, or a whole new vocabulary, may come along'?

It seems to me that Macintyre's argument shows only the latter internalist sense in which there can be rational progress and improvement. In fact, what it shows is only that a tradition can be rationally discredited by appealing to *its very own* standards of rationality, and replaced by a rival tradition shown to be rationally superior by those same standards. Since the standards by which a tradition resolves its epistemological crises are *its own* ones, showing that a tradition can resolve such a crisis by appealing to the resources of another tradition does not show that we can resolve the problem posed by fundamental disagreements about the very standards of rationality. What has been shown is simply what Rorty and Putnam acknowledge, namely, that the latter tradition scores better than the former, that the latter tradition represents a better version of the former, and *better* in terms of the standards of the former tradition.

The resolution of an epistemological crisis seems, thus, to be just a solution, even if a radical one, to the problems internal to a tradition afforded from within *that same* tradition. For, if the standards of rationality by which we judge the resolution of an epistemological crisis occurring within our own tradition (whether the resolution comes from an already existing different tradition or from a new one created by our imagination) are those belonging to our own very tradition, then, there cannot be a radical discontinuity between different successive stages of our tradition. This was after all what the third requirement for a resolution of an epistemological crisis

recommended to us -i.e. continuity with the belief of the tradition. This does not mean that a tradition which has gone through several epistemological crises in the course of its history might not end up, by a continuous process of slight replacement of its fundamental standards and beliefs similar to that of Neurath's seamen fixing their boat afloat, holding a system of values, beliefs, and standards of rationality, entirely different from that which it started out with. But, even so, we would always be placed within some tradition or other with its local standard of rationality.

Besides, we would not have escaped from contingency even if the standards by which a tradition admits its inferiority to another rival tradition were not its own standards, but those of the rival or of a further different tradition. In fact we would just have a situation in which a change of mind is brought about "through the exercise of philosophical and moral imagination" (85), as Macintyre himself says replying to the question "how is it possible that someone whose moral beliefs and practices are both informed and limited by the concepts and standards of her or his own particular point of view could have acquired the ability to understand her or his own standpoint from some external and rival vantage point?" (86) And imagination is not exactly what is needed to guarantee the availability of a neutral framework of rationality *as such*. It involves narrative redescription and not rational argumentation.

Hence, the consideration of epistemological crises does not move us a step away from ethnocentrism. It does not offer an argument for the possibility of arriving at a *de jure* resolution of all possible disagreements between conflicting traditions. The only neutral ground we may ever find is a ground of contingent agreement, of agreement within a particular tradition; and what Macintyre's account of tradition-embodied rationality and his discussion of epistemological crises ultimately shows us -despite what Macintyre may think- are exactly those resources available to us for trying to reach this *contingent* neutral ground, this *de facto* agreement. And these, now we are able to see, are not epistemological resources but moral, political, and imaginative ones. They are those attitudes of conversability, of readiness to fairly consider matters from other points of views and to put in question our own standpoint -for the full exercise of which a good dose of imagination can be essential- typical of a fallibilistic, democratic and pluralist tradition.

It is by appealing to these attitudes that Macintyre ultimately argues against both "those post-Nietzschean theories according to which rational argument, enquiry, and practice always express some interest of power and are indeed the masks worn by some will to power" (87), and those contemporary anti-relativist theories which share the Enlightenment's "plainly self-interested belief that whenever we succeed in discovering the rationality of other and alien cultures and traditions, by making their behaviour intelligible and by understanding their languages, what we will also discover is that in essentials they are just like us...thereby making more plausible those theories which identify every form of rationality with some form of

contending power.”(88) “What can liberate rationality from this identification”, he claims, is precisely an acknowledgement, *only possible from within a certain kind of tradition*, that rationality requires a *readiness* on our part to accept, and indeed to welcome a possible future defeat of the forms of theory and practice in which it has up till now been taken to be embodied within our own tradition, at the hands of some alien and perhaps as yet largely unintelligible tradition of thought and practice.(89)

Thus, at the end of his polemic against anti-foundationalism and liberalism, Macintyre seems to have finally come to converge on the same anti-foundationalist liberal position shared by Rorty and Putnam. This is the position according to which that that can enable us to overcome the limitations and defects of ethnocentrism - e.g. the possible situation of *deaf*, conservative and authoritarian assertion and counter-assertion of our conceptions and practices - can only be a self-critical, open-minded, imaginative and tolerant ethnocentrism, an ethnocentric endorsement of a conception of rationality as reasonableness, as imaginative, fallibilistic and tolerant openness towards our fellow human beings regarded as free and equal persons.

However, Macintyre’s inveterate resistance to abandoning a foundationalist approach to rationality makes him still inclined to think that there is something more that we can and should do in order to overcome the ethnocentric predicament and defend ourselves against its possible illiberal consequences. He still appears to think that the endorsement of liberal reasonableness is, and should be, subordinated to a correct analysis of the concept of rationality. It is rationality, “*qua* rationality”(90), in fact, that he thinks *requires* a readiness on our part to be fallibilistic and liberal. He still tends to think, that is, as the supporters of the Enlightenment’s foundational project do, that practical, political and moral issues are subordinated to epistemological ones, and that therefore the defence of those fallibilistic and liberal attitudes should depend, not on a primary pragmatic, political and moral choice, but on an adequate analysis of truth and rationality, an analysis that would urge us to do what Macintyre himself regards at other times impossible, that is to transcend all the particularisms of the contingent local traditions we inhabit and to endorse the liberal practice of undistorted communication as the best means to reach that impartial standpoint. That he thinks so is shown by his endorsement of the Platonic conviction that “the argument against the tyrant and the argument against relativized predicates of truth and justification require the same premises”, that “it is only in those forms of human relationship in which it is possible to appeal to impersonal standards of judgement, neutral between competing claims that the possibility opens up of unmasking and dethroning arbitrary exercise of power, tyrannical power within communities and imperialist power between communities.”(91)

Notes

- (1) A. Macintyre: *After Virtue (AV)*, (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp.1-2.
- (2) Ibid., p.2.
- (3) Ibid., pp.8-9.
- (4) Ibid., p.18.
- (5) I will usually refer to anti-foundationalism where Macintyre refers to emotivism, as I regard the latter to be a particular instance of the former. Emotivists, believing that all moral and evaluative judgements are just expressions of contingent preference, share the central tenet of the anti-foundationalist conception of normativity as always internal to an ungrounded set of ultimate values and beliefs.
- (6) Ibid., pp.18-19.
- (7) Ibid., p.39.
- (8) This and the above quote: Ibid., p.54. The emphases are mine
- (9) Ibid. The emphasis is mine.
- (10) Ibid., p.59.
- (11) Ibid. The emphasis is mine.
- (12) Ibid., p.55.
- (13) Ibid., p.56.
- (14) That Macintyre conceives of teleology in a metaphysical sense can be seen very clearly in the following remark made in a paper subsequent to *After Virtue*: "This contemporary universe of discourse [the anti-foundationalist one, in the light of which 'the firstness of first principles has been relativized to social contexts and individual purposes' and 'the range of such purposes is taken to be indefinitely various'] thus has no place within it for any conception of *fixed* ends, of ends to be *discovered* rather than decided upon, and that is to say that it has no place for the type of *telos* or *finis* which provides the activity of a particular kind of being with a goal to which it must order its purposes of fail to achieve its own specific perfection in its activity." 'First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophy', in *The MacIntyre Reader (MyR)*, K.Knight ed. (Oxford: Polity Press, 1998), p.173.
- (15) See Putnam's description of the two key ideas of his idealization theory of truth in 'Two Philosophical Perspectives', in *Reason, Truth and History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p.56, and Rorty's formulation of the cautionary use of 'true' in 'Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?', in *Truth and Progress*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.22
- (16) Ibid.: *AV*, p.70. "A central characteristic of moral fictions which comes clearly into view when we juxtapose the concept of utility to that of rights is now identifiable: they purport to provide us with an objective and impersonal criterion but they do not."
- (17) Ibid., p.257.

(18) Ibid.

(19) Ibid., p.8.

(20) Ibid., p.23.

(21) Ibid., pp.23-24.

(22) Ibid., p.24.

(23) A. Macintyre: 'Relativism, Power, and Philosophy', in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, (RIC) M.Krausz, ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p.192.

(24) See Ibid. p.191. "I am claiming that it is only in those forms of human relationship in which it is possible to appeal to impersonal standards of judgments, neutral between competing claims and affording the best type of rational justification both relevant and available, that the possibility opens up of unmasking and dethroning arbitrary exercises of power, tyrannical power within communities and imperialist power between communities." And we have seen that for Macintyre impersonality and neutrality must be intended in a metaphysical sense. This, we will see, will remain true also for the later Macintyre, despite his abundant and plain anti-metaphysical remarks.

(25) Ibid., p.192.

(26) I would like here to add a consideration about the three moral characters that Macintyre regards as typical of an emotivist culture and as an example of how in such a culture there is no escape from manipulative forms of social relationship, that is, The Aesthete, The Manager and The Therapist. I believe that these characters are neither typical of a post-modern culture, nor examples of manipulative social relationships. 'Rich men committed to the aesthetic pursuit of their own enjoyment' have always existed in every culture, even metaphysical ones, and if there is a greater abundance of them in post-Enlightenment cultures is only because, through increasing economical growth and democratization of Western societies in the last three centuries or so, more people have been able to dedicate their lives to their own enjoyment. Yet, to possess the means and possibility of enjoying oneself and escaping the boredom of a life not completely absorbed by the need to work in order to obtain the necessary means for survival, does not necessarily mean that one will try to do so "by contriving behaviour in others that will be responsive to their wishes, that will feed their sated appetites." That is, to be rich and have free time, and to wish to dedicate one's own private life to aesthetical enjoyment, does not need to be incompatible with liberal ethics, an ethics of treating other human beings as ends in themselves. Exactly the same considerations apply to the figures of the Manager and the Therapist. In every culture there have been 'specialists', in any area of culture, hiding behind the prestige and rhetoric of 'effectiveness', of expertise, of being the depositaries of knowledge (the crude reality of which is 'successful power'), the expression of particular, often self-interested, stances on different issues of public concern. Actually, it has been more likely to be that the more a particular culture has thought a special *aura* of prestige

to be attached to 'knowledge'; and foundationalist cultures are the ones more likely to think so. Besides, one of these social categories of depositaries of knowledge has traditionally been that of the Priest, the expert of the souls, the predecessor figure of the Therapist. Yet, just as there is nothing impossible, despite the rarity of the circumstance, about the idea of priests who regard the freedom and equality of every human being as fundamental values and who act coherently with this belief, so managers and therapists too, despite their typical tendency to subordinate people to prefixed anti-liberal ends, can, without contradiction, abide by liberal principles of justice. It is therefore false to say both that aesthetic, managerial and therapeutic forms of behaviour are typical of a foundational culture and that they exemplify manipulative forms of behaviour. Concerning the former contention we may further observe that, after all, Macintyre himself admits that the emotivist self "cannot simply or unconditionally identified with any particular moral attitude or point of view (including that of those characters which [allegedly] embody emotivism)", which concedes our point that anti-foundationalism cannot unconditionally be identified with anti-liberal characters. Concerning the latter contention we should notice that, if those social characters in history do exemplify manipulative forms of behaviour, it is only because of the historical circumstance that the endorsement of and the commitment to liberal values and forms of social behaviour by both the basic structures of our societies and a substantial number of their members, is a very recent achievement, and of course still very far from full completion.

(27) A. Macintyre: *AV*, p.32.

(28) *Ibid.*, p.31.

(29) *Ibid.*

(30) *Ibid.*, p.34.

(31) *Ibid.*, p.60.

(32) *Ibid.*, p.34.

(33) *Ibid.*, p.220.

(34) *Ibid.*, pp.33-34 The emphasis is mine.

(35) *Ibid.*, p.122.

(36) *Ibid.*, p.226. The emphasis is mine.

(37) *Ibid.*

(38) *Ibid.*, pp.162-163.

(39) *Ibid.*, p.221.

(40) *Ibid.*, p.276.

(41) A. Macintyre: *Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (WJ?WR?)*, (London: Duckworth, 1988), p.7.

(42) *Ibid.*, p.6.

(43) *Ibid.*

(44) *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

(45) *Ibid.*

- (46) Ibid., p.343.
- (47) Ibid., p.9.
- (48) A. Macintyre: 'Relativism, Power, and Philosophy', in *RIC*, p.191.
- (49) A. Macintyre: *WJ?WR?*, p.7.
- (50) A. Macintyre: 'Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification', in *MyR*, p.205.
- (51) A. Macintyre: 'Relativism, Power, and Philosophy', in *RIC*, p.199.
- (52) A. Macintyre: 'Moral Relativism...', in *MyR*, p.202.
- (53) Ibid., p.216.
- (54) Ibid., p.220.
- (55) Despite the fact that in the postscript to the second edition of *After Virtue* he says that his position "entails that there are no successful *a priori* arguments which will guarantee in advance that such a situation [of rationally interminable disagreement] could not occur." *AV*, p.277.
- (56) A. Macintyre: *WJ?WR?*, p.352.
- (57) Ibid. The emphasis is mine.
- (58) A. Macintyre: 'Moral Relativism...', in *MyR*, p.204.
- (59) Ibid.
- (60) Ibid. The emphasis is mine.
- (61) Ibid., 205.
- (62) H. Putnam: 'Values, Facts and Cognition', in *Realism, Truth and History*, p.216, R. Rorty: 'On Ethnocentrism: A reply to Clifford Geertz', in *Objectivism, Relativism and Truth*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p.204.
- (63) H. Putnam: 'Two Philosophical Perspectives', in *Realism, Truth, and History*, p.55.
- (64) R. Rorty: 'Is Truth a Goal of Enquiry?', in *Truth and Progress*, p.22.
- (65) R. Rorty: 'Solidarity or Objectivity?', in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.23.
- (66) A. Macintyre: 'Moral Relativism...', in *MyR*, p.206.
- (67) Ibid., p.207. "Claims to truth are claims to have transcended the limitations of any merely local standpoint." Ibid., p.214.
- (68) B. Williams: *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1978); T. Nagel: *The View from Nowhere*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986)
- (69) A. Macintyre: 'Moral Relativism...', in *MyR*, p.214.
- (70) Ibid., p.205. The emphasis is *not* mine.
- (71) A. Macintyre: *WJ?WR?*, p.367.
- (72) Ibid., p.369.
- (73) Ibid., p.346.
- (74) Ibid., pp. 360-361.
- (75) A. Macintyre: 'Relativism, Power, and Philosophy', in *RIC* p.200.
- (76) A. Macintyre: *WJ?WR?*, p.361.
- (77) A. Macintyre: 'Moral Relativism...' in *MyR*, p. 218.

- (78) A. Macintyre: 'Relativism, Power, and Philosophy', in *RIC* p.200.
- (79) A. Macintyre: *WJ?WR?*, p.364.
- (80) A. Macintyre: 'Relativism, Power, and Philosophy', in *RIC* p.200.
- (81) A. Macintyre: *WJ?WR?*, p.362.
- (82) Ibid., p.364. The emphasis is mine.
- (83) Ibid., p.366. The emphasis is mine
- (84) Ibid., p.365.
- (85) A. Macintyre: 'Moral Relativism...', in *MyR*, p.219.
- (86) Ibid.
- (87) A. Macintyre: 'Relativism, Power and Philosophy', in *RIC*, p.201.
- (88) Ibid. The polemic against contemporary anti-relativist theories is here directly against Davidson's criticism of conceptual relativism and against those ethnocentric and internalist solutions to relativism, like Rorty's and Putnam's, in which Davidson's 'charitable' arguments plays a central role. Thus Macintyre says: "The danger of contemporary anti-relativism is that it suggests that what is in fact a contingent social condition whose limitation it is important for us to overcome is in fact a necessary condition of rational social existence. For anti-relativism pictures us first as necessarily inhabiting our own conceptual scheme, our own *Weltanschauung*, and second as necessarily acquiring whatever understanding we may process of the conceptual schemes and *Weltanschauungen* of others by a process of translation so conceived that any intelligible rendering of the concepts and beliefs of the others must represent them as in all central respects similar to our own." 'Relativism, Power and Philosophy', p.197. This can be considered a correct characterization of the anti-foundationalist approach I have delineated. Yet, Macintyre's accusation that this kind of anti-relativism is nothing but ethnocentric imperialism does not hold, because, as Macintyre rightly observed, Davidson never traced the limits between the beliefs we can and those we cannot put in question without compromising our capacity for understanding, and thus our capacity for understanding the others. Exactly because Davidson never traced those limits his argument does not put any precise limit to the extent to which we can step into others people's shoes and give an intelligible rendering of their concepts and beliefs without representing them as basically similar to our own. Davidson's -intentional or unintentional- silence on this crucial matter allows his argument to be used in the way Putnam and Rorty use it. They resort to it in order to reassure us of our contact with the external world and of the normative force of our thought once we have dropped any metaphysical standpoint, by claiming that we cannot even make sense of the thought that the whole of our beliefs could be wrong, without at the same time having to fall back into deaf and blind conservatism and imperialism and thus to exclude the recognition of diversity. In fact, the extent to which the common ground we must presuppose as being shared with other people in order to recognise them as intelligible and rational human beings and to prevent the loss of a common world, and thus the extent of our capacity to understand diversity, is

not given any determined limit by the anti-relativist epistemological argument itself, but is left to the deficiency or ingenuity of our imagination and to our good will of trying to understand others and their different ways of dealing with the world. These are also the resources we have seen that Macintyre himself believes we can ever have at our disposal for overcoming epistemological crisis. As we have already said, ethnocentrism is neither conservatism nor imperialism; it is not a moral or political position at all. It simply says that, since there is no metaphysical order of things we should be true to, the correct moral stance to endorse is left to our own considered reflection.

(89) Ibid., pp.201-202. The emphasis is mine.

(90) Ibid., p.201.

(91) Ibid., pp.191-192.