MacIntyre, Virtue, and Liberalism: a Response to Schneewind

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This thesis titled
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This thesis is a defense of Alasdair MacIntyre’s virtue theory. In particular, it is a defense against J.B. Schneewind’s claim that MacIntyre’s virtue theory is compatible with modern liberalism. In providing these criticisms, Schneewind attacks MacIntyre’s virtue theory at each of its three stages and also questions the legitimacy of the communities that MacIntyre believes can best embody his theory. In defending MacIntyre against these charges, I argue that his theory can sufficiently respond to Schneewind’s argument at each stage by drawing on resources within *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, as well as several other works by MacIntyre. Furthermore, I argue that Schneewind is unsuccessful in undermining the legitimacy of MacIntyre’s communities.

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For Katie
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INTRODUCTION

At a meeting of the 1982 American Philosophical Association, J.B. Schneewind presented a paper in a symposium for Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*.¹ This paper, entitled “Virtue, Narrative, and Community,”² provides a summary of the general aims of MacIntyre’s book, examines the key tenets MacIntyre’s moral and political theories, and presents several trenchant criticisms of MacIntyre’s position. Perhaps the most serious of these criticisms is the following: though one of MacIntyre’s primary objectives in *After Virtue* is to critique modern liberal theory in contemporary moral philosophy and replace it with his own version of Aristotelian virtue theory, MacIntyre’s own position eventually collapses into the same modern liberal theory that MacIntyre critiques. At the same symposium, MacIntyre presented “Intelligibility, Goods, and Rules,”³ a response to Schneewind’s arguments. In this paper he responds briefly to some of Schneewind’s challenges, but does not give any treatment to the overarching criticism that his virtue theory is ultimately a variant of modern liberalism. In the years following the publication of “Intelligibility, Goods, and Rules,” MacIntyre has still failed to publish a more thorough response to Schneewind’s arguments on this point. The primary objective of this thesis is to respond to Schneewind’s arguments against MacIntyre’s theory using the resources within both *After Virtue* and later works.

² This later appeared in *Journal of Philosophy* 19 (November 1982): 653-663.
³ This also appeared in *Journal of Philosophy* 19 (November 1982): 663-665.
In the first chapter of this thesis, I provide a thorough exposition of Schneewind’s article. This exposition includes Schneewind’s gloss on MacIntyre’s general aims in *After Virtue*, Schneewind’s overview of MacIntyre’s virtue theory, an explanation of the tests that Schneewind sets for MacIntyre’s theory, and the arguments that Schneewind presents in an attempt to show that MacIntyre’s theory fails these tests. Specifically, Schneewind sets two tests for the tenability of MacIntyre’s theory. The first test is that MacIntyre’s theory must distinguish itself from modern liberalism in that its practitioners cannot view its contents as something that they can accept or reject based on their individual choice alone. In arguing that MacIntyre’s theory fails this test, Schneewind critiques MacIntyre’s virtue theory at each of the stages MacIntyre specifies for his theory. The second test requires the possible embodiment of MacIntyre’s theory in a stable and ongoing community. In arguing that MacIntyre fails this second test, Schneewind says that MacIntyre’s communities are ultimately self-defeating and that, were communities to embody MacIntyre’s theory, over time they would come to resemble a community embodying the tenets of modern liberalism. In this first chapter, I do not attempt to respond to Schneewind’s arguments in any way, but only present them as carefully as I can.

In the second chapter of the thesis, I provide an exposition of those aspects of MacIntyre’s theories relevant to Schneewind’s central criticisms.\(^4\) In particular, I explain in detail MacIntyre’s three stage theory of virtue and his political theory. When reviewing his political theory, I explain MacIntyre’s account of the ways in which a

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\(^4\) For instance, I spend a good deal of time explaining how MacIntyre’s theory handles the revision of social roles within a tradition. This explanation is given with consideration to Schneewind’s criticism of MacIntyre on this point.
particular community could model his virtue theory in its regular practices. The general objective in this chapter is to explain MacIntyre’s position in sufficient detail to lay the groundwork for my response to Schneewind in the third chapter.

In the third and final chapter, I review Schneewind’s arguments against MacIntyre’s positions and respond to them using the ideas and arguments given in the second chapter. In response to Schneewind’s arguments concerning the first test, I argue that MacIntyre’s theory can withstand Schneewind’s arguments at each stage and thereby passes the first test. In response to Schneewind’s arguments concerning the second test, I challenge Schneewind’s characterization of MacIntyre’s communities and argue that MacIntyre’s communities can resist the sort of collapse into liberalism that Schneewind anticipates. In conclusion, this thesis shows that if one draws carefully from MacIntyre’s own work, there are sufficient resources to respond to Schneewind’s arguments in “Virtue, Narrative, and Community.”
CHAPTER ONE: AN EXPOSITION OF SCHNEEWIND’S CRITIQUE

This chapter provides an exposition of J.B. Schneewind’s article “Virtue, Narrative, and Community.” In addition to reviewing the criticisms Schneewind levels against MacIntyre’s moral and political theories, this exposition provides an outline of MacIntyre’s theory of virtue and the communities that embody it. The latter task, which I turn to first, is important insofar as it motivates Schneewind’s objections to MacIntyre’s theories.

I. Summary of MacIntyre’s Historical Narrative

Schneewind begins his article by describing the general aims of After Virtue with a concise two-paragraph summary of the historical argument in the work. The first paragraph of this summary outlines the nature of MacIntyre’s dire diagnosis of modern morality and its causes. As MacIntyre sees it, “the modern self has no necessary social content and no necessary social identity.”5 This is because seventeenth-century European culture roundly rejected the Aristotelian tradition and, along with it, the vocabulary of functional terms and the idea that human nature has within it a natural end, or telos. Subsequently, it is now impossible to provide rational justification for morality, and the morality that is in place is inconsistent with human nature. Schneewind notes that, for MacIntyre, this change in moral theory is not merely an academic problem, but instead is one embodied in our daily moral practices and modern Western social/political structures.

According to MacIntyre, this new morality of modern liberalism that serves to replace the discarded Aristotelianism stresses the centrality of each individual’s self-

———. After Virtue, 30. In this first chapter, I will be using the text of After Virtue from the first edition to parallel the edition Schneewind was working with unless otherwise noted.
determination in regard to the sort of life one chooses to live. Moral theorizing continued in this way until Nietzsche, who pointed out that this morality has no real foundation and serves only as a mask for manipulation. MacIntyre’s take on what Nietzsche’s arguments mean for modern liberalism can be summarized as follows: Give up belief in determinate human function and in a correlative human good, and an ethic of rules must result. But without something like an Aristotelian functional teleology, no basis in the facts can be found for such rules. Nietzschean nihilism and its social embodiment—exemplified in our current moral chaos—are thus the inevitable dead end of modern liberal morality.\(^6\) Schneewind is very brief in his comments on these important points in part because he vigorously argues against MacIntyre’s historical argument elsewhere.\(^7\) However, whether or not MacIntyre’s story is accurate is not in question here, so much as whether or not the theory he proposes in response to modern liberalism’s failings is viable and is truly distinct from modern liberalism.

II. Schneewind’s Tests for MacIntyre’s Virtue Theory

Schneewind’s primary arguments against MacIntyre’s theory are driven by the theory’s failure to adequately pass two important tests. They are not, traditionally speaking, the most obvious tests to require of an ethical theory. In explaining why he formulates these two tests, Schneewind first picks out three initial questions that would be asked of most ethical theories and then explains why these cannot be justly applied to MacIntyre’s theory.


The first question, “Does it explain ordinary moral language?,” cannot be asked because MacIntyre believes that the terminology currently in use is part of the problem. The second question, “Does it represent our deepest considered moral judgments?,” cannot be asked because MacIntyre thinks that contemporary moral judgments themselves are confused because of their rejection of teleology, and the story of why many humans hold these confused judgments can only be explained historically and anthropologically. The third question, “Does [the theory] show its rationality by providing a comprehensive method for making uniquely right decisions in every case?,” cannot be answered because MacIntyre denies any ethic that does not grasp the “reality of tragic conflict in the moral life.”

Though these questions cannot be reasonably posed as tests of MacIntyre’s theories, Schneewind sees MacIntyre’s own work as suggesting three tests that his theory should be able to pass. Given that the first test is both the most serious and the one he subsequently spends the most time attempting to show MacIntyre’s theory does not pass, it is worth quoting here: “His theory must outline a morality that is genuinely different from what our culture now has, at least with respect to the feature of current morality which MacIntyre singles out as its root defect. This is its inability, due to lack of rational vindication, to prevent moral agents from viewing any of its contents as something they can choose to accept or reject.”

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9 To avoid confusion, Schneewind does indeed discuss three tests but only requires MacIntyre to satisfy two. The reasons for this will be made clear below.

10 Ibid., 655.
MacIntyre explicitly ties both his and others’ moral theories to viable social practices, his theory should be able to “inform or be embodied in a stable, on-going community as the conscious self-understanding of its moral agents.”\textsuperscript{11,12} The third test is that MacIntyre’s theory must serve as a legitimate development within Aristotelian virtue theories so that the tradition can be seen as alive in a way the “moribund” modern liberal tradition is not.

While all three of these are reasonable tests for one to ask MacIntyre’s theory to pass, Schneewind does not pursue the third test in his critique of MacIntyre’s theory of virtue. The reason for this is that Schneewind does not see MacIntyre offering any sort of sufficient criteria in \textit{After Virtue} in order to determine whether or not a tradition is thriving or moribund, and Schneewind does not feel he himself has the necessary historical knowledge needed to legitimately challenge MacIntyre. Thus, he does not spend time considering this point and instead focuses on arguing that MacIntyre fails on the first two tests. Schneewind asks that MacIntyre’s theory in \textit{After Virtue} pass these tests because the primary aims of his entire book are to diagnose the state of current moral theories, give the historical narrative as to why the modern liberal ethic has failed, and offer an alternative theory of virtue that could justifiably be expected to be embodied in an actual community. If MacIntyre’s theory does not avoid what he sees as the central

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{12} Schneewind gives support for the rationale of this test by inviting a comparison with page 22 of \textit{After Virtue}, where MacIntyre says, “For every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions, and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be in the real world.”
\end{flushright}
defect of modern liberalism, then it will not even get off the ground as a tenable alternative view.

III. An Overview of MacIntyre’s Virtue Theory

The following section will include a brief overview of MacIntyre’s virtue theory. Though MacIntyre’s theory will be given a much more thorough treatment in the second chapter, it is important to outline the basics of the theory here in order to motivate Schneewind’s criticisms. MacIntyre’s theory of virtue includes three equally important stages of the moral life: virtue within the individual life, virtue within the whole life, and virtue as it relates a particular person to her community. MacIntyre’s explicit definition of virtue for the first stage of his theory is “an acquired human ability the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve goods which are internal to practices.”

The relevant background for understanding virtue at this stage is that of a social practice. A practice is “an established form of cooperation where the point of the activity is ‘internal.’” Examples of practices include playing chess for the sheer joy of the game and not for any external reasons (e.g., money or fame) or practicing architecture when, again, one does it because one finds one’s good in engaging in the art of creating fine buildings—not for the sake of procuring any external goods. In order to practice virtue through these social practices, one must undergo a certain amount of initiation into the practice before attaining the goods internal to that practice. This includes learning the history of the practice, learning from other experts and submitting to their criticisms in some cases, and learning the explicit rules and informal traditions that govern the practice.

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13 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 178.

itself. Ultimately, once one has mastered the rules and traditions of the practice, one can begin to engage in the practice in a way that supersedes the explicit rules of the practice in an attempt to innovate the practice itself. Through the engagement of the practice and by achieving those goods internal to it, one will not only achieve those goods internal to the practice but also engage other virtues as well, such as patience or honesty, as they are goods internal to the excellent performance of a number of practices in which one might participate.

Now MacIntyre admits that virtue at this stage is not sufficient to constitute a whole moral life. The primary reason for this is that one may engage in a number of practices through life, and if the demands of one practice conflict with others (as they are surely wont to do) one needs an overarching ranking system of priorities for those who engage in the conflicting practices. Furthermore, some virtues, such as integrity, cannot be explained entirely in terms of goods internal to practices, and some practices may be morally unacceptable and may need to be significantly altered or abandoned. Thus, to avoid a scheme compatible with modern liberalism where the individual is free to arbitrarily choose how to engage in various practices, one needs to consider MacIntyre’s second stage of virtue.

The second stage of virtue is grounded in the narrative unity of each individual’s life. MacIntyre says that in developing an account of virtue beyond the first stage he must ask a question

. . . to which the Aristotelian tradition presupposed an answer, an answer so widely shared in the pre-modern world that it never had to be formulated explicitly in a detailed way. The question is: is it rationally justifiable to conceive of each human life as a unity, so that we may try to specify each such life as
having its good and so that we may understand the virtues as having their function in enabling an individual to make his or her life one kind of unity rather than another?\textsuperscript{15}

MacIntyre, unsurprisingly, thinks that it is rationally justifiable because all human lives do embody narratives having definite narrative forms. Each individual’s personal as well as social identity is constituted and characterized by one’s narrative.

The background for understanding virtue at this second stage and the goods attained within it requires an understanding of MacIntyre’s theory of the intelligibility of human actions. In order to understand a given human’s actions, one needs to know the intentions behind that person’s actions. Furthermore, one needs an account of both short and long-term intentions and how the short-term intentions fit within the context of the longer ones. In order to do this, one must be relating a narrative history. Relating a narrative history, then, is a necessary condition for rendering human action intelligible.

Even with the above background, it is still not immediately clear how the concept of narrative unity serves to provide virtue for the whole of an individual’s life. In recognizing virtue at this stage, MacIntyre uses an analogy. Just as one must use narrative to render an action intelligible, so also should one view one’s life as a unified narrative in order to render one’s life intelligible. In living the virtuous life where one’s narrative is unified, an individual should seek the good for one’s life. In pursuing this good, one will be pursuing the good common to all humans: the good for man.\textsuperscript{16} In the search for this good, MacIntyre calls it a quest, one will not be able to specify all of the

\textsuperscript{15} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 189.

\textsuperscript{16} I am using the term “man” here to denote human beings generally. Throughout this thesis I primarily use gender neutral or female pronouns in the appropriate situations. When I reference, “the good life for man,” I am following MacIntyre’s own usage of the term.
characteristics of the good ahead of time.\textsuperscript{17} As one proceeds through various obstacles while on the quest, one will learn more about the good. Virtues, at the second stage, will be those traits that sustain one in the quest and allow one to pursue the good in a settled and undistracted way. Vices will be those traits that impede one’s quest to find the good for man.

Building upon the theory at the first two stages, virtues at the third stage are defined as “traits involved in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context.”\textsuperscript{18} The relevant background for the virtues at this stage involves seeing individuals as necessarily inhabiting a social identity chosen for them by the culture and society into which they are born. One cannot pursue virtue only as an individual through one’s autonomous choices in this stage, but instead one must pursue the good and virtuous life as a person who inhabits specific socially given roles.

An important part of this background involves understanding how one begins to make changes from within one’s tradition. Similar to how one develops virtue through the practices, at this stage one must also learn the history, rules, and other formal constraints in order to act virtuously within a certain tradition. It is only when one has an appropriate understanding of one’s tradition that one can justly begin to question its essential elements. Any thriving tradition must continue to question what is essential to that tradition and whether or not certain features of a given tradition need to be altered or outright discarded. Given that one cannot determine changes from within one’s tradition

\textsuperscript{17} This fact allows for the unpredictability that is common to all human lives.

\textsuperscript{18} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 207.
by arbitrary self-determination but instead must consult the tradition, narrative history, and practices of his community before making revisions, MacIntyre claims that the virtues exercised at this third stage are sufficient to offer a real alternative to the modern liberal ethic he rejects.

IV. Schneewind’s Arguments against MacIntyre’s Virtue Theory

Schneewind does not spend much time attacking virtue at the first stage in MacIntyre’s theory. Besides the two points of inadequacy that MacIntyre admits for virtue at this stage—the problems of the need for a hierarchy of values and the need for revision or abandonment of certain practices—Schneewind only hints at one small objection in the following remark, “MacIntyre is more confident than I that, if one learns not to whine and cheat when playing rugby, one will play straight in the great game of life as well.”19 Though brief and undeveloped, this barb appears to be an attempt to undermine the general efficacy of virtue at this stage. Specifically, it is undermining the idea that by cultivating skills and attaining certain internal goods, one can attain more general virtues such as patience and honesty.

In contrast to his brief argument against the first stage, Schneewind’s arguments against virtue at the second stage are much more thorough and developed. He challenges MacIntyre’s reasoning at this stage by attacking MacIntyre’s theory of action characterization and his concept of narrative unity. First, he challenges MacIntyre’s contention that explaining a human action adequately requires an elaboration of the long-range intentions of the agent performing the action. Second, he argues that the concept of narrative unity presents a dilemma both horns of which are unacceptable by

19 Schneewind, “Virtue,” 656.
MacIntyre’s own standards. MacIntyre faces this dilemma, Schneewind argues, because the notion of the good for an individual human life is too thin a notion to do the work MacIntyre needs it to do.

In his initial attack on the second stage of virtue, Schneewind questions the legitimacy of the conditions for the intelligibility of human action set forth by MacIntyre. Specifically, he claims, “it is not true that the only characterization of behavior which is adequate to make it intelligible requires setting it in the form of the ‘longest-term intentions’ of the agent.” To support this contention he offers a counterexample: one can adequately explain a series of movements by saying that someone is dancing a jig without having to tell a story about the action of dancing a jig. He notes that though the tradition of dancing a jig may have a story, one does not need to tell it to explain the movements of a person as a jig. What the jig example is supposed to show, then, is that an action can be explained without reference to the longest-term intentions of an agent.

As a second argument against MacIntyre’s theory of action characterization, Schneewind claims that even if an action characterization involves “longest-term intentions,” such as plans, hopes, and fears of that agent, explanations such as these do not amount to a story in the relevant sense. Schneewind suggests that MacIntyre is misunderstanding an important part of narrative explanation, namely that it is essentially retrospective and that plans, hopes, and fears can only be adequately placed in a narrative when one sees how the rest of the narrative turns out. Thus, it seems that even if one explains actions under the heading of “longest-term intentions,” one does not provide a

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story in the sense that MacIntyre is suggesting one must in order to adequately characterize the action.

In his final argument against virtue at the second stage, Schneewind presents what he sees as a disturbing dilemma for MacIntyre’s concept of narrative unity. On the first horn of the dilemma, if deliberate actions qualify as being in a narrative, as one might suppose from MacIntyre’s theory of action characterization, then each life will have unity regardless of one’s diligence or negligence in creating that unity. On the second horn, if narrative unity is not a necessary feature of human life, then MacIntyre needs to offer an account of how one can give her life unity by her choices. Thus, if narrative unity is a part of every human life, then one can choose to live any way she pleases (e.g., pursuing the good or not); or if it is not, then one can give one’s life narrative unity by one’s own choices.

Whichever horn of the dilemma MacIntyre chooses here is ultimately compatible with the emotivism 21 MacIntyre singles out as one of the central problems within the movement of modern liberalism; 22 thus, neither horn of the dilemma could be acceptable to MacIntyre. In explaining why the second horn of the dilemma allows for the emotivist self of modern liberals, Schneewind contends that MacIntyre’s conception of the good at this stage is too thin to allow for the non-arbitrary determination of whether one is living a unified life or not. To underscore this point, Schneewind indicates that

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21 Though Schneewind does not provide his own definition of emotivism, MacIntyre defines it as “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments are nothing but expressions of preferences, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character” (After Virtue, 11-12). Presumably, what Schneewind and MacIntyre mean by the “emotivist self” is that self which views any of its evaluative judgments as nothing more than expressions of personal choice with no one choice being any more correct than any other except insofar as it expresses the feelings of that self.

22 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 11–16.
MacIntyre’s own formulation of the good at this stage—merely that it ought to be sought and learned about even if one cannot be too specific about its content while seeking it—is compatible with the theory of the good of “every good bourgeois moralist from Butler to Rawls.”23 Like these thinkers, MacIntyre does not substantially determine what constitutes the good for one’s life but only insists that it should be sought in a settled and undistracted way. In this way, Schneewind sees MacIntyre agreeing to the tenet that a person must decide the nature of the human good on his or her own and that the good ought to be considered systematically unsettleable from the public standpoint.24

In his critique of the third stage of virtue, Schneewind begins by maintaining that the account given of virtue at this stage is compatible with the emotivist self and ergo modern liberalism. The argument stems from MacIntyre’s claim that one does not need to accept each inherited feature of one’s identity. Rather, just as with one’s practices within a community, one may need to abandon or alter certain features of one’s socially given identity. Thus, given that one can reevaluate or reject any part of one’s socially given identity, what one retains or eliminates from that identity is ultimately up to one’s individual choices. Now Schneewind is careful to note that one might not be able to reject all of one’s identity and maintain one’s sanity, but to admit this is not to blunt the force of the criticism. The point remains that any, even if not all, particular parts of one’s tradition may be reevaluated and rejected according to one’s individual choice. Because


24 In his argument, for rhetorical effect, Schneewind quotes MacIntyre from chapter nine of After Virtue, where he discusses Ronald Dworkin’s claim that at the very center of modern liberalism is the idea that one’s own good cannot be decided from any kind of communal standpoint, but must rely upon individual determination.
this process is entirely dependent upon the whims of individual choice and no aspect of one’s identity is beyond being rejected, the decision making procedure is compatible with emotivism.

Schneewind claims that given the above criticism, “the good as defined by one’s tradition is, then, so contestable that it does not provide one with a firmly fixed social identity.”25 Because of this, there arises a problem with the priority of virtues in their relation to moral rules and the ability to make consistent communal use of these rules to pursue the good at this third stage. Social rules, for MacIntyre, are only required insofar as they are necessary to sustain a moral community. Within a given community, some will contribute greatly to the end of seeking the good in light of a certain tradition, and others will not contribute as much. Furthermore, some may behave in ways that are decidedly harmful to the pursuit of the good for the community. For the sake of the survival of the community, this community must then create social rules or laws to either stop certain actions or require others. Thus, because it is for the sake of the virtues that these social rules or laws are established, the virtues are prior to social rules or laws. Schneewind, however, sees this priority, for practical purposes, as vacuous. MacIntyre’s account asks that people work together to secure the good. However, given that he does not say more about what is actually required for the pursuit of that good, the rules derived from this prior concept amount to no more than what is necessary for communal life and cooperation, regardless of what that community is pursuing together (e.g., greater wealth for the top wage earners of that community). Given that these rules are similar to all that

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is really required for most of the modern liberal states, MacIntyre’s view once again appears compatible with modern liberalism.

V. MacIntyre’s Proposal for New Forms of Community

In Schneewind’s second test for MacIntyre’s theory, he questions whether or not the sorts of communities MacIntyre proposes toward the end of *After Virtue* are at all plausible or at least offer what he calls “the forms of a stable community.”\(^\text{26}\) It is important for Schneewind’s argument that MacIntyre’s account of these communities does not, in fact, offer the forms of a stable community he is looking for. This is because, as Schneewind admits, MacIntyre might justifiably respond to his arguments concerning the first test that only a specific society with its own traditions, roles, and practices can appropriately ground a community modeled on his theories. This section provides an outline of the kinds of communities MacIntyre imagines could embody his theory of virtue.

To begin with, MacIntyre does not think the current Western liberal society can create the sort of political state that can embody his theories. In order to adopt his theory, political states must undergo a vast and radical change to the degree that they abandon anything resembling current states. In further developing this point, MacIntyre includes a discussion of eighteenth-century republicanism, where he raises the problem of reinventing morality on a scale so large that the sorts of problems it creates are alien in different but important ways for both the common citizen as well as the academic. He sees this kind of problem as essential to any attempt to reinvent the moral traditions of a

\(^{26}\) Ibid.
modern society. Second, it is worth noting MacIntyre’s belief that modern politics in Western culture is ill-equipped to settle moral conflict and cannot be looked upon to reinvent morality on the scale necessary to instantiate a state modeled on his theories. Third, MacIntyre makes comparison of the times in which one now lives to the decline of the Roman Empire into the dark ages. In these new dark ages, MacIntyre writes, one must construct “local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through new dark ages which are already upon us.” In making this comparison, MacIntyre is saying that one ought to abandon the current political order in order to form insular communities, (just as the medieval monks did), in which they can live a life devoted to virtuous living.

Schneewind makes his argument against these new MacIntyrean communities by granting him that such communities may arise for the reasons suggested in After Virtue, but adds that even if they do arise, they will not embody MacIntyre’s theory of virtue. Presumably, these communities will not succeed on MacIntyre’s terms because what he is asking them to do is ultimately “self-defeating.” The reasons for this, according to Schneewind, are as follows: the members of these communities do not have significant doubts about their identities; however, communities in the past, including those resembling the sort envisioned by MacIntyre, have not treated all of their members fairly. In order to avoid this, MacIntyre concedes that community members must, in some cases anyway, revise their identities and practices in order to address injustices that arise from treating the cultural as the natural. For these reasons, MacIntyre is rejecting both fixed

\[27\] MacIntyre, After Virtue, 236.
social identities and the “bad faith involved in treating the cultural as the natural.” The rejection of both of these tenets is an important part of modern liberalism. Furthermore, the degree to which MacIntyre’s communities seem to be open to criticism coupled with the speed at which communication is exchanged in the modern world suggest that even if MacIntyre’s communities were to exist they would eventually come to embody the same liberalism that he critiques.

VI. Conclusion

As a result of the above criticisms, Schneewind concludes that MacIntyre’s moral theory fails two important tests it should be able to pass. The first requires that MacIntyre’s theory cannot have its contents viewed by its practitioners as something that they can accept or reject and the second requires that the theory allow for embodiment in a stable, ongoing community. For the first test, Schneewind attacks MacIntyre at the three stages of his theory of virtue. In his critique of the first stage, he questions the legitimacy of supposing that employing the virtues in practices means that one will employ those virtues in other areas of life as well. In his critique of the second stage, Schneewind questions the validity of MacIntyre’s theory of action characterization, argues that MacIntyre’s concept of the pursuit of the good at this stage is insufficiently distinct from other modern liberals, and argues that MacIntyre faces a troubling dilemma regarding the concept of unifying the narrative of one’s life. In his critique of the third stage, Schneewind argues that the ability to revise the roles that exist within one’s tradition allows one to live one’s life according to the dictates of emotivism and that

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29 As Schneewind in “Virtue,” has it on 663 “in a world as crowded and communicative as ours.”
virtue at this stage is insufficient for justifiably instituting social rules. For the second test, Schneewind argues that MacIntyre’s communities are not viable. In arguing for this point, Schneewind says that MacIntyre’s communities are ultimately self-defeating and that in outlining some of the central features of his communities, MacIntyre incorporates certain important tenets of modern liberal theory. For these reasons, Schneewind says that were any of these communities to exist, they would eventually come to embody the same liberal ethic that MacIntyre so decisively rejects. Thus, Schneewind sees MacIntyre’s theory as untenable for failing to pass these two tests that emerge from MacIntyre’s own work.
CHAPTER TWO: MACINTYRE’S THEORY OF VIRTUE AND POLITICS

In order to respond adequately to Schneewind’s arguments against MacIntyre’s theory given in chapter one, it is important to examine in greater depth how MacIntyre himself formulates his three stage theory of virtue, as well as his thoughts on the possibility of a community existing that embodies this theory. To this end, this chapter provides an expanded exposition of MacIntyre’s moral and political theories as found in *After Virtue* and later works. This expanded exposition will, in turn, supply the resources used in responding to Schneewind’s objections in the third chapter of this thesis.

Schneewind might object that to select passages from works other than *After Virtue* is to move beyond the scope of the argument he was making insofar as he was focusing exclusively on the theory propounded in that particular book. However, the goal of this thesis is to show how MacIntyre could have, and in some cases has, at least indirectly, responded to Schneewind’s arguments in ways that are consistent with the theory proposed in *After Virtue*. Given this, it is appropriate to draw upon these additional works, provided that they are consistent with those aspects of *After Virtue* that are the subject of Schneewind’s criticisms. That MacIntyre himself saw his later work as consistent with the core theory of *After Virtue* is evident from his preface to the third edition where he claims, “[After 25 years of criticism concerning the work] I have found no reason for abandoning the major contentions of *After Virtue.*” *31* Moreover, the unified

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*30* For example, though he does not mention Schneewind in the development of his political theory, MacIntyre is apparently trying to fill in some of the gaps that Schneewind identifies as problematic for his view.
theory explicated in this chapter and drawn from both After Virtue and later works constitutes a *prima facie* case that MacIntyre’s later work is consistent with the core theory of After Virtue, including, most importantly, those aspects of the theory to which Schneewind objects. Thus, barring some independent argument showing that the later works are inconsistent with After Virtue, it is thoroughly appropriate to draw upon these works in fashioning a reply to Schneewind’s objections.

This chapter includes the following four sections. Section I offers an analysis of MacIntyre’s theory of practices that comprise virtue at the first stage. The exposition of virtue at the second stage in section II includes an exposition of MacIntyre’s views on action, narrative unity, and the quest for the good. Section III covers arguments that relate to virtue at the third stage and developments within the concept of a tradition. Finally, Section IV addresses the viability of communities that embody MacIntyre’s virtue theory.

I. Virtue at the First Stage: Practices

The essential part of MacIntyre’s views on virtues at the first stage can be found within chapter 14 of After Virtue. As was mentioned above, each stage in MacIntyre’s theory of virtue requires explanation of a particular concept. The relevant concept at this first stage is that of a “practice”. Once it is clear what MacIntyre means by the term

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31 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed., (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), viii. Departing from the previous chapter where, in order to parallel Schneewind’s uses in his article, I used the first edition of After Virtue. In this chapter I will be referring only to the third edition of the book.

32 My exposition in this section benefited greatly from reading Bruce Ballard’s *Understanding MacIntyre*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2000).

33 Specifically from pages 186-201.
“practice” and all that it implies, one can better understand his definition of virtue at this stage.

At the outset of his discussion of practices, MacIntyre is careful to note that he is using the term “practice” in a very specific sense. He defines a practice as, “Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to those standards of excellence are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”

As he does throughout his discussion of practices, MacIntyre elaborates on this definition through examples that identify some of the activities and disciplines that either qualify or fail to qualify as practices under this definition. Activities that do qualify as practices include chess, football, architecture, farming, physics, chemistry, biology, history, music, and medicine. Activities that do not qualify as practices include tic-tac-toe, throwing a football, bricklaying, and digging for turnips. Presumably, tic-tac-toe is too simple to serve as a practice and throwing a football, bricklaying, and digging for turnips only seem to make sense as components within more comprehensive practices, such as football, architecture, and farming.

As before with the list of practices, MacIntyre gives his initial explanation of internal and external goods by way of an example. In addition, however, he also provides several important points of clarification concerning the nature of the two kinds of goods. His example involves a bright, seven year-old child he is teaching to play chess by means

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of offering the child a certain amount of candy if the child plays once a week with him. If the child wins the game, which MacIntyre promises will be difficult but not impossible, he will be given twice the amount of candy as he will get if he merely plays. With this kind of motivation, MacIntyre thinks that the child will play to win and, though perhaps not immediately, will realize that by playing by the rules and applying oneself diligently to the game, one can gain a certain kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination, and competitive intensity particular to the game of chess.

In this example concerning the child, the goods internal to chess include at least a certain kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination, and competitive intensity. The candy, on the other hand, serves as an example of an external good. Goods external to practices usually include such things as prestige, fame, and monetary rewards, which are more the result of contingent social circumstances than the nature of the practice itself. In contrast to the specification of external goods, goods internal to practices can only be specified in terms of the practice itself or practices very similar to it. Furthermore, though one may identify and recognize external goods without reference to the practice by which they may have been procured, goods internal to practices can only be specified and recognized by those having relevant experience of those goods in the practice.

But what is the “relevant experience” necessary to specify and recognize such goods? Here MacIntyre notes that one must have some awareness of the rules and

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35 That is to say, one can derive precisely these external goods by any number of practices. Furthermore, they are often attainable without reference to the specific rules and guidelines of a practice, something that is not true of goods internal to practices.

36 Ballard has a thoughtful discussion of this clarification between internal and external goods on pages 12-13.
standards by which the practice is judged, and, furthermore, one must submit oneself to those rules and standards if one is going to genuinely participate in the practice. For instance, if one wishes to learn the practice of farming but does not acknowledge that other more experienced practitioners might know many of the techniques of the practice (e.g. sowing one’s seeds, crop rotation, etc.) better than one does currently, one will not learn the practice of excellent farming or even how to recognize it. Of course, any given practice’s rules and standards have not stayed precisely the same and may change over time, as each has its own unique history. By considering a practice’s history, it seems clear that the goods internal to practices are different from the mere technical skills needed to procure those goods. For instance, the set of technical skills needed to procure goods internal to the practice of medicine in the eighteenth century are different in important ways from those required in the twenty-first century. Yet, one may still be achieving goods internal to the practice of medicine with skills suitable for eighteenth or twenty-first century medicine, provided that such skills correspond to the appropriate time period of the practice. Beyond these skills, however, MacIntyre identifies a second kind of good internal to practices. This internal good requires one to live a significant portion of one’s life pursuing a given practice. That is to say, to achieve this second type of internal good requires an individual to participate for him or herself in the pursuit of excellence of a practice in time. When discussing living one’s life pursuing excellence within the practice of portrait painting MacIntyre says, “it is in participation in the attempts to sustain progress and to respond creatively to problems that the second

37 I make this distinction between the first type of internal goods and “mere technical skills” to emphasize that just because one has a certain skill that is a good internal to a practice at one point, does not mean that it will always be a good internal to a practice.
kind of good internal to the practices of portrait paining is to be found. For what the artist discovers within the pursuit of excellence in portrait painting—and what is true of portrait painting is true of the practice of the fine arts in general—is the good of a certain kind of life.”

Within this background of practices and their respective internal and external goods, MacIntyre defines virtue at this first stage as, “An acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.” Virtues at this stage, then, seem to be those qualities that allow one to pursue goods internal to a variety of practices and thus are more general to the specific goods unique to a given practice. MacIntyre explicitly identifies justice, courage, and honesty as three virtues that need to be present for the continued flourishing and sustaining of any given practice. One can see the importance of the virtue of honesty in the case with the child playing chess. If the child continues to cheat while playing the game, his ability to procure goods internal to chess is stunted when compared with what would occur if the child chose to practice the virtue of honesty and play the game

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38 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 190.

39 Ibid., 191.

40 While MacIntyre does not seem to express the sentiments of this sentence explicitly, the importance of virtues being those qualities that allow one to pursue goods in a general sense seems to be implied by his general discussion of virtues and practices. For instance, the trait of deception is one that might allow one to pursue goods internal to the practice of magic, but not in other practices.

41 “In other words we have to accept as necessary components of any practice with internal goods and standards of excellence the virtues of justice, courage and honesty.” Ibid.
fairly.\textsuperscript{42,43} However, just as playing honestly in chess requires a different set of behaviors than does being an honest architect, so also might the virtue of honesty be embodied through practices in a different way relative to a person’s social surroundings. To illustrate and emphasize the diversity of behaviors that might be associated with a virtue like honesty, MacIntyre notes the following:

Lutheran pietests brought up their children to believe that one ought to tell the truth to everybody at all times, whatever the circumstances or consequences, and Kant was one of their children. Traditional Bantu parents brought up their children not to tell the truth to unknown strangers, since they believed that this could render the family vulnerable to witchcraft. In our culture many of us have been brought up not to tell the truth to elderly great-aunts who ask us to admire their hats. But each of these codes embodies an acknowledgement of the virtue of truthfulness. . . Practices then might flourish in societies with very different codes; what they could not do is flourish in societies in which the virtues were not valued, although institutions and technical skills serving unified purposes might well continue to flourish.\textsuperscript{44}

In addition to contributing directly to the pursuit of the goods internal to a given practice, virtues also serve an indirect role by sustaining the institutions that themselves support practices through time. While chess, medicine, and chemistry are practices, the corresponding institutions that sustain them might be chess clubs, hospitals, and universities. Institutions serve to manage the external goods achieved in practices, e.g.,

\textsuperscript{42}Though he is not entirely clear on this point, the reasons behind why one’s ability to procure internal goods is stunted seems to be that, in general and merely in the case of chess, if one is relying upon dishonesty to achieve success at the early stages of learning a practice then one will not sufficiently learn the other legitimate techniques necessary for attainment of goods internal to the practice. As he says, continuing to cheat in a practice “renders it pointless except as a device for achieving external goods” (p. 188). An example from a different sport might be that if one continues to slyly travel when playing pickup basketball in order to gain an advantage, then one is not genuinely participating in the practice of basketball, but is instead pursuing the goods external to the game rather those internal to it.

\textsuperscript{43}MacIntyre is careful to note, though, that achieving a number of goods internal to a practice does not bar one from being a vicious person otherwise. However, such vicious persons rely on the exercise of virtues of other people in the practice in order that the practices continue. This is particularly evident when one considers practices at the institutional level (see below).

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 193.
the money and status gained by an institution’s practitioners, so that the pursuit of the goods internal to practices can continue. Though for the sake of their own survival, and thus that of the practice itself, institutions must carefully consider the importance of external goods; such things carry with them a corrupting power that must be countered by the exercise of the virtues within the institution. One example of this could be how certain practices within universities have suffered because the university makes policy decisions based more on what is favorable to corporate donors rather than what is good for the practice in question.45

One might object at this point, however, that virtues are not necessary for the sustaining of practices or the institutions that support those practices. Here MacIntyre says that if one is not exercising the virtues within a practice, then one is not attaining all of the goods internal to that practice that one could. At the institutional level, if a substantial number of practitioners are acting viciously, the practice will decline in time. This decline may arise out of the inefficiency that corruption and dishonesty brings, a weakening of public trust, or even for external reasons such as the prohibition of a certain practice by a government. An example of a decline in a practice, at least for a period of time, due to the flourishing of vice within an institution might be the tapering in the public’s interest in major league baseball due to the dishonesty displayed by players in their use of performance-enhancing drugs.

Virtues as exercised within practices, however, cannot serve as a complete account of virtue. One reason that their role within practices cannot serve to provide a

45 This example is borrowed from Ballard, *Understanding*, 15.
complete account of virtue is, according to Macintyre, that some practices may be evil.\textsuperscript{46} A second reason is that the pursuit of a practice that is not inherently vicious may nonetheless contradict the requirements of virtue in certain circumstances. In these cases, the practice ought to be appropriately modulated, altered, or discontinued. These points underscore MacIntyre’s conviction that a complete virtuous life as a member of a community requires more than can be provided by practices alone. If practices alone were the only elements required for virtue, then an individual would be forced to make seemingly arbitrary choices between conflicting allegiances of practices. This is because there would be no way of justifiably ranking sets of internal goods, even if those goods were achieved through virtuous means. To illustrate this point, MacIntyre considers the virtue of patience, which he defines as “waiting patiently without complaint, but not of waiting for anything at all.”\textsuperscript{47} One clearly needs patience in situations such as crafting with a refractory material, teaching a slow student, or negotiating a treaty for a nation: “But what if the material is just too refractory, the pupil too slow, the negotiations too frustrating? Ought we always at a certain point just give up in the interests of the practice itself?”\textsuperscript{48} Here, MacIntyre points out that for some medieval exponents of the virtue of patience, it might sometimes be the case one should never abandon a task within a practice. The reason, in such cases, is that an individual should embody the sort of everlasting persistence that God has towards his created beings. In other words, because

\textsuperscript{46} MacIntyre specifically cites torture and sadomasochism as potential cases, but he says that these do not qualify as practices.

\textsuperscript{47} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 202.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
God never gives up on his creation, then, humans, in turn, should not give up on some particular task even if standard operating procedure within a practice suggests that one should. To rank this particular good of obeying God in this way by being patient above other goods requires that, “... patience served some overriding good, some *telos* which warranted putting other goods in a subordinate place.”\(^{49}\) Of course, a practice on its own cannot serve to provide this kind of ranking of goods. To avoid such worries, one needs an account of how the virtues function within the whole life of an individual. It is to this end that MacIntyre considers the importance of narrative unity in the life of an individual.

II. Virtue in the Second Stage: Narrative Unity

In order to provide a guide for the whole of an individual life and to avoid the problems of grounding virtue solely in practices, MacIntyre explains the concept of the narrative unity within an individual’s life and grounds virtue in the proper pursuit and refinement of that unity *via* the medieval conception of a quest.\(^{50}\) In the background of this explanation is MacIntyre’s disagreement with both certain analytic philosophers, with regard to his philosophy of action and theory of personal identity theory, and existentialist philosophers, (particularly Sartre) with regard to his theory of narrative and the social roles one inhabits. To understand both MacIntyre’s own theory of narrative unity and the nature of his disagreement with these two groups, it is important to explain MacIntyre’s conception of an intelligible action.

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\(^{49}\) Ibid.

\(^{50}\) As in the previous section, the majority of MacIntyre’s views on narrative unity and supporting views (e.g. intelligible action and the narrative self) can be found in *After Virtue* (specifically pp. 204-221).
At the center of MacIntyre’s theory of action is the process by which one adequately characterizes a given human action as intelligible. It is necessary in such a characterization that one refer to the intentions of the agent as well as the setting of the given action. An action, for MacIntyre, is a human activity that is informed by intentions and performed deliberately.\(^{51}\) Now MacIntyre has specific requirements on what qualifies as appropriate characterization of intentions and settings. MacIntyre provides an example of a man digging for turnips, where there may be many possible descriptions of a single agent’s action such as, “digging,” “gardening,” “taking exercise,” “preparing for winter,” or “pleasing his wife.” Any characterization of the action presupposes some kind of answer to the question “what is he doing?” and the correct answer to this question can only be determined by knowing an agent’s primary intention and the appropriate social setting for that primary intention. For instance, if the agent has the primary intention of digging the garden to prepare for winter and only accidentally pleases his wife by taking his exercise, then that is a different kind of behavior than if the agent’s primary intention was to take exercise in order to please his wife.\(^{52}\) In the first case, the setting in which the action must be situated is that of a household, and in the second case the setting is that of a marriage. By settings, MacIntyre means any kind of social milieu such as an institution or a practice. An action may take place in more than one setting, but it should be clear that some reference to a particular setting is required for appropriate

\(^{51}\) This formulation, though hinted at in After Virtue, is can be found in MacIntyre’s “The Intelligibility of Action,” in J. Margolis, M. Krausz and R.M. Burian, eds. Rationality, Relativism, and the Human Sciences. (Boston: Martinus Nijoff, 1986), 178-210.

\(^{52}\) MacIntyre notes on 208 of After Virtue that ascribing intentions in an intelligible way involves correctly identifying an agent’s beliefs, and to fail in this respect alone is to characterize unintelligibly. MacIntyre does not discuss precisely how one is to go about correctly identifying an agent’s beliefs in order to make their actions intelligible.
characterization of an action. Each of these settings has its own narrative, and to characterize a given action as being within that narrative is to be relating a story.

The requirements for the characterization of intentions are a bit more complicated than for settings. Besides ascribing primary intentions to an agent in order to characterize an action, one must also relate the agent’s short-term intentions to his longer ones. To illustrate this point, MacIntyre considers a case where one might answer the question of what an agent is doing with, “writing a sentence,” “finishing his book,” “contributing to the debate on the theory of action,” “trying to get tenure.” In each case, the short-term intentions, such as “writing a sentence”, can be made intelligible only by their relation to the longer-term intention and that longer-term intention is related to the following longer-term intention, and so on. “Hence,” MacIntyre observes, “behavior is only characterized adequately when we know what the longer and longest-term intentions invoked are and how the shorter term-intentions are related to the longer.”

To characterize an action as intelligible, one needs to identify an agent’s primary intentions, relate the short-term intentions to the long-term intentions in the appropriate way, and place the action in the appropriate setting. In making an action intelligible, then, MacIntyre believes that one is relating a narrative history. The narrative history includes both the history of the agent and the correct ordering of her short and long-term intentions.

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53 Though MacIntyre does not make a distinction between primary intentions and short and long-term intentions, primary intentions seem to be a subset of short-term intentions. Specifically, primary intentions seem to be those short-term intentions that one would admit to when asked, “What are you doing?”

54 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 208.
intentions for a given action, as well as the agent’s role in the action’s setting or group of settings.

Supplementing his discussion of intelligible action in *After Virtue*, in “Intelligibility and Action,” MacIntyre further specifies what is required for an action to be intelligible.\(^{55}\) Intelligibility is a property of an action in relation to a certain sequence of events.\(^{56}\) That is, one cannot determine whether an action is intelligible or unintelligible without placing it within a sequence of other events. Furthermore, actions are intelligible or unintelligible with respect to the degree to which they conform or depart from standards of everyday routine, standards of a practice, and standards within an individual’s narrative.

Continuing in this same line of thought in these requirements, what MacIntyre requires for an action to be intelligible is that there need to be good reasons for the action. MacIntyre defines a good reason for an action as something that amounts to a conformity or departure from either routines, practices, or an individual’s narrative.\(^{57}\) Naturally, what counts for a good reason with regard to routines, practices, and narratives will be different in each case depending on the context of the event. With regard to routine, for example, if the set of actions for a given man can be described as “getting out of bed, taking a shower, shaving, etc,” then this is made intelligible if it conforms to his routine. In order to interpret the action as intelligible, one needs to know something about the

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\(^{55}\) MacIntyre, “Intelligibility in Action” 64-81.

\(^{56}\) Though all four of the following requirements for intelligibility are compatible with what has already been said regarding identifying the primary intention, placing an action within a setting, and relating short and long-term intentions to one another, the following explains a bit more of what MacIntyre means by placing an action within its appropriate setting.

\(^{57}\) An example will be given below for each of these three.
context in which the action takes place and what kinds of reasons can function as good reasons relative to that context. In this case, if a different person has a different routine for getting ready in the morning or if the same man performed these actions in some other context (e.g. at his boss’ office), then that same set of actions is *prima facie* unintelligible. Actions within a practice, also, may have constraints on what can serve as good reasons. For instance, in some cases the fact that a person is hungry and wants to eat an apple might act as a sufficiently good reason to eat the apple. This is not always true, however, if one considers such a case, as the in MacIntyre’s example, where one is present for some tests that are about to be done on a very rare hybridized apple that is about to be studied by scientists within the practice of biology. If a scientist walks up, eats the apple, and, when queried as to why she would do such a thing, says “I was hungry and wanted the apple”, the reason given is not sufficient for an intelligible action within the context of this instance of the practice of biology. To underline the point that intelligibility depends not only on the content but also on the source and context of the answer to the question, “Why did you eat the apple?”, one can consider a case where a child wanders into the laboratory and performs precisely the same act as the scientist. Though the child may give the same answer, her answer is intelligible even within the practice of science because the child is assumed not to know that she should not eat the apple. Furthermore, even if one, strictly speaking, follows the rules of a practice, the narrative of one’s life might affect whether an action is intelligible or not. Imagine a case where a person is visiting a sick child and is trying to cheer him up by playing chess with him. If that person aggressively moves to checkmate the child as soon as possible in their
game, then their action is unintelligible within that narrative due to the lack of a good reason to behave in that way.

As one would reasonably expect, there are opponents to MacIntyre’s views on intelligible action. Instead of embracing intelligible action as the fundamental concept in action characterization, MacIntyre notes that some analytical philosophers regarding the concept of a single action as fundamental. On this view, any series of human actions is nothing but a sequence of individuated actions. Furthermore, an action or series of actions may be intelligible without regard to the context in which the action takes place. MacIntyre thinks this view is mistaken and provides a counterexample to it. Consider the following series of individuated actions from a cookbook that illustrate the way analytical philosophers regard any given action as intelligible: “Take six eggs. Then break them into a bowl. Add flour, salt, sugar, etc. . .” The problem with treating an action in this sequence as intelligible in its own right is two-fold. First, though he does not provide any specific argument for it, MacIntyre says that any one of these actions is only intelligible as a-possible-element-in-a-sequence. Second, if any one of these actions or the series of actions were performed in the middle of a lecture on Kantian ethics and the lecture proceeded to make no mention of why these actions were done, then merely performing the action in the appropriate sequence has not made the sequence intelligible.

It is also important to make clear that MacIntyre sees the concept of “intelligible action” as more fundamental than that of “action” itself. MacIntyre sees the concept of intelligible action as more fundamental because, “Human beings can be held to account

58 Though he does not specify which people in he particularly has in mind here, he does say on 209 that he is targeting, “those analytic philosophers who have constructed accounts of human actions which make central the notion of ‘a’ human action.”
for that of which they are the authors; other beings cannot. To identify an occurrence as an action is in the paradigmatic instances to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent’s intentions, motives, passion and purposes.”59 In other words, before one can even identify an occurrence as an action, one must first determine if one could hold a human agent accountable for that occurrence. To hold an agent accountable for an action, though, is to seek an account from that agent that would render her behavior intelligible. Now that action might be intelligible or unintelligible, but to even identify an occurrence as an action means that it could possibly be the kind of thing for which a human being is accountable.

If an action is apparently a deliberate human action but it is not clear what account could be given for the intentions and settings of the action, then it is deemed an unintelligible action. If an action is unintelligible, then, “we are intellectually and practically baffled. We do not know how to respond; we do not know how to explain . . . our distinction between the humanly accountable and the merely natural seems to have broken down.”60 To illustrate an instance of this, MacIntyre considers a case where a young stranger at the bus stop says to him, “the name of the common wild duck is Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus.” Though the sentence is meaningful, it is not intelligible unless there is some context, specifically some kind of narrative, in which to place the comment. One possibility would be if the stranger had mistaken MacIntyre for someone who, the day before, had asked him if he knew the Latin name for the common duck.

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59 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 209.

60 Ibid.
wild duck. Whatever the case, if an utterance, speech act, or action in general is found to be intelligible, it must be because of its placement within a narrative.

Now that it is clear what makes action intelligible, it remains to be explained how this fits in with the unity of an individual life. MacIntyre begins his explanation by making an analogy. In this case, the analogy is from the intelligibility of conversation to the intelligibility of human transactions in general. In order to determine if a conversation is intelligible, one must have the ability to, “bring it under some one of a set of descriptions in which the degree and kind of the coherence in the conversation is brought out.” An important set of descriptions for conversation involves placing a conversation into a genre (tragedy, comedy, etc.) just as one does in literary narratives. Furthermore, just as conversations have a narrative structure to them, (i.e. beginnings, middles, and ends, movement to and from climaxes, reversals and recognitions, etc.) so also mutatis mutandis do human transactions in general (e.g. philosophy seminars, battles, chess games, family dinner table behavior, etc.). Human actions and their respective characterizations in narratives, then, are not merely the work of novelists, poets, and bards, but of all humans who are trying to characterize the actions of their lives and the lives of others as intelligible. As MacIntyre insists, “It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.”

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61 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 211.

62 Ibid., 212.
One might object here that to place each human life within a narrative structure is to impose something foreign onto it, for narrative can only be applied to lives *ex post facto*. To this criticism, MacIntyre says that though one may only rightly classify certain aspects of life, say hopes as unfulfilled, after the fact, it remains the case that we *do* characterize actions as significant in the narrative even if it is not clear how they will turn out.\(^63\) Furthermore, though one might object to viewing life’s events as beginnings, middles, or endings in narratives, MacIntyre thinks that a single event often is characterized as having these features, and it is in such characterizations that one finds the events meaningful even if it might not be correct. For instance, a student may view the filling out of graduate school applications as an important part of the narrative of her getting her PhD, even if it turns out that she does not attain this goal. In such a case, though the action of applying is not correctly put in the narrative of getting a PhD, the action is intelligible in that possible narrative.

Just as a sequence of events in a life might have a narrative structure, it is also the case that a human life may be characterized as a part of the narratives of other lives. For instance, the life of a graduate student might be a part of a particular faculty member’s administration as chair of a department or even of the narrative of a particular university. That one life-narrative is a part in other life-narratives is important for understanding MacIntyre’s view that along with serving as an actor in other narratives, individuals are “never more (and sometimes less) than co-authors in our own narratives.”\(^64\) An individual is only a co-author, rather than stand-alone author, in that the narrative of

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\(^63\) Unfortunately, MacIntyre does not seem to give much more of an argument for this point.

\(^64\) Ibid., 213.
one’s life is constrained by the narratives that are part of one’s existence as a social being. That is, by virtue of interacting with other individuals in social settings, one may be the heroine in her own story while only serving as a minor character in another person’s narrative. Along with this consideration, MacIntyre claims that any action is a moment in a possible or actual history or number of histories. It is in these histories that the actions are intelligible, and without intelligible actions there would be no meaningful histories.

It is with these last claims, though, that Sartre would particularly disagree. In Sartre’s view, to present human life as a meaningful narrative is to falsify it. Life consists of a series of actions, but to put them together in narrative form is to falsify them, since actions exist solely as distinct meaningless units. To this MacIntyre has two responses. First, he asks Sartre what would human actions deprived of any falsifying narrative look like. MacIntyre says that Sartre does not really seem to have any kind of answer to this question, but suggests that it might be merely a disjointed set of events. This, however, seems perfectly compatible with what MacIntyre has been claiming all along; namely, that without appropriate context, any set of events will appear as disjointed and unintelligible. Second, MacIntyre seems to agree that it does not make sense to talk of a person’s life as being a narrative if one means that a person is narrating her story from within as the heroine from the very beginning and then proceeding on as she wishes. Rather, MacIntyre insists that any given author of her narrative finds herself as a character in *media res* within that narrative. A character can choose neither the absolute beginning of her narrative nor all of the turns the narrative may take.
MacIntyre sees the social constraints on an individual’s narrative as having a Marxist character to them\textsuperscript{65} except for two important characteristics that he thinks Marx overlooked. While Marx thought that the narratives of human life conformed to certain predictable outcomes governed by law-like generalizations, MacIntyre insists that life is unpredictable in such a way that it does not adhere to a Marxist description. Furthermore, MacIntyre sees the narrative of life as having a certain teleological character to it. He makes this point as follows: “There is no present which is not formed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a \textit{telos}-or a variety of ends or goals-towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present.”\textsuperscript{66} Human lives, then, have both an unpredictable and at the same time partially teleological character to them. However, simply because there exists some level of teleology in one’s life, it does not follow that one’s life is inevitably unified: “If the narrative of an individual and social life are to continue intelligibly—and either type of narrative may lapse into unintelligibility—it is always both the case that there are constraints on how the story can continue \textit{and} that within those constraints there are indefinitely many ways that it can continue.”\textsuperscript{67}

With his view on the character of the narrative in an individual life in place, MacIntyre moves on to develop his theory of personal identity as it relates to his theory of narrative unity. While this discussion may appear, \textit{prima facie} at least, a bit out of

\textsuperscript{65} Though MacIntyre is not clear on exactly what he means by Marxist here, it would seem to involve some kind of agreement with Marx’s theory of classes and the importance of social roles in the individual life.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 215.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 216.
place in the discussion of the second stage of virtue, there are at least two considerations motivating MacIntyre’s discussion here. First, given what he said elsewhere about the importance of relating short and long-term intentions, MacIntyre wants to stress the importance of seeing action in general within a life as having a narrative structure to it. For actions to be intelligible they need to be placed within the narrative of the whole of a person’s life.\textsuperscript{68} By making, as will be evident below, sameness of person contingent upon sameness of character and one’s ability to be accountable for the changes of one’s character through time, MacIntyre strengthens his case that narrative structures pervade human life.\textsuperscript{69} Second, MacIntyre is trying to avoid what he sees as the mistake of several analytic philosophers. Following in the footsteps of Locke and Hume, certain analytic philosophers have focused carefully on actions and events and their relationship to the psychological states of persons through time. In their discussions, however, MacIntyre says that they have overlooked the importance of viewing those actions and events as parts of a story and the importance of sameness of character in that story. MacIntyre views this oversight by the analytic philosophers as creating “insoluble problems” for their views.\textsuperscript{70}

To begin with, MacIntyre dismisses the views of both modern empiricist philosophers (e.g. Locke and Hume) and contemporary analytic philosophers (e.g. Derek Parfit) as not giving sufficient place to the role of narrative in an individual self and focusing too much

\textsuperscript{68}This is so in at least the sense that short-term intentions need to be related to longer-term intentions as in the previous discussion of intelligible actions.

\textsuperscript{69}See Ibid., “A central thesis begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth.”

\textsuperscript{70}Ibid., 217.
on the psychological continuity of the self.\textsuperscript{71} Instead, one ought to view the self as a character within a story, and whatever unity that self has is derived from the unity of that character.\textsuperscript{72}

This unity of selfhood is two-pronged. The first prong is to view the self as being a character in her own story who can be asked to give an account of her actions within her narrative. For instance, MacIntyre says that to ask how the prisoner of the Chateau d’If (who languishes in his cell) is the same person identified as the Count of Monte Cristo (who uses his great wealth and knowledge to destroy his enemies and reward his friends) is to ask how a person may perform quite different sets of actions and still be the same character. The sameness of that person, then, depends on the account of the unity of the person within her own narrative. Similarly, the second prong involves the individual’s ability to ask others for an account of their actions in their narrative. Given that the narrative of any one life is interlocked in a number of other interlocking narratives, one is able to make sense of her own narrative self by virtue of reflecting on the differences in accounting that another person might give for his or her action. It is in requiring and understanding other people’s accounts for their actions that allows the self to grasp the necessary background required for making an action intelligible.

With the concepts of intelligible action, narrative unity, and narrative identity in place, MacIntyre can now specify what is grounding virtue at this second stage. In the process of providing unity to one’s narrative, MacIntyre thinks that one must pursue the

\textsuperscript{71} The actual argument he gives against these two is not particularly germane to his own theory and the purposes of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{72} Explicitly he writes on page 217 that, “The self inhabits a character whose unity is given as the unity of a character.”
unity of a narrative quest. To explain what he means by a narrative quest, MacIntyre considers two important aspects of the medieval conception of it. First, one needs some conception of a final good or telos guiding the quest. In this case, the guiding aspect of the quest is the good for man. Second, the good for man cannot be specified at the beginning of the quest. As one continues on in the quest one will come to find out more about it as one pursues other kinds of goods: “It is in looking for a conception of the good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of the good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of the good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life, that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good” (emphasis his).73

Thus, while the pursuit of this good will involve practices and pursuing the goods internal to them, the virtues at this stage will be those traits which will also realize the appropriate way in which to order one’s life in relation to practices: “The catalogue of virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical inquiry about the character of the good.”74

What this new conception of virtue does, then, is provide an account of how one can engage in practices and achieve goods internal to those practices, but only in such a way that allows one to sustain a household and political community that can continue to pursue the goods internal to practices. For instance, if one pursues the goods internal to

73 Ibid., 219.

74 Ibid.
the practice of painting to such an extent that one’s actions become unintelligible to those around one and one’s family suffers from the neglect, then one is distracting one’s self from the unity of their quest for the good. By pursuing this good for man in the form of a quest, one learns to move beyond seeking virtues solely in terms of practices.

III. Virtue at the Third Stage: Tradition

While MacIntyre’s views on the first two stages of his theory of virtue can be gleaned primarily by reference to his work in *After Virtue*, explaining his views on virtue in the third stage will require a few more references to his later work. In fact, MacIntyre’s next two books *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* are, essentially, devoted to developing his thoughts on the role of tradition in morality. However, as with the previous two sections, the scope of what will be included in the explanation of his views will be limited to those aspects germane to crafting a MacIntyrean response to Schneewind’s criticisms. Primary consideration, then, will be given to the views expressed in *After Virtue*, and further developments will be brought in as needed.

MacIntyre begins his discussion of virtue in the third stage in *After Virtue* by claiming that the individual can never seek the good or exercise the virtues independent of the community and the history of the community to which that person belongs. Just as in the second stage of virtue, MacIntyre stresses here that each person is a character within a narrative. Furthermore, many of the roles that one might play within one’s narrative are not of one’s own choosing and are the result of contingent social circumstance. To pursue the good life is to pursue the good life *qua* member of a
particular social role (family member, tribal member, citizen of a city) within that role’s historically inherited obligations. The set of social roles to which one belongs constitutes one’s moral “starting point” or “moral particularity.” While some modern moral theories (e.g. Kant’s) would have the individual undergo moral reasoning as a self that is completely abstracted from the particular social roles into which one is born, MacIntyre sees this as unreasonable in light of the obligations that are present upon many people’s particular social roles. For example, though many white Americans claim that because they did not own any slaves the plight of many contemporary African Americans has nothing to with them, these same Americans continue to receive certain social and financial privileges at the expense of prior persecutions of African Americans. To ignore this fact does not relieve one of his historical inheritance. Furthermore, the contingent social circumstances into which one is born will change the sort of practices, institutions, and narratives of which one is a part. To exercise the virtues at the first two stages one must do so, naturally, within the practices, institutions, and narratives that one has access to, and the goods that one can pursue through these means will be different for persons inhabiting different roles: “What the good life is for a fifth century Athenian general will not be the same as it was for a medieval nun or a seventeenth century farmer.”

From one’s particular moral starting point, there are certain obligations one has as a character in certain social roles, whether those roles are within the context of families, institutions, or political communities. Thomas D’Andrea summarizes MacIntyre on these points: “Fairness requires of us that we discharge the requirements of the social roles with which our moral starting point endows us—that we make a contribution to the

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75 Ibid., 220.
maintenance and development of the larger social entities to which we belong and which sustain us.\footnote{Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 278. D’Andrea’s summary of MacIntyre’s work in After Virtue and other works by MacIntyre has been very helpful in the development of my thoughts on the subject.}

What these requirements are, however, will not be the same for all practitioners of a certain role. This is because any given social role that one may have has its own history or tradition of which it is a part. As an inheritor of these roles one is a bearer of a tradition. Furthermore, a tradition, or at least a thriving one, is not static but is instead constantly evolving to one degree or another. Traditions evolve because of conflict and this conflict, or at least a certain kind of conflict, is part of what it means to be a thriving tradition:

So when an institution—a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital—is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is . . . A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.\footnote{MacIntyre, After Virtue, 222.}

Traditions, then, seem to be at least the intellectual settings in which debates about practices, institutions, justice, and any number of topics relevant to a community or society occur. How exactly traditions inform and change that debate will be discussed later on. For immediate purposes, though, it is important to be clear that it is traditions that ground virtue at the third and final stage: “The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in
which that individual may seek out the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context."78 By his talk of providing the necessary historical context, MacIntyre seems to mean that when a group of people are debating particular questions on a social level, traditions include the shared set of beliefs and standards in which the disputes occur. Furthermore, each tradition will have a certain story to tell about the history of a certain debate or set of questions and what acceptable answers to those questions may be.

It is important to keep in mind that one of the goals of *After Virtue* is to point out that certain public debates (e.g. abortion) are irresolvable from a public standpoint. The debates are not going to be settled, in part, because the various participants within those debates are reasoning within contrary traditions. Within those contrary traditions are beliefs (e.g. the nature of personhood) that are at the same time central to the tradition and contradictory to the central beliefs within other traditions. Thinking along these lines, MacIntyre wants to make clear that at the third stage there will arise a yet unrecognized virtue, “whose importance is perhaps most obvious when it is least present, the virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one.”79 By recognizing the traditions of which one is a part and reasoning from within those traditions, MacIntyre thinks that one can come to definite answers as to how one ought to live one’s life within a certain tradition and community embodying that

78 Ibid., 223.

79 Ibid.
tradition. D’Andrea provides a concise summary of the three stages of MacIntyre’s theory of virtue:

What his reconstructed virtue theory provides us with is a scheme for determining whether a contemplated action does or does not lead to the genuine all-things-considered good of an agent: an agent, that is, considered (1) as a participant in a practice, and (2) as a subject of narrative with an identity through time, and (3) as member of a social tradition (or, presumably, of overlapping interlocking social traditions). Moral obligation on this picture, then arises from the discovered demands that these three spheres of human agency jointly place upon the self.80

As one might expect, however, MacIntyre does not hold that one ought to accept all of the continued obligations and mores present within certain social roles, even if it is those roles that initially provide one’s moral identity. Though these roles are important, one need not accept the moral limitations of a particular set of roles within a community. Without those moral particularities to begin with there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularities that the search for the universal good consists. Nonetheless, such particularities can never be simply left behind or obliterated. The notion of escaping from them into a realm of entirely universal maxims, which belong to human beings as such, whether in its eighteenth-century Kantian form or in the presentation of some modern analytical moral philosophies, is an illusion with painful consequences.81 At this point in the discussion, D’Andrea brings up a worry echoing Schneewind on the rejection of certain social roles as a member of a community. How is one to proceed if one finds one’s self in what seems to be a morally deformed tradition (e.g. Neo-Nazism) in which it appears that to be both rational and virtuous one would need to make a radical departure from the tradition one was born

81 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 221.
into? In order to escape the charge that one can arbitrarily choose to abandon any roles one chooses, MacIntyre would need to provide the means by which, in some cases, the rejection of certain social roles within a tradition can be both rational and non-arbitrary.

In the preface of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*\(^8^2\) (hereafter *Whose Justice?*), MacIntyre acknowledges that though he speaks in *After Virtue* of proper practical reasoning for a moral agent, he does not provide a specific account of practical rationality that allows one to choose between alternative moral standpoints. One of MacIntyre’s stated goals in *Whose Justice?* is to say “what makes it rational to advance and defend one conception of practical rationality rather than another.”\(^8^3\) In explaining how this is to be done, MacIntyre notes that there are three types of situations in which one might find oneself with respect to the tradition of practical reasoning to which one belongs; however, only the first of these is relevant to the worry raised by both Schneewind and D’Andrea.\(^8^4\) This first situation is one where a person recognizes that she places herself intellectually within a particular tradition. This means that she might recognize certain texts as authoritative or even tend to find one kind of argumentation style particularly persuasive:

Upon encountering a coherent presentation of one particular tradition of rational enquiry, either in its seminal texts or in some later, perhaps contemporary restatement of its positions, such a person will often experience a shock of recognition: this is not only, so such a person may say, what I take to be true, but in some measure have always taken to be true. What such a person has been presented with is a scheme of overall belief within which many, if not all, of his

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\(^8^3\) Ibid., ix.

\(^8^4\) A full outline of the three situations can be found on pages 389-403 in *Whose Justice?*. 
or her particular established beliefs fall into place, a set of modes of action and of interpretive canons for action which exhibit his or her mode of reasoning about action as intelligible and justifiable in a way or to a degree which has not previously been the case, and the history of a tradition of which the narrative and enacted history of his or her life so far forms an intelligible part.\textsuperscript{85}

For such a person, this realization should be a moment of self-discovery, and if she wishes to be a \textit{rational} member of that tradition, there is an obligation to both investigate the ongoing debates within that tradition and also to engage alternative traditions. This engagement entails, as much as is possible, one learning both the concepts that an alternative tradition employs in its understanding of the world by perhaps learning that tradition’s language (i.e. either the actual language in which a tradition tends to speak such as Classical Greek and/or the conceptual terminology in which it is explained) as well as using one’s conceptual imagination. By conceptual imagination, MacIntyre means that one should attempt to try to adopt the belief structures of a member of that tradition. So, for instance, if one is currently in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, one should try, as MacIntyre has done in \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality?}, to examine David Hume’s theory of justice as it is laid out in terms of impressions, passions, and ideas. It will not do for one to examine Hume’s view merely using the concepts already familiar to one within one’s own tradition. Similarly, if one found one’s self in what many would consider a morally deformed tradition, such as neo-Nazism, one might attempt an investigation of one of the traditions of Judaism.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 394.
In his later work, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre outlines in greater specificity the process by which one can both evaluate one’s own tradition as well as others. In that work he specifically explains the Aristotelian-Thomistic moral tradition (which he refers to as “Tradition”) as it compares to both the Enlightenment tradition (which he refers to as the “Encyclopaedia”) and the Nietzschean tradition (which refers to as “Genealogy”). In each case, insofar as he is able, MacIntyre tries to explain the tradition’s views on its own terms. After examining all three traditions, MacIntyre gives arguments as to why the both the Encyclopedic and Genealogical traditions fail on their own terms and why the Aristotelian-Thomistic standpoint can withstand the other traditions’ strongest objections. What is important here is not so much whether or not MacIntyre’s account on all of these contentious claims is right, but rather that he does provide an account (even if not in *After Virtue*) where if one wishes to abandon one’s tradition and the roles within one’s tradition, there is a story within MacIntyre’s theory as to how one would go about it. To think that one may arbitrarily reject any part of one’s tradition on a whim is to ignore the primary project undertaken in these last two books.

IV. MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy

Though MacIntyre does not say a great deal about his political philosophy within *After Virtue*, what he says is enough to suggest the basic outlines of the views that he develops elsewhere. In general, MacIntyre’s view is that the modern state is a failure in its ability to lead one to a life devoted to the pursuit of the common good and the virtues.

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Furthermore, modern forms of government should be abandoned for the sake of a life lived in small communities committed to the communal pursuit of the good life and the good of those in the community. In his article, Schneewind calls this view “profoundly pessimistic” and, at least at first blush, Schneewind appears correct about this insofar as he is speaking to MacIntyre’s hopes for living out a life of virtue in the modern state.

The deeper question, however, is whether this kind of community is at all plausible and, if it were, whether it would be able to embody MacIntyre’s theory of virtue. Though this question will get a more direct answer in the next chapter, this section includes an overview of his argument against modern states and an outline of how the communities he envisions are able to embody his theory of virtue.88

Throughout the process of outlining his theory of virtue, MacIntyre emphasizes the importance of living a unified life. He thinks that if one is to live a life of utmost human flourishing, one must live in such a way that the various roles one inhabits do not require one set of norms and behaviors in one social sphere (e.g. in the managing of a household) that are incompatible with the norms and behaviors in another sphere of one’s life (e.g. as a school teacher). MacIntyre does not think that living such a life is feasible in the modern state: “Someone who, for example, insists upon observing the same ethics of truthful disclosure in every sphere of life, holds her or himself and others accountable for either deceptions in the same way, whether it is a matter of conversation within the family, the pledges of politicians, the presentation of products by advertisers in the marketplace, or the information given to patients by physicians, will acquire a reputation

88 Part of the structure of this section is inspired by the thoughtful and very helpful essay by Mark Murphy in “MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy” in Mark Murphy ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152-175.
not for integrity, but for social ineptitude. A compartmentalized society imposes a fragmented ethics.\textsuperscript{89}

Given that MacIntyre is attacking the political justification of “neutralist states,” it is important clarify what he mean by these terms. First of all, a state is an entity that requires its citizenry to place their allegiance to it above all other allegiances one might have, including those of one’s family, village, or religion. A state is neutralist, “if it decides how to act in terms of, and bases its claims for citizen’s allegiance upon, only those extremely thin conceptions of the good that are shared by all minimally rational members of a political society.”\textsuperscript{90} In order to have this allegiance, MacIntyre thinks that the state must depend on citizens’ rational self-interest for their allegiance.\textsuperscript{91} These neutralist states, however, offer insufficiently compelling evidence for public self-interest for two reasons. The first is that the state is unable to offer sufficient reasons why one ought not be a “free rider” on the system. That is, it seems rational to contribute as little as possible to the good of the state while reaping its benefits, “so long as one can avoid whatever penalties are imposed by political authority for free riding.”\textsuperscript{92} A second but related reason is that just as “free riding” in the system depends on other people to bear

\textsuperscript{89} MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good,” 236.

\textsuperscript{90} Murphy, “MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy,” 154. I quote Murphy here, as MacIntyre does not get quite so clear on what either a state or a neutralist state is before commencing his attack.

\textsuperscript{91} Most philosophers would say that the citizens owe their allegiance to the state based on the requirements of justice. However, MacIntyre does not think that a state putting forth such a thin conception of the good can rationally settle competing theories of justice (chapter 17 in After Virtue is devoted to this argument). Just as debates in public morality, such as abortion, cannot be settled rationally by members of society, neither can philosophers or a nation’s citizens settle the debates on justice. Though interesting, the validity of this argument will not be explored here, as the objective of this section is not to carefully examine why MacIntyre thinks the neutralist state fails, but rather to explore the legitimacy and consistency of what he offers in its stead.

\textsuperscript{92} MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and The Common Good”, 242.
disproportionate burdens in order to keep the state afloat, MacIntyre thinks that there is no reason that one should perform one of the several dangerous jobs (e.g. soldiers, police officers, firefighters) that endanger the livelihood of those that perform them and thus place an undue burden on that individual. Since a neutralist nation cannot offer sufficient reasons why one ought to bear a proportionate social burden in society or work a dangerous job, it must depend on deceiving its citizens. In a particularly strong statement, MacIntyre condemns this sort of behavior, claiming that the neutralist nation, “presents itself on the one hand as a bureaucratic supplier of goods and services, which is always about to, but never does, give its clients value for money, and on the other as a repository for sacred values, which from time to time invites one to lay down one’s life on its behalf . . . It is like being asked to die for the phone company.”

If MacIntyre thinks that a neutralist nation state ultimately fails in its justification for public interest because its conception of the human good is too thin, one might think that a state should have some more substantial theory of the good for its citizens that it pursues by coercing them to seek it. This view, sometimes called communitarianism, is one that MacIntyre has tried to distance himself from, even if, prima facie at least, it seems in line with his overall goal of the pursuit of a common good within a community. Mark Murphy is correct in suggesting that the problems MacIntyre has with communitarians appear to have to do with the limited role of rational inquiry by all individuals in such a society and the hierarchical nature of the decision making process in

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communitarian forms of government. MacIntyre finds this view unsatisfactory because of his commitments to the individual’s very direct role in political practical decision making. MacIntyre *qua* Aristotelian, believes that the “human good is realized in large part through practical reasoning, and that practical reasoning is not simply a means to achieving one’s good but a constituent of that good.” In other words, part of the pursuit of the good for each individual just is the process of practical deliberation about political ends. In communitarian forms of government, practical deliberation about politics is done by a group of elites, and the common individual is unable to successfully contribute their own reasoning to the political process.

While it might sound as if MacIntyre is advocating a wholesale abolishment of the modern state, some passages in *After Virtue* suggest that one ought not wholly reject the modern state. For instance, consider the following passage at very the end of his discussion of incompatible theories of justice:

> It now becomes clear that [the pursuit of virtue throughout one’s life] involves a rejection of the modern political order. This does not mean that there are not any tasks only to be performed in and through government which still require performing: the rule of law, so far as it possible in the modern state, has to be vindicated, injustice and unwarranted suffering have to be dealt with, generosity has to be exercised, and liberty has to be defended, in ways that are sometimes only possible through the use of governmental institutions. But each particular task has to be evaluated on its own merits.  

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94 Murphy, “MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy,”159-160.

95 Ibid., 160.

96 Elaboration on the role of practical deliberation in a community will be given later on in this section.

97 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 255.
How can one evaluate each of these things “on its own merits” and still reject rational participation in the neutralist state government? How does one “reject the modern political order” and yet set injustices aright within it? In the next chapter, when discussing the plausibility of MacIntyre’s communities, these questions will be explored further, but for now it will suffice to say that it is not immediately clear what the individual’s relationship with modern nation states should be in creating a community. MacIntyre is clear that it can only exist “on the fringes” of society, but even that notion requires further explanation.

When providing his positive view of government, MacIntyre grounds his theory on his conception of the common good pursued by individuals in a community as conceived of in a particular way. MacIntyre identifies at least three ways in which one can speak of a common good. First, a common good may be just those goods that characterize the various ends of activities pursued by a number of people within a community: “The members of a family, the members of a fishing crew and the members of an investment club, the students, teachers and administrators of a school and the scientists at work in a laboratory all share aims in such a way that a common good can be identified as the end of their shared activities.”

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98 In his interview with Giovanna Borradori, MacIntyre suggests that the forms of community he has in mind can spring up, “at the level of the family, the neighborhood, the workplace, the parish, the school, or clinic, communities within which the needs of the hungry and the homeless can be met,” 265. This is found in “An Interview with Giovanna Borradori” in The MacIntyre Reader, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 255-266.

99 MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” 239.
community. Second, one might characterize the common good as the summing of goods attained by individuals within a particular association. This association, then, is merely an instrument that individuals may employ so as to attain goods that they cannot attain strictly by their own powers. Using MacIntyre’s example, this would include the goods of capital that individual investors may attain by virtue of pooling their money in such a way that, as individuals within an investment club, they can attain financial opportunities they would not have if they were not in the club. It is in this way, apparently, that MacIntyre sees neutralist states pursuing a common good. Third, there is a conception of the common good, which MacIntyre finds more amenable to a justifiable political structure, in which, “the good of the association cannot be constructed out of what were the goods of its individual members, antecedently to and independently of their membership in it. In these cases the good of the whole cannot be arrived at by summing the goods of the parts.”

As an example of the pursuit of this common good, MacIntyre considers the case of a fishing crew. If an individual is to acquire part of the common good of being in a fishing crew, presumably the catching of fish, one must do so as a member of that crew and not merely as an individual. That is to say, “the good of a member of a fishing crew is partially characterized in terms of whether the good of the whole crew is being realized, and so what it is for the fishing crew to be realizing a common good cannot itself be defined in terms of the goods of the individual members of the crew.”

According to MacIntyre, the best place for the pursuit of the third sort of

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100 Ibid., 240.

101 Murphy, “MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy,” 161. Though MacIntyre does not make this clear in his discussion of the three kinds of ways to talk about the common good, it seems that the distinction
common goods are practices. This being the case, however, the question arises as to which practices one ought to pursue within one’s life and how one should order the goods that one pursues within those practices:

Yet any individual who attempts to answer this question pertinaciously on her or his own must soon discover that it is not a question that she or he can answer by her or himself and for her or himself, apart from those others together with whom she or he is engaged in activities or practices. So the questions have to be posed: what place should the goods of each of the practices in which we are engaged have in our common life? What is the best way of life for our community?102

Persons seeking to live a flourishing life embodying MacIntyre’s theory of virtue, then, need to pursue the common good within a certain kind of community and reference that community when ordering the goods internal to practices within one’s life. What does this community look like? What are the central features that distinguish it from the neutralist modern state? Recognizing that such a community embodies certain Aristotelian characteristics, MacIntyre refers to it as a polis, in which the members share a common language, a common tradition, and a shared understanding of practices and institutions. Each community will have a small number of practices and institutions embodying those practices that will serve to promote the pursuit of the common good. Like a tradition, MacIntyre acknowledges that the flourishing community will embody a continuing dialogue about the central features appropriate to it, and this dialogue must be ongoing, public, and engaged in by each member of the polis.

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between the first and third kind of common good is that some fishing crews might pursue their own ends without regard to a community, but other kinds of fishing crews will pursue the common good in the third way. It is those that pursue the common good in the third way that MacIntyre sees a model for his communities.

102 MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” 240.
By requiring each member to contribute to the political life, the *polis* is putting practices, in particular the practice of politics, at its very foundation. Just as within the narrative of one’s life one must give some kind of ordering to the practices one pursues, so also within a particular community practices must be ordered in a certain way to pursue the common good. As was mentioned above, the answer to this question must reference other members of the community to which one belongs. Politics as a practice within a *polis* will be, “that practical activity which affords the best opportunity for the exercise of our rational powers, an opportunity afforded only by political societies to whose decision-making widely shared rational deliberation is central, societies which extend practical rationality from the farm and the fishing fleet, the household and the craft workplaces, to its political assemblies.”

As Mark Murphy rightly points out, while all practices are cognitive to some extent, the practice of politics is an intensely cognitive activity in that the good internal to politics is the practical deliberation about other practices, the goods internal to those practices, and how they ought to be ordered. Unlike other practices, the practice of politics is indispensible to each person’s life in a way that is not true of any other practices because it serves to develop one’s ability to reason practically. Similar to

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103 Ibid., 243.

104 Murphy, “MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy,” 163-164.

105 Consider even the case of basketball, where even if the primary part of participation in the practice might be physical, in order to attain the goods internal to it, one must be continually aware of both the rules of the game and the standards of evaluation of one’s performance within it.

106 In comparison, for instance, it would seem strange to consider the practice of chess as indispensible to one’s life.
other practices, however, the practice of politics requires an institution to support it; in this case some kind of government. This type of government, in contrast with other forms previously discussed, is justifiably adhered to by rational agents because it allows for each person to practice politics within it and thereby both pursue the third kind of common good discussed above and avoid the problem of elitism confronting communitarian governments. Since each member of the polis must participate in political deliberation, this government must be small-scale in such a way as to allow all members (regardless of age, occupation, or physical infirmity) to have a voice in the governing of the community. If the government were too large, then some of the less forceful voices might be ignored. Furthermore, it must be small-scale so that those who are making decisions at the institutional level can be readily “put to question” by any and all of the members of a polis.

In addition to what has already been mentioned, MacIntyre specifies further requirements that a state must meet in order for it to have rational political processes and rational adherence from its citizens. Such a polis must have members who, “generally and characteristically recognize that obedience to those standards that Aquinas identified as the precepts of the natural law is necessary, if they are to learn from and with each other what their individual and common goods are.”108 It is from these precepts, which are eminently knowable to all polis members, that the positive laws of a community may

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107 MacIntyre says more about the importance of practical reasoning in Dependent Rational Animals, 150-151.

be derived.\textsuperscript{109} Within these precepts, MacIntyre includes such traits as truthfulness, patience with the needs of others, and faithfulness in one’s keeping of promises. Also, it is important for these communities to strive to avoid the compartmentalization of life that is so common in the modern nation state. What MacIntyre seems to have in mind here is that by making the polis so small-scale, one will be forced to behave with integrity and consistency across one’s various places of work and play: “One and the same set of individuals and groups will encounter each other in the context of a number of very different types of activity, moving between one sphere and another, so that individuals cannot avoid being judged for what they are.”\textsuperscript{110} This kind of accountability, MacIntyre thinks, will encourage polis members to pursue the unity of their life, as one faces challenges throughout one’s daily life in a way that one does not within modern nation states. Furthermore, it is important for these to be as self-sustaining as possible so as to “protect themselves from the destructive incursions of the state and the wider market economy.”\textsuperscript{111} The polis should strive to create real “free markets” in which workers can genuinely choose whether or not to participate in economic exchange.\textsuperscript{112} In the kind of polis MacIntyre envisages, “no one is denied the possibility of the kind of productive work without which they cannot take their place in those relationships through which the

\textsuperscript{109} Though the qualities embodied will be the same, he allows that the means by which the communities enact the laws may vary from community to community.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 249.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 248.

\textsuperscript{112} Following what seems to be a general Marxist line, MacIntyre argues that contemporary versions of “free market economies” are actually nothing of the sort as they provide many of the market participants with no real choice as to whether they should take part, deprive workers of productive work, and create class inequality (see “Ibid., 249).
common good is realized." Because such communities are withdrawing from the wider market economy, MacIntyre acknowledges that the community will be forced to go without a number of the latest technological developments. He contends, however, that this is a reasonable price to pay given what the *polis* is gaining in its pursuit of the common good and a non-compartmentalized life among its constituents.

To conclude this section, it is worthwhile to entertain two important worries that one might justifiably have about a MacIntyrean community. First, if such a society is going to have the necessary consensus to maintain itself, it seems as if it would be prone to act oppressively to those who would question the community’s tenets. In responding to this worry, it is important to note that though MacIntyre thinks that community members will share a significant amount of cultural and traditional starting points, “what it is able to learn, in order to sustain itself, includes knowing how to identify its own incoherencies and errors and how then to draw upon the resources of other alien and rival traditions in order to correct these.” This thought seems to go along with the idea of encouraging active political participation by all members of a community, including those that dissent from the common opinion. MacIntyre even says that one should be more than “passively tolerant” of dissenting political views, in that one should actively encourage radically dissenting views to have their say in the political realm. Nonetheless, as D’Andrea points out, to admit that the expression of minoritarian viewpoints ought to be encouraged does not mean that the community is then neutral about its view of the

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113 Ibid., 250.
114 Ibid., 251.
common good. It means, rather, that the establishment can be consistently challenged, from within its basic moral framework, in its choice of its political means and ends as well as its account of the common good.¹¹⁵ MacIntyre marks it as a mistake that in some smaller communities in the past, specifically Christian communities, they actively discouraged dissenting views, especially those dissenting views from the Jewish members.

A second worry is whether MacIntyre sees any past communities that resemble the communities he envisions here. As it turns out, MacIntyre sees a number of prior communities, including certain forms of medieval communes and certain native North American tribes. More recent versions include some fishing villages off the west coast of Ireland and some hand-loom weavers of Lancashire and Yorkshire at the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.¹¹⁶ MacIntyre develops the example of this last society in his essay, “The Theses on Feuerbach”, where he writes,

> At its best the hand-loom weaver’s way of life sustained his family’s independence and his own self-reliance. Honesty and integrity were highly valued and what Thompson calls the ‘rhythm of work and leisure’ allowed the cultivation of gardens, the learning of arithmetic and geometry, the reading and composition of poetry . . . . [T]hey embodied in their practice a particular conception of human good, of virtues, of duties to each other and of the subordinate place of technical skills in human life, but one which they themselves had no theory to articulate.¹¹⁷

The breakdown of this community, as well as others like it, came about due its inability to resist the larger forces of the market economy and to fail in its mission of self-

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¹¹⁷ Quoted in Knight, *The MacIntyre Reader*, 231.
sustenance for one reason or another. How hopeful MacIntyre is for a permanent community embodying his theory of virtue is unclear, but he does appear confident about the possibility of at least short term existences for these kind of communities.\textsuperscript{118} Furthermore, MacIntyre thinks that they offer the best opportunity for living a life devoted to cultivating his theory of virtue at all three of its stages.

\textsuperscript{118} One might object here that to reserve judgment on the plausibility of MacIntyre’s communities’ ability to sustain themselves is granting too much to Schneewind. However, the objective here is not to argue for whether or not MacIntyre’s communities have the capacity to sustain themselves against any argument whatsoever, but that they at least do not fail for the reasons that Schneewind says that they do. For further discussion on this point, see footnote 150.
CHAPTER THREE: A MACINTYRIAN RESPONSE TO SCHNEEWIND’S ARGUMENTS

The purpose of this chapter is to show that MacIntyre’s moral and political theories have the resources to overcome Schneewind’s criticisms. As was stated in the first chapter, Schneewind specifies two tests that MacIntyre’s theory must pass and then argues that his theory fails both of those tests. Employing the detailed exposition of MacIntyre’s moral and political theories presented in the previous chapter, I argue that his theories pass both of Schneewind’s tests. The procedure for this chapter will be to reiterate the first test, examine Schneewind’s arguments attempting to show that MacIntyre’s theory fails this test, respond to these arguments, and then repeat the same procedure for the second test.

I. Arguments Concerning the First Test

In outlining what MacIntyre’s theory must accomplish in order to pass the first test, Schneewind states, “His theory must outline a morality that is genuinely different from what our culture now has, at least with respect to the feature of current morality which MacIntyre singles out as its root defect. This is its inability, due to lack of rational vindication, to prevent moral agents from viewing any of its contents as something they can choose to accept or reject.” In arguing that MacIntyre fails this test, Schneewind critiques all three stages of MacIntyre’s theory, but primarily focuses on the second and third stages of virtue. While Schneewind only raises one objection to MacIntyre’s theory

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in the first stage, in his criticism of the second stage he offers three arguments to support his contentions and at the third stage he offers two.

A. Argument Concerning the First Stage of Virtue

Besides noting the limitations, of which MacIntyre himself is aware, of virtue at the first stage, Schneewind also points out that “MacIntyre is more confident than I that, if one learns not to whine and cheat when playing rugby, one will play straight in the great game of life as well.”\textsuperscript{120} Though this claim by Schneewind might be true, it surely misses the point of pursuing the virtues in practices. Even if Schneewind is skeptical about certain traits, such as honesty and fairness, being transferred from rugby to, say, the treatment of one’s family, he would still likely agree that honesty and fairness are important for attaining goods internal to rugby. With regard to individuals, MacIntyre explicitly says that, “It is no part of my thesis that great violinists cannot be vicious or great chess-players mean-spirited. . . . It is just that the vicious and mean–spirited necessarily rely on the virtues of others for the practices in which they engage to flourish and also to deny themselves the experience of achieving those internal goods which may reward even not very good chess-players and violinists.”\textsuperscript{121,122} At the institutional level, MacIntyre says that one can identify certain virtues, such as truthfulness, not on their ability to transform the moral character of the practitioners within an institution, as Schneewind’s worry would suggest, but rather on the deterioration of the practice that ensues when certain vices, such as dishonesty, rather than truthfulness, predominate in an

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 656.

\textsuperscript{121} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 193.

\textsuperscript{122} I will be referring to the third edition of \textit{After Virtue} in this chapter.
institution. In the first stage of MacIntyre’s theory, MacIntyre does not claim that one can see the importance of virtues in their power of transference from practices into the rest of life, but rather in their ability to promote the attainment of goods internal to practices at both the individual and institutional levels.

B. Arguments Concerning the Second Stage of Virtue

Unlike the first stage in which Schneewind only provides one argument, he provides three arguments at the second stage. The first argument Schneewind uses to attack MacIntyre’s second stage of virtue comes in his challenge to MacIntyre’s account of how one should appropriately characterize an action. As Schneewind has it, MacIntyre claims that to characterize an action as intelligible, one must place it within the appropriate setting and relate an agent’s short-term intentions to the longer-term ones. To thus situate the action amounts to telling a story. Schneewind’s objection is that, “we may adequately explain some movements by saying (e.g.) that that the person is dancing a jig, and we can adequately explain what a jig is without relating a story.”


124 Ibid., 658-659.

125 In this debate, neither Schneewind nor MacIntyre define precisely what they mean by “explain.” However, it is worth noting that Schneewind sometimes inserts “explain” in his description of MacIntyre’s view in “Virtue, Narrative and Community” when he seems to mean “to make intelligible.”
As MacIntyre notes in his own response,\textsuperscript{126} the primary confusion on Schneewind’s part is that Schneewind phrases his objection in terms of “explaining” an action when MacIntyre is interested in “intelligible” actions. That is, Schneewind initially says that “it is not true that the only characterization of behavior which is adequate to make it intelligible requires setting it in the framework of the ‘longest-term intentions’ of the agent,”\textsuperscript{127} but goes on to give his objection to action characterization in terms of explanation. MacIntyre might agree with Schneewind that one can give explanations of an action or a tradition without telling a story or relating an agent’s short-term intentions to his longer-term ones, but this is not the same as rendering an action intelligible. In order for Schneewind’s objection to be worrisome for MacIntyre, it would need to be the case that a person can characterize an action as \textit{intelligible} without telling a story. The problem for this argument is that in some cases it seems difficult to say that the action of “dancing a jig” is intelligible even if it includes a physical description and the short-term intentions of an agent.

Using MacIntyre’s example, if one begins to dance a jig in the middle of a philosophical discussion, then that action is, at least \textit{prima facie}, unintelligible. Indeed, unless one can know something about the rest of the setting that would allow one to see

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\textsuperscript{126} MacIntyre, “Intelligibility,” 664.

\textsuperscript{127} Schneewind, “Virtue,” 658.
why it makes sense to have the short-term intention of dancing a jig, it would be hard to see how this action could be seen as being done for a good reason. As was made clear in the previous chapter, to describe an act as intelligible, for MacIntyre, is to say that the agent performing the act is acting for a good reason. Thus, one cannot describe the dancing of a jig as intelligible without putting the action in a sufficiently robust context to allow one to determine whether the action was done for a good reason.

In addition to his jig counterexample, Schneewind provides a second argument along similar lines to question MacIntyre’s conception of intelligibility and its relation to action characterization. He argues that, “actions may be explained by an agent’s plans, hopes, and fears,”128 and though these may involve longest-term intentions, they are not a story in the relevant sense. An agent’s plans, hopes, and fears, are only projections of what will be a story if everything works out. Thus, given that the future is not known to individuals it is hard to see how these things amount to a story since narrative explanation is essentially retrospective.

Now even if one adopts a charitable view and assumes that Schneewind really means that actions can be made intelligible by referencing an agent’s plans, hopes, and fears, this objection does not hold. In section II of the previous chapter, it was noted that referencing a hoped-for outcome might explain a given action and act as a story. In other words, it seems that even if narrative explanation is retrospective, one can still tell a story via hopes, plans, or fears because they can suggest how an event may fit into a given narrative. To use the same example from the second chapter, an agent might hope to procure a PhD in philosophy and this hope may serve to make intelligible the set of

128 Ibid., 659.
actions described as “applying to a PhD program in philosophy.” If one does not place the set of actions of “applying to a PhD program in philosophy” within the story of procuring one’s PhD in philosophy (or in some other relevant story, like intending to avoid the draft), then that action would likely be unintelligible. There seems to be little reason to think that one’s attainment of a PhD does not amount to a story, and it would make sense that the set of actions that amount to “applying to a PhD program in philosophy,” while requiring stories in their own right to be intelligible, is one sequence in that story. Even if one does not attain a PhD in philosophy (i.e. it does not “work out”), the hopes that one had of doing so rendered certain sets of actions intelligible. Given this, it does not seem correct to say that entities like plans, hopes, or fears cannot be stories if they are appropriately connected to other actions in which certain actions or sets of actions are made intelligible.

The third argument that Schneewind proposes at this stage concerns the dilemma he sees for MacIntyre’s concept of narrative unity. Either every human life has narrative unity and one need not strive towards creating such unity or one can give one’s life unity by choosing to do so. In the first case, it would seem that an individual could create narrative unity by living whatever kind of life one wished, a conclusion that MacIntyre surely is not comfortable with, or, in the second case, one can give unity to one’s life by way of individual choice. The problem with this second choice, for MacIntyre, is that his conception of how ought to unify the narrative of one’s life is sufficiently non-specific so as to allow one to choose to live one’s life as a modern liberal. Whichever horn of the dilemma MacIntyre chooses is, in Schneewind’s view, compatible with emotivism and
therefore modern liberalism. In MacIntyre’s brief response, he affirms the claim that narrative unity is not an inevitable trait of every human life, but simultaneously claims that an individual cannot provide the unity of the narrative of one’s life merely by choice, as “what degree and kind of unity is possible varies with social structure.” What MacIntyre seems to mean here is that it is important to remember that individuals are, “never more (and sometimes less) than co-authors in their own narrative,” and that one does not necessarily have the luxury of choosing one’s co-authors/fellow social participants. In this way, the choice as to how to unify one’s life is more limited than Schneewind supposes in his argument. The degree of the unity of the life that one co-authors seems, for MacIntyre, not to be determined solely by an individual’s ability to choose certain actions, but instead by the degree to which one can live a non-compartmentalized life. When speaking of a non-compartmentalized life, MacIntyre seems to mean a life where one does not divide one’s life, “into a set of demarcated areas of role playing [that] allows no scope for the exercise of dispositions which could genuinely be accounted virtues in any sense Aristotelian.” Though one has some limited powers as to what degree of compartmentalization of responsibility one has in one’s life, one’s ability to live a non-compartmentalized life is dependent upon, to some

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129 MacIntyre, “Intelligibility,” 664.
130 Ibid.
131 After Virtue, 230.
132 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 205.
degree, the kind of society in which one lives. For MacIntyre, this kind of societal influence has a great effect on the unity of one’s life.\textsuperscript{133}

Throughout his discussion of virtue at various stages, MacIntyre points out that in contemporary western culture, individuals are held to various degrees of accountability in the various spheres of their lives (home, work, leisure, etc.). Given that part of what it means to have a narrative identity is to be accountable to others and to hold others accountable for their decisions, the degree to which one can have a unified community of those to whom one is accountable and holds others to account is limited by contingent social circumstance. Though one can choose some of the social circumstances of which one is a part, one cannot create such a unified social sphere on one’s own. In a \textit{polis} of the sort MacIntyre imagines, an individual is held responsible in all the spheres of her life to a degree that is not the case in liberal societies.\textsuperscript{134} This is due, in part, to the small size of MacIntyre’s communities as well as the responsibility each person in the \textit{polis} has to his fellow members of the \textit{polis}. This responsibility is not merely in his home life or in his general moral decision making, but in his contribution to the community through his political involvement and his occupation. Thus, while individuals can strive on their own, to some degree, to give their lives unity, one is always limited by the contingent

\textsuperscript{133} Though I am not aware of a direct argument for MacIntye’s contention that one cannot live a unified life in a modern liberal state, it seems to be largely dependent upon the sheer size of most modern liberal states. That is to say, MacIntyre seems to believe that unless one is around only a few people each day, most of whom share in various spheres of one’s life (e.g. home, office, recreational, etc.), then one will not be unilaterally accountable. MacIntyre’s communities \textit{de facto} require such accountability given their small population. Modern liberal communities make no such requirement and this fact is worrisome for MacIntyre.

\textsuperscript{134} By “\textit{polis}” I mean the communities that MacIntyre speaks of in his later writings. Both in this case and below I will reference MacIntyre’s political communities to explain how it is that his theory diverges from modern liberalism. Schneewind specifically allows for this as a possible response on MacIntyre’s behalf on page 661.
social circumstances and spheres of accountability of which one is a part. Moreover, only societies meeting certain specific conditions allow for the unification of a life, and modern liberal societies fail to embody these conditions. For these reasons, it is evident that one cannot create the narrative of unity in one’s life by an act of individual arbitrary choice.

In a continuation of his third argument at this stage, Schneewind’s views the above dilemma arising for MacIntyre because of the insufficiently specified conception of the good. That is to say, the above dilemma follows from the fact that MacIntyre’s conception of the good at this stage does not allow one to decisively say which lives are unified and which are not. When writing on the pursuit of the human good, MacIntyre says that though one’s life should be oriented around the quest for the good, the precise nature of that good is not specified at the outset of the quest—one must learn about it as one goes. As Schneewind characterizes it, MacIntyre’s pursuit of the good at the second stage has two conditions. First, it should be sought in a “settled and undistracted way.” Second, it should be pursued without a substantial characterization of what that good is. The problem for MacIntyre’s theory, according to Schneewind, is that this second condition gives considerable room for individual choice in the matter. Given both conditions, Schneewind argues that MacIntyre’s theory of how to pursue the good in one’s life is relatively indistinguishable from that advocated by liberal thinkers such as John Rawls. In fact, Schneewind claims that by characterizing the pursuit of one’s good in this way, MacIntyre implies that the good that one pursues is to be decided by each

individual for him or herself; an outcome that would be compatible with modern liberalism.

The problem with this particular part of the argument is that though it might be true that MacIntyre’s theory of how one ought to pursue one’s good is to some extent open to individual choice and is similar in some respects to the theories of some modern liberals, there are at least two important aspects of MacIntyre’s theory that sufficiently differentiate his view from modern liberal ones when one considers how this pursuit is carried out at the community level. Though the way in which one pursues the good is to some degree up to the individual, MacIntyre specifies two important constraints on how this pursuit is to take place. First, in one’s pursuit of the good, one must look to practices to see what virtues allow one to attain those goods that are internal to practices. Thus, in deciding how one ought to pursue the good, one must make reference to the social institutions that support practices and not merely pursue the good for one’s life in whatever way one chooses. Second, MacIntyre insists that the pursuit of the good must involve a pursuit that allows both members of one’s household as well as one’s political community to similarly pursue the good and learn more about it as they progress in their own respective quests. Now, though many liberal theorists might be comfortable with one or both of these two constraints prima facie, the differentiation comes in MacIntyre’s mention of pursuing the good from within one’s political community. While Schneewind says that MacIntyre’s theory at this stage allows for debate concerning what constitutes the good for the individual to be “regarded from the public standpoint as systematically
unsettlable,"\textsuperscript{136} MacIntyre will ultimately disagree with this. Though this is not definitively ruled out by what MacIntyre says in \textit{After Virtue}, his later writings on political philosophy seem to preclude this from being the case.\textsuperscript{137} As MacIntyre makes clear when writing about the communities he sees as embodying his theories, the way in which one pursues the good from within MacIntyre’s political communities will be settled from the public standpoint. It will be settled, to some degree at least, in that each individual will have a certain social role that they are supposed to perform (especially one within a practice of a given community), and if one does not conform to that role then one will not be pursuing the common good for that community. While individuals do pursue the good for their lives and learn more about it as they go, the way in which this pursuit takes place involves more than merely avoiding interference with others’ pursuit of the good. In addition, it must actively promote the good of that community. Throughout \textit{Dependent Rational Animals}, MacIntyre stresses that each member of the community is to be both a teacher and a student in the politics of the community and to not do so is to fail to act in pursuit of the good for oneself or the community. Thus, though each individual must pursue their individual good, it cannot be done in whatever way one chooses, but must conform to certain standards of both a household and a community.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid..

\textsuperscript{137} In particular “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good.”
C. Arguments Concerning the Third Stage of Virtue

In his criticism of MacIntyre’s third stage of virtue, Schneewind puts forward two specific arguments. His first argument is that MacIntyre’s account of the virtues at the third stage is one that an emotivist, and therefore a modern liberal, could accept. The reason for this is that even though MacIntyre emphasizes the importance of recognizing one’s self as a bearer of a certain tradition, it is just as important for members of a given tradition to continue to question what parts of a tradition are central to it. In some cases, an individual must progress beyond the moral particularity of one’s position within a tradition and reject certain portions of that tradition. The problem that Schneewind highlights is that this seems to allow for one to reject any part of the tradition that constitutes one’s identity. As Schneewind specifically has it, “The emotivist self can be comfortable with the third phase of the virtuous life as MacIntyre sees it because it can always view any part of its inherited tradition as subject to re-evaluation and therefore to choice.”

Though Schneewind does note that one might not be able to reject the entirety of one’s tradition simultaneously, he argues that the ability to revise one’s tradition is sufficiently wide to pose a problem for MacIntyre.

MacIntyre’s own response to Schneewind’s criticism is helpful, but also a bit puzzling. He disagrees with Schneewind’s claim that any part of one’s tradition can be rejected at any time for the reason that:

We cannot in advance specify which features of the institutions and practices that are the bearers of the tradition in which our identity is defined may not at some time come to be questioned. But in any given situation the relationship between

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me, my social identity, and my good may and characteristically will preclude what is central to my tradition as matter for re-evaluation.139

The point that MacIntyre seems to have in mind here is that the process of re-evaluating certain aspects within one’s tradition has to proceed in a slow and thoughtful way, resulting from certain tensions within the tradition that confront an individual at a given time. What is puzzling is that he does not directly address Schneewind’s point that any part of one’s tradition may be rejected. One reading of MacIntyre’s response is that he is agreeing that, in theory at least, any part of one’s tradition may be open to revision, but it is beside the point to talk of such open-ended revision apart from the particular circumstances in which one might reject a certain part of one’s tradition. In his own example, MacIntyre cites Socrates in the *Crito* where Socrates must, from within his own tradition, weigh the interests of justice versus the saving of his own life via an escape from his impending execution. In this case, MacIntyre seems to be saying that if Socrates fails to “give the laws their due” and obey the dictates of justice, then he would not be pursuing his good either in the present or in the future. Presumably, Socrates revising his concept of justice in this case, would be the sort of *ad hoc*-tradition-reevaluation that MacIntyre wants to avoid. If MacIntyre agreed that Socrates could revise his view of justice according to his tradition at any time for any reason, then MacIntyre’s position would seem open to individual choice to such a degree that it could collapse into modern liberalism.

In his argument against MacIntyre at this point, Schneewind moves from claiming that there is some possibility of revision of one’s role or tradition to it being a merely

emotivist choice. This might be the case if MacIntyre left it open strictly to unguided human choice, but in several places MacIntyre puts fairly substantial limits on the ways in which revision is possible in such situations. To see some of the limits for revision of one’s tradition, one should look to MacIntyre’s political theory as embodied in certain communities. There, MacIntyre states that members of the polis will need to share a common tradition so they can decide certain public disputes and controversies. Furthermore, he specifies that all members of the polis must, “generally and characteristically recognize that obedience to those standards that Aquinas identified as the precepts of the natural law as necessary, if they are to learn from and with each other what their individual and common goods are.” In other words, MacIntyre believes that if such a community is going to be able to exist at all, it will at least need to recognize certain precepts of the natural law. From what MacIntyre says in his essay on his political views, these precepts are not on the table, as it were, for discussion and rejection by individuals. The reason for this might be that, from MacIntyre’s view, such precepts are so axiomatic from within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition that to abandon them is to abandon the tradition altogether. Just as one cannot abandon all of one’s tradition simultaneously and, as Schneewind says, maintain one’s sanity (for in most cases this

140 Though the discussion following this point relies primarily on MacIntyre’s political theory, it is worth recalling the discussion in chapter two involving Whose Justice? and Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry. In these works, MacIntyre argues that if one is going to be a rational member of a tradition then one needs to carefully evaluate other competing traditions according to certain statutes, any given tradition before choosing it over others. In Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, MacIntyre discusses the choices one has in declaring a particular moral tradition superior to other contending ones. In particular, he argues that to be a superior moral tradition one needs to respond to the strongest objections from an alternative tradition as well as show how a tradition cannot satisfactorily respond to the challenges that one’s tradition levels against it. The kind of detailed outlining of how to make a choice regarding one’s tradition seems quite distinct from the kind of open-ended choice that Schneewind thinks MacIntyre allows.

141 MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” 247.
would include basic principles of logic), so also might MacIntyre believe that to give up
axiomatic precepts of the natural law would be to move out of the tradition. If one
abandons the tradition, then one would presumably not wish to be in the community any
longer. Furthermore, if one does not recognize these precepts as true and worth enacting,
MacIntyre might say that the individual is likely to do more harm than good and would
not then be welcome in the community any longer, given that they are no longer
contributing to the common good. Thus, while this response to Schneewind’s argument
might not hold against members of other traditions, it does reveal at least how a member
of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition is barred from rejecting certain parts of that
tradition.

Schneewind makes a second argument against MacIntyre’s theory at the third
stage of virtue, which is supposed to follow from the first. This argument concerns the
viability of MacIntyre’s communities. The worry is that the virtues are supposed to be
prior to social rules concerning how a community can enforce punishments on those
persons who act contrary to what is perceived to be the common good. MacIntyre’s
communities will have some laws to guide the treatment of such individuals, but the
virtues are supposed to be prior to those laws in that it is they (the virtues) that should
determine if someone is acting contrary to the common good of the community. If what
constitutes that common good, however, is practically vacuous, as Schneewind says it is,
then all that community members can justifiably insist on for the pursuit of the common
good is that individuals work together to pursue it.
There are at least two responses that MacIntyre could have to this argument. First, a community embodying MacIntyre’s theories will adopt a teleological conception of the human good that is consistent with the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. Though participants from within this tradition will continue to debate to some extent about how to collectively pursue it, their conception of the human good is surely substantial enough to encourage certain rules for the community that are grounded in this pursuit of the human good. Second, Schneewind overlooks the importance of practices in a community that is seeking a common good. To use an example to which MacIntyre often refers, consider the case of a MacIntyrian community that is striving for self-sufficiency as a fishing village. In such a case, certain social rules such as “Do not stand up and rock the boat when in open waters” follow from the virtues that are evident in the pursuit of goods internal to the practice of fishing. Since MacIntyre’s communities are going to be dependent upon practices and the virtues evident in them, it seems appropriate to expect that the virtues will be prior to those social rules in a way that is assuredly not vacuous.

II. Arguments Concerning the Second Test

Schneewind’s second test for MacIntyre’s theory requires that a community embodying that theory must be realizable in stable and ongoing in communities. Schneewind allows, though, that MacIntyre might say that only a particular kind of community, in this case one laid out according to his political theory outlined in the second chapter, can successfully do this. Responding to this possibility, Schneewind gives several arguments to show that a community embodying MacIntyre’s theory would not be a stable community and that those communities would collapse into modern liberal
states. These arguments attempt to show that MacIntyre’s theory fails the second test, which MacIntyre’s theory must pass in order for it to tenable.

Schneewind holds that even if a community embodies MacIntyre’s virtue theory and its corresponding sociology, the aims of such a community are ultimately “self-defeating.” Even if such communities were to exist, Schneewind argues, if they embodied MacIntyre’s counterpart sociology to his virtue theory then those communities would, in time, come to hold a moral theory that resembles the very moral disorder that MacIntyre finds so troubling in modern liberalism. One of the primary problems Schneewind sees for MacIntyre’s community members is the tension that community members must face between both recognizing their social roles as given by the traditions of which they are a part and the possibility of the legitimate revision and rejection of those roles. Schneewind is right that MacIntyre puts much emphasis throughout his writings in the third stage of virtue on individuals recognizing their social roles and the traditions that have, in part, created those roles,142 and MacIntyre also insists, in After Virtue and especially in Whose Justice? and Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, that part of being a rational participant in a tradition is to continually question the essential parts of that tradition.143 According to Schneewind, “MacIntyre envisages communities whose key feature is that their members will not have any deep doubts about their socially given identities and therefore will not have to make decisions about them.”144

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142 Recall his quote on 223 in After Virtue concerning a virtue, “whose importance is perhaps most obvious when it is least present, the virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one.”

143 Though, as was said above, it is important to note that certain parts of a tradition might not, in some cases, be wholly open to revision.
The problem, as Schneewind apparently sees it, is that these community members are supposed to lack any significant doubts about their identities and yet be willing to revise their roles in the community. As Schneewind puts it, though they should lack deep doubts about their roles the community, when considering the need to revise their roles to avoid certain pitfalls, “MacIntyre does not want them mystified into thinking this cannot be done.”145 Furthermore, given the amount and speed of communication in the modern world, it seems that the revisions that these confused community members will come to adopt will ultimately be consistent with the full range of choices open in a modern liberal state.

Before moving on to the rest of Schneewind’s argument here, it is worth challenging Schneewind’s characterization of MacIntyre’s community members as lacking serious doubt about their social roles and simultaneously being required to keep an open mind regarding the need for revisions of social roles. While much has already been said regarding revisions of traditions and social roles, MacIntyre also requires that his members be sufficiently sophisticated to have certain doubts about their roles. For instance, while MacIntyre does make it clear that the individuals within his communities will have a “high degree of shared cultural inheritance,” the kinds of roles that individual members within a community inhabit will be continually up for debate in the political sphere of that community. That is, given the highly participatory nature of MacIntyre’s communities, decisions concerning who is going to be acting in administrative roles in the community and who is going to participate in practices within the community will be

144 Schneewind, “Virtue,” 663.
145 Ibid.
continually discussed. It is mistaken to speak of these community members as not having “deep doubts” about their identities, if that is taken to mean that they think that one’s role in such a community will always follow expected patterns. Such a small and self-sufficient community as the one MacIntyre discusses surely requires a great degree of social flexibility (i.e. the willingness to inhabit different social roles as the community demands) from its members if it is to endure as a community.

Schneewind also raises a worry concerning the kind of community consensus that these communities will need to have in order to encourage fair treatment for all of their members. What he seems to have in mind are apparently MacIntyrean communities in which the cultural was treated as the natural, as in the Greek polis where women and slaves were unfairly treated or in the maltreatment of Jews in certain Christian communities. By rejecting this mistake of treating the cultural as the natural and also rejecting unquestionably fixed social identities, MacIntyre is accepting two “closely related principles of that modern liberal morality that he so detests.”

While MacIntyre’s theory does indeed share these points in common with modern liberalism, it does not follow that MacIntyre’s theory therefore collapses into modern liberalism. That is to say, Schneewind has not sufficiently argued that MacIntyre’s specific versions of these two points and the way they function in his theory render his theory essentially indistinguishable from modern liberalism in those respects in which MacIntyre finds modern liberalism deeply flawed. Unless one shows that the rejection of fixed social roles and the treatment of the cultural as the natural leads inevitably to a theory where the practitioners of a moral tradition are permitted to view any of the

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146 Schneewind, “Virtue,” 663.
contents of their theory as something they can choose to accept or reject arbitrarily, it seems that MacIntyre can help himself to at least some form of both of these rejections.

In the case of social roles, though MacIntyre does reject the idea of his communities embracing fixed social roles, he is going to emphasize that one must first strive to recognize the traditions that one belongs to and the roles that one inhabits in a way that most liberals do not. Furthermore, it is worth recalling his contrast with Kantian ethicists who would have individuals practice their moral reasoning in such a way that they abstract from their particular moral position. MacIntyre is careful to avoid the other extreme, however, of some liberals, who have, “followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. Both contrasts obfuscate. For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as that of medieval logic.”

In the case of the contrast with Kantian ethics, MacIntyre emphasizes the importance of recognizing traditions in moral reasoning from within one’s role. In the contrast with Burke, MacIntyre is going to emphasize the importance of not only recognizing the tradition of which one is a part by virtue of social circumstance, but also being willing to move beyond the dictates of that tradition if reason so calls for it. In other words, any thriving moral tradition will include continual debate concerning its tenets.

147 Of course, emphasizing this point does not contradict the previous claim that it is mistaken to characterize MacIntyre’s community members as not having “deep doubts” about their social roles. What MacIntyre is striving for in his communities is that its members pursue a balance between acknowledging one’s past cultural inheritances, sustaining some of those inheritances, and rejecting certain others.

148 MacIntyre, _After Virtue_, 221-222.
When speaking of the rejection of treating the cultural as the natural, such a rejection seems perfectly acceptable as simply a development from within a number of traditions, including Aristotelianism, rather than just modern liberalism. That is to say, MacIntyre emphasizes throughout *Whose Justice?* that certain tensions are likely to arise within a tradition and will need to be responded to in a certain way. For instance, though Aristotle’s views on slaves and women made the mistake of treating the cultural as the natural, it seems perfectly permissible for the Aristotelian tradition to recognize this mistake in its thinking and adjust its view accordingly. Though contemporary Aristotelian-Thomistic traditions still argue for certain principles in teleology and natural law, the move of recognizing the distinction between occurrences resulting from custom or natural forces is one that they are comfortable with to some degree and should not be regarded as the sole intellectual property of modern liberalism.\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{149} It should be made clear, however, that some conception of teleology is a non-negotiable aspect of MacIntyre’s political communities.
WORKS CITED


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