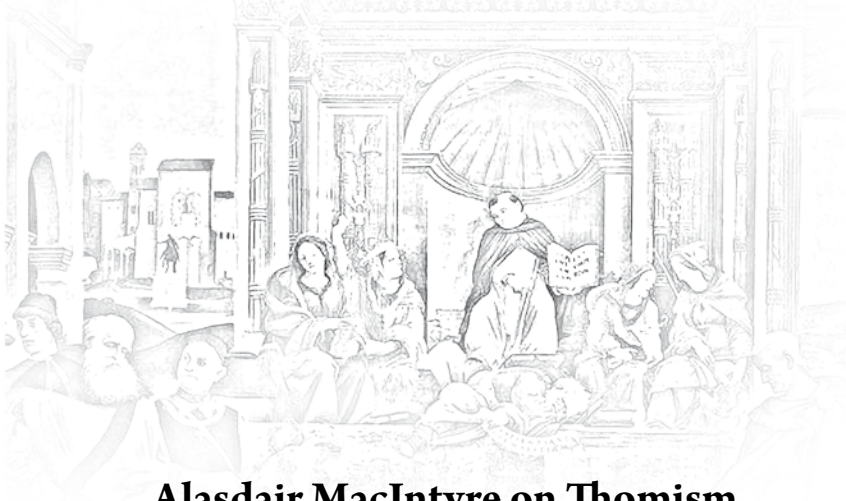




Alasdair MacIntyre on Thomism and The Status of Modern Moral Inquiry¹

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This paper presents MacIntyre's reading of the contemporary discourses in moral philosophy where he has argued that modern-day debates appear as if they are interminable and incommensurable. MacIntyre however argues that pluralism is not a unique modern phenomenon. Pluralism has been present also in the classical times. Yet, there is a difference between the pre-modern pluralist conceptions of the good life and the disagreements that dominate the contemporary milieu. While pre-modern cultures accommodate the conception of a human telos that is shared in the concrete practice of the larger polis, contemporary moral discourses no longer have a common framework where discussions on moral issues may be based. It is the repugnance to any form of tradition that makes the modern and contemporary culture inhospitable to any conception of human telos. To initiate dialogue amidst pluralities, MacIntyre proposes a consideration of Aquinas' approach to moral inquiry. He however warns against a puritan brand of Thomism that will rather lead to isolating Thomism instead of reasserting Aquinas' relevance in our modern-day discourses on morality.

Keywords: *Thomism, MacIntyre, Moral Inquiry, Telos, Enlightenment*

Introduction

This paper articulates MacIntyre's reading and critique on the modern-day conceptions of morality. MacIntyre argues that contemporary moral utterances are characterized by untranslatable pluralities, where debates between rival versions of moral inquiries seem interminable. MacIntyre

¹ This paper is an excerpt of a more extensive study being done at the UST Graduate School, Manila, Philippines.

however argues that pluralism is not a unique modern phenomenon. Pluralism has been present also in the pre-modern times. Yet, there is a difference between the pluralism of the pre-modern and modern cultures. While plurality is present in the works of pre-moderns like Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, their discussions remained to be hospitable to the conception of a human *telos*. Their common admission of the role of the *polis* in the individual's definition of the good life has separated the pre-modern from modern moral philosophy. While the former is hospitable to the talk about human *telos*, modernity has been explicit in its claim that the definition of the good life has to be insulated from any tradition: cultural or religious. For MacIntyre, it is this repugnance to any form of tradition that makes the modern-day debates seemingly interminable.

The present case of pluralism

MacIntyre's second chapter of the *After Virtue* forwards the claim that "the most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character" (MacIntyre 2007, 6; cf. MacIntyre 1990b, 4).² He noted that despite our repeated attempts to come to an agreement and consensus, there remains to be, even in Universities, an appearance of an "*impasse* resulting from theoretical commitments of those involved in debate" (MacIntyre 1990b, 6). One reason for this, he says, is the fact that "adherents of each point of view tend to discuss in any depth only with those with whom they are already in fundamental agreement" (MacIntyre 1990b, 7). Hence, even if "debate between fundamentally opposed standpoints does occur," these debates are "inevitably inconclusive" (MacIntyre 1990b, 7). MacIntyre even identifies at least three characteristics of our present-day debates on morality: 1) conceptual incommensurability of the rival arguments; 2) *impersonal* rational arguments that are presented in a mode appropriate to that impersonality; and 3) employment of conceptually incommensurable premises that have variety of historical origins (cf. MacIntyre 2007, 8-10).

MacIntyre argues that the conceptual incommensurability of the rival arguments allows us to see that each argument in our modern day debates is logically valid and their "conclusions do follow from their premises. But the rival premises are such that we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one as against another" (MacIntyre 2007, 8). It is in this lack of any rational standard whereby we could weigh these arguments against one another that our modern day debates become interminable. Moreover this lack of rational resources to justify one option against

² MacIntyre even added that our modern political structures now lack the 'institutionalized fora' within which our fundamental disagreements can be 'systematically explored and charted.' Moreover, contemporary institutions no longer even find the need to resolve these fundamental differences, and have turned to a complacent admission of the inevitability of disagreements (See MacIntyre 1988, 2).

another suggests that the way to settle differences, even within oneself, would now have to resort to non-rational justifications. Hence he claims that, “corresponding to the interminability of public argument, there is at least the appearance of a disquieting private arbitrariness” (MacIntyre 2007, 8).

Yet paradoxically, these arguments also claim that they are based on *impersonal* rational standards. MacIntyre describes this paradox saying that “if we attended solely to the first characteristic... we might conclude that there is nothing to such contemporary disagreements but a clash of antagonistic wills, each will determined by some set of arbitrary choices of its own” (MacIntyre 2007, 9). Yet, the second characteristic, the alleged impersonal character of the common standards, suggests otherwise. For it seems that the admission of an impersonal standard that is applicable to all participants of the debates suggests that moral reasoning expresses at least an aspiration to be or to become rational (cf. MacIntyre 2007, 10).

Discerning the third characteristic of these arguments then may help us better understand the nature of our disagreements. One of MacIntyre’s most insightful contributions in the confrontations common in our modern day disagreements is to make us realize that most of the premises to which we base our moral conclusions are themselves charged with long histories and were initially formulated as a response to particular contexts. In concrete, we oftentimes come to a disagreement with others because we used premises that are Thomists while the other camp uses premises that are Kantian or Millian (utilitarian). The issue here however is not just because Aquinas, Kant and Mill have opposing perspectives, but that *they have opposing perspectives because they are responding to different conditions*.³ MacIntyre then would claim that though we speak of pluralism to describe our modern culture, ‘the notion of pluralism is too imprecise’ (MacIntyre 2007, 10). Our current disagreements may also “well apply to an ordered dialogue of intersecting viewpoints and to an unharmonious *mélange* of ill-assorted fragments” (MacIntyre 2007, 10).⁴ It is then

³ It seems that this consideration of the context in the formulation of the ideas is a central point in MacIntyre’s project for it still figures prominently even in his more recent speeches. In the lecture which he gave during the 13th Annual Fall Conference of the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame entitled as “Catholic Instead of What?,” he pointed out that though Catholics believe in a single Creed, there is no single Catholic culture but there are rather Catholic cultures. This is inevitable because a faithful Catholic would have to articulate the content of the Creed ‘as a response to a particular context.’ The recognition of these contexts is important if we are to take a premise from history to bear on our present day concerns (see MacIntyre 2012).

⁴ For MacIntyre, an important realization needed to progress in our moral reflection is the understanding that most of the ‘moral guidelines’ that we hitherto employ in our argumentations are but fragments of an active argument that was initially meant to respond to aspects of ‘specific controversies.’ Hence, in his above mentioned lecture (MacIntyre 2012), he spoke of Catholic cultures to refer to the specific responses that Catholics had to articulate in their attempt to make the Catholic Creed relevant to the ‘debate’ to which those particular Catholics in history were trying to respond to. Hence, it is important not to take Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* apart from the context in which Aquinas was writing; as it would be unwise to interpret Aristotle, Mill or Kant apart from the contexts in which they were writing their own philosophies. It is the realization of the indispensable role that the context

important that we become aware of this in order for us to realize the need to dig the contexts of the fragments that have reached us if we are to seriously understand them.⁵ For, as MacIntyre observes, “the concepts we employ have in at least some cases changed their character in the past three hundred years; the evaluative expressions [that] we have changed their meaning” (MacIntyre 2007, 10). Failure to make this discernment,⁶ MacIntyre would claim, constitutes an obstacle for a fruitful understanding of our moral issues, especially our disagreement on the nature and status of our present moral discourses.

This then, for MacIntyre, asserts the need to trace the evolution of our modern form of disagreements, and see if there are *contexts* that can be rediscovered in order for us to at least initiate a more meaningful dialogue that need not resign on the interminability of our discourses on the one hand, or to falsely presuppose, on the other, that we could identify universal rational standards that could arbitrate and settle our differences. Our task here then is to look into how have our rivalries evolved into their current status which seemed to be made of arguments that are both untranslatable and incommensurable (MacIntyre 1990b, 4).

The Task of the Enlightenment

Noting that disagreements are oftentimes brought by our lack of better understanding of the context of the moral stances that have informed our contemporary moral views and practices has made it a relevant MacIntyrean project to retrace the evolution of the history of moral philosophy in order to see the important turns in that history which may have contributed to the seeming deadlock in our contemporary pluralism.⁷ This is the reason MacIntyre’s project could be seen both as a historical reading of the philosophy of morality or a philosophical reading of historical moral theories and practices as they are concretized in particular historical

has played in the formulation of individual philosophies which MacIntyre hopes to forward so as to save us from dogmatically arguing that the philosophical fragments that we hitherto inherit from the great thinkers in history are ‘the’ philosophy of these thinkers.

⁵ MacIntyre says that this becomes an important concern once “we recognize that all those various concepts which inform our moral discourse were originally at home in larger totalities of theory and practice in which they enjoyed a role and function supplied by contexts of which they have now been deprived” (MacIntyre 2007, 2).

⁶ MacIntyre would tell us that we, in fact, oftentimes failed to take notice of the contribution of a philosopher’s context in the formulation of a moral theory, for we “all too often still treat the moral philosophers of the past as contributors to a single debate with a relatively unvarying subject-matter, treating Plato and Hume and Mill as contemporary both of ourselves and of each other” (MacIntyre 2007, 11).

⁷ MacIntyre (2007, 39) argued in *After Virtue* that an important turn in the history of morality is the emergence of a project that justifies a kind of morality apart from the theological, legal and aesthetic. MacIntyre argued that a “breakdown of this project provided the historical background against which the predicaments of our own culture can become intelligible.”

traditions and institutions.⁸ For MacIntyre, history plays an important role in the understanding of our present moral debates and practices.⁹

One important component in MacIntyre's project is his dialogue with the protagonists of the Enlightenment tradition. MacIntyre has accorded to both Kant and Foucault the prestige of being the foremost protagonists of the project: the Enlightenment's definition as a 'task' that attempts to achieve "a condition in which human beings think of themselves rather than in accordance with the prescriptions of some authority" (MacIntyre 2006b, 172). Moreover, MacIntyre speaks of three stages (cf. MacIntyre 2006b, 173) in this project: the first is that of becoming enlightened, which means, that we would only need an appeal to our universal reason which could provide us a standpoint that is independent of the standards set by the requirements of kinship and political ties, culture or religion; the second is the need to come up with universal moral prescriptions that is valid to all rational individuals; and the third is the attempt to formulate precise set of social, political and even economic *institutions* whose primary task is to concretize the enlightenment's moral and political objectives. A central question in the evaluation of this project however is the fact that major proponents of the Enlightenment ideals even end up "affirming positions incompatible in some respects with one another" (MacIntyre 2006b, 172).

Worth attending to in the enlightenment's task is the attempt to ground one's action no longer on any authority of the law, custom, or even religion, but on one's capacity to think 'for oneself.' In contrast, the "unenlightened thinking is characterized by the indiscriminate and unintelligent use of and appeal to rules and formulas" (MacIntyre 2006b, 174). One of the implications of the Enlightenment then is the ruling out of the traditional justification of morality via the admission of a divine revelation that has been cascaded into the concrete norms promulgated by religious traditions, particularly Christianity. The Enlightenment has assigned to the peoples' 'universal capacity for rational discourse the task of arbitrating over their rival answers to moral questions.'¹⁰ In MacIntyre's account, this has reached its definitive status in the eighteenth century, and this is characterized primarily by the distinction of the moral from the theological. With this distinction, the project of an autonomous rational justification of morality has become a central concern (MacIntyre 2007, 39).

MacIntyre's critique of this project is centered on the claim that every theory is colored by a practice that it is trying to respond to. MacIntyre argues that "the

⁸ John Haldane (2013, 38) discussed this in his contribution to a volume dedicated to honor Alasdair MacIntyre.

⁹ MacIntyre would even argue that one obstacle to our attempt for a dialogue is the "persistently unhistorical treatment of moral philosophy by contemporary philosophers" (MacIntyre 2007, 11).

¹⁰ MacIntyre was commenting on a critique against tradition by an encyclopedist and pronounced that "the narrative of the encyclopedist issues in a denigration of the past and an appeal to principles purportedly timeless" (MacIntyre 1990b, 78).

reading public at any particular time and place is always some particular, highly specific, reading public with its own stock of shared assumptions, expectations, and focus of attention (MacIntyre 2006b, 174).” Further, MacIntyre added that thinking “in any time and place, let alone thinking for oneself, always involves thinking with certain particular others, thinking in the context of some particular and specific public, with its own institutional structure (MacIntyre 2006b, 179).” It becomes evident then that the differences that MacIntyre has with the Enlightenment project lie precisely on the extent that one can possibly ‘think by oneself.’ MacIntyre’s quarrel with the Enlightenment is on the extent of influence that principles outside the ‘self’ (like law, customs, traditions and religions) may exercise over one’s moral agency. This has become more evident when we take into consideration what MacIntyre has taken to be central to the failure of the Enlightenment, particularly its incapacity to carry out its third task. MacIntyre’s words may be quoted here in length:

Notice then that it is not just in its ability to provide rationally justifiable and agreed moral values and principles that the Enlightenment and its heirs have failed. *The failure of those modern institutions that have been the embodiment of the best social and political hopes of the Enlightenment is quite as striking...* Indeed the dominant forms of organization of contemporary social life militate against the coming into existence of this type of institutional arena. And so the dominant modes of what passes for political discourse. We do not have the kinds of reading public necessary to sustain practically effective social thought. What we have instead in contemporary society are a set of small-scale academic publics within each of which rational discourse *is* carried on, but whose discourse is of such a kind as to have no practical effect on the conduct of social life; and by contrast, forms of organization in the larger areas of our public life in which effective decisions are taken and policies implemented, but within which for the most part systematic rational discourse cannot be systematically carried on, and within which therefore decisions and policies are by and large outcomes of the distributions of power and money and not of the quality of the argument (MacIntyre 2006b, 185 – emphasis is mine).

This long text readily presents to us MacIntyre’s distrust in the Enlightenment’s capacity to carry out its task, not just of the second stage, the crisis of which is evident in the proliferation of plural if not opposed moral points of view, but also of the third stage, that is, the inability of the post-enlightenment institutions to provide universally acceptable arguments that are truly legitimated by authentic rational discourse. In MacIntyre’s view, the Enlightenment has not really succeeded in fostering the kind of ‘enlightened’ decisions that it wishes to establish in our moral and social communities. While the Enlightenment is wary about the presence of non-rational factors in the adoption of moral stances when it critiqued the church-dominated moral and social institutions of the Europe of its time, it has failed to produce the ‘enlightened’ institutions that should have guaranteed the impersonal standards of the moral and social reflections of the world of its future. Looking into

history, as human civilization unfolded after the Enlightenment, MacIntyre would say that we could not deny the fact that there is less success that we could attribute to this particular goal of the enlightenment.¹¹

It is worthy to note, moreover, that MacIntyre's critique against Enlightenment is not just on its failure to provide the much needed institutions that would have fostered 'enlightened' moral stances. MacIntyre's critique is even more fundamental, that is, he claims that we could hardly come up with moral discourses and moral theories that are freed from any bias.¹² MacIntyre himself claims that our reading of history will attest that the attempt to "construct tradition-free individuals" and institutions has been a "history of continuously unresolved disputes, so that there emerges no uncontested and incontestable account of what tradition-independent morality consists in" (MacIntyre 1988, 334).

Reading the enlightenment project on this light, McIntyre proceeds to consider two further relevant concerns: 1) an investigation on how pluralities were also true even in the pre-modern communities; and 2) a manner on how the concept of 'tradition' remains to be influential in the way we shape even the post-enlightenment social and political institutions that we now have. In relation to the first task, MacIntyre argues against the oft taken for granted claim that pre-modern communities were governed by dogmatism, which means that pre-modern communities are monolithic precisely because certain powers, especially the Church, have successfully silenced the rival conceptions about the moral and social realities. With regard to the second, MacIntyre has been pointing out that liberalism has eventually emerged as the social, political and even economic arrangement that is most hospitable to the enlightenment ideals, and yet even liberalism itself has eventually become a tradition whose sets of values are imposed on certain institutions in order to ensure that actual behaviors of individuals are shaped according to the enlightenment's ideals (see MacIntyre 1988, 326-348).

¹¹ This does not however neglect that there are notable progress in this effort for there are now institutions that are, at least in their ideal conditions, attempting to concretize the enlightenment ideal. MacIntyre even identified the politics of representative democracy and its corresponding legal system as examples. Both are sensitive to the talks about human rights and empowerment. The modern day government efforts to promote and finance public education system and public health care facilities are hoped to become the very institutions that would lead us to the ideals of equality, freedom and empowerment (MacIntyre 2006b, 173).

¹² MacIntyre points out that Descartes has even failed to realize that even his "Methodic doubt" is but part of a larger conversation. At best, Descartes should have realized that his thoughts are but responses to the epistemological crises which he saw, and such crises have colored the way he formulated his own philosophy... MacIntyre has this to say of Descartes' failure, "he does not recognize that among the features of the universe which he is not putting in doubt is his own capacity not only to use French and the Latin languages, but even to express the same thought in both languages." (MacIntyre 2006a, 9). MacIntyre further adds that "what thus goes unrecognized by Descartes is the presence not only of languages, but of a tradition, a tradition that he took himself to have successfully disowned... Descartes also cannot recognize that he is responding not only to the timeless demands of skepticism but to a highly specific crisis in one particular social and intellectual tradition" (MacIntyre 2006a, 9).

Understanding Pluralism: pre-modern and modern forms of pluralism

Pluralism as a pre-modern phenomenon

In MacIntyre's early works (*After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*), we have already seen his illustrations of the inaccuracy of the claim that 'pluralism' is a modern phenomenon, and correspondingly, the pre-modern world is readily monolithic. In the *After Virtue*, MacIntyre has used the 5th century Athens as an example of the extent of pluralism that can thrive in the pre-modern world. He noted that the Athenian explorations and investigations on the nature of virtues, particularly on justice, will already show us that there is no such monolithic understanding of what accounts as virtuous. MacIntyre has, for example, pointed out the basic difference in Homer and Sophocles in their definition of what would account as virtuous and honorable conduct. In the *After Virtue*, MacIntyre narrates that the once established list of virtuous acts in Homer's society has evolved in the later centuries so much so that Sophocles has provided a rival understanding of virtue. MacIntyre pointed out, as an example, that "in Homer the question of honor is the question of what is due to a king; in Sophocles the question of honor has become the question of what is due to a man" (MacIntyre 2007, 133). MacIntyre has further argued that the Greek society of the 5th century B.C. has inherited several virtue words from Homeric societies, but most of these words no longer have meanings univocal to their use in Homer's own contexts. Included in this list are courage, friendship, justice, wisdom, and self-restraint. MacIntyre moreover noted that the use of these words in the 5th century Greek society does not only show their departure from Homer, but also the proliferation of their meaning and connotations among their users at that time (see MacIntyre 20007, 134).¹³ MacIntyre however noted that despite the fact of the disagreements in which these words were viewed, they at least shared one basic presupposition: their users "do take it for granted that the milieu in which the virtues are to be exercised and in terms of which they are to be defined is the *polis*" (MacIntyre 2007, 135).

If we then are to speak of a contrast between the modern moral landscape and that of the pre-modern world, particularly the classical world of the Greeks, then it is not the plurality of views that contrasts these communities, but it is rather the

¹³ This is even illustrated more in the dialogues of Plato, particularly in the *Republic* whose characters especially in the first four books are arguing for varied and in fact rival conceptions of justice. MacIntyre himself has noted that to speak of a single meaning that these virtue-words possess in the fifth century can be misleading. He pointed out that the plural understanding of these words escapes our attention because these texts use as sources those literature "in which a deliberate reorganization and redefinition of the moral vocabulary is taking place, texts in which words are being assigned a clear meaning which earlier they did not possess" (MacIntyre 2007, 135). But these efforts of presenting ancient conceptions as if they possess monolithic implications, and oppose such unitary conception with the claimed pluralism of the modern times, could possibly lead us to serious misconceptions, which may also have serious repercussions in our understanding of our moral language.

underlying ‘admission’ of the role that the *polis* plays in the understanding of moral language, particularly the virtues. MacIntyre comments on this saying that “we lack, as they did not, *any* public, generally shared communal mode either for representing political conflict or for putting our politics to the philosophical question” (MacIntyre 2007, 138). Homer’s understanding of justice, for example, admits that *dikaioi* is *not to transgress the order* set by the kings, who also act on the behest of the gods (MacIntyre 2007, 134);¹⁴ and in the Athens of the 5th century, the virtues are viewed within the social context of the city-state; and being a good man almost immediately implies being a good citizen (see MacIntyre 2007, 135). Thus, we have in the 5th century Athens an example of plurality, wherein such pluralism was not a hindrance for their conversations because they still have a common standard against which they could evaluate their differences. These are the *polis* and the *agôn* (the venue for competition in order to promote the culture of excellence, exemplified by the Olympics).¹⁵

MacIntyre argues that the profession of the sophists will explicitly illustrate the pluralism of the 5th century Athens. MacIntyre even says that “the sophistic conclusion is that in each particular city the virtues are what they are taken to be in that city. There is no such thing as justice-as-such, but only justice-as-understood-at-Athens and justice-as-understood-at-Thebes, and justice-as-understood-in-Sparta (MacIntyre 2007, 139).¹⁶ MacIntyre however traces two important responses to this ancient form of pluralism. One is given by Plato and the other is by, an even earlier thinker, the tragedian Sophocles. MacIntyre argues that Plato’s response to the pluralism in the actual politics of the Greek society made him resort, in the *Republic*, to an ideal state that is not identical with any of the actual Greek states. Plato has provided us a framework of an ideal state which is the ancient equivalent of a modern cosmopolitan understanding of justice and the virtues. Plato argues that the world has a particular order which determines the place of each virtue in a total harmonious scheme of human life (MacIntyre 2007, 142).¹⁷

¹⁴ Dealing with this same point in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre claims that Homer’s use of the word *dike* “presupposed that the universe had a single fundamental order, an order structuring both nature and society... To be *dikaioi* is to conduct one’s actions and affairs in accordance with this order” (MacIntyre 1988, 14).

¹⁵ MacIntyre himself said, “we have noticed in turn that different and rival lists of virtues, different and rival attitudes toward the virtues and different and rival definitions of individual virtues are at home in the 5th century Athens and that nonetheless the city-state and the *agôn* provide the shared contexts in which the virtues are to be exercised” (MacIntyre 2007, 138).

¹⁶ MacIntyre claims that the definition of justice is related to the kind of political system that each of these states practices: democracy for Athens, aristocracy for Thebes and military government for Sparta. It was not possible even in the 5th century Greek society to impose one political system to all Greek states, and consequently, it was not possible to have a single conception of justice for all these states. This comment has also become the basis for MacIntyre’s commentators to tag him as a communitarian, that is, as a political theorist who advocated a kind of relativism via traditions of particular communities. MacIntyre however explicitly distances himself from communitarianism (see MacIntyre 2007, xiv).

¹⁷ MacIntyre has noted that this is sharply contrasted by the modern traditions that argue for the variety and heterogeneity of human goods in a way that the pursuit of these goods cannot be reconciled

There is however an alternative response to that of Plato's cosmopolitan tendency, and MacIntyre finds that in the tragic plays of Sophocles. MacIntyre has noted that there are two important aspects of Sophocles' reply to pluralism that may be worth our attention in the modern times. First is the emphasis on the close link between the narrative of the lives of individuals and the narrative of the community where that individual belongs. MacIntyre noted that when the individual in Sophocles' plays makes a decision, "it is the individual in his or her role, representing his or her community" (MacIntyre 2007, 145). Secondly, it is also important to note that though the individual transcends the boundaries set for him or her by social roles, and even if he or she is able to scrutinize these roles, the individual remains *accountable*, even to the point of death, to carry out his role for his or her society – this view has differentiated Sophocles from the relativism of the Sophists.

Another example used by MacIntyre that will illustrate another case of 'pre-modern pluralism' was the pluralism which he saw in the middle ages (see MacIntyre 1988, 164-182). He pointed out that even before Aquinas' philosophy became a constituted tradition, Aquinas himself was responding to contending, if not rival, views of Aristotle and Augustine. This, MacIntyre argues, will again show us that pluralism is as true in the pre-modern times as it is in our time. MacIntyre has pointed out that even the very structure of the *Summa Theologiae* reveals the plurality of views that were prevalent during Aquinas' time. He pointed out for example that the articles of the *Summa* does not only have to reckon with the rival views of prominent authors of the time, but "each article is composed in such a way that they enunciate what Aquinas has so far known at the time of writing, but the corpus is also open to be taken further" (MacIntyre 1988, 172). Moreover, in MacIntyre's narration, the 11th and 12th century European culture was one where philosophy was hardly systematic, and where theology hardly used philosophy as a tool. This is the reason why when the new Universities were founded in the 13th century, where Aristotle was introduced primarily by the Islamic interpreters and commentators, most of the philosophical conclusions derived from Aristotle were hardly compatible with the Christian doctrine, which was then largely Augustinian (see MacIntyre 1988, 167). This was the academic rivalry that has dominated most European Universities at this time, particularly at the University of Paris where Aquinas has studied under Albertus Magnus, from whom Aquinas has learned the task of doing a dialogue between these two major intellectual traditions. MacIntyre then argues that it is this particular Thomistic enterprise of engaging major traditions in dialogue that merits our special attention when we are to confront the pluralism of the contemporary times. MacIntyre was pointing out that Aquinas' manner of confronting the rivalry between the traditions of Aristotle and Augustine was superior to the now widely regarded

in any single order of morality where attempts to reconcile them under a single set of goods is bound to become totalitarian (MacIntyre 2007, 142). MacIntyre traces this modern objection to reconciliation of goods from Weber, and in his later works, would ascribe the practice to the institutions given birth by the post-Enlightenment liberal traditions.

wrong solution proposed by Siger de Brabant, who espoused for the separate truths of philosophy and theology. It also becomes apparent that Brabant's conclusion seems resurrected in the compartmentalization of disciplines especially in modern research universities. Contemporary compartmentalization of disciplines no longer provides a suitable venue for dialogue, where each specialized discipline is left to pursue its own ends and interests independently of others. Such compartmentalization is even extended, so MacIntyre argues, to moral reflections so much so that the postmodern theories of morality entitle all participants of a debate with their respective versions of the true and the good to the effect that no real dialogue has occurred.¹⁸

In MacIntyre's understanding, the superiority of Aquinas rested on his capacity to enter into the arguments of both traditions, Aristotelianism and Augustinianism. It was his training under Albert the Great that provides him the background for the thoughts of both thinkers. It is only when Aquinas was able to speak as an insider of Aristotelianism on the one hand, and of Augustinianism on the other, that he was able to highlight the strength of both as he also improved on the weakness of each. It is in this capacity to elevate the thoughts of a tradition to a level that is already capable of characterizing the arguments of a rival tradition where dialogue becomes possible.¹⁹

Hence, for MacIntyre, pluralism should not be claimed as a unique modern phenomenon, and it is inaccurate to speak of tradition as if its pre-modern assignation should be taken to readily imply that the pre-modern intellectual landscape is monolithic and is therefore inhospitable to variation and pluralism. It is also equally inaccurate to claim that the modern intellectual terrain has already insulated itself from tradition which consequently makes our contemporary institutions and academic landscape open to rival views and therefore to pluralism and dialogue. What MacIntyre has shown in these two instances is that pluralism, and therefore the relevance of dialogue, is true not just in the contemporary times but also in the pre-modern times, and the toleration of plural views is not even a unique modern contribution to human thought and civilization.

¹⁸ MacIntyre would even argue that each of these contending positions will appear to be irrefutable to its own adherents, "indeed in its own terms and by its own standards of argument it is in practice irrefutable." Yet, each of this position will appear to their own opponents as also unfortunately "insufficiently warranted by rational argument" (MacIntyre 1990b, 7). Moreover, MacIntyre also argues that in most modern-day forms of moral enquiry, the resolution for fundamental differences is not achieved despite the efforts of the respective proponents to argue for the rationality of their claims. What has happened instead is the indefinite postponement of the resolution (MacIntyre 1990b, 5).

¹⁹ MacIntyre attributed to Dante the following claim: "that narrative prevails over its rivals which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes" (MacIntyre 1990b, 81). This statement also reveals the method which MacIntyre endorses as the manner through which the effort of overcoming our pluralities – in a way that would be responsive to the isolating tendencies of the present day pluralities – could proceed.

MacIntyre is then inviting us to revisit the pluralism of the past because they are apt to teach us a lesson: *that pluralism does not necessarily mean impasse and deadlock of rival views, and dialogue should mean more than mere compromise*. It is this ‘interminability and incommensurability’ of the modern day debates, especially on moral matters, that makes the contemporary form of pluralism more problematic.²⁰ In proving that skepticism is not the only attitude, and especially not the best premise, that we could adopt in confronting our present rivalries, MacIntyre is inviting his readers to reconsider the methods of pre-modern thinkers and learn from the way by which they bring into conversations the major, but rival, positions of their own time. In MacIntyre’s view, Aquinas – in the same way that Plato and Sophocles also did during their time – has shown us a particular approach to authentic dialogue that is oriented towards a rational confidence on a truth-claim even if the proposition concerned admittedly remains provisional (see MacIntyre 1988, 172).

Pluralism in the Modern Period

Discerning the difference between the pre-modern and the modern (and its post-modern offshoot) forms of pluralism, MacIntyre’s task included the tracing of the significant turns in history in order to see which events have contributed to the important shifts that have displaced the pre-modern platform for debate.²¹ This is rooted in MacIntyre’s critique against contemporary philosophy’s (that is, post-Enlightenment) skeptical stance towards successful dialogue²² for as he

²⁰ John Haldane referred to MacIntyre’s Inaugural lecture at Notre Dame (MacIntyre 1990, 349), where MacIntyre pointed out that “what we genuinely share in the way of moral maxims, precepts and principles is insufficiently determinate to guide action and what is sufficiently determinate to guide action is not shared” (Haldane 2013, 47-48). This line allows MacIntyre’s readers to see what he meant by the incommensurable nature of the modern form of pluralism: “shared values and ideas” are no longer appreciated as possible and so they are no longer pursued, so much so that any pursuit for such ideals as common good are now being generalized as ‘totalitarian.’ It is this lack of a common platform for discussion that has differentiated the modern conversations from the pre-modern ones. Haldane illustrated this via an example, “modern societies lack substantial agreement on such basic questions as whether or why lying is bad. In traditional societies, by contrast, actions are subjects to sets of norms appropriate to various roles (though these norms are not always codified or codifiable); and these prescribe what is honorable and dishonorable, vicious and virtuous” (Haldane 2013, 48).

²¹ In MacIntyre’s Gifford lectures, he argued that modernity’s departure from the pre-modern moral thought can be characterized by the displacement of the concept of the *telos*. Modern modes of moral inquiry, which in these lectures MacIntyre named as encyclopedist and genealogist – though opposed to one another in major respects – both agree on their rejection of realism which traces the meaning and purpose of the world from a Divine who is conceived as its creator. This, MacIntyre would argue, constituted a major shift in the way moral philosophy is pursued, and the disagreements that ensued after this departure have contributed to the incommensurability of the moral language of the contemporary times. For the role that the human *telos* had to play in the pre-modern debates, see MacIntyre 2007 chapters 10, 11, 12 & 13; the discussion on the differences of Aquinas from both the encyclopedists and the genealogists, see MacIntyre 1990b chapters 3, 8 & 9, specifically p. 79.

²² John Haldane noted that MacIntyre’s project can also be interpreted as a ‘social criticism’ that is focused ‘directly and somewhat uncomfortably on contemporary professional academic practice, particularly in the area of moral philosophy’ (Haldane 2013, 38). MacIntyre is specifically concerned with the liberal understanding of ‘plurality’ that is ultimately oriented towards tolerating ‘every’ moral stance as legitimate even if our multiple moral stances hold contradictory positions.

argues, contemporary moral discourses dwell so much on disagreements, and these disagreements have interminable character (MacIntyre 2007, 6).

In MacIntyre's reading, the shift in the direction of moral enquiry started even before the modern period. It is certainly the Enlightenment's separation of the realms of faith and moral philosophy, and the consequent rejection of any appeal to the concept of *telos* – understood as the end proper to human persons and the world – that characterized modern moral philosophy, but the academic atmosphere of the late Middle Ages, MacIntyre so argues, has already paved the way for this development.

MacIntyre argues that crucial to the development of philosophy in the late Middle Ages is the increasing neglect of philosophy as a craft-tradition brought about by the efforts to establish philosophy as a separate discipline, that is, as a discipline that is independent of the truths established by theology's appeal to revelation. MacIntyre even said that it is Scotus' dedication to safeguard the purity of theology that has sadly paved the way for this (see MacIntyre 1990b, 156). MacIntyre has then argued that this is a precursor of an increasing tendency for the compartmentalization of knowledge, so much so that when natural sciences emerged during the time of Copernicus, philosophy would have to slowly suffer the fate that theology had to go through when philosophy was initially established as a separate discipline (MacIntyre 1990b, 157). What has then resulted from this is the loss of a conception of theoretical reflection as a craft or a tradition. There is no longer any unifying discipline that will bring various disciplines in a common framework in order to discuss issues common to all. Disciplines have become compartmentalized, and this compartmentalization has eventually affected philosophy. There was a "dissolution of unified enquiry into variety and heterogeneity... the story is that of the genesis of the institution of academic philosophy as an organized and professional university discipline" (MacIntyre 1990b, 158). This has eventually led to the sustaining of fundamental disagreements, which have – in the present times – become interminable. Modern pluralism are different from the pre-modern ones precisely because the former is no longer treated within the framework of theoretical enquiry that is closely linked to practice where the actual practice, especially in the *polis*, provides the *telos* for the discussion. Moreover, modern day pluralism has become interminable because philosophers cease to look at philosophical discipline in a manner of a 'craft' that has to evolve – which is an appropriate perspective because moral concerns recur throughout history. If we are to look into the history of moral questions, they remain fundamentally the same – though they have taken contemporary contexts in our time – despite having gone through centuries. It is the sad fate of contemporary moral philosophy that we have not advanced in our reflections on these moral issues. MacIntyre traces the root of the problem and claimed that there is no or insufficient agreements on the standards through which we could settle our disagreements,

and “without such shared standard a large measure of disagreement is bound to be ineliminable” (MacIntyre 1990b, 159; cf. MacIntyre 2007, 8).

Moreover, MacIntyre has also argued in as early as his *After Virtue* that modern-day positions on moral issues display a certain form of arbitrariness where there is “a clash of antagonistic will, each will determined by some set of arbitrary choices of its own” (MacIntyre 2007, 9).²³ Yet, despite this, modernity – as shown above – also searches for a universal, impersonal standard (MacIntyre 2007, 9-10). While MacIntyre agrees that there is a need to reread history in order to expose the coercive wills of the past, and the need to discern in our modern-day moral discourses the dominant wills that impose themselves on others, MacIntyre also affirms the need to overcome the pluralism so that talks about justice and the common good could proceed.²⁴

Yet, in MacIntyre’s reading, the development brought about by modernism makes it rather more difficult to initiate a dialogue. When the pre-modern culture has a way of resolving their pluralism, the modern period has almost lost that framework. It has become MacIntyre’s concern then to discern the ways through which we could address this pluralism. As a preliminary to this project, MacIntyre first endeavored to show that the initial response of the Enlightenment thinkers to the call to establish a universal morality that will serve as standards for adjudicating plural moral stances has failed.

The third section of this paper (pp. 50 ff) has already pointed out that the Enlightenment’s project has attempted to question the place of any principle outside the self in the process of justifying the legitimacy of certain moral rules.²⁵ What the

²³ In his Gifford Lectures, MacIntyre spoke of genealogies as one type of subversion – though remaining to be equally pessimistic on the talk about human telos – against the Encyclopedists (please see the discussion below). Genealogists argue that the academic mode of utterance propounded by the Encyclopedists is but “an expression of merely reactive attitudes and feelings, their negative, repressed, and repressive character disguised behind a mask of fixity and objectivity” (MacIntyre 1990b, 39). Moreover, he added that the task of a genealogist is then to expose the dominant will that has controlled the moral utterance of the past. For MacIntyre, though the genealogists may have diagnosed an important problem in history, it has no resources to provide a solution to the discerned problem. He shows his critical stances against genealogists when he said that “the inadequacy of the responses so far to these questions may suggest that the history of genealogy has been, and could not have been other than, one of progressive *impoverishment*” (MacIntyre 1990b, 55).

²⁴ MacIntyre’s (2006c) also narrates the tension between the pluralism of antagonistic wills and the need to come up with standards to which we could make our appeal in order to serve the interests of our common life and initiate dialogue to talk about issues of justice and common good. In this article, MacIntyre has examined the sensitive role that the state will play in these conversations, and the limits which we would need to observe in order to keep the state from exercising its unwarranted coercive powers.

²⁵ MacIntyre observed that the Enlightenment thinkers, and the nineteenth century advocates of the encyclopedia, have seen in Descartes a symbol for a “declaration of independence by reason from the particular bonds of any particular moral and religious community” (MacIntyre 1990b, 59). Hence, the enlightenment is an attempt to remove the old ‘alleged’ hegemony of faith and revelation, and

Enlightenment and its successors have seen in the pre-modern language is articulated by Elizabeth Anscombe when she argued that “the basic moral vocabulary of requirement and prohibition – ought, ought not, must, must not, and so on – is a remainder from earlier religious ways of thinking” (Haldane 2013, 45; cf. Anscombe 1958, 1-19). With this then, the core concern of the Enlightenment is to come up with the principle/s that would ground the discussions on morality. Hence, the Enlightenment was on a crusade to articulate a universal moral language that would be held true and binding for all contending parties – a language that has to be freed from, and neutral to, all sorts of influence that may result from one’s culture, religion, tradition or even personal convictions. The Enlightenment is aware of the sociological fact of pluralism, but it is also convinced that this can be successfully overcome by a universal language that is itself rooted in reason. This is what MacIntyre would call as the “Encyclopedist” version of moral inquiry.

The Encyclopedists’ Project

For MacIntyre, the hope of the enlightenment project to come up with consensus is concretized by such projects which attempted to establish dictionaries and encyclopedias which are meant to be used by ‘all’ participants in given inquiries. This is an important shift, in MacIntyre’s narrative, in the history of philosophy.

Moreover, MacIntyre observes that this project was also accompanied by the developments in science, where standards for knowledge-legitimation were also instituted. Hence, in science only those that have passed these standards are to be established as truths. Any attempt for truth legitimation that falls short of the agreed standards will be treated as non-scientific, and are oftentimes regarded as superstitious. The hegemony of science has slowly emerged in the modern world, replacing the alleged old hegemony of the faith. Hence, modernity talks about the language of science in trying to establish which of those opinions vying for recognition are meant to become acceptable for all. As a consequence to this, other disciplines attempted to approximate the scientific evolution when they attempted to speak of their own development.²⁶

establish the realm of reason as the trusted guide for the moral and social endeavors. This repugnance towards faith and faith revelation is central to the culture of the 19th century that Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris* would have to refer to them: “we know that there are some who, in their overestimate of the human faculties, maintain that as soon as man’s intellect becomes subject to divine authority it falls from its native dignity, and hampered by the yoke of this species of slavery, is much retarded and hindered in its progress toward the supreme truth and excellence” (Leo XIII 1879, no. 9). Leo XIII however condemns this and says that “such an idea is most false and deceptive, and its sole tendency is to induce foolish and ungrateful men wilfully to repudiate the most sublime truths, and reject the divine gift of faith, from which the fountains of all good things flow out upon civil society” (Leo XIII 1879, no. 9). These statements however are clear illustrations of the kind of incommensurability and pluralism that MacIntyre has talked about when he described the culture of the late 19th century.

²⁶ Haldane (2013, 43) noticed this development which he named as ‘scientism’ and even calls this as ‘more threatening.’ Scientism simply ridicules all humanistic sciences as an ‘irrational ideology.’

MacIntyre has noted this as a framework that has led to the endowment for the Gifford lectures. He noted that the benefactor of the lectures, Lord Adam Gifford, has the presumption that natural theology and ethics could progress in the manner of scientific progress, where the discoveries of the past becomes the platform for succeeding endeavors.²⁷ MacIntyre however noted that such hopes seem to get frustrated by the fact that there is no visible progress in the reflections on moral issues.²⁸ Whereas Gifford was hoping that the endowment for the lecture will become a venue for ongoing and progressive development in moral reflection to a point where we come up with principles that would have a quasi-scientific status, that is, acceptable to all, the actual lectures that have proceeded from the endowment seem to have instead produced multiple, if not opposed, points of view.²⁹

MacIntyre himself pointed out that the attempts of the leading thinkers of the 19th century to come up with dictionaries and encyclopedias in order to articulate a universal understanding of certain issues were blinded to the fact that we could hardly speak of any moral truth beyond the limitations of our own traditions.³⁰ Moral consciousness is always a consciousness of a particular culture, and we commit a mistake if we are to treat such consciousness as universal.³¹ This is the point that he insisted on since he wrote the *After Virtue*. In his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre has even extensively explained that moral reflections on justice and practical rationality is, as has been repeatedly pointed out above, tradition-dependent; and any presumption for a tradition-neutral reflection on justice and practical rationality is prone to mislead rather than to enlighten.³²

Scientism then entered philosophy via analytic philosophy which dismiss existential brands of philosophizing as ‘unrigorous and obscurantist.’

²⁷ MacIntyre has pointed out that the Gifford lectures on ethics and natural theology, where he delivered the lectures published in TRVME, were intended by Lord Gifford to deal with their subjects strictly as if they are of natural science (MacIntyre 1990b, 9).

²⁸ MacIntyre, at the start of the Gifford lectures, noted that since the death of Adam Gifford, natural science can certainly be described to have progressed. But, the same may not readily be said of natural theology as a foundation for ethics. MacIntyre pointed out that it is not just the case that there is “no progress in respect of generally agreed results” but “there is not even an agreement as to what the standard of rational progress ought to be” (MacIntyre 1990b, 10).

²⁹ Reviewing even a few of the names of those who already delivered the Gifford lectures in the past, MacIntyre observed that each lecturer arrived at conclusions that were also denied by another (MacIntyre 1990b, 10).

³⁰ MacIntyre noted that the thinkers who lived in the culture of the encyclopedia, particularly those who contributed to the Ninth edition of Encyclopedia Britannica who were also contemporary of Adam Gifford – the benefactor of the Gifford lectures, took for granted that any observer who is freed from prejudices and prior commitments to belief will be able to report an objective data (MacIntyre 1990b, 16-17). MacIntyre is openly skeptical against this project.

³¹ Haldane (2013, 39) even pointed out that central to MacIntyre’s critique to modernity’s moral philosophy is his insistence that “any attempt to understand moral concepts and moral reasoning without locating them in their social and historical contexts was bound to fail, and worse, was likely to lead to skepticism about the very possibility of moral justification.” This is why, it is also argued in this dissertation that this ‘Enlightenment turn’ has been seen by MacIntyre as a major shift that has displaced the usual pre-modern platform for conversations especially on issues related to morality.

³² MacIntyre boldly claimed that “any hope for discovering tradition-independent standards of judgment turns out to be illusory” (MacIntyre 1988, 348).

With the project to universalize our moral reflections, including our understanding of values and the ‘good for human persons,’ the enlightenment thinkers – the encyclopedists – have not successfully overcome that which they saw as problematic in the preceding era, that is, the *central* role of a tradition – which rather ensures that philosophy becomes a ‘craft.’ While they were very critical of the ‘alleged’ hegemony of the faith and revelation, as concretized in the tradition of the Church, they have only superseded such tradition with a parochial conception on morality, that is, a tradition of the west which had slowly emerged to become the liberal philosophies of our time.³³

In other words, the project of the enlightenment to democratize the claim for truth in order to ensure that all would have an access and a claim to such truth, has not successfully escaped the old problems of imposition where the fallacy of universalizing a parochial concept was at the core. Modernism, with its particular ally – secularism – has only introduced new terms that will take the role of that which they had, in the first place, objected. The problem of the authors of the encyclopedia precisely rests on their erroneous identification of the parochial understanding of the modern west with the universal nature of human beings.

Hence, with the encyclopedists’ failure to secure consensus on the subject matter of debates in moral philosophy, the question on how to confront our modern day differences becomes a continuing concern. In fact, MacIntyre argues that there are two dominant ways of dealing with the problem: The first way submits to skeptical stance amidst these pluralities and avers that “there is and can be no independent standard of measure by appeal to which their rival claims can be adjudicated, since each has internal to itself its own fundamental standard of judgment” (MacIntyre 1990b, 4); the second option centers on the claim that “the alleged facts of incommensurability and untranslatability are always an illusion” (MacIntyre 1990b, 5). MacIntyre argues that both points of view are insufficient. He instead points out that it is important to recognize and admit that there are indeed incommensurabilities, but such admission should not become ground for a resignation that dialogue is not possible. In fact,

³³ In more than one occasion, MacIntyre invokes Franz Steiner’s observation about the concept of *taboo* to illustrate this point. He noted that the concept of ‘taboos’ was seen as both a ‘problem and a solution.’ The *taboos* of the Polynesian culture were taken by the Europeans as “anticipations of the latter’s scheme of rational ethics” though characterized by a failure to make the proper distinction between authentic moral norms and whimsical prohibitions (MacIntyre 1990b, 27). Hence, the concept of taboo came to be regarded as universal between cultures. But, MacIntyre, following Steiner, pointed out that the European adoption of the concept of *taboo* was already colored by their understanding of moral rules as purely negative prohibitions. MacIntyre added that in this, those who adopted that *taboos* in the European culture – and claimed that any remnant clinging to a particular moral rule as in the Church is reminiscent of the unenlightened Polynesian culture – is self-deceived (MacIntyre 1990b, 28). The failure in the translation of the *taboos* from its original Polynesian conception to its adoption by the ‘enlightened’ thinkers – and the latter’s claim that their characterization of the concept speaks of an universal aspect of a culture – is MacIntyre’s illustration of the enlightenment’s attempt to project its own ‘parochial’ culture and tradition as the universal one.

MacIntyre is convinced that there can be genuine dialogue amidst our pluralities, and the admission of their present incommensurability and untranslatability is a *prologue* for any genuine dialogue (MacIntyre 1990b, 5). Having recognized this important prologue, it becomes worthwhile to discern for the appropriate ways by which the project could proceed.

Thomists' Response to the Encyclopedists

With the Enlightenment's emphasis to argue for a morality that is insulated from any 'contamination' of faith or religious traditions, there emerged the need to justify morality on a level separate from the religious admission that the world exhibits an order that has been ordained by God where morality is viewed as the process of discerning that divine order.³⁴

Having initiated the distancing of morality from theology (or natural theology), the Enlightenment has contributed to the emergence of various level of indifference towards and rejection of the truths of religion. Any moral theory then that made an appeal to a 'natural law' that is fundamentally linked to, and thus finds its source from, the eternal law was accorded with similar suspicion, and was increasingly regarded as irrelevant.³⁵ Hence, in what has been presented above, the Enlightenment project has attempted to articulate a kind of justification for a moral theory that is no longer the same as the justifications that were done prior to the Enlightenment. Consequent to the rise of the Enlightenment culture is the decline of the 'old system' that heavily relies on the morality propounded by traditions, particularly religious traditions, foremost of which is the Catholic culture that has been heavily influenced by the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas.

While its supporters hail the emergence of the Enlightenment ideals as a form of emancipation from the old tyrannies of the traditional past,³⁶ inhabitants of

³⁴ *Aeterni Patris* would characterize this as an error that has dangerously crept into the modern culture and has even afflicted the minds of the masses. Leo XIII says in the encyclical, "that false conclusions concerning divine and human things, which originated in the schools of philosophy, have now crept into all the orders of the State, and have been accepted by the common consent of the masses" (Leo XIII 1879, no. 2). It is in view of this false conclusion that *Aeterni Patris* was urging the members of the Catholic Church to root their philosophy in the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas.

³⁵ This is the reason the Victorian culture of the enlightened modern Europe would even regard 'morality' as likened to the Polynesian taboos that are contaminated with 'irrational and arbitrary prohibitions' (MacIntyre 1990b, 29). This is clearly in contrast to the Christian, specifically Catholic, tradition. In his encyclical devoted primarily to the issue of freedom, Leo XIII himself asserts that "the eternal law of God is the sole standard and rule of human liberty, not only in each individual man, but also in the community and civil society which men constitute when united" (Leo XIII 1888, no. 10).

³⁶ MacIntyre argues that both the encyclopedists and the genealogists support the decline of religious influence in the public sphere of morality. Encyclopedists look at this emancipation as a repudiation of the irrational elements of the moral codes that have dominated the moral life of the earlier culture, while the genealogists would view such emancipation as a breaking free from the tyrannical exercise of the will and power of a privileged status that has oftentimes been inimical to the real progress of humanity (MacIntyre 1990b, 79).

the old culture obviously view this as an unwarranted attack to the core of a tradition, and is thereby more destructive than emancipatory.³⁷ It is then understandable that the inhabitants of the 'old culture' wish to redefine themselves amidst this threat and calls for a resolute defense against it.³⁸ This then occasions the release of the *Aeterni Patris* by Leo XIII.

MacIntyre's interest in the *Aeterni Patris* is visible in the third chapter of the published transcripts of his Gifford Lectures, entitled as 'Too Many Thomisms.' *Aeterni Patris* was the Catholic Church's resolute response to what she considers to be the 'harms' brought about by modernity.³⁹ In the mind of the Catholic Church, the explicit attempt of the Enlightenment to dislodge faith in the realm of reason and morality, as manifested by the Encyclopedists' confidence in universal rationality that is freed from the contamination of cultural or religious traditions, impoverishes rather than emancipates reason.⁴⁰ In order to 'rescue' reason, so to say, philosophy is then invited by *Aeterni Patris* to return to her own resources which secure reason's foundation in faith and revelation. For *Aeterni Patris*, securing philosophy in faith is the appropriate recourse rather than emphasizing philosophy's autonomy, as if reason functions in a realm separate from faith. In the mind of Leo XIII, Thomistic philosophy is an excellent guide in the attempt to trace the rootedness of reason in faith. Hence, *Aeterni Patris* is essentially an endorsement of the philosophical thought of Thomas Aquinas (see O'Riordan 1907).

MacIntyre admits that he is a Thomist. In fact, his publications after the *After Virtue* have already spoken more openly not just about the lasting influence of Aquinas' philosophy but also on the correctness of Aquinas' method in confronting

³⁷ *Aeterni Patris* (Leo 1879, no. 5) reiterated a core doctrine of the Catholic Tradition, which asserts that human reason can discern "the fullest faith and authority united in the word of God." *Aeterni Patris* then articulated the worry of the Catholic Church against the influence of false doctrines for it is convinced that "every assertion contrary to the truth of revealed faith is altogether false, for the reason that it contradicts, however slightly, the truth," (Leo XIII 1879, 7; from the Lateran Council's Bull *Apostolici regiminis*). Further, its counsels reiterated Augustine's claim that "if reason is turned against the authority of Sacred Scripture, no matter how specious it may seem, it errs in the likeness of truth; for true it cannot be" [AP, 7; from Augustine's Epistola 147, *ad Marcellinum*, 7 (PL 33, 589)].

³⁸ *Aeterni Patris* will instead reiterate the contribution of faith in philosophy, thereby undermining the modern man's argument that adherence to any tradition, including religious traditions, are rather remnants of the 'irrational attitude,' just like the taboos, of the past. The encyclical instead added that "[F]aith *fre*es and saves reason *from* error, and endows it with *manifold* knowledge. A wise man, therefore, would not accuse faith and look upon it as opposed to reason and natural truths, but would rather offer heartfelt thanks to God, and sincerely rejoice that, in the density of ignorance and in the flood-tide of error, holy faith, like a friendly star, shines down upon his path and points out to him the fair gate of truth beyond all danger of wandering" (Leo XIII 1879, 9).

³⁹ *Aeterni Patris* argues that the threats have now become serious because "false conclusions concerning divine and human things, which originated in the schools of philosophy, have now crept into all the orders of the State, and have been accepted by the common consent of the masses" (Leo XIII 1879, 2).

⁴⁰ *Aeterni Patris* argues that, contrary to the beliefs of Enlightenment, "so far is the super-added light of faith from extinguishing or lessening the power of the intelligence that it completes it rather, and by adding to its strength renders it capable of greater things" (Leo XIII 1879, 2).

the question about the human good (see MacIntyre 1988, 183-208). This is especially evident in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality*, *The Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, and *Dependent Rational Animal*. However, MacIntyre has also lamented on the tendency among Thomists themselves to multiply the controversies, rather than to generate understanding, within the Thomistic tradition, hence his discussion about “too many Thomisms” (MacIntyre 1990b, 58-81).

In his Gifford Lectures, MacIntyre has argued that most of the Thomism that has evolved after *Aeterni Patris* was not too different from the modern mindset. These ‘modern Thomisms’ have lost sight of one important component of Aquinas’ philosophy – the conception of philosophy as a craft-tradition only through which philosophy could have said to progress in a manner that natural sciences did. In MacIntyre’s reading, Aquinas’ method is dialogical⁴¹ and this dialogical character was overlooked in the Thomistic traditions that evolved in the modern period, where Thomism was seen as a closed system (MacIntyre 1990b, 74). Seeing Aquinas’ philosophy as a closed system made it less conversant with other traditions, and this has contributed to the further decline in the appreciation of Aquinas’ thought outside the comfort zone of the Thomists. What has the modern Thomists’ response to *Aeterni Patris* done was to further isolate Aquinas eventually making him mute to deal with contemporary moral, social and political issues as they were discussed outside the Thomists’ circles. Most forms of Thomism that evolved after *Aeterni Patris* were meant as apologies for Aquinas, and most of their arguments are actually articulated within the modern framework of contesting and opposing epistemologies.⁴² Aquinas has become just one form of epistemology – though continuously evolving within itself as a viable paradigm for its own adherents – that is valid as any other epistemology but has become sterile in engaging other traditions in the attempt to discuss the pressing moral, social and political issues of the time.⁴³

⁴¹ MacIntyre has repeatedly affirmed for example that the *Summa Theologiae* is meant to be an open-ended exposition on the moral questions of its time. He argues that Aquinas presents his arguments as the most that he could make given the available knowledge of his time, and the arguments could be revisited once new sources of reflections are made (MacIntyre 1988, 172).

⁴² MacIntyre has pointed out that one of the most prominent commentators of Aquinas during the time of *Aeterni Patris* was Joseph Kleutgen. Kleutgen’s apologies for Aquinas has however concentrated on presenting Aquinas as an “author of one more system confronting the questions of Cartesian and post-Cartesian epistemology,” though Aquinas’ version is able to provide sounder answers. For MacIntyre however, this impedes rather than engender the development of Aquinas’ thought for this has only “doomed Thomism to the fate of all philosophies which give priority to epistemological questions: the indefinite multiplication of disagreement” (MacIntyre 1990b, 75).

⁴³ MacIntyre is emphatic about this point. In fact, in one of his recent lectures where he spoke about “Catholic identity” in his “Catholic instead of what?” (see MacIntyre 2012 cited above), MacIntyre emphasized that the Catholic Tradition is a constituted tradition; there are various temporal cultures and traditions within a single Catholic identity. Prominent Catholics were responding to pressing issues of their time. Hence, if we are to affirm the Catholic identity in our time, we could not but engage our Catholic philosophy – mostly indebted to Aquinas’ philosophy – in the moral, social and political reflections of the contemporary culture of actual Catholics.

Interpreting *Aeterni Patris* then as a call for an apology of Aquinas' thought that ignores the need to dialogue with other tradition is, for MacIntyre, more of a disservice than beneficial to Aquinas' philosophy. A response to *Aeterni Patris* that prized Thomistic philosophy as it dismissed other traditions rather contributes to the increasing displacement of Thomism in the larger arena of the academe. To read *Aeterni Patris* simply as suggesting merely that we have to discard modern philosophy in our bookshelves will be detrimental to the Thomistic tradition. It will isolate Thomism and will eventually make it irrelevant in modern-day conversations.

This is the reason MacIntyre has been repeatedly insisting on dialogue. But, this dialogue could never be done in the way the enlightened Encyclopedists thought it possible. Dialogue could never proceed via the illusion that we could effectively give up our allegiances. MacIntyre argues that “[W]hen two rival large-scale intellectual traditions confront one another, a central feature of the problem of deciding between their claims is characteristically *that there is no neutral way of characterizing either the subject matter about which they give rival accounts or the standards by which their claims are to be evaluated* (MacIntyre 1988, 166 – emphasis is mine).⁴⁴ What is essential is for one to be able to immerse oneself in the rival tradition and be able to articulate the problems of that rival tradition through that other tradition's own terms and show such other tradition's internal problems, which that other tradition could not resolve if it is to rely only on its own language and resources. The superior tradition, among competing traditions, will emerge when a rival tradition fails to resolve its own internal conflicts, and such conflicts could only be resolved via recourse to the language and resources of one's tradition.⁴⁵

Hence, MacIntyre is proposing a specific reply to the invitations of *Aeterni Patris*. If Thomists are to reassert Aquinas as relevant in the modern-day debates, then they should not isolate Thomism as simply a specialized academic discipline. Thomism has to be engaged rather in dialogue, and must converse with other traditions like

⁴⁴ MacIntyre has discussed this extensively in a chapter of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* where he talked about “overcoming a conflict of traditions” (MacIntyre 1988, 164-182). In the process of evaluating contesting traditions, MacIntyre argues for the importance of the ‘rare gift of empathy as well as of intellectual insight’ which will allow one to understand the claims and concepts of the other tradition in such a way that s/he is viewing these claims and arguments as if s/he himself/herself is an adherent of the rival tradition. A good dialogue must proceed from a situation where one is able to ‘recharacterize his/her own belief’ according to the paradigms of the other traditions (MacIntyre 1988, 167).

⁴⁵ Elsewhere, a commentator of MacIntyre even once claimed that this ideal for dialogue is in fact very visible in the very life of MacIntyre and in some of those figures that he works on: John Henry Newman, Edith Stein and even Augustine. The transitions that they have gone through their life spoke of that capacity to articulate the problems and respond to such problems via a language that is once alien to the tradition where one has an allegiance with. MacIntyre's career shows this: from Marx, to Aristotle, and to Aquinas. His latter allegiance to Aquinas' philosophy is a product of those conversations, those immersions, that MacIntyre even had to personally undergo in the attempt to understand life's fundamental questions, and his attempt to find answers to these questions.

existentialism, utilitarianism, neo-Kantianism and liberalism. Thomism then has to become conversant in the way that Aquinas himself was conversant with the leading theories of his time. MacIntyre himself said that “in theoretical enquiry the readers of Aquinas, like his original hearers, both enact the narrative of their own enquiry and make that narrative a continuing part of a larger narrative of enquiry in which they are only the latest actors, who also understand that what they are able to contribute will lead on beyond them” (MacIntyre 1990b, 79).

Conclusion

Presented in this paper is MacIntyre’s reading of the contemporary discourses in moral, social and political philosophy where he has argued that modern-day debates appear as if they are interminable and incommensurable. MacIntyre however argues that pluralism is not a unique modern phenomenon. Pluralism has been present also in the classical times. Yet, there is a difference of the pluralist conceptions of the good life between the pre-modern and modern cultures. While the pre-modern cultures are also plural in their understanding of what is the good life, their discussions remained to be framed within a common framework that is hospitable to the conception of a human *telos* that is shared in the concrete practice of the larger *polis*. This conception of the *telos* has separated the pre-modern from modern moral reflections. For while the former is hospitable to the talk about human *telos*, modernity has been explicit in its claim that the good life has to be defined apart from any tradition: cultural or religious. It is this repugnance to any form of tradition that makes the modern culture inhospitable to any conception of human *telos*.

Hence, while modern-day versions of moral enquiry are confident that we could speak of morality apart from any tradition, this paper argues that MacIntyre questions the very presupposition of a tradition-neutral conception of the human good. What MacIntyre wishes to achieve is to arrive at a talk about morality, where standards common to the relevant parties are established in order to adjudicate over their disagreements, as these standards are also sufficiently attentive to the resources and traditions from which these participants put their allegiances and fundamental commitments. While MacIntyre believes that the skeptical stance against morality is destructive rather than helpful to our communities, he also believes that we could not come up with any conception of morality that is neutral to all participating traditions.

This is why MacIntyre progressed in his thoughts by espousing one important tradition, which he thought to be relevant, instructive, and even effective in the quest for the discernment of a common framework that will allow rival versions of moral, social and political enquiries to talk about adjudicating over their differences. MacIntyre himself has counseled that for a relevant project in moral philosophy to proceed, the Thomistic tradition has to be made visible and be articulated in the

attempt to understand the prevailing social, political and moral issues of the present times (MacIntyre 2013, 474-486).⁴⁶ ■

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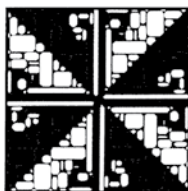
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⁴⁶ MacIntyre has also warned against the development that reduces Thomism into textbooks about Aquinas. Relevant to the point raised here, MacIntyre argues that "At its worst textbook Thomism had the effect on those who assimilated it of making them not just insensitive to, but unaware of the questions and concerns of the contemporary secular philosophy, while the Thomism that was genuinely informed by Aquinas's insights became able to engage in a long needed constructive dialogue with secular thought" (MacIntyre 2009, 154).

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