Alasdair MacIntyre and Leo Strauss on the Activity of Philosophy

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Abstract: Followers of Leo Strauss have criticized Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the activity of philosophy as historicist. MacIntyre himself has been dismissive of Strauss. I argue that these apparent disagreements obscure their deeper agreements about the activity of philosophy. Rather than holding to historicism, MacIntyre's account of philosophy has a strong symmetry with Strauss's. To counter modern dogmatism, both Strauss and MacIntyre argue for a balanced mixture of history and philosophy to contend that philosophy's task is to gain knowledge of natural reality. Yet both place similar epistemic limits on philosophy, arguing that philosophy's gains are modest and always open to revision. Moreover, both hold that no authority other than human reason can direct the activity of philosophy. Putting MacIntyre and Strauss in a more careful conversation enriches the account of the fundamental philosophical problems that each addresses.

Alasdair MacIntyre and Leo Strauss rank as two of the twentieth century's greatest thinkers. Although a generation apart, their philosophical concerns overlap. Troubled by the prevalence of relativism and the breakdown of rationalism in modern social science and broader sociopolitical life, both offer a trenchant critique of modern philosophy. To overcome the defects of modern philosophy, both demand a recovery of premodern philosophy, in which the interpretation of Aristotle plays a central role.

However, there has been little intellectual engagement between the philosophical themes of Strauss and those of MacIntyre. While those influenced by Strauss have criticized MacIntyre's understanding of politics, they have

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paid little attention to his other themes.[1] While followers of Strauss deserve credit for taking the first steps toward engaging with some of MacIntyre's central philosophical themes, they have prematurely dismissed him.[2] For his part, MacIntyre has observed that his conception of politics and of philosophy as political activity makes his conception of philosophical enquiry "very different from that of Leo Strauss." Yet MacIntyre restricts himself to noting rather than explaining this difference, and the difference that preoccupies him concerns Strauss's understanding of politics rather than Strauss's understanding of philosophical enquiry per se.[3]

My approach is to show how the apparent disagreements between MacIntyre and Strauss obscure deeper agreements. Articulating these deeper agreements allows us to be more precise about what their genuine disagreements are. I argue that there is an unappreciated symmetry in how each understands philosophy, with the focus here on theoretical activity. *Pace* MacIntyre's own judgment, he and Strauss understand philosophy as an activity primarily concerned with seeking timeless truth, assisted by historical study but not reducible to it. To counter modern dogmatism, whether it takes the form of pronouncing knowledge of self-evident principles or holding that no knowledge of reality is possible, both adopt a position between these extremes. They insist that philosophy can gain knowledge of reality, but that its gains are modest and always in need of refinement. Finally, both emphasize that philosophy aims at the discovery of truth about nature. Both hold that philosophy acknowledges the possibility of a higher authority beyond nature, but no authority beyond human reason must direct philosophy.

The basic obstacle to the case for an as of yet unappreciated symmetry between Strauss and MacIntyre is the problem of historicism. Two followers of Strauss, Aristide Tessitore and Robert Bartlett, have challenged MacIntyre's reconstruction of Aristotle. Because this reconstruction charges Aristotle with certain mistakes, they conclude that MacIntyre accepts historicist

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[1]E.g., Thomas Hibbs, "MacIntyre, Aquinas, Politics," *Review of Politics* 66, no. 3 (2004): 357–83, esp. 374–75; Émile Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair MacIntyre: Une biographie intellectuelle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), esp. Pierre Manent's preface in the same book; Vincent Descombes, "Alasdair MacIntyre en France," *Revue internationale de philosophie*, no. 264 (2013): 135–56.

[2]E.g., in a book that otherwise covers a masterful range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship on Aristotle, Thomas Pangle makes one mention of MacIntyre as "a typical expression of twentieth century historicist dogmatism" (Pangle, *Aristotle's Teaching in the "Politics"* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013], 271).

[3]Alasdair MacIntyre, "Replies," *Revue internationale de philosophie*, no. 264 (2013): 207. Elsewhere, MacIntyre notes "Strauss's unfortunate mistakes," but does not elaborate. See Ronald Beiner, *Political Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 185.

assumptions.[4] Though their views must not be equated with the views of Strauss himself, their charge merits examination because of Strauss's concern with historicism. My contention is that MacIntyre's considered views are further from historicism than they argue. But handling this problem first requires an abridged presentation of Strauss's views on the relationship between history and philosophy, followed by MacIntyre's. I provide this in sections 1 and 2.

Turning then to the substantive issues about which MacIntyre and Strauss appear to disagree, in sections 3 and 4 I outline how MacIntyre's concept of a tradition affects his conception of truth and how MacIntyre conceives of epistemic progress. In both these sections I show how MacIntyre and Strauss hold similar views. In section 5, I address MacIntyre's account of Aristotle's alleged mistakes. While MacIntyre's initial account does not conform to the views of Strauss, it does indicate MacIntyre's concern with philosophic truth—a concern that Strauss shares. In sections 6 and 7 I demonstrate how MacIntyre's most important later revisions of his account of Aristotle on naturalism and natural theology draw him closer to the views of Strauss.

1. The Mixture of History and Philosophy in Strauss

For Strauss, the problem of moral relativism that the breakdown of modern rationalism exacerbates has its roots in historicism, which challenges the very possibility of philosophy. Fusing philosophy and history, historicism is "the assertion that the fundamental distinction between philosophic and historical questions cannot in the last analysis be maintained."[5] Historicism holds that "all human thought is historical and unable ever to grasp anything eternal."[6] "An analysis of all comprehensive world views," it is a theoretical insight that transcends history and concludes, despite self-contradiction, in favor of the relativity of all views.[7] It privileges a particular modern view as superior to past consciousness and becomes the dogmatism of the modern age, affecting "more or less all present-day thought."[8]

[4]Robert Bartlett, *The Idea of Enlightenment: A Post-Mortem Study* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Aristide Tessitore, "MacIntyre and Aristotle on the Foundation of Virtue," in *Aristotle and Modern Politics: The Persistence of Political Philosophy*, ed. Tessitore (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

[5]Leo Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 57. Hereafter *WIPP*.

[6]Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 12. Hereafter *NRH*.

[7]Strauss, *NRH*, 25. See also "What Is Political Philosophy?," in *WIPP*, 26.

[8]Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History," 57; *NRH*, 22, 28–29. Radical historicism denies the transhistorical theoretical insight to adopt a "fateful dispensation" committing themselves to a particular world view (*NRH*, 25–28).

To counter historicism, Strauss's project is to recover the right understanding of philosophy. The possibility of philosophy requires a distinction between the historically contingent and the naturally permanent. Philosophy seeks an understanding of nature: it seeks what is permanent, also known as the "first things."[9] Strauss defines philosophy as "the quest for universal knowledge, for knowledge of the whole," or "the attempt to replace opinions about the whole by knowledge of the whole." The quest for "the whole" means the quest not for understanding the totality of all phenomena, contingent and permanent, but for the permanent natures or "first things."[10] The quest is for "knowledge of the natures of all things: the natures in their totality are 'the whole.'"[11] While Strauss argues that possessing the truth about the whole is the goal of philosophy, he qualifies philosophy as a "zetetic" activity, concerned with seeking the truth.[12] Philosophy is "essentially not possession of the truth, but the quest for the truth. The distinctive trait of the philosopher is that 'he knows that he knows nothing.'"[13] For Strauss, philosophy is an activity involving awareness of one's ignorance about the nature of all things, and a subsequent effort to remedy this.

Political philosophy, the main theme of his recovery, has a multifaceted meaning for Strauss; as a branch of philosophy, it seeks knowledge of the "nature of political things." Unlike historicism, it takes seriously the goal of political action, the good society, and seeks knowledge of the good society.[14] However, direct recovery of philosophy in the above sense—which is classical philosophy—is not possible, in Strauss's view. The challenge of historicism is very serious because modern political philosophy introduces the concept of history, fusing philosophical and historical questions so that this fusion appears inevitable. The historicized development of modern political philosophy obscures its basis as a modification of concepts of classical philosophy. Strauss concludes that philosophy requires an altered introduction to make a nonhistoricist recovery of classical philosophy possible. Though distinct from history, philosophy is now dependent upon history. Strauss does not call for a simple separation of the two, and does not advocate for a simple nonhistoricist philosophy.[15]

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[9]Strauss, *NRH,* 35, 88–90.
[10]Ibid., 82.
[11]Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?," 11.
[12]Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero,*" in *WIPP,* 114.
[13]Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?," 11.
[14]Ibid., 10; *NRH,* 35–36.
[15]Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History," 76–77; Leo Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *Review of Metaphysics* 5, no. 4 (1952): 583–84; Nathan Tarcov, "Philosophy and History: Tradition and Interpretation in the Work of Leo Strauss," *Polity* 16, no. 1 (1983): 20–21, 27; Arthur Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 342.

To avoid fusing the two as historicism does, the right relationship between philosophy and history expresses itself in a series of interpretative steps. First, the interpreter must attain the experience of philosophical ignorance, abandoning the pretense of knowledge, before undertaking the study of the history of philosophy.[16] Second, the interpreter must have philosophical incentive to reject modern philosophy in favor of premodern philosophy. The interpreter acknowledges that a theme of the past is worthwhile, and maintains philosophical criticism of modern thought. The interpreter must have a philosophical concern with the claim to truth, and openness to rejecting modern dogmatism and changing one's views.[17] Third, the interpreter must engage in philosophic activity, considering whether the claims within a text in the history of philosophy are true.[18] For Strauss, though philosophy now requires the history of philosophy, the authentic interpretation of the history of philosophy requires philosophy.

2. The Mixture of History and Philosophy in MacIntyre

An account of MacIntyre's thought must pay attention to his intellectual biography, since his views have changed considerably since he began his career in the 1950s. As a mature philosopher, he describes himself as "engaged in a single project" since 1977, when after years of self-reflection, he developed an account of why the theory to which he was attached in his youth, Marxism, had failed.[19] MacIntyre's single philosophical project aims "to reconstruct the moral theory and communal practice of Aristotelianism in whatever version would provide the best theory so far, explaining the failure of the Enlightenment as part of the aftermath of the breakdown of a tradition."[20] His project thus has two facets: a critical and a constructive argument. The critical argument explains the failure of the Enlightenment project to provide an adequate moral theory, or a theory of practical reasoning; the constructive argument explains why Aristotelianism, the Aristotelian tradition, is the best theory of practical reasoning so far to correct this failure. MacIntyre's interest in providing a rationally justifiable, true explanation

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[16]Tarcov, "Philosophy and History," 21–22; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 55. Hereafter *CM*.

[17]Tarcov, "Philosophy and History," 23–24; Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," 576, 583.

[18]Tarcov, "Philosophy and History," 25–26.

[19]Alasdair MacIntyre, "An Interview for *Cogito*," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 267–69. See also Christopher Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 10–32.

[20]Alasdair MacIntyre, "An Interview with Giovanna Borrado," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, 263.

for the Aristotelian theory of practical reason against the modern Enlightenment alternative invites consideration of how he conceives of the right mixture of philosophy and history.

Philosophic concerns orient MacIntyre's study of Aristotle. It is noteworthy that these concerns, when expressed as moments in MacIntyre's intellectual biography, parallel Strauss's own interpretative steps. The first step in MacIntyre's project is his experience of philosophic ignorance. In the late 1950s MacIntyre was stupefied by the inability of his contemporaries—including himself—to provide a rational justification for the moral critique of Stalinism. This brought him to reject the dominant theoretical positions of his contemporaries, who adhered to either Marxism or liberalism. As his former revolutionary Marxist colleagues drifted with the age closer to liberalism, MacIntyre refused to follow them.[21] This led to the second interpretative step. MacIntyre concluded that these preeminent modern positions culminated in Nietzschean irrationalism. This failure provided the philosophical incentive to consider whether the premodern Aristotle, scorned in modern moral philosophy, was right.[22] MacIntyre thus had a philosophic concern with the claim of past thinkers to truth, as well as openness for rejecting modern dogmatism and changing one's views.

At Strauss's third interpretative step, however, the problem of historicism confronts MacIntyre. The question is whether MacIntyre has sufficiently engaged in philosophic activity: considering whether the claims within a text in the history of philosophy are true, and dispensing with the dogmatism of historicism. A key theme in MacIntyre's philosophical project is a critique of nonhistorical philosophy. Influenced by R. G. Collingwood, MacIntyre makes a constructive argument for the mixture of philosophy and history.[23] Here, his principal target is nonhistorical analytical philosophy. As we have seen, Strauss does not subscribe to a simple nonhistoricist position, and though writing in a different context he likewise appreciates historicist correctives to the self-assertions of dominant philosophical schools.[24] But Collingwood's influence pulls MacIntyre's project in the direction of a potentially historicist mixture of philosophy and history. This raises the question of whether the dogmatism of historicism distorts MacIntyre's philosophic

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[21]Émile Perreau-Saussine, "The Moral Critique of Stalinism," in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism*, ed. Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 134–51. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, "Notes from the Moral Wilderness" (1958–59), in *The MacIntyre Reader*.

[22]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 109–20. Hereafter *AV*.

[23]MacIntyre, *AV*, 3, 4. Note that MacIntyre's concern with rational justification shows that he cannot be characterized as a radical historicist who adopts his world view out of a "fateful dispensation."

[24]MacIntyre, *AV*, 265; Strauss, *NRH*, 21–22.

activity in such a way that it severs the symmetry between his thought and Strauss's thought. It is this question that informs the substantive issues about which MacIntyre and Strauss appear to disagree.

Addressing these substantive issues requires first resolving an interpretative one. Interpreting MacIntyre's project correctly requires acknowledging that while he has a single philosophic project, many of his arguments have been reformulated or revised. Befitting the scope of his project, MacIntyre sometimes stated positions schematically or in brief asides (as in his judgment about Strauss). Later, a further reconstruction or elaboration of these positions (sometimes undertaken by others) becomes his revised, considered conclusions.[25] These revisions are consonant with the way MacIntyre understands the philosophical project of *After Virtue* and his subsequent works. MacIntyre's works are part of a unified enquiry proceeding from his core theses. But his views have an open-ended character, subject to further revision and development, and some views remain open-ended.[26] While some of MacIntyre's initial formulations leaned in historicist directions, his revisions take him away from historicism and closer to positions that Strauss holds.

3. Tradition and Truth

One of the substantive issues that historicism raises is whether MacIntyre's concept of a tradition of rational enquiry makes truth subject to historical context. More interested in defending an Aristotelian tradition than Aristotle per se, MacIntyre places Aristotelian arguments into an Aristotelian tradition of enquiry, which is then compared to other traditions of enquiry.[27] For Tessitore, MacIntyre then appears to judge which tradition is truer based on a historically qualified understanding of truth: the Aristotelian tradition, culminating in Aquinas, is truer than other traditions because it survives the verdict of epistemological crises that emerge throughout history.[28]

This account of MacIntyre, however, misunderstands the role traditions of enquiry and epistemological crises play in his thought. MacIntyre has always

[25]In the late 1980s and 1990s, MacIntyre's critics contended that his Aristotelianism was politically conservative. Kelvin Knight argued that this was a misreading of MacIntyre—an argument that MacIntyre later endorsed. See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, 235. In 2007, MacIntyre added a prologue to *After Virtue* sharpening his criticism of political conservatism (see *AV*, xv–xvi; cf. 222).

[26]MacIntyre, *AV*, ix. See also Thomas D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 397–402; Kelvin Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 224–25; Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 7.

[27]MacIntyre, *AV*, 146–47; Bartlett, *Idea of Enlightenment*, 46.

[28]Tessitore, "MacIntyre and Aristotle on Virtue," 156.

been incipiently committed to philosophical realism, and he revised his views to make this commitment explicit in his 1990 Aquinas Lecture.[29] Truth is the correspondence or adequacy of the intellect to an object. It is a relationship between the mind and reality, which is expressed in judgment. Philosophical enquiry aims at comprehensiveness or finality, achieved by gaining knowledge of the *archai*, the permanent first principles: the goal of judgment is the approximation to this final truth, in which the mind is fully adequate to its object. At this point the first principles are known.[30] To achieve this goal, judgments are subject to dialectical testing, wherein judgments are compared. Dialectical testing succeeds when one judgment better approximates a final truth than another judgment. In that way it is possible to claim that philosophical enquiry is achieving rational progress toward finality. Nevertheless, this process of dialectics is not the same as the demonstration from first principles that shows that a judgment is comprehensively true. This means that, on the basis of dialectical testing, one cannot know for certain when final truth has been achieved. Although rational progress is possible, philosophical enquiry is open-ended, and one's judgments must always be open to further dialectical testing.[31]

Modern, primarily Cartesian, philosophy challenges how this realist yet provisional account upholds the open-ended character of knowledge claims. It develops an alternative epistemic account to meet a demand for confident self-awareness that one has achieved final truth. But this high standard for certainty comes up short.[32] It attempts to formulate a neutral and impartial ideal of rationality based on self-evident principles structuring the whole of reality. Yet it cannot secure agreement on what these self-evident principles are. For that reason, the modern ideal of rationality provides no reconciliation between alternative, incompatible, and incommensurate answers.[33] The agent engaged in rational enquiry will thus begin to doubt whether these philosophical questions can ever be resolved.[34] The neutral and impartial ideal of rationality, lacking the rational resources for resolving philosophical disagreements and successful dialectical testing, is responsible for the relativism

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[29]As MacIntyre thinks philosophy's object of enquiry is the world external to a tradition, he is therefore committed to philosophical realism. See Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 43, 47, 113–60; D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 410–14. MacIntyre's Aquinas Lecture is published in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Selected Essays*, vol. 1, *The Tasks of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Hereafter *TP*.

[30]MacIntyre, *TP*, 158–59.

[31]Ibid., 166–67.

[32]See, e.g., *TP*, 146–54.

[33]Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 3–4, 6. Hereafter *WJWR*.

[34]MacIntyre, *AV*, 11.

pervasive in modern philosophy. It culminates in perspectivism, where one questions the significance of any truth claim, and moral relativism. [35]

To understand dialectical testing properly, MacIntyre counters Cartesianism by placing the standards of rationality within historically developed traditions of rational enquiry. To avoid perspectivism and moral relativism, MacIntyre upholds that every tradition addresses a series of perennial questions: how we should best live, by what standards to evaluate our lives, and what norms we should support in our activities.[36] Philosophical debate about what is true proceeds from the standpoints of competing traditions of enquiry.[37]

To make progress in dialectical testing and resolve these perennial questions, a tradition develops certain epistemological ideals or standards of rational justification: what constitutes "appropriate reasoning, decisive evidence, and conclusive proof" for resolving a problem.[38] These standards develop in response to challenges and epistemological crises, so that rational justification has a history.[39] A justifiable tradition of enquiry must be able to extend itself through history, predicting otherwise unexpected events and resolving new problems that present themselves in attempting to answer the perennial questions.[40] When one tradition has the resources for resolving these new problems that remain insoluble to a second tradition, and can provide a specific account as to where those problems occur in the second tradition and why those problems remain insoluble, this provides some confirmation of the truth of the central assertions advanced within the first tradition.[41]

MacIntyre does not equate a tradition of enquiry's resolution of an epistemological crisis with the judgment that the tradition's conclusions are true. Epistemological crises are understood within the context of dialectically testing different judgments in order to advance philosophical enquiry toward the goal of final truth.[42] A tradition's capacity to resolve epistemological crises that perplex other traditions provides some evidence for claiming that one tradition better approximates final truth than another. Epistemological

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[35]MacIntyre distinguishes between relativism, where one holds that rational debate between conflicting traditions is irresolvable, and perspectivism, where one questions the significance of any truth-claim. See *WJWR*, 352. See also Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 66–111 and *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue,"* (London: Continuum, 2012), 176–79; D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 403–9.

[36]Alasdair MacIntyre, "Intractable Moral Disagreements," in *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), 32–33.

[37]MacIntyre, *WJWR*, 363–66; "Intractable Moral Disagreements," 32–34.

[38]MacIntyre, *TP*, 11–12.

[39]MacIntyre, *WJWR*, 8.

[40]Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 48.

[41]MacIntyre, "Intractable Moral Disagreements," 34–35.

[42]MacIntyre, *TP*, 163–64.

crises have some explanatory power for recounting why some theories are true and others false, but they do not replace judgment about what is true; a tradition's capacity to solve a crisis is not a demonstration that it has achieved final truth.[43] In short, a tradition of rational enquiry is unreservedly truth-seeking. MacIntyre is neither a perspectivist nor a radical historicist, because he grants that there are timeless truths and that the goal of philosophy is to discover and articulate them.[44]

While Strauss only cursorily addresses the epistemic questions that MacIntyre explores at length, his position bears a strong symmetry to MacIntyre's. On one hand, both maintain that truth is eternal and that philosophical investigation seeks final truth or first principles, or knowledge of the first things or the whole. On the other hand, both acknowledge the limitations of human reasoning that make it difficult, if not impossible, to declare definitely that one possesses final truth or knowledge of the whole. For MacIntyre, enquiry is always open-ended, in need of further revision. For Strauss, "the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of all the problems."[45] While MacIntyre emphasises the limits of philosophical enquiry by referring to a tradition of rational enquiry, Strauss emphasises the weakness of the human intellect alongside the mystery of the whole.[46]

Yet both incline toward skepticism rather than the dogmatism ascendant within modern philosophy. Strauss shares MacIntyre's opposition to any neutral and impartial ideal of rationality that claims self-evident principles upholding the whole of reality. Like MacIntyre, Strauss attributes the error to Descartes, who thinks of the whole as a "mere object of man's knowledge," as if it could be known self-evidently or necessarily in the manner of mathematical truths.[47] The principles of knowledge constituting the whole of reality cannot be self-evident. Strauss holds that knowledge of the whole is not immediately accessible to the human mind.[48] It is grasped only in pieces,

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[43]Ibid., 167–68.

[44]Ibid., 5; *AV*, 270.

[45]Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," 116.

[46]E.g., "The classics were fully aware of the essential weakness of the mind of the individual" (ibid., 114). See also Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 54, 69, which connects Strauss's account of the mystery of the whole with his aim to recover what metaphysics intended.

[47]Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 144.

[48]Gregory Smith, "The Post-Modern Leo Strauss?," *History of European Ideas* 19, no. 1 (1994): 193. Smith observes that Strauss imitates Aristotle, for whom *nous* does not grasp first things or the whole directly. Importantly, this imitation allows Strauss to counter Heidegger. Heidegger's historicism claims to expose a single metaphysical tradition and its questionable Cartesian premise about the whole being immediately intelligible and knowledge as an object. For Strauss's description of this issue, see

by dialectically pursuing knowledge of the parts. But as knowledge of the parts requires knowledge of the whole, knowledge remains elusive: we only possess "partial knowledge of the parts."[49]

Strauss's emphasis on the tentative character of philosophic truth makes it seem as if he thinks all knowledge claims are impossible.[50] In fact, if one replaces "first things" or "the whole" with MacIntyre's "first principles," one sees that Strauss is implicitly upholding an epistemic conception that MacIntyre, drawing from Aquinas, upholds explicitly against Descartes. Interpreting Aquinas, MacIntyre argues that knowledge claims do not have to meet the high standard of certain self-awareness that Descartes demands.[51] In acknowledging that genuine knowledge proceeds from the understanding of the first principles (in Strauss's terms, the first things or the whole), one can still affirm that one knows, without having direct awareness of those first principles. This kind of knowledge claim is tentative but ordered toward a more comprehensive understanding. MacIntyre concludes: "all knowledge even in the initial stages of enquiry is a partial achievement and completion of the mind, but it nonetheless points beyond itself to a more final achievement in ways that we may not as yet have grasped."[52]

This epistemic conception parallels Strauss's paradoxical emphasis on the limitations of philosophical activity, while still insisting that philosophy must pursue its highest goals: knowledge of "God, the world, and man." Also interpreting Aquinas, Strauss acknowledges that despite the absence of final, confident certainty, some kind of knowledge of first things or the whole is possible and desirable.[53] This is the consolation that zetetic philosophy does not degenerate into play.[54]

NRH, 30–31; see also Richard Kennington, "Strauss's *Natural Right and History*," *Review of Metaphysics* 35, no. 1 (1981): 57–86, esp. 67; Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy*, 122.

[49]Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?," 39.

[50]Cf. Paul DeHart, "Political Philosophy after the Collapse of Classical, Epistemic Foundationalism," in *Reason, Revelation, and the Civic Order: Political Philosophy and the Claims of Faith*, ed. Paul DeHart and Carson Holloway (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 39–40.

[51]"It is difficult to discern whether we know from appropriate principles, which alone is genuinely scientific knowing, or do not know from appropriate principles" (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*, bk. 1, lect. 18, cited in *TP*, 149).

[52]MacIntyre, *TP*, 149.

[53]"The slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I q1 a5, cited in "What Is Political Philosophy?," 11). This refutes DeHart's charge that Strauss's conception of philosophy is epistemologically incoherent. See DeHart, "Political Philosophy after the Collapse," 39.

[54]Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," 116.

4. Tradition and Epistemic Progress

For Strauss, historicism holds to a concept of necessary progress and relativizes the beliefs of all ages, so there is no regress. This raises the substantive issue of whether MacIntyre's account of epistemic progress is historicist. Now, MacIntyre rejects the concept of necessary progress: the modern alternative to Aristotelian practical reasoning is regressive.[55] Yet because of MacIntyre's sympathy for a tradition of enquiry, he handles epistemic progress in a way that differs from Strauss. MacIntyre's arguments for a tradition of enquiry and the role of epistemological crises are an ambitious account of how epistemic progress takes place over time. Strauss's comments on the viability of a "tradition" are skeptical. Whereas MacIntyre thinks a tradition is constitutive for progress in philosophical enquiry, Strauss doubts that the concept of a tradition, if broadly understood as a "Western tradition," withstands precise analysis. Moreover, Strauss thinks traditions inhibit philosophical enquiry; it is "the essence of traditions that they cover or conceal their humble foundations by erecting impressive edifices on them," obscuring genuine phenomena.[56]

But Strauss's suspicious remarks about traditions do not entail that he is opposed to MacIntyre outright. He must accept three of the premises that prompt MacIntyre to develop the concept of a tradition of enquiry. First, Strauss must think some epistemic progress is possible. For example, "The Socratic Turn" represents epistemic progress over the mistaken conception of the whole that the sophists and the pre-Socratics promulgate.[57] Second, Strauss must agree with MacIntyre's view that as philosophical enquiry proceeds, it encounters new philosophical positions and problems, which challenge old positions and transform how we must approach perennial philosophical problems. Traditions change the approach to philosophy. For Strauss, modern political philosophy fuses philosophical and historical questions and contends that it is simply better than earlier approaches. But this historicized development obscures its own status as a tradition, as a modification of the concepts of premodern political philosophy. Following from the development of this tradition, Strauss concludes that philosophy cannot be defended straightforwardly but requires its altered introduction: awareness of the traditional character of modern philosophy, then historical recovery

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[55]Strauss, *NRH*, 22; "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," 576–77. Cf. MacIntyre, *AV*, 1–2.

[56]Strauss, *NRH*, 31. See also Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 73 (hereafter *RCPR*); *CM*, 9.

[57]Strauss, *CM*, 13–17, 20–21. Strauss would describe epistemic progress as ascent out of the cave. He opposes positivism and radical historicism, which dogmatically insist that an improved understanding of the whole is impossible. See Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy*, 73.

of premodern philosophy. In this way, awareness of a tradition is for Strauss a requirement for philosophical understanding.[58]

Third, Strauss agrees with MacIntyre that traditions are never to be valued for their own sake, and must be evaluated on their own philosophical merits.[59] This is evident in their critical treatments of the modern philosophical tradition. For both, the failure of the tradition of modern philosophy to solve its own predicaments requires a critique of its philosophical foundations. MacIntyre explicitly adopts genealogy as a subversive activity. He exposes the negative consequences of the Enlightenment's choice to reject teleology.[60] While Strauss does not explicitly use the language of genealogy, his approach is similar. He uses the history of modern political philosophy to expose the premises that, in successive waves, lead into radical historicism. This allows for the historical recovery of philosophy, as it was originally understood, to take place. But Strauss's "genealogy" is not as subversive as MacIntyre's. Strauss softens his criticisms of the architects of modernity, comparing them sympathetically with premodern philosophers.[61] In sympathizing with the modern project, Strauss considers its own philosophical merits and thus sympathizes with a philosophical tradition.

Ultimately, the major difference is that MacIntyre deploys his genealogy for subverting the liberal Enlightenment tradition of enquiry and vindicating another, the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition of enquiry.[62] By contrast, Strauss makes tradition itself problematic. As Nathan Tarcov points out, tradition is for Strauss "both an access and an obstacle to understanding."[63] His recovery of philosophy is a phenomenological turn "to the things themselves" to get a genuine account of reality. Reflecting on the significance of "the Socratic turn," Strauss looks for the prephilosophic and pretraditional foundations of reality, prioritizing the political things as the path to recover the

[58]Tarcov, "Philosophy and History," 15.

[59]Hence it is a mistake to think that Strauss exalts the "Western tradition" for its own sake. See *RCPR*, 73. MacIntyre agrees: traditions are only properly traditions insofar as they seek rational understanding of reality, and cannot be contrasted to rationality. In that vein, both Strauss and MacIntyre are critical of Edmund Burke for emphasizing historical practices and disparaging theory. See *NRH*, 311, 318–19; *AV*, 221–22. See also Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy*, 132–33.

[60]MacIntyre, *TP*, 172–73.

[61]See Michael and Catherine Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 167–72, 192–95. Strauss also expresses admiration and sympathy for the philosophical stances of Martin Heidegger. See Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy*, esp. 41–61, 67–68, 126.

[62]E.g., MacIntyre, "Replies," 205.

[63]Tarcov, "Philosophy and History," 15.

genuine understanding of philosophy.[64] Unlike MacIntyre, who hopes to vindicate a tradition emerging from Aristotle, Strauss hopes to recover the Aristotle who preceded this tradition.[65] Aristotle makes an attempt to understand political things on their own terms, and so provides a direct relationship to political things that is not mediated by a tradition.[66] These are the contours of Strauss's path to recover genuine philosophy that can understand the whole.[67]

5. The Interpreter's Philosophic Activity: MacIntyre on Aristotle's "Mistakes"

The substantive issue in *After Virtue* is that MacIntyre seems to use historicist presuppositions to fault Aristotle.

> Aristotle did not understand the transience of the *polis* because he had little or no understanding of historicity in general. Thus a whole range of questions cannot arise for him including those which concern the ways in which men might pass from being slaves or barbarians to being citizens of a *polis*. Some men just are slaves "by nature," on Aristotle's view.[68]

Apparently on this basis, MacIntyre contends that Aristotle makes five mistakes.[69] First, Aristotle exalts the Greek polis as the only possible arena in which to pursue the good life. But, MacIntyre argues, this is incorrect:

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[64]Strauss's path is reminiscent of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, but breaks with them on the decisive point of political things. See *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 31; *NRH*, 79; *RCPR*, 28–29; "A Giving of Accounts," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 460–62. See also Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy*, 66–68, 71–72; David O'Connor, "Leo Strauss's Aristotle and Martin Heidegger's Politics," in Tessitore, ed., *Aristotle and Modern Politics*, esp. 166–67, 181–96.

[65]Strauss, *CM*, 11–12.

[66]See Nathan Tarcov, "Leo Strauss's 'On Classical Political Philosophy,'" in *Leo Strauss's Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading "What Is Political Philosophy?,"* ed. Rafael Major (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 66.

[67]Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy*, 46, 72.

[68]MacIntyre, *AV*, 159–60.

[69]Tessitore, "MacIntyre and Aristotle on Virtue," 138. While I identify five, Tessitore focuses on three. Because MacIntyre has developed his views since *After Virtue*, I restate MacIntyre's position and criticisms of Aristotle with a view to his whole work. With that broader restatement, it is possible to see the strengths and defects of Bartlett's and Tessitore's interpretations of MacIntyre. A defect in their approach is that they base their judgment almost exclusively on the reading of *After Virtue* (despite the fact that both wrote after the publication of MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals*, his most comprehensive restatement of his stance toward nature).

the good life can be realized in other social and political arenas with which Aristotle was not familiar. Second, his account of virtue and vice makes a false virtue of magnanimity based on a flawed emphasis on human self-sufficiency, elevating the life of the Greek aristocrat while denigrating the artisan classes and the virtues involved in manual skill and labor. Third, his understanding of human nature excludes non-Greeks, women, and slaves from the good life.[70] Fourth, Aristotle neglects to consider insoluble, sometimes tragic moral dilemmas.[71] Fifth, Aristotle holds to evidently mistaken views of metaphysical biology.[72] These five criticisms impel MacIntyre to reconstruct Aristotelian ethics free of these mistakes. According to Tessitore, MacIntyre comes close to establishing "historical consciousness as an unassailable, virtually a priori, basis for the activity of philosophic investigation itself."[73]

But none of the criticisms MacIntyre makes of Aristotle suggest that MacIntyre believes himself to have a superior historical consciousness. The first three criticisms stem from philosophical conclusions about the nature of political things: the kind of community in which the good life is possible, what constitutes virtuous activity, and the kind of human nature required to achieve the good life. MacIntyre is asking whether Aristotle's conclusions are true—a question distinct from whether modern historical consciousness prejudices us about his views. MacIntyre writes: "What is *likely* to affront us—*and rightly*—is Aristotle's writing off of non-Greeks, barbarians and slaves, as not merely not possessing political relationships, but as incapable of them."[74] For MacIntyre, Aristotle's overly exclusive views about the polis, what qualifies as virtues, and who can achieve the good life, are all instances where a thinker has made mistakes in their own philosophical investigation into the nature of political things.

MacIntyre distinguishes between the truth and falsity of conclusions and an explanation as to why a thinker has made false conclusions. His comments on Aristotle's "historicity" are confusing, but they are about Aristotle's "historical context" and serve as an auxiliary sociological explanation for how he ended up with mistaken views. MacIntyre holds that Aristotle's blindness was not particular to him, but "was part of the *general*, although *not universal*,

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[70]Variations of these three criticisms are found throughout MacIntyre's work. See *AV*, 157–60; *WJWR*, 104–5; *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 7–8, 127, 164–65 (hereafter *DRA*); *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 85–86 (hereafter *ECM*). See also D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 258–59; Lutz, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue,"* 179–80.

[71]MacIntyre, *AV*, 157–58, 163.

[72]MacIntyre, *AV*, 158; cf. xi.

[73]Tessitore, "MacIntyre and Aristotle on Virtue," 158.

[74]MacIntyre, *AV*, 159. Emphasis added.

blindness of his culture."[75] Noting these cultural deficiencies does not elimi-
nate the responsibility agents have for making these mistakes, nor does it
determine in advance that they will make mistakes.[76] There is a "general"
tendency within the culture to believe some mistaken things, but it is not a
"universal" necessity, as historicism holds. In making this distinction
MacIntyre is subtler than Collingwood.[77] Whatever Aristotle's brilliance, he
was not infallible.

Explaining, as MacIntyre does, why a thinker has made false conclusions
requires knowledge of historical context. But it need not entail historicist pre-
suppositions. In "Political Philosophy and History," Strauss distinguishes
between historical knowledge and historicist presuppositions. To use
Strauss's language, MacIntyre's Aristotle has mistaken "the specific features
of the political life of one's time and one's country for the nature of political
things," a mistake "only" remedied by "historical knowledge."[78] For
MacIntyre to judge that Aristotle has made mistakes, and to explain why, is
for him to affirm, as Strauss does, that historical knowledge is important
for political philosophy, in the sense that historical knowledge can help one
achieve a better understanding of the nature of political things.

Nevertheless, MacIntyre acknowledges that he made mistakes in his inter-
pretation of Aristotle; in Strauss's language, he "underestimated the difficulty
of finding out 'What Aristotle meant by his statements' or 'Whether what
he thought was true.'"[79] In later works, MacIntyre retracts his fourth and
fifth criticisms of Aristotle, the most explicitly historicist.[80] MacIntyre's
self-corrections show that his abiding concern is with whether the positions
of Aristotle are true or false.

6. Naturalism and Morality, Ancient and Modern

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's formulation of how Aristotle introduces the
virtues is as the qualities which enable the human agent to achieve their
telos of *eudaimonia*.[81] As MacIntyre knew, Aristotle went on to argue that
nature determines the specific good that human beings seek. The *ergon*

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[75]MacIntyre, *AV*, 159. Emphasis added.

[76]Aquinas's example is that the ancient Germans did not consider theft to be wrong
(*ST* I-II q94 a4). Cf. "Intractable Moral Disagreements," 7–8.

[77]Cf. Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," 575.

[78]Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History," 56–57.

[79]Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," 585. Cf. MacIntyre, *AV*, x:
"What I now understand much better than I did twenty-five years ago is the nature
of the relevant Aristotelian commitments."

[80]Alasdair MacIntyre, *Selected Essays*, vol. 2, *Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2006), viii–ix.

[81]MacIntyre, *AV*, 148.

(function) argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* tries to determine the specific good that human beings seek in terms of the specific *ergon* of the human being. Aristotle answers this in terms of the unique activity characteristic of the human being, stemming from a feature of the human nature, the rational part of the soul.[82]

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre was concerned that Aristotle's ethics presupposed this supposedly discredited metaphysical biology, so he looked for a completely different account.[83] MacIntyre thought that for the human *telos* to be defensible, one must abandon substantive, biological justifications and argue that the human *telos* is the historical direction of human life—the narrative unity of a human life.[84] History must replace nature. As Bartlett charges, MacIntyre's acceptance of an "essentially historical character of morality" accepts "a version of historicism" that could "collapse into relativism."[85]

Following *After Virtue*, MacIntyre acknowledged that this historicist account of the human *telos* lacked objectivity, and was therefore insufficient to refute moral relativism. To achieve objectivity, MacIntyre revised his account to ground teleology not on history but on nature. To elaborate on the specific human nature that supports the common deliberation about the good that achieves the specifically human *telos*, MacIntyre acknowledges that the account of the goods requires a natural, biological explanation, which he develops in *Dependent Rational Animals*.[86]

MacIntyre follows Aristotle in identifying human flourishing as a specifically human activity, though he adds his own reflections on how human animals are similar to and different from nonhuman animals. Human beings need to understand themselves as practical reasoners about goods, and in order to achieve this understanding we must learn from and argue with other humans about human flourishing.[87] All this helps us judge truly for ourselves what is good. The specific activity that must be realized to achieve human flourishing is independent practical reasoning. "Independent" signifies that we humans evaluate our own social practices and the social practices of others. This enables us to judge and act on our own.[88]

While MacIntyre follows Aristotle in arguing that we need the moral and intellectual virtues because of the kind of biological being we are, he emphasizes different virtues. He argues that we are rational animals whose biological vulnerability (susceptibility to disability and affliction) throughout life makes us mutually dependent on one another. To become independent

[82]See *EN* 1097b22–1098a20; cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 62–63.

[83]See MacIntyre, *AV*, xi, 148, 162.

[84]MacIntyre, *AV*, 217; D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 277.

[85]Bartlett, *Idea of Enlightenment*, 49, 51.

[86]MacIntyre, *DRA*, x.

[87]Ibid., 67–68.

[88]Ibid., 71–77; Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy*, 197–98.

practical reasoners, we require the constant aid and assistance of other independent practical reasoners.[89] The virtues that enable us to become independent practical reasoners foster these relationships of aid and assistance, the virtues of "acknowledged dependency."[90] A key virtue of acknowledged dependency is "just generosity."[91] Interpreting Aquinas's analysis of the virtue of *misericordia* (mercy or pity), MacIntyre argues that *misericordia* calls us to meet the urgent needs of our fellow human beings, notably when situations of vulnerability arise. Only when we can depend on others can the goods human beings seek in their social practices be realized.[92] While *Dependent Rational Animals* is in a significant way Aristotelian, MacIntyre turns "Aristotle against Aristotle" with "the aid of Aquinas."[93] He acknowledges that the biological explanation he offers is "not an especially Aristotelian one," because he grounds the human *ergon* in the human biological condition of mutual dependency, which Aristotle, placing too much emphasis on self-sufficiency, is reluctant to recognize.[94] It is Aquinas, not Aristotle, who provides a correct theory of the virtues.[95]

Since *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre's project has been to vindicate a biological or naturalistic understanding of human teleology. He provides a naturalistic, not historicist, account of morality. This account is meant to combat modern philosophy's prejudice against a teleological understanding of nature, notably human biological nature—a prejudice initially held by MacIntyre. MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals* is a head-on confrontation with this prejudice.

Strauss acknowledges that the same antiteleological prejudice exists in modernity, impeding the recovery of classical political philosophy. The Baconian investigation of nature has called into question the claim that the teleological conception of human nature can be grounded in biology. Baconian science thinks it is a mistake to understand the cosmos and biology in teleological rather than mechanistic terms. While the classical view attempts to fit a teleological conception of human nature into a teleological conception of the cosmos, the Baconian conception attacks the latter and undermines the former. In modernity, a new nonteleological cosmology reigns, which implies that a new nonteleological conception of human nature reigns.[96]

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[89]MacIntyre, *DRA*, 81–98; D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 378.

[90]MacIntyre, *DRA*, 120.

[91]Ibid., 121–23.

[92]Ibid., 123–28; MacIntyre is interpreting *ST* II-II q30 a3, a4; q31 a3.

[93]MacIntyre, *DRA*, 8.

[94]MacIntyre, *AV*, xi; *DRA*, x–xi, 127, 164; Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy*, 200.

[95]Cf. Tessitore, "MacIntyre and Aristotle on Virtue," 151. Rather than blurring the distinction between Aristotle and Aquinas, MacIntyre is clear he sides with Aquinas against Aristotle. In arguing that Aquinas and Aristotle share the same tradition, MacIntyre does not need to claim that they share the same answers to every set of problems.

[96]Strauss, *NRH*, 7–8; *WIPP*, 39–40.

But while MacIntyre and Strauss acknowledge the same modern prejudice, Strauss ultimately decides not to confront it directly. Strauss's path is to contend that one cannot know whether either the modern, nonteleological cosmology or the classical teleological cosmology is correct. Strauss sees the modern claim as another form of metaphysical dogmatism, about which he remains extremely wary.[97] Instead of committing himself to the ancient or modern account of "the whole" outright, Strauss bypasses this. By refusing to address directly whether one can philosophically justify the link between biological naturalism and teleology, Strauss departs from Aristotle. Instead, he follows the path of phenomenology, to recover the political things in themselves as a precursor to developing an account of the whole. Unlike MacIntyre, Strauss does not attempt to recover Aristotelian naturalism, and so makes no attempt to contest modern cosmology's ambition to dispel the application of teleology to living (including human) beings.[98]

7. Natural Theology and the Theologico-Political Problem

A curious feature of MacIntyre's Aristotelian naturalism is that it is a defense of Aquinas's conclusions, rather than Aristotle's. This embrace of Aquinas poses difficulties for the claim of philosophic symmetry between Strauss and MacIntyre. For Strauss, Aquinas attempts an overly rigid synthesis between biblical theology and philosophy. Since MacIntyre sides with Aquinas against Aristotle, it is possible to charge MacIntyre with attempting

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[97]Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography,* trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 129–30. There is a discrepancy between the argument Strauss makes in the main body of the text at *NRH*, 8, and the citations from Aristotle's *Physics* 196a30ff., 199a3–5. Strauss's lesson is to be wary of definitive accounts of the whole. See Stephen Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 50; Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy,* 128; Terence Marshall, *À la recherche de l'humanité: Science, poésie ou raison pratique dans la philosophie politique de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Leo Strauss et James Madison* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009), 295–96.

[98]For Strauss, the strategy of neo-Thomists is to concede the validity of the nonteleological cosmology but argue for a teleological conception of human nature. This strategy has two flaws. First, it breaks the link between cosmology and human nature, setting up a potential contradiction about the nature of the whole. Second, it gives up on providing a comprehensive presentation of the whole. This strategy "presupposes a break with the comprehensive view of Aristotle as well as that of Thomas Aquinas himself" (*NRH*, 8; *WIPP*, 285–86). If MacIntyre attempted this strategy in *After Virtue, Dependent Rational Animals* shows that he is more faithful to Aristotle and Aquinas on terms Strauss himself acknowledges.

a synthesis between biblical theology and philosophy.[99] For Strauss, this would be a serious charge: Aquinas's approach conceals the perennial theologico-political problem, of which Strauss aims to raise awareness throughout his works.[100] Strauss's theologico-political problem is "the fundamental question" as to which is the source for knowledge of reality: unassisted human reason or divine revelation.[101]

In Strauss's view, Aquinas's theological synthesis makes it unclear whether conclusions about reality are coming from the source of unassisted human reason, as they often purport to be, or are in fact conclusions only achieved through divine, biblical revelation.[102] In critiquing Aquinas's synthesis, Strauss's strategy is to expose instances where seemingly philosophical enquiry is really driven by the authority of divine revelation. Strauss's aim is to show that the tension between unassisted human reason and divine revelation cannot be eluded.

However, Strauss's critique would not rebut MacIntyre. MacIntyre's use of Aquinas against Aristotle is grounded in naturalism, not divine revelation. He argues that Aquinas's description of biological dependency is a better description of the human species than Aristotle's reliance on biological self-sufficiency. In light of this biology, *misericordia* is, as we saw in section 6, the most important moral or character virtue for human beings to cultivate. In MacIntyre's argument, it is a natural or secular virtue.[103]

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[99]Barlett and Tessitore touch this theme. Bartlett thinks that if MacIntyre affirms Christianity (with its "simply true" accounts of the world), then he must break with the historicism he allegedly holds. See Bartlett, *Idea of Enlightenment*, 53. For Tessitore, MacIntyre's embrace of Christianity is another kind of historicism: "Whereas Aristotle sought to ground his understanding by moving toward some biologically informed conception of *nature*, Aquinas anchored his appropriation of Aristotle on the authority of grace as it has been revealed in *history*" (Tessitore, "MacIntyre and Aristotle on Virtue," 152). Since MacIntyre's argument is that Aquinas displays a superior understanding of nature to Aristotle's, Tessitore's conclusion does not apply to MacIntyre's Aquinas.

[100]Leo Strauss, "Preface to *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft*," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 453; See also Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 4–5.

[101]Strauss, *NRH*, 74.

[102]Strauss, *NRH*, 144, 157–59, 163–64. Recognizing the same issue, MacIntyre writes that "the most cogent statement of the case against" the reconciliation of biblical theology and Aristotelianism lies in the "unduly neglected minor modern classic" of Harry Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (*AV*, 278).

[103]MacIntyre, *DRA*, 124. MacIntyre's naturalism exposes him to a theological critique for failing to consider the role grace must play in perfecting the human life. See Joseph Dunne, "Ethics at the Limits: A Reading of *Dependent Rational Animals*," in *What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical*

If the charge is not true of MacIntyre's specific Thomist arguments, perhaps it is true as to how MacIntyre conceives of the relationship between reason and revelation in his account of his own philosophic activity. As a self-professed Thomist and Catholic, MacIntyre grants that divine revelation is a source of knowledge.[104] Thus MacIntyre's conception of philosophy seems to provide the perspective of a "synthesis" between reason and revelation; evading the tension, he really yields to the authority of knowledge provided by divine revelation.[105]

But MacIntyre is closer to Strauss's formulation than initially appears to be the case. First, they agree that philosophy and divine revelation are both ordered toward acquiring true knowledge of reality. They also agree that these sources are distinct. Since revelation must be in principle inaccessible to unassisted human reason, it is the authoritative source of knowledge in cases where unassisted human reason cannot achieve the requisite knowledge of reality.[106] As a Catholic believing in the role grace plays to perfect nature, it need not trouble MacIntyre to uphold this claim; stated more theologically, natural human reason cannot in principle access the supernatural. Divine revelation, not human reason, communicates knowledge of the supernatural.[107]

As Strauss declares, the distinction between divine revelation and unassisted human reason produces a civilizational tension between the implications divine revelation has for understanding nature and the conclusions unassisted human reason is inclined to make about nature.[108] While MacIntyre does not speak in such grand terms, he acknowledges such a tension.[109] To navigate this, MacIntyre emphasizes that the goal of human reason is truth. Divine revelation is an additional source that human reason can use to acquire a greater understanding of what is true. Revelation does not put an end to the activity of human reason, but provides new resources and new direction for enquiry. It is from the commitment to continued rational enquiry that tensions between these theoretical claims and others will arise.[110] MacIntyre examines these tensions from the point of view of a

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Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre, ed. Fran O'Rourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 68–76.

[104]MacIntyre, *TP*, 182.

[105]Strauss, *NRH*, 74.

[106]Strauss, *NRH*, 75.

[107]See Ernest Fortin, "Rational Theologians and Irrational Philosophers: A Straussian Perspective," in *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem*, ed. Brian Benestad (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 294–95.

[108]Strauss, *RCPR*, 270.

[109]MacIntyre, *TP*, 197–98.

[110]Ibid., 213–14.

secular philosopher, not a theologian. He brackets theology, inviting his reader to debate him on philosophical grounds.[111] On this path, he and Strauss are in agreement. As philosophers, they halt their enquiry at the same point, when pursuing the question of *quid sit deus* would take one beyond secular philosophy.[112]

When tensions arise, MacIntyre freely debates whether theoretical claims about nature that draw from divine revelation stand up to the scrutiny of unassisted human reason. Like Strauss, when unassisted human reason and divine revelation appear to reach contradictory conclusions, MacIntyre sides with unassisted human reason. On these grounds, there are points where MacIntyre disagrees with Aquinas. For example, he disagrees that Christian rulers have a duty to punish heresy. His reason is that Aquinas misunderstands the nature of political things, confusing political and theological categories. Aquinas does not recognize "the possibility of a political common good shared by individuals and groups of differing religious belief."[113] Aquinas appeals to theology and canon law to make these arguments, not to nature. MacIntyre's case against Aquinas vindicates nature over and above an interpretation of divine revelation: to be justified philosophically, morals must be grounded in nature, not theology.[114]

MacIntyre is sensitive to the theologico-political problem, as Strauss understands it. To preserve the secular, unassisted character of his philosophic reasoning, MacIntyre avoids writing theologically. In cases where his philosophic activity conflicts with an interpretation of divine revelation, MacIntyre does not adopt either a rational or a pious silence.[115] Instead, he allows nature to serve as the arbiter. When contradiction arises, he defers to unassisted human reason. MacIntyre's enquiry may arrive at conclusions compatible with religious authority, but like Strauss's, his enquiry remains within the realm of philosophy, as he presupposes that no authoritative source for knowledge of nature is readily available and no authoritative source concludes enquiry.

[111]"My philosophy … is secular in its content as any other" (MacIntyre, "Interview with Giovanna Borrado," 266). See also MacIntyre's account of early twentieth-century Thomists at *ECM*, 106; D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 392.

[112]Cf. Strauss, *CM*, 240–41; MacIntyre, *ECM*, 314–15.

[113]MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, 62.

[114]"It is in the end corrupting to suggest to [the purely secular] world that the only adequate grounds they can have for certain norms is that there is a revelation which declares there to be such" (Alasdair MacIntyre, "Pastoral Concerns," in *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Vatican II: A Look Back and Ahead*, ed. Russell Smith [Braintree, MA: The Pope John Center, 1990], 257).

[115]MacIntyre, *TP*, 182, 213–14.

Conclusion: Awareness of the Fundamental Problems

The apparent disagreements between Strauss and MacIntyre obscure deeper agreements. Nevertheless it remains true that Strauss and MacIntyre are not the same. To close, after summarizing their deeper agreement on the activity of philosophy, I sketch some important differences that I hope are made clearer by understanding their agreements. The goal here is to recognize that considering the perspective of the other thinker can sharpen the account of what their genuine disagreements are.

Starting from different points and using different vocabulary, Strauss and MacIntyre have a similar understanding about philosophy's goals and its limits or qualifications. Strauss and MacIntyre consider theoretical activity as a zetetic or provisional activity that raises awareness of the questions the tradition of metaphysical philosophy poses. For both, these questions are definitively posed and tentatively solved. To refute radical historicism, Strauss emphasizes how important it is for philosophy to raise definite *awareness of* the fundamental questions. To refute perspectivism and relativism, MacIntyre emphasizes how important it is for philosophy to raise definite awareness *of the means by which* the fundamental questions can be tentatively solved.

While Strauss and MacIntyre argue for the paramount importance of theoretical activity, they do not lose sight of the fact that theoretical activity is an *activity*, ordered toward the discovery of reality. For Strauss, philosophy is a "way of life" ordered toward knowledge about God, man, the world, and the nature of all things, but never reducible to a system about these things.[116] For MacIntyre, philosophy is a "practice" ordered to "a comprehensive vision of the good, the ends of life, and the order of things"; but philosophy's characteristics are not reducible to this system.[117] Their idea of philosophy is as a way of discovery.[118]

While both thinkers argue that the present moment requires a mixture of philosophy and history to re-present this idea of philosophy, MacIntyre's greater sympathy for Collingwood could compromise his philosophic activity with historicist assumptions. But for MacIntyre—as for Straus—history, while necessary for philosophy, remains its auxiliary. The goal of philosophy is to gain final truth, understood as knowledge of what is eternal and permanent. In advancing toward final truth and evaluating epistemic progress, philosophy needs an account of how dialectical testing between competing judgments can take place. It is at this point that a tradition of rational enquiry assumes its role, as a way to provide evidence that epistemic progress

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[116]Strauss, *RCPR*, 259.
[117]MacIntyre, *TP*, 180–82.
[118]Cf. Seth Benardete, "Socrates and Plato: The Dialectics of Eros," in *The Archaeology of the Soul: Platonic Readings of Ancient Poetry and Philosophy*, ed. Ronna Burger and Michael Davis (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's, 2012), 245.

is taking place, while emphasizing that theoretical judgments are fallible and in need of revision. MacIntyre's way of discovery discovers in turn that his own judgments are in need of revision, including the historicist criticisms of Aristotle he once made.

Considering their disagreements provides complementary resources for better understanding philosophy's fundamental problems. First, both raise awareness of the "Cartesian" problem which provides a starting point for the goal of better understanding the problem of modernity. For Strauss, Descartes mistakenly contends that the "whole" is an object of knowledge; for MacIntyre, Descartes mistakenly sets too high a standard of self-awareness and certainty for knowledge claims. Though MacIntyre and Strauss do not emphasize this in their work, they share a common sympathy with the epistemological critique of modernity associated with mid-twentieth-century Thomism.[119] Followers of Strauss should explore this aspect of modernity in more detail, as modernity's epistemology is the means by which historicism spreads.[120] They should also draw attention to Strauss's veiled critique of Christianity, which is complicit in preparing the modern project.[121] Followers of MacIntyre should acknowledge that MacIntyre's account of modernity is vague on its conceptual roots in premodernity, which suggests that he must provide a better statement on modernity's origins.[122] Second, conversation between Strauss and MacIntyre shows the interpretive strengths and weaknesses of each's reading of Aristotle. Both acknowledge the "open-ended, unresolved character" of Aristotle's texts.[123] MacIntyre sees this as an expression of philosophic activity itself, and thinks this requires critical philosophic engagement with the arguments in the text to articulate their reasonability or soundness. MacIntyre thus confronts Aristotle's arguments directly. Yet Strauss's Aristotle ultimately points not to Aristotle's arguments, but back to Plato's dialogues.[124] The goal here is

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[119]Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Scribner's, 1950), 132–33; Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, trans. Mabelle Andison (London: Editions Poetry London, 1946); Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1970), esp. 57–60, 65; John Hittinger, "On the Catholic Audience of Leo Strauss," in *Leo Strauss and His Catholic Readers*, ed. Geoffrey Vaughan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 175–76 and n. 18, 186–87.

[120]Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines*, 93.

[121]See Ralph Hancock, "Leo Strauss's Profound and Fragile Critique of Christianity," in Vaughan, ed., *Leo Strauss and His Catholic Readers*, 316–19.

[122]MacIntyre sketches some aspects of these origins in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 152–54, 162.

[123]Tessitore, "MacIntyre and Aristotle on Virtue," 147.

[124]See Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 144–66.

to use textual interpretation to give a better account of philosophy, against the modern challenge. MacIntyre's approach can more directly challenge modern metaphysical assumptions. He seeks to answer the question whether Aristotelian biological naturalism can be vindicated in the face of modern prejudice against it, and looks to later thinkers who reconstruct this argument in justifiable ways. In a de facto concession to the moderns, Strauss avoids this question. He does not challenge the modern project's basic assumptions about nature as boldly as does MacIntyre, and this casts doubt upon the character of his project.[125] But Strauss's approach can better capture the pedagogy informing the philosophic life. Strauss is more attentive than MacIntyre to the intention behind the "open-ended, unresolved character" of Aristotle's writings. Unlike MacIntyre, Strauss considers the esoteric thesis, the contention that some philosophers do not make their true teaching explicit in their texts. An important aspect of esotericism is that it can help transmit philosophical understanding.[126]

Third, conversation between the two can pursue the goal of understanding the social question of how and indeed whether to distinguish between philosophers and nonphilosophers. Strauss's "sociology" strongly demarcates between philosophers and nonphilosophers.[127] MacIntyre, by contrast, places philosophers and nonphilosophers on a continuum of lesser to greater deliberation, but marked by a common capacity to live well. While Strauss writes that "philosophy must beware of wishing to be edifying," but is "of necessity edifying," MacIntyre pushes the second clause more strongly.[128] He argues that *a* task of philosophy is to make nonphilosophers or "plain persons" more capable of critical self-deliberation. Plain persons can become more philosophical, but they need not become philosophers to achieve the human good. On this point MacIntyre is correct: his "conception of philosophical enquiry is … so very different from that of Leo Strauss."[129] Strauss's challenge to MacIntyre is that the "plain person" who is "merely just or moral without being a philosopher

[125]For a comparison of two approaches to this ambiguity, see Peter Minowitz, "The Enduring Problem of Leo Strauss?," *Claremont Review of Books Online*, October 21, 2014, https://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/the-enduring-problem-of-leo-strauss, accessed Feb. 5, 2019.
[126]Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines*, 205–34; cf. 30–46, 373–78: MacIntyre is formed by the tradition that argues esotericism is a foolish legend.
[127]Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 7–8. Because Strauss thinks that this sociology helps clarify the perennial character of philosophy's relationship to the city, he need not immediately discount as relativism MacIntyre's own acknowledgment of the importance of sociology for philosophy. Cf. Descombes, "Alasdair MacIntyre en France," 140–41.
[128]Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 299.
[129]MacIntyre, "Replies," 207.

appears as a mutilated being."[130] If MacIntyre's "plain persons" are genuinely seeking the human good, they must overcome modern liberalism's pervasive distortions to practical reasoning. Consequently, they must be more rare—and more philosophic—than MacIntyre seems to think. This obliges a more direct confrontation with Strauss's demarcation of society.[131]

Fourth, conversation between Strauss and MacIntyre can provide a more complete presentation of the theologico-political problem. Strauss avoids a comprehensive definition of this theme, enabling a variety of "Straussian" interpretations with differing theoretical assumptions about theology, philosophy, and politics.[132] Putting Strauss and MacIntyre in conversation draws attention to the theoretical assumptions at play in philosophy, especially in terms of the questions of natural theology and philosophy of religion. Attending to these themes makes it clear that Strauss has disputable theoretical assumptions that require interpretative and critical clarification.[133] For example, the character of divine causation and the separation between revelation and philosophy are controversies in the philosophy of religion. Strauss inclines toward Karl Barth's strict separation; MacIntyre, despite early sympathies, is finally critical of Barth's strict separation. Strauss inclines toward voluntarism; MacIntyre concludes voluntarism is untenable. Strauss is skeptical of any natural account of moral absolutes; MacIntyre concludes that natural reason identifies moral absolutes.[134]

Given the provisional character of philosophy that both Strauss and MacIntyre defend, these debates, on their own terms, are hardly settled. Followers of Strauss can learn from the extended philosophical treatments of natural religion, developing or challenging some of the points on which Strauss was elusive.[135] Followers of MacIntyre and other Thomists can learn from Strauss's insights on the flexibility of natural law in the face of political challenges.[136] Because Strauss and MacIntyre are not in agreement about how to confront the theologico-political problem, they bring home for us that there is a *problem* that needs to be addressed. Starting a productive conversation between the two invites, therefore, a heightened awareness that philosophy's fundamental problems persist.

[130]Strauss, *NRH*, 151.

[131]Cf. Beiner, *Political Philosophy*, 188.

[132]See Michael Zuckert, "Straussians," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 263–75.

[133]Cf. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 16, 24–26.

[134]Leora Batnitzky, "Leo Strauss and the 'Theologico-Political Predicament,'" in Smith, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Strauss*, 45; MacIntyre, "Interview with Giovanna Borrado," 257, 266; *AV*, 150; Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair MacIntyre*, 88, 145–47; D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 123–63, 230, 249, 389–93; Strauss, *NRH*, 162.

[135]E.g., Marc Guerra, "Modernity, Creation, and Catholicism: Leo Strauss and Benedict XVI," in Vaughan, ed., *Leo Strauss and His Catholic Readers*, 111–13.

[136]E.g., Geoffrey Vaughan, "Wisdom and Folly: Reconsidering Strauss on the Natural Law," in Vaughan, ed., *Leo Strauss and His Catholic Readers*, 77–93.