Getting into the Game of Tradition-Constituted Moral Inquiry: Does MacIntyre’s Particularism Offer a Rational Way In?

Nathan P. Carson

Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre’s early project highlights contemporary moral fragmentation, in which the typical person, a product of Enlightenment individualism, endures a cacophony of historically and philosophically “incommensurable” voices competing for her allegiance.¹ One of MacIntyre’s chief aims is to provide this fragmented modern self with resources to adjudicate these competing claims and give full allegiance to a coherent tradition of moral inquiry.² However, MacIntyre’s Thesis of Rational Particularism might hamper such a person’s rational choice between rival moral traditions:

There is no tradition-independent, neutral, or universally acceptable rational standpoint from which the competing claims of rival traditions can be sufficiently evaluated or an allegiance-choice made, for the resources of adequate rationality are only available from within coherent traditions.³

Additionally, MacIntyre’s strategy for silencing the self-avowed relativist might further impede the rational choice of the fragmented self. For, like the relativist, the fragmented self remains outside any coherent tradition and is thus unequipped to rationally adjudicate between them.

In this paper, I combat a prevalent argument that MacIntyre’s Particularism Thesis (and his relativist disjunction) renders the tradition allegiance-choice of the fragmented self non-rational and

---


² For instance, he claims that his book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is “primarily addressed [to] someone who [has] not as yet ... given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry,” and who is “besieged by disputes over what is just and how it is reasonable to act.” Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), 393.

³ Cf. *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*, 10 and 367. This Thesis is, arguably, the central claim of this entire book. Central to MacIntyre’s overall project is a thoroughgoing rejection of an Enlightenment conception of “pure” rationality and rational justification, divorced from the historical context and development of specific traditions of enquiry. His conceptions of rationality and its normative dimensions are inextricably tied to traditions and their formative histories as such, and he calls this the “tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive” character of rational inquiry.
hence arbitrary, in a way that also commits MacIntyre to relativism about practical rationality and moral theory. I contend that MacIntyre can retain strong Particularism, and that the allegiance-choice of the fragmented self need not be arbitrary in a way that leads to relativism. Furthermore, the Particularist MacIntyre can still pedagogically assist his target readers; they need not be stuck in a real paradox of inquiry. I show that while his historical resources are problematic, MacIntyre’s personal narratival resources can positively contribute to tradition allegiance-choices.

The Narrative Self and MacIntyrean Tradition

For the early MacIntyre, human beings are “narrative” selves, whose identity is always already composed of various tradition-constituted pieces of rationality and moral perspectives. For MacIntyre, such beings need to understand their own narrative before they can ask what to choose or decide: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” The problem, according to MacIntyre, is that in fallaciously reducing the human self to a traditionless, autonomous chooser of arbitrarily selected goods and actions, the Enlightenment project has left human beings in a morally fragmented and incoherent state. The typical disinherited product of Enlightenment individualism is thus a person constituted by pieces of various traditions, but without a coherent place in any of them, such that the narrative unity of his life is undermined. Such a self is thus often confronted with rival and

---

4 George, Haldane and Graham have all endorsed some version of this claim, but none of them have either sufficiently articulated the objection, or robustly developed the defensibility of the claim.

5 MacIntyre continues: “We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed” (After Virtue, 201).

6 On the one hand the modern moral agent is “freed from hierarchy and teleology” and “conceives of himself and is conceived by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority.” On the other, however, moral rules have been stripped of their teleological and categorical divine-law character, such that appeal to them now appears, at bottom, “a mere instrument of individual desire and will” (After Virtue, 62).

7 However, in Whose Justice?, MacIntyre does claim that incoherent Enlightenment individualism has itself become a new tradition, that is, the liberal tradition. But, he also claims that this tradition is unique in that its original formulation and development was a decidedly anti-traditional. So, at best, liberalism is an anti-tradition tradition: “...liberalism,
incompatible accounts of practical rationality and justice competing for her moral, social, and political allegiance.⁸

The fragmented self depicted here is challenged with the question of where to place her own allegiance, but nonetheless is not yet part of any coherent tradition of inquiry, as MacIntyre understands them. A robust and coherent MacIntyrean tradition is a socially and historically particular community of inquiry, with distinctive and potentially coherent utterances, beliefs, institutions and practices, in which participants see themselves as part of the tradition, and are consciously reflective on the historical narrative and future trajectory of the tradition.⁹

For MacIntyre, with the exception of the incoherent liberal “tradition,” these traditions can help initiate and sustain the coherence and narrative unity of a person’s life. Moreover, in MacIntyre’s view, authentically giving one’s allegiance to a robust tradition is an all or nothing matter: “…genuinely to adopt the standpoint of a tradition thereby commits one to its view of what is true and false and, in so committing one, prohibits one from adopting any rival standpoint.”¹⁰

MacIntyre describes this typical, fragmented modern self in the opening pages of Whose Justice? Which Rationality?: “…what many of us are educated into is, not a coherent way of thinking and judging, but one constructed out of an amalgam of social and cultural fragments inherited both from different traditions from which our culture was originally derived (Puritan, Catholic, Jewish) and from different stages in and aspects of the development of modernity (the French Enlightenment, the Scottish Enlightenment, nineteenth-century economic liberalism, twentieth-century political liberalism). So often enough in the disagreements which emerge within ourselves, as well as in those which are matters of conflict between ourselves and others, we are forced to confront the question: How ought we to decide among the claims of rival and incompatible accounts of justice competing for our moral, social, and political allegiance?” (Whose Justice?, 2)

At its most basic level, for MacIntyre, “A living tradition...is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition (After Virtue, 207). However, when MacIntyre outlines the more robust differentiating features of traditions, the radical particularity of each emerges, and forms part of MacIntyre’s strong anti-Hegelianism: “traditions are always and ineradicably to some degree local, informed by particularities of language and social and natural environment, inhabited by Greeks or by citizens of Roman Africa or medieval Persia or by eighteenth-century Scots, who stubbornly refuse to be or become vehicles of the self realization of Geist” (Whose Justice?, 361).

¹⁰ Whose Justice?, 368.
by different pieces of traditions, must choose between genuinely incommensurable and “antagonistic” rivals. How is such a self supposed to “get in the game,” so to speak, of robust tradition-constituted moral inquiry?

The Thesis of Rational Particularism

Getting in the game is a problem. How is this incoherent self to rationally choose between rival traditions and their totalizing demands for allegiance? MacIntyre famously rejects an Enlightenment conception of “pure” practical rationality and rational justification, divorced from the historical context and development of specific traditions of inquiry. For MacIntyre, rationality and its normative dimensions are inextricably tied to traditions and their formative histories as such; rationality is by nature “tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive.” So, MacIntyre consistently affirms what I call the Thesis of Rational Particularism, as stated above:

There is no tradition-independent, neutral, or universally acceptable rational standpoint from which the competing claims of rival traditions can be sufficiently evaluated or an allegiance-choice made, for the resources of adequate rationality are only available from within coherent traditions.

Positively, the Particularism Thesis emphasizes the embeddedness of practical rationality and argumentative theses in historical contexts and the traditions bringing them into being, each of

---

11 Ibid., 368.

12 Ibid., 10. MacIntyre notes that disputes about the nature of practical rationality (and rationality in general) are as manifold and intractable as are disputes about the nature of justice. “To be practically rational, so one contending party holds, is to act on the basis of calculations of the costs and benefits to oneself of each possible alternative course of action and its consequences. To be practically rational, affirms another party, is to act under those constraints which any rational person would agree should be imposed. To be practically rational, so a third party contends, is to act in such a way as to achieve the ultimate and true good of human beings.” Ibid., 2.

13 I derive this formulation largely from Whose Justice?, 367. The negative thesis is designed, in part, to end the interminable Enlightenment search for universally undeniable rational principles, which for MacIntyre do not exist. MacIntyre shows how proponents of various Enlightenment camps have themselves never agreed on what those principles are: “One kind of answer was given by the authors of the Encyclopedie, a second by Rousseau, a third by Bentham, a fourth by Kant, a fifth by the Scottish philosophers of common sense and their French and American disciples. Nor has subsequent history diminished the extent of such disagreement. It has rather enlarged it” (Whose Justice?, 6).
which has its own “specific mode of rational justification.” Negatively, the thesis denies that there is any place outside traditions from which to adjudicate between the claims of rivals, and that these rivals are based on incommensurable premises and modes of justification.

Consider, then, the predicament of our fragmented modern self. By MacIntyre’s Particularism Thesis, it would seem that such a person has no rational means to evaluate competing traditions and their claims, for such means are available only to robust participants of competing traditions of inquiry. I will return to the predicament of the fragmented self presently. First, however, I will examine issue of moral relativism, which has a significant bearing on this predicament.

The Challenge of Relativism

In light of his Particularism Thesis, MacIntyre is often accused of relativism about either practical rationality, moral theory, or both. If there are no tradition-independent bases of practical rationality available to any rational person as such, and each tradition employs distinct and incommensurable premises and modes of rational justification, then we are left with no way to rationally adjudicate between the competing claims of those traditions.

MacIntyre’s gives two standard responses. First, he claims that incommensurability does not entail incomparability, for competing traditions do share a respect for minimal requirements of

14 Cf. for example, Whose Justice?, 9. MacIntyre adds: “…from the standpoint of tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive enquiry, what a particular doctrine claims is always a matter of how precisely it was in fact advanced, of the linguistic particularities of its formulation, of what in that time and place had to be denied, if it was to be asserted, of what was at that time and place presupposed by its assertion, and so on” (Whose Justice?, 9-10).

15 Hence MacIntyre states that “There is no place for appeals to a practical-rationality-as-such…to which all rational persons would by their very rationality be compelled to give their allegiance. There is instead only the practical-rationality-of-this-or-that-tradition…” (Ibid., 12).

16 I am grateful to Robert C. Miner for this helpful distinction. In his article, “Lakatos and MacIntyre on Incommensurability and the Rationality of Theory-Change,” Miner identifies three different theses of incommensurability. Thesis 1 (IT1) is the strongest, and posits an incommensurability of semantic meaning, criteria, and goals. Thesis 2 (IT2) holds to an incommensurability of criteria, but commensurable semantic meaning. Thesis 3 (IT3) is MacIntyre’s position, according to Miner. IT3 involves incommensurability of most semantic meaning as well as common and decisive criteria (as IT1 and IT2), but affirms a commensurability of goals (229). On semantic meaning,
logic and a minimal conception of truth, as well as “some standards of justificatory reasoning and some premises.” Further, all coherent traditions of moral inquiry share a commitment to claims of non-local, universal truth and unqualified standards of justification. This is, in part, what makes competing traditions bona fide rivals. While these minimal common resources are always insufficient to resolve moral disagreements, says MacIntyre, intra and inter-traditional closing in on the truth is nonetheless possible.

MacIntyre’s second response is that “epistemological crises” sometimes occur in which a tradition of inquiry fails by its own standards to solve crucial problems, suffering an internal coherence failure. Moreover, sometimes the problems of the crisis-ridden tradition can be better

---

17 After Virtue, prologue to 3rd edition, xii.


19 Ibid., 8. In the wake of Dependent Rational Animals, of course, MacIntyre adds competing universal-truth claims about human nature as the “ground” of competing universal claims about morality: “Every major moral standpoint…presupposes…some distinctive account of human nature and activity and of how human nature and activity are such that morality is whatever the adherents of that particular standpoint hold that it is. So, the claim to authority…is never merely local. It is never merely the claim that this is how we Athenians democrats (sic.) or we Japanese Confucians or we Shi’ite Iranians happen to live; it is always the claim…that ours is the best way for human beings to live. And a crucial ground for this claim is the further claim that our account of human nature and activity is by and large true… [and] their account of human nature is false.” MacIntyre, “Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism,” in The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, vol. 1 issue 0 (1999), 3.

20 This response is a block to relativism, for over time, a tradition of inquiry begins to “recognize what it shares with other traditions, and in the development of such traditions common characteristic, if not universal, patterns will appear.” Whose Justice?, 359.

21 However, though not decisive for resolving differences, these minimal common resources are occasionally “sufficient to enable enquiry to identify and transcend” limitations in one’s own tradition of enquiry (“Moral Relativism,” 24).

22 Whose? Justice, 361-63. One example MacIntyre gives of an unsuccessful attempt at resolving such a crisis, is the attempt by Reid and Stewart to “rescue the Scottish tradition from the incoherence with which it was threatened by a combination of Humean epistemological premises with anti-Humean moral and metaphysical conclusions” (363).
solved by a rival tradition through an immanent critique.\textsuperscript{23} In this way, one tradition can indeed emerge as the rational victor over another, without violating the Particularism Thesis.\textsuperscript{24}

Problematically, however, both responses presuppose robust participation within a coherent tradition of inquiry. What about MacIntyre’s fragmented target reader who is composed of tradition-pieces, but has not given such full allegiance to any of them? MacIntyre’s third response to the relativist challenge, and the only one relevant to this fragmented self, appears to put this person in a very problematic position.

This third response is designed to silence the self-conscious proponent of relativism, who claims that that no tradition is to be rationally preferred, or that all traditions are (\textit{ceteris paribus}) equally endorsable by a rational agent. MacIntyre responds with what I call his Anti-Relativist Disjunction:

For assessing the rational adequacy of competing traditions someone must either be:

1. within a tradition, committed to its truth and using its rational and evaluative resources, or
2. outside any tradition, completely unequipped to rationally adjudicate between them.

This exclusive disjunction places the fully committed adherent of a coherent tradition on the one side and the deceived atraditional relativist on the other.\textsuperscript{25} Given the Particularism Thesis, only

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Whose Justice?}, 364-365. Here we must remember that the Thesis of Rational Particularism is still in force, making one tradition’s rationality and justificatory modes incommensurate (but not incomparable) with those of another. So, what makes this inter-traditional adjudication of “rational superiority” possible is an act of philosophical imagination on the part of the superior tradition, in which its adherents genuinely try “to think in the terms prescribed by...a rival tradition,” imagining themselves as “convinced adherent[s] of that rival tradition.” This enables a given tradition to identify the internal problems of a rival, and articulate a resolution to these problems through its own tradition-constituted resources. \textit{After Virtue}, prologue to 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition, xiii.

\textsuperscript{24} MacIntyre also adds that it is possible that some rival traditions could persist in irresolvable conflict due to unrecognized or unacknowledged defeat, or simply because the resources for deciding rational superiority have yet to emerge. One example he gives of such conflict in perpetuity are the current rival traditions of Thomistic Aristotelianism, Madhyamaka Buddhism, and Modern Utilitarianism (\textit{After Virtue}, prologue to 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition, xiv). But, says MacIntyre, the historical facts and theoretical possibilities of both occasional decidability and internal coherence failure, is enough to block the strong relativist thesis that each tradition will always be vindicated on its own terms (\textit{Whose Justice?}, 366).

\textsuperscript{25} Here is MacIntyre’s own (loose) formulation of the disjunction: “Who is in such a position to issue such a challenge? For the person who is to do so must during such a period [of rival traditions’ stalemate] either be him or herself an inhabitant of one of the two or more rival traditions, owing allegiance to its standards of enquiry and justification and
those committed within a tradition of inquiry, employing its distinctive modes of reasoning and justification, can weigh in on matters of rational superiority. So, the self-avowed atraditional relativist has no resources with which to adjudicate the matter of rational preferability. Moreover, the allegiance of every tradition to the universal truth of their position precludes the relativist challenge.  

A False Dilemma for MacIntyre

Now, while this may silence the committed relativist, several of MacIntyre’s critics have argued that MacIntyre’s disjunction also bars his intended audience from any ability to rationally ask or answer the allegiance question. George, Haldane and Graham have each argued that MacIntyre faces a dilemma: He can either retain strong Particularism (and the related Anti-Relativist Disjunction), or weaken (or reject) it. If he retains it, then not only is he unable to be of any help to fragmented modern selves, he also remains open to charges of moral relativism. So, MacIntyre should weaken or reject strong Particularism, which is absolutely central to his entire early anti-Enlightenment (and anti-liberalism) project. The argument for the first horn of the dilemma runs something like this. MacIntyre’s target reader is a person who has “not yet given…allegiance” to “a coherent tradition of enquiry.” How can this person choose between rival traditions, and commit herself to one? Her choice must either be rational, or non-rational. It cannot be rational, for the Particularism Thesis holds that rational norms of practical reasoning and their modes of justification are only available to committed adherents within a coherent tradition. But the

---


27 Whose Justice?, 393.
target reader is *ex hypothesi* not so committed, so her choice must be non-rational, and hence arbitrary. And, if all such choices are arbitrary, then not only is MacIntyre unable to help his fragmented readers begin moral inquiry, his view also entails relativism about practical reasoning, and hence about moral (and political) theory as well.\(^{28}\) What is more, MacIntyre’s blocking of the avowed moral relativist doesn’t help matters, for it only *further* bars and alienates his target readers from getting started in tradition-constituted moral inquiry, and their allegiance choice remains arbitrary. In this situation, moreover, the moral relativist premise that *no tradition is to be rationally preferred* (or that all traditions are equally endorsable by a rational agent) remains firmly in place.

To avoid this alienation, arbitrariness and relativism, MacIntyre must either weaken or reject his Particularism Thesis, which, as I have noted, is rather central to his entire early project.

I contend that this dilemma founders on an implicit and unsound analogical argument comparing the avowed moral relativist and MacIntyre’s target reader.\(^{29}\) The analogical argument implied by George, Haldane and Graham, assumes that the avowed moral relativist and MacIntyre’s fragmented self both: (1) are outside all coherent traditions, (2) accept (or can accept) the Thesis of Rational Particularism, (3) are strangers to tradition-constituted moral inquiry, and thus (4) have *no* resources for rational inquiry or tradition evaluation. My response (and I think MacIntyre’s as well) is that the relativist and the fragmented self may indeed be both outside all coherent traditions and

\(^{28}\) My version of this argument is closest to Haldane’s (2004, p. 20). Graham simply cites Haldane, and George has a more loosely stated version of the argument. Graham has particularly strong remarks here: “...to anyone who stands outside” any given tradition, “the answers will be rationally unassessable, even unintelligible perhaps.” Further, Haldane’s suggestion of “suspicions of relativism” is too modest, for in Graham’s view, Haldane has in fact shown MacIntyre “to be a relativist” (Graham, 33-34).

\(^{29}\) I state the argument more loosely in the main text. Here is a formalized version: Let F be “the fragmented modern self” and R be “the avowed relativist.” Let O be the property, “being outside all coherent traditions,” and P be the property “accepts the Thesis of Rational Particularism.” Finally, let S be the property of “being a stranger to enquiry,” and N be the property of “having no resources for rational inquiry or evaluation.” Here is the analogical argument:

1. F is similar to R
2. R has properties O, P, S and N
3. So, F has properties O, P, S and N

This analogical argument is unsound. For, while F and R may both have properties O and P, only the relativist necessarily has properties S and N.
accept Particularism [(1) & (2)], while only the relativist is necessarily a stranger to tradition-constituted moral inquiry, and thus without any resources for rational inquiry or tradition evaluation [(3) & (4)].

From (1) and (2), the relativist draws three inferences that bring make him uniquely a stranger to inquiry and bereft of rational resources of evaluation. First, the relativist infers that no tradition can possess universal truth or the correlative unqualified justification. Second comes the inadjudicability inference, because no tradition can ever rationally vindicate itself against another. Third, the relativist concludes an equality of rational acceptability; a rational person could equally be at home in any tradition.30

For MacIntyre, these inferences entailed by the relativist’s position produce systemic estrangement from tradition-constituted modes of inquiry [i.e. (3)]. All coherent moral traditions are committed to the universal scope of their truth claims and justificatory modes, and hence to the falsity of relativism, denying all three inferences.31 Hence in drawing these inferences, the relativist is de facto a stranger to all traditions and at home in none; he is thus bereft of rational resources of evaluation [i.e. (4)].32 The relativist’s position is also self-defeating, for his presumed neutrality denies the Particularism Thesis, while he simultaneously endorses its truth.

Turning to the fragmented modern self, then, it is plainly possible for such a person, being outside all coherent traditions (1), to self-consciously admit the traditioned and socially-constituted character of her identity and rationality, and hence deny the relativist’s illusion of a neutral standpoint. For any such person, if she denies the neutrality-illusion and coherently holds to the Particularism Thesis (2), then she need not draw the three neutrality-funded relativist inferences leading to systematic estrangement (3) and a lack of rational inquiry resources (4). The rivals

30 Ibid.
31 For MacIntyre’s extended version of this argument, see “Moral Relativism,” 6-11.
32 Ibid., 7.
contending for her allegiance will remain genuine rivals making universal truth claims. The analogical argument supporting the first horn of the dilemma is unsound, and the dilemma false.

I think it follows that MacIntyre can consistently affirm his Particularism Thesis as well as his anti-relativist disjunction, while affording the fragmented self some resources necessary for rational inquiry; her choice need not be arbitrary. Moreover, while such a self still lacks sufficient resources for rational inquiry and evaluation to conclusively resolve moral disputes, the prospect of obtaining them lies open.33

MacIntyrean Resources for Inquiry

One might object that while MacIntyre escapes the proposed dilemma, his Particularist thesis still leaves the fragmented modern self with no substantial resources for real moral inquiry. In response, I will outline two resources that MacIntyre offers—historical and personal narratival resources—and argue that while both offer substantial positive contributions to the allegiance choice of the fragmented self, the former remains problematic, and the latter alone can sufficiently respond to the objection.34

A first resource, quite central to MacIntyre’s project, is that prior to a person’s full commitment to any one tradition, historical reasons could form a basis for allegiance choice. By studying the history of tradition-constituted forms of inquiry, rationality and justification and by


34 Due to space limitations, I have omitted what I call MacIntyre’s “minimal rationality resource.” MacIntyre has claimed that incommensurability does not entail incomparability, making demonstrable rational superiority of one tradition over another a real possibility. He affirms that competing traditions share a minimal respect for logic and a minimal conception of truth and its universality, as well as “some standards of justificatory reasoning and some premises” (After Virtue, prologue to 3rd edition, xii; “Moral Relativism”). Presumably, then, such minimal rational resources are available to the non-estranged seeker. However, these resources will probably not amount to much. Given the Particularism Thesis, apart from commitment to a coherent tradition the seeker still has no access to the robust reasoning, premises, or justificatory modes of any tradition. These minimal resources are thus insufficient for real inquiry, rendering the allegiance-choice perpetually undecidable. So, this placeholder for blocking relativism doesn’t help our fragmented modern self too much, but it at least ensures that, formally speaking, such a person’s allegiance-choice is never wholly non-rational.
internally understanding their triumphs and defeats, a seeker can develop a set of historical “reasons” for allegiance-choice. This is quite consonant with MacIntyre’s claim that rational progress can only “be judged by reference to the historic problematic of which it was a part,” and presumably it is this kind of judgment into which MacIntyre intends to lead his fragmented modern readers.35

This resource creates problems for MacIntyre’s project. By his Particularism Thesis, there is no rational “meta-criterion” that provides sufficient adjudication between rival traditions. But the seeker employing the resources of historical judgment would, presumably, make an allegiance choice in accordance with which tradition appears to have historically trumped the others. But, then, does the criterion of “which theory has proven historically to be the most effective problem solver” become the new “transcultural and transtemporal criterion of rationality,” external to any tradition as such?36

MacIntyre can respond to this meta-criterion objection. While this criterion is not unique to a single tradition, its source need not lie outside any tradition.37 For MacIntyre, successful problem solving between traditions is inextricable from successful coherence internal to each, so the shared external criterion is always a tradition-constituted internal criterion.

Nonetheless, the original problem of inadjudicability still looms. Presumably, the fragmented modern self can begin, through study, to share in the knowledge of a tradition’s history, and so move toward an induction into the rationality specific to that tradition. However, there are numerous historical stories, even the best of which are highly selective and perspectively shaped. Is there any reason to suppose that, in the end, a person must simply choose which history appears to


36 I am grateful to Stern for raising this question (Stern, 151-152).

37 Miner, 232.
“out-narrate” the others? In my view, the ultimate inadjudicability of solid, but rival historical narratives remains an issue for MacIntyre.

A final problem for the historical resource is that of elitism. The average fragmented modern self has neither the time for, nor the luxury of, sifting through the historically-constituted character of the competing claims that confront her. In the case of the average modern person, the objection that MacIntyre leaves the modern self with scant allegiance-choice resources, remains quite effective.

It is here that a second, and more promising pedagogical option arises, and it is focused on the individual narrative of the fragmented self. In MacIntyre’s picture, the fragmented self does not possess robust, largely coherent tradition-constituted rationality conceived of as a practical art, and so does not have the rational resources sufficient to judge one tradition as superior over another. However, such a self does have some rational resources necessary for getting started. I think the key here is MacIntyre’s notion that human selves are always already constituted, however incoherently, by some pieces of traditions and the norms of rationality inhering in them. In “Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy,” for instance, he exposes the mythical character of Sartre’s view that the initial choice of which philosophical direction to take is, for the “plain person,” “rationally unguided” and arbitrary.38 If we are, however fragmented, always constituted by some pieces of traditions and their norms of rationality, then it follows that our initial choices or movement toward one tradition or another can be guided by some tradition-constituted reasons. Given this picture, the fragmented self can progress toward “getting in the game,” perhaps by beginning with the tradition pieces that have

38 “Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues and Goods,” in Kelvin Knight, ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 137. Notably, MacIntyre does not deny that there are many fragmented selves who, due to social, philosophical and moral deprivation, lack the resources “to make fundamental choices in anything but a criterionless way.” Such persons have been “stripped of the ability to understand her or himself aright” (137-38). It is this sort of self with which I have been concerned in this paper. If they have been so stripped, how can they get started? MacIntyre’s answer, at least in “Plain Persons,” is that many such people are “proto-Aristotelian” enough to recognize themselves as beings possessed of “norm-governed directednesses,” a teleological orientation made evident, in part, through practices in which such selves are engaged (138-39).
been most formative in his or her own life. This beginning point will also make the initial movement non-arbitrary for the person getting started, given their personal narrative thus far.

This is why, I take it, MacIntyre enigmatically says that how one gets in the game will “depend on who you are and how you understand yourself.” This comment then brings up a second pedagogical option related to personal narratives. If a fragmented self buys into the Particularism Thesis, and accepts the view that human lives, as narratives, possess greater or lesser degrees of narrative coherence, such a person may, denying the view from nowhere, begin paying attention to his own life, norm-directed practices, and sources of fragmentation. If MacIntyre does move fragmented selves to pay such attention, they may find themselves becoming (as MacIntyre suggests) reflective about norms, goals, goods internal to their practices, and about how such goods are to be ordered, such that movement toward a coherent answer to the question, “what is my overall good?” gets underway.

Then, MacIntyre seems to motivate the tradition-adoption move by suggesting that, if the question of one’s own good is raised, one is typically led to consider the overall good for human beings. Once this meta-question is asked, the *zetetic* fragmented self may see the need for narrative coherence of the sort that can only be had through participation in a tradition which systematically pursues an answer to that question. Which tradition is chosen, it would seem, may depend on the narrative situation of the person choosing and the coherence-producing goods which that tradition offers relative to their story. Such a choice will be neither arbitrary, nor based on reasons universally acceptable by any rational person. Additionally, unlike the elitism of the historical resource, the minimal requirements of this resource for allegiance-choice are attractive. All that is needed is some self-reflection on one’s own story, honesty about sources of incoherence, and exposure in ordinary life with aspects of potential traditions.

---

39 *Whose Justice?*, 393.

40 That is, MacIntyre pedagogically points his readers toward, in Lutz’s words, the “subjective condition of the narrative quest for truth.” Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 58.
However, while this picture gives an answer to how it is that a fragmented self could in principle get started, some problems remain. For instance, if the main thing a tradition offers is a coherent view of the human good and narrative coherence for its participants’ lives, why can’t a person (in principle) get such answers and coherence on their own, apart from robust tradition participation? After all, narrative coherence is a property that extends beyond the tradition-embedded variety. It is unclear to me why such selves require tradition-participation to move beyond their fragmented state. Second, is reflective attention to one’s own story a tradition-independent mode of practical reasoning, based on one’s individual narrative and unique coherence needs? If so, it may be that MacIntyre needs a distinction between substantive tradition-constituted rationality, and the more modest rationality that is possible for narratival beings such as ourselves. This might require some weakening of the Particularism Thesis. However, I leave the pursuit of this issue, as well as the problem of tradition dispensability, for another time.

Conclusion

In sum, I’ve argued that MacIntyre’s Particularism Thesis, together with his exclusion of the relativist, does not render the allegiance-choice of his intended audience non-rational and hence arbitrary. MacIntyre can coherently uphold his Particularist Thesis, avoid the relativist charge, and still offer substantial allegiance-choice resources to the fragmented modern self.

---

41 As with the historical case, the objection that an extra-traditional meta-criterion of choice—namely, to choose the tradition which provides the best individual narrative coherence relative to one’s story—seems to fail. For, again, presumably the internal coherence criteria of every tradition will include success at providing adherents with a wide spectrum of coherence-producing practices and goods relative to the participants’ lives. Having said this, MacIntyre does admit that, in his later projects (such as Dependent Rational Animals), he came to see that he did in fact need a “biological grounding” for his virtue ethics. After Virtue, prologue to 3rd edition, xi.
Bibliography


