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Beyond Relativism? Rorty and MacIntyre on Historicism and Progress

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Abstract: In this chapter, I argue that despite Rorty and MacIntyre's shared historicism, critics are right to claim that Rorty is more of a relativist than MacIntyre because the latter provides a more substantial conception of rational progress. At its most fundamental, MacIntyre's inter-tradition conception of rational progress recognises incoherence as a general ill and the pursuit of truth as a general good, whereas the spectre of incommensurability precludes Rorty from establishing generalities regarding progress. Thus, after a brief introduction I present the key points of confluence found in Rorty's and MacIntyre's respective conceptions of historicism focusing on their conceptions of 'justification' and 'rationality' as well as their attempts to reject the charge of relativism. Then I show how MacIntyre's conception of rational progress and the role he envisions for truth as the ideal end of enquiry set him apart from Rorty. Finally, I conclude that these differences make MacIntyre less susceptible to the charge of relativism and that this, in turn, makes his conception of progress more alluring than Rorty's.

Key Words: Historicism, Progress, Relativism, MacIntyre, Justification, Rationality, Truth

1. Introduction

Hilary Putnam explains that historicism is the view according to which "all our ideas, including above all our ideas of rationality, our images of knowledge, [are] historically conditioned" (Putnam 1983, p. 287). In this view, there is no way of settling debates about the way the world is in itself once and for all, and those who claim to do so are dogmatists blind to their own historical limitations. In other words, historicists typically believe that there is no neutral perspective from which we can grasp the world as it is *sub specie aeternitatis*; all we can hope to attain is a particular perspective embedded in a particular language, epoch, and culture. Understood in this way, Richard Rorty and Alasdair MacIntyre (2007, p. xiii) are historicists.

It is sometimes argued that a consequence of historicism is an acute form of cultural or historical relativism (see, for example, Putnam 1983, pp. 287-88). Yet, in 'MacIntyre and

Historicism', Robert Stern argues that MacIntyre manages to avoid this type of relativism whilst still holding onto a form of historicism (Stern 1994, pp. 146-7).[1] Moreover, Stern maintains that MacIntyre succeeds in proposing a substantive conception of 'progress' and thereby avoids the pitfall of relativism characteristic of Nietzschean leaning historicists such as Rorty. Although it would be unfair to characterise Stern's piece as revolving around this issue (because its stated aim is to explore the cogency of MacIntyre's position), the claim that MacIntyre's historicism is less relativistic than Rorty's is in need of justification. In this chapter, I will seek to provide it. Ultimately, I will argue that MacIntyre's conception of progress is less relativistic than Rorty's on the grounds that the former allows for a more substantive (that is, less contingent) notion of progress than the latter. Indeed, MacIntyre holds that progress *across* traditions consists in reducing incoherence and getting closer to truth, whereas Rorty does not offer a cross-vocabulary criterion of progress but merely situated liberal solidarity. In section 2, I will thus characterise Rorty and MacIntyre's historicisms by way of presenting their respective conceptions of 'justification' and 'rationality', as well as their attempts to overcome the threat of relativism. Then, in section 3, I will show how MacIntyre's conception of progress departs from Rorty's in envisioning an inter-tradition criterion of rational progress which amounts to overcoming incoherence and pursuing truth, while Rorty is content with a highly contingent conception of progress inexorably bound to his vocabulary.

2. Historicism

Charting the points of confluence between Rorty's and MacIntyre's respective versions of historicism requires explaining their respective conceptions of 'justification' and 'rationality', as well understanding their responses to the charge of relativism. I will thus address these in turn.

2.1 Justification

Rorty and MacIntyre reject the idea that "there are procedures of justification which are natural and not merely local" (Rorty 1991a, p. 22). Instead, they recognise that existing groups and their practices are the sources of legitimate procedures of justification. In the realm of justification, Rorty's ethnocentrism and MacIntyre's historicism thus share a communitarian sensitivity.

According to Rorty's ethnocentric account of justification, we cannot make sense of claims to absolute validity or transcendent truth for the simple reason that propositions and sentences are a part of the human world, but they are not to be found in the nonhuman natural world under the form of "facts" (Rorty 1989, p. 5). Indeed, Rorty rejects the correspondence theory of truth:

> The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that. (Rorty 1989, p. 6)

On this account, although the world can cause us to hold beliefs, it cannot justify them. For example, according to Rorty, the belief that the world is spherical might be caused by particular aspects of our experience of the world (for example, that the horizon bends in the distance when observed at an altitude higher than 35,000 feet, or that one can return to one's original point of departure if one travels in a straight line for long enough, or that the images of the Earth from Space show that it has a spherical shape) but this belief is only 'rationally justified' as a result of human interaction. In other words, whilst we may be creatures that live in a world which shapes our biology and constrains our abilities and activities, our linguistic faculties do not map on to the world in such a way that our words actually represent the world around us. Rather, the kind of interaction that makes a belief justified is thoroughly discursive, insofar as a belief must be taken to be justified by one's community in order to be justified. Subsequently,

justification is intensely local (in terms of where the community begins and ends) and historical (in the sense that a belief might fall in and out of favour). Rorty writes:

> [O]ne consequence of antirepresentationalism is the recognition that no description of how things are from a God's-eye point of view, no skyhook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-developed science, is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were. (Rorty 1991a, p. 13)

As Bjørn Ramberg (2009, §2.2) puts it, for Rorty, "we can give no useful content to the notion that the world, by its very nature, rationally constrains choices of vocabulary with which to cope with it". Instead, on this account, justification always occurs within a given discursive context or a community. For Rorty, communities are contingently bound by the existence of a shared conceptual apparatus (which he calls 'vocabulary'). This conceptual apparatus consists of broad clusters of sounds, symbols, and metaphors thanks to which members of a given community express (and hopefully, communicate) meaning with each other. These modes of communication do not represent the world more or less successfully; they are mere tools in Rorty's view. Their function is to enable humans to cope with their environments, but none point more or less successfully to the way the world really is. Thus, for Rorty, since all we can encounter is a multitude of diverging justificatory mechanisms, we cannot hope to develop meta- or absolute standards of justification.

Similarly, for MacIntyre (1988, p. 8), "the concept of rational justification […] is essentially historical." He argues that each tradition is enshrined in its own language and possesses its very own standard of rational justification. Why? In his view, all standards emerge from practices and practices take place within particular traditions, where each tradition constitutes an "argument extended through time" (MacIntyre 1988, p. 12). So, for example, praying to a single God is a practice that pertains to a monotheistic tradition – say, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Furthermore, practices emerge with narratives embedded in particular languages. To further the example, the *Old Testament*, the *New Testament* and the *Qur'an* offer

three different Abrahamic ways of thinking about the existence of a single God. Such narratives reflect the self-understanding of those taking part in their respective practices. In this sense, each of the three sacred texts reflects the idea that monotheists owe their piety to one and only one God. But narratives also "set the constitutional limits for the practices they define" (Lutz 2004, p. 43). So, practices that fail to respect the unity of Divinity – such as, for example, offering a sacrifice to a God in the Greek Pantheon – are excluded from monotheistic traditions. Conversely, the purported commandments of the single God set the standards by which one can be said to be a good monotheist according to Abrahamic traditions. It follows from this, for MacIntyre, that the standards by which one's actions can be evaluated are internal to the practice one is taking part in. For example, it could be said that monotheistic traditions are guided by the hope of putting human beings in contact with the one true God. Thus, the self-image of a practice is a direct consequence of "a particular goal or good internal to its practitioners" (Knight 1998, p. 10).

At first glance, this may seem rather uncontroversial as it appears quite natural to evaluate the greatness of an agent by reference to the activity in which this agent is invested. We thus find it natural to evaluate the greatness of, say, a farmer according to some set of standards that are different from those used to evaluate, say, a basketball player. Indeed, the farmer seeks to work the land in order to produce the best quality and the greatest quantity of food, whereas the basketball player seeks to perform the maximal number of acts that will contribute to their team winning basketball games. And yet, this level of differentiation is not what MacIntyre is driving towards. The explanation I just provided portrays judgments about value as being merely instrumental calculations of the following form: if one is an agent of type *t*, then one's excellence will be demonstrated by the accomplishment of acts that result in goods *g*. Instead, MacIntyre hopes to demonstrate that the very way in which such a judgment is arrived at is a fluctuating matter (see MacIntyre 1988, p. 4). In other words, practices not

only vary in the internal goods they promote, but they also vary in the ways in which beliefs about the desirability and attainment of such goods are justified.

Practices take place within traditions, and standards emerge from practices, but traditions provide the historical context under the form of narratives within which practices take place (MacIntyre 1977, p. 453). So, the relationship between traditions and practices is dialectical. On the one hand, practices provide the continuous instantiations of the characteristics particular to this or that tradition. In other words, the tradition of playing basketball is kept alive by the continuing practice of the sport. And on the other hand, traditions establish the conceptual fabric within which judgements about practices can occur. In the case of basketball, this means that the existence of a tradition of playing basketball makes it possible to take part in the game, because the tradition sets the rules, aims, and language within which one can be said to be playing this sport and not another. Thus, because traditions set the language within which we can make judgements, all judgements occur within one tradition or another.

But what happens when different traditions put forward diverging judgments? How are we to determine which is correct and which false? Lutz (2004, p. 43) explains that "[a]ccording to MacIntyre there is no tradition-independent judging between traditions."

2.2 Rationality

What does this tell us about MacIntyre and Rorty's respective conceptions of rationality? Arguably, if we cannot determine what is the procedure of rational justification thanks to which we can arrive at transcendentaly true propositions, then we cannot hope to have a true belief about which standards of rational justification are truly rational. There is little doubt that Rorty and MacIntyre accept some general notion of theoretical rationality, in the sense that they both accept that if we accept that 'if p then q' is true, then the assertion of p

entails the assertion of q. Yet, MacIntyre argues that standards of practical rationality are not only specific to a tradition but cannot hope to escape being tradition-constituted. In other words, each tradition has its own standards of rational justification (MacIntyre 1988, p. 348).

Thus, earlier, when I used the example of the farmer and the basketball player to illustrate how different functions can require different actions in virtue of the fact that different functions serve different ends, I was implicitly making use of the instrumental conception of 'practical rationality'. For MacIntyre, this means-ends notion of rationality is a by-product of the tradition of the Enlightenment epitomised by David Hume (see MacIntyre 1988, pp. 300-325); it is not the only or the true meaning of 'rationality'. In Mark Colby's (1995, p. 54) words, according to MacIntyre, "there is no evaluatively neutral understanding of rationality."

For Rorty, the picture is very similar. First, he embraces the usefulness of instrumental rationality, although he does not see it as being an absolute standard of rational justification. Second, he argues against the idea that certain people actually possess an extra-ingredient called 'rationality' that distinguishes "human beings from brutes" (Rorty 1998, p. 186). Rather, he holds that standards of rationality are broadly internal to epistemic communities, as "our norms and standards always reflect our interests and values" (Rorty 1998, p. 49 – here Rorty approvingly quotes Putnam 1990, p. 21). Moreover, ascribing 'rationality' to some people and not to others, essentially dissociates members of our communities (those we consider to be "rational human beings") from non-members (those we see as "brutes") (Rorty 2000, p. 62). Thus, Rorty proposes that 'rational' "names a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force" (Rorty 1991a, p. 36). And yet, he does not offer a precise standard by which we might able to evaluate competing claims to the kind of openness and inclusivity various communities might perform. This is all the more problematic since he depicts 'rationality' as being an essentially commendatory concept, the use of which is subject to the values, wants and needs of the

community making use of it. This means that conflict between communities regarding what counts as being 'tolerant' or 'willing to listen' cannot be resolved by appealing to an "overarching structure of rationality" (Rorty 1979, p. 271, fn.13). Accordingly, rational justification simply consists in a given community taking a specific belief to be rationally justified. However, this does not entail that a given belief simply needs to be taken to be justified by one's community in order for it to be justified *once and for all*. A certain version of fallibilism still prevails, since subjection to greater scrutiny and changing standards may affect how a community evaluates the rational standing of its beliefs.

Thus, for Rorty as for MacIntyre, rationality is not a single mind-independent standard. Furthermore, competing standards of rationality cannot be settled with reference to a meta-standard thanks to which all claims to rationality could be impartially evaluated and then compared against one another. This is why, I think, both Rorty and MacIntyre often find themselves compelled to answer the charge of relativism: since neither of them can appeal to an objectively rational standard that would provide the basis to determine which vocabulary or tradition is more rational compared to another, critics worry that such a standard would seem to be necessary to establish that Rorty's and MacIntyre's respective vocabularies and the traditions which they are participating in are, in fact, more rational than rival vocabularies and traditions.

2.3 Relativism

Critics sometimes call MacIntyre and Rorty 'relativists'.[2] Both, however, spend many pages refuting an imaginary interlocutor they call 'the relativist', in order to demonstrate how their respective position differs from that of this problematic character (see, for example, Rorty 1998, p. 51, pp. 56-9; MacIntyre 1988, pp. 366-367). How are we to make sense of this? Are

Rorty and MacIntyre simply unavowed relativists? Or are they merely misbranded as such by confused 'dogmatists'?

Let us start with Rorty. As is his custom, Rorty responds to the charge of relativism with none other than a distinction. For him, there are "three different views [. . .] commonly referred to by [. . .] [the] name [of relativism]" (Rorty 1991a, p. 23):

1. "every belief is as good as any other";

2. "true is an equivocal term, having as many meanings as there are procedures of justification";

3. "there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *ours* – uses in one area or another of inquiry" (Rorty 1991a, p. 23 – emphasis in original).

Out of these three, Rorty claims to only hold the third. This view, he argues, is 'ethnocentric' rather than 'relativistic'. Why? Because, unlike the traditional relativistic position epitomised by the view Socrates attributed to Protagoras – according to which "as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you" (Plato 1990, p. 272 [152.1]) – Rorty's view does not assert positively that something is relative to another. Instead, he is merely "making the *negative* point" (Rorty 1991a, p. 23 – emphasis in original) that we should stop thinking of truth as a transcendental predicate, but rather as a term of commendation ascribed to well-justified beliefs (according to relevant standards of justification). Rorty insists that he does not seek to proffer a theory of truth, but merely reject the correspondence theory of truth. Rorty explains the misconstrual of this position as being 'relativistic' on the basis that realists interpret this claim as being a positive theory of truth according to which 3 is asserted as absolutely true (Rorty 1991a, p. 24). This is why, for realists, Rorty's position seems hopelessly self-refuting. If 3 is true, then 3 cannot be true. And indeed,

using the form of the traditional relativist dilemma, but affording Rorty his own premise, he seems to face the following horns:

Either:

H1- There is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society - *ours*- uses in one area or another of inquiry, except for this statement.

Or:

H2- There is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *ours* – uses in one area or another of inquiry, and consequently, as this sentence does not describe familiar procedures of justification, it cannot be referring to, or saying anything about 'truth' or 'rationality'.

H1 is self-refuting and H2 makes 3 a trivial statement.

Although MacIntyre later softened his critique,[3] he once took Rorty to be committed to the self-refuting H1, writing:

> At perhaps its most fundamental level I can state the disagreement between Rorty and myself in the following way. His dismissal of 'objective' or 'rational' standards emerges from the writing of genealogical history […] But at once the question arises of whether he has written a history that is in fact true; and to investigate the question, so I would want to argue, is to discover that the practice of writing true history requires implicit or explicit references to standards of objectivity or rationality of just the kind that the initial genealogical history was designed to discredit. (MacIntyre 1982, p. 138)

In contrast, since Rorty flatly rejects the notion that practices of inquiry require a continued commitment to ultimate standards of objectivity or rationality, I think he can be understood as opting for H2. Why? One of his basic premises is that statements are not designed to represent the world; rather they are but more or less useful descriptions of it. If this is correct, then he should not be worried by triviality in respect for the truth value of his claim, for all claims would be trivial in this sense (Rorty 1991a, pp. 24-5). Thus, the reason why we should believe him is not that his theory is 'true', but rather that it is pragmatically useful for us to believe

him. However, something is only 'pragmatically useful' for one to believe with respect to a given set of ends. That is why 'pragmatically useful' cannot be collapsed into a claim to superior rationality, unless one strictly understands rationality as 'instrumental rationality'. But Rorty does not (Rorty 1989, p. 48). Consequently, he claims not to be saying that from a "God's eye view there is no God's eye view" (Rorty 1998, p. 58); rather he is providing a perspective which is profoundly rooted in the interests and values he defends – namely, democracy and liberalism. That is why he takes himself to be an open liberal ethnocentrist rather than a relativist (see, for example, Rorty 1991a, p. 217).

MacIntyre also accepts that a certain kind of relativism is part of the human condition (see Lutz, 2004, p. 43). This relativism is a consequence of what Colby calls MacIntyre's "constitution thesis", according to which "argumentative situatedness is inescapable: there is no thought, contention, or epistemic value that is not shaped by the specificity of some tradition" (Colby 1995, p. 54). And, like Rorty, MacIntyre accepts that this goes for his own theory as well (MacIntyre 1988, p. 367). However, they differ, at least in how they hope to convince their readers to value their theories despite their lack of universal appeal. We have seen that Rorty's argument is clearly pragmatic and rooted in the context of defending liberal values, but MacIntyre's is more dialectical. For MacIntyre, the correct way to evaluate theories is to understand them in their historical context, as each theory is a response to the limitations of immediately preceding theories within a given tradition. Thus, for him:

> The criterion of a successful theory is that it enables us to understand its predecessors in a newly intelligible way. It at one and the same time, enables us to understand precisely why its predecessors have to be rejected or modified and also why, without and before its illumination, past theory could have remained credible. (MacIntyre 1977, p. 460)

Furthermore, if MacIntyre is to remain internally coherent, this must be the relevant criterion to be used in the task of evaluating his own theory. However, whether or not MacIntyre's theory successfully meets his own criterion is a question I cannot hope to resolve here. Still, one is

compelled to notice that MacIntyre crucially denies the relevance of criteria external to his own tradition in the same way that Rorty brushes away the norms of argumentation external to his vocabulary. In this sense, both make a similar move in redefining the aim of their inquiry, away from absolute rational validity, towards their own respective criterion of progress such as to avoid relativistic self-refutation.

We have seen that Rorty and MacIntyre share a great deal: from denying the possibility of accessing a description of the world as it is 'in itself' to opting for a similar strategy in avoiding relativism, *via* a shared critique of a uniform conception of rationality. However, in the face of these positions one is entitled to wonder how Rorty and MacIntyre manage to make sense of the notion of progress. Indeed, if we cannot access a standpoint from which we can determine the superiority of one theory, vocabulary, or tradition over another, how are we to understand the notion that adopting one theory, vocabulary, or tradition rather than another constitutes progress? Rorty and MacIntyre's respective replies to this question, I contend, are markedly distinct.

3. Progress and Truth

In this section, I will argue that MacIntyre's conception of progress is less relativistic than Rorty's. To this end, I will begin by discussing their respective conceptions of rational progress and then move on to discuss truth as the *telos* of enquiry.

3.1 Rational Progress

The concept of 'progress' here should be understood as the movement from a situation S to a situation S', where S' is in some sense demonstrably superior to S, thereby making movement from S to S' rational. In Rorty's view, there is no vocabulary-independent way of

assessing the rationality of this move because the superiority of S' over S is ultimately dependent upon the values and interests of those making that judgement. Progress is thus always progress by *our* lights (Rorty 1989, p. 50). This requires further explanation.

As I mentioned previously, Rorty holds a distinctive account of the function language. Drawing on a Darwinian naturalistic story, he contends that vocabularies come into existence for the same purpose as practical tools, namely: to help humans navigate their environments and improve techniques to manage their interactions with it (Rorty 1998, pp. 47-48, p. 55). Such vocabularies are then further refined by evolutionary stresses. This refinement, however, does not generate more or less representationally accurate vocabularies. Rather it generates richer or poorer modes of interaction between humans and their environments. Based on how these modes of interaction match up with the needs and conceptions of human flourishing of a given human community, these vocabularies can be said to be more or less useful. Thus, judgements about a movement from S to S' will depend upon our conception of flourishing and the problems it solves for us; if S' is judged to enable a mode of interaction that brings us closer to our ideal of human flourishing than S, then such a move will be judged rational; if it does not, then it will be deemed irrational. Therefore, judgements about the rationality of progress are dependent upon the values we hold and the vocabularies we use to achieve our conception of the good. From within his own liberal perspective, Rorty argues that, in politics, we should consider progress to consist in expanding the diversity of vocabularies such as to expand our sphere of solidarity. Rorty explains that a kind of edificatory process also applies in the sciences:

> Instead of seeing progress as a matter of getting closer to something specifiable in advance, we see it as a matter of solving more problems. Progress is, as Thomas Kuhn suggested, measured by the extent to which we have made ourselves better than we were in the past rather than by our increased proximity to a goal. (Rorty 1999, p. 28)

For MacIntyre, in the absence of a tradition-independent notion of rationality, there can be no tradition-independent way of assessing the rationality of progress. In this sense, it would seem that he should agree with Rorty's claim that it is "good to give up the idea that intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of 'rational' which is neutral between vocabularies" (Rorty 1989, p. 48). However, I think that MacIntyre would not agree that the impossibility of independence from tradition entails the impossibility of inter-tradition rational standards.

Indeed, MacIntyre argues that the role new theories or new conceptual frameworks play is, crucially, that of offering a new narrative account of the limitations and incoherencies found in its predecessors. So, in other words, the value of a new theory or conceptual framework is that it reinterprets the historical context in which it has come into being in order to transcend the problems encountered in the previous conceptual scheme. The limitations of the incumbent theories having been overcome, change from the older theories to the new can be said to be 'rational' without presuming that the new theories possess a greater degree of absolute validity than the older ones. How so? Although MacIntyre holds that different theories are incommensurable, a particular theory – let us call it T2 – can be said to have been vindicated with respect to its rival T1, if and only if:

1- T2 manages to withstand the harshest criticisms available against T1;

2- T2 can individuate the problems and incoherencies found in T1 and offer remedies that are recognisable by defenders of T1, and;

3- T2 explains the inevitability of encountering such inadequacies if we are to hold T1;[4]

4- T2 must have the conceptual resources to express all of the above in the language of T1.

MacIntyre calls learning a language as a 'second-first language' (MacIntyre 1988, pp. 370-389) the process through which a theory or conceptual scheme becomes able to express itself in the language of another theoretical system. Furthermore, in order to make sense of this movement as being a genuine advance, defenders of each theory must have some shared conception of what their theoretical aims are, certain basic norms of theoretical rationality, and a shared recognition that they disagree about a particular subject-matter.

Thus, if T2 can show in T1's own terms that T2 is a better theory than T1, then T2 can be said to be rationally vindicated. MacIntyre thereby offers us a criterion to determine the rationality of theoretical or conceptual change while relying strictly on internal or traditionally-bound standards of rational justification. This permits making substantial claims regarding the rationality of adopting one theory over another, and indeed, one tradition over another, in a strictly internalist mode. Or, as Tom Angier puts it:

> Positive rational justification is always, on [MacIntyre's] view, grounded in and structured by norms that find their home in a specific historical tradition (or plurality of these). But it does not follow from this that there can be no inter-traditional comparisons of rational progress. For against the background of diverse internal justificatory standards, MacIntyre provides criteria for determining a particular tradition's comparative success: viz. the degree to which it manages to overcome incoherence. Incoherence, he maintains, is a trans-traditional ill *without qualification*, an incontrovertible mark of rational decline (Angier, 2011, pp. 557-8 – emphasis in original).

In response, the critic might point out that Rorty also holds coherence and conversation in high esteem, arguing that these are the markers of progress. He writes:

> There is no such thing as asymptotic approach to the Truth, but there is progress nevertheless – progress detectable by retrospection. Scientific progress is made when theories which solved certain problems are replaced by theories which solve both those problems and certain other problems, which earlier theories were unable to solve […] Analogously, political progress is made when institutions which have made possible increased freedom and decreased cruelty are replaced with institutions which enlarge freedom still more and mitigate cruelty still further. (Rorty 1997, p. 40)

The critic is right to point out that Rorty and MacIntyre's narratives of progress have a lot in common, however she is wrong to conclude from this that they are one and the same. Why? Principally, because Rorty does not understand incoherence to be an ill without qualification.

Indeed, in his view, discontinuities or beliefs that do not cohere with the rest of what we currently believe may well be the source of fundamental progress, because they might spur on "conceptual revolutions" (Rorty 1991b, p. 15) and the eventual outcome of these revolutions is incommensurable with the previous conceptual apparatus. The spectre of incommensurability weighs heavily in Rorty's thinking: short of a meta-standard by which to judge the relative coherence of various vocabularies, no rational cross-tradition comparison can be drawn to establish which conceptual scheme is more coherent.[5] Thus, progress cannot be said to consist in the overcoming of incoherence *simpliciter*. Rather, one's appreciation of the coherence of conceptual schemes remains irremediably parochial, bound by, nay, imprisoned in one's current conceptual apparatus. In contrast, MacIntyre contends that cross-tradition standards of coherence apply. This is one crucial way in which MacIntyre distinguishes himself from Rorty, but he also gives truth a more prominent role in his understanding of enquiry (D'Andrea 2006, p. 406).

3.2 Truth

Like Rorty, MacIntyre (2006, pp. 199-200) rejects the correspondence theory of truth. Nevertheless, he does not share Rorty's wider disregard for truth in enquiry. While Rorty insists that he does not offer a theory of truth, he maintains that there are only limited uses of the term 'true': commendation (p is true, entails I agree with p and I think you should do so too), caution (when I ask, 'p is justified but is it true?' I am expressing the thought that p might not be justifiable to better or future audiences) or disquotation (to express how the concept of 'truth' is used in a given language-set) (Rorty 1998, pp. 21-22). Above and beyond this, Rorty's position about truth can be summed up, as he sometimes does, in William James's (1975, p.106) famous words: "'The true' […] is only the expedient in the way of our thinking."

However, MacIntyre (1988, p. 357) holds the Thomistic belief that truth is adequacy of mind to object. For him, this type of correspondence does not suffer from the problems encountered in the traditional correspondence theory of truth because it does not posit a special relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic entities. His theory merely states that when one is enquiring into the truth of a given matter, one is seeking to come into contact with some mind-independent object. This conception of truth, MacIntyre argues, is crucially important for us to make sense of rational enquiry, as it is its "goal and [. . .] terminus" (MacIntyre 2006, p. 65). In Aristotelian terms, truth is the *telos* of enquiry (MacIntyre 2006, p. 162). For him rational justification is simply the process thanks to which we move towards that goal. Procedures of justification change *because* some are less able than their rivals in driving us towards the object of our enquiry (MacIntyre 2006, pp. 65-66).

However, MacIntyre is not interested in establishing an abstract standard of truth thanks to which we could judge which beliefs are true and which are false. Instead, he attempts to demonstrate that his conception of truth is presupposed in the ways in which we speak and enquire: anybody engaging in enquiry must start from the basic assumption that they do not know the answer to the question they are enquiring into. It is this essentially fallibilistic position, central to enquiry, which MacIntyre sees as being the other side of the presumption that there *is* an answer, "a true account of the fundamental order of things" (MacIntyre 1977, p. 471). In other words, MacIntyre is a realist about the objects of enquiry and truth (understood as converged adequacy of mind to such objects) is a regulative ideal required by the very practice of engaging in enquiry.

Rorty disagrees in two important ways. Firstly, he does not believe that truth can be the goal of inquiry. For him, it only makes sense to aim for something we can knowingly achieve. He thus rejects the idea that truth-as-the-ideal-end-of-inquiry can be a regulative ideal which effectively guides our actual inquiries, because even if we converged upon certain beliefs, we

would never know whether or not we have reached the ideal end of inquiry. Instead, he thinks that all we can seek is the broadest possible level of justification for our beliefs within existing (not ideal) communities. This, in his view, amounts to little more than aiming for wider warranted assertability within actual communities (Rorty 1998, pp. 19-42). This means that we can only meaningfully aim for context-relative justification, not context-transcending truth.

Secondly and consequently, on this view, fallibilism does not point towards a realm ordained by a transcendental order of things; rather, it reminds us of, on the one hand, the variety of communities and standards of justification, and on the other hand, the future possibility of a better theory (Rorty 1998, p. 41, pp. 52-3). For Rorty, it is not truth but solidarity which ought to play a significant role in expanding the purchase of our procedures of rational justification (Rorty 1991a, pp. 35-45). In his view, solidarity is not the result of recognising our common humanity or common orientation toward truth but the product of developing kinder, more empathetic imaginaries which would result in expanding our communities of justification ever more widely (Rorty 1989). Thus, for him, progress consists in the expansion of our spheres of 'solidarity'. Yet, Rorty does not think there is a vocabulary-independent way of justifying the demand to expand our spheres of solidarity. Instead, our practical commitments to live in a certain kind of society and thus our attachment to our ethnos and its vocabulary take precedence over any attempt to epistemically justify beliefs. That these commitments might exclude some from our present conversations is unfortunate but inevitable. Our reaction to this should not be to seek a cross-tradition criterion of progress to remedy this but to seek to foster ever-widening spheres of conversation. At its most general, Rorty maintains that liberals ought to hope that more people can be brought over into the practice of conversation (as opposed to violence) merely for the sake of solidarity (i.e. expanding circles of care), not truth or rationality. For him, pursuing the goal of rational agreement will not motivate expanding our spheres of discussion and, worse, may get in the way of developing

new ways of speaking. Although he maintains that our existing practices of rational discussion ought to continue to operate in public discussions, he contends that we would be better served by abandoning the attempt to establish abstract rational criteria for progress that would sit above ordinary practices. Indeed, he understands his own thinking not as a foundation for but as an articulation of liberal ethnocentrism. Thus, while coherence in our overall beliefs is a desirable theoretical goal, it is only contingently so in a vocabulary-dependent manner.

In contrast, it should be clear by now that MacIntyre holds that the practices of enquiry within all traditions presuppose that incoherence is the ill to be overcome and that truth is the good we implicitly or explicitly aim for. Thus, for him, progress *simpliciter* consists in reducing incoherence and getting closer to the truth. And in response to Rorty, MacIntyre writes: "What postmodern bourgeois liberalism exhibits is not moral argument freed from unwarranted philosophical pretensions, but the decay of moral reasoning" (MacIntyre 1983, p. 590). To this, the Rortyan would no doubt protest that the absence of non-local standards of truth, rationality or objectivity do us no harm, since our practices of public justifications should continue to occur on the basis of our current community-dependent standards of progress. However, this pays little regard to the fact that our current public justificatory practices may well be so confused and fragmented as to be in need of clarification and correction with reference to more general standards than those currently in circulation.[6] Thus, MacIntyre's willingness to articulate a more robust standard of progress (i.e. the avoidance of incoherence and the pursuit of truth), rooted in the actual practices of various traditions provides a mid-way point between a meta-standard and a merely internal standard: that is, an inter-tradition standard of progress. This, combined with Rorty's insistence on containing himself within his own tradition minimally suggests a thorough-going epistemic parochialism (Rorty 2007, p. 925) – or, as Susan Haack (1996, p. 299) calls it, "epistemic tribalism". This type of parochialism, Rorty maintains, fails to be harmful in any sense since our energies are better spent attending to

concrete opportunities to fight cruelty than to establish less parochial abstract rational criteria of progress. While that is an empirical claim which may have once been worthy of consideration, recent developments in advanced democracies shed serious doubt upon this hypothesis. Moreover, a theoretical point already holds: even though Rorty may well evade the self-refuting form of relativism (that is, H1), it is hard to escape the conclusion that his embrace of this thorough-going epistemic parochialism firmly plants him in on top of H2, which is to say that his conception of rational progress is simply trivial to those who stand outside his own community.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that although Rorty and MacIntyre are both historicists, Rorty's historicism is more relativistic than MacIntyre's. While Rorty and MacIntyre share a similarly situated view of justification and rationality and they both seek to evade the charge of relativism by insisting on their claims being internally justified by the standards of their own ethnos (for Rorty) and tradition (for MacIntyre), it is MacIntyre's insistence that certain standards internal to his own tradition (i.e. reducing incoherence and pursuing truth) intersect with standards internal to all other traditions that make his historicist conception of progress more robust and less vulnerable to the charge of relativism. Crucially, although Rorty insists that no neutral criterion of rational progress is to be found across vocabularies, MacIntyre maintains that, across traditions, the very practice of enquiry presupposes a commitment to avoiding incoherence and to seek the truth. While Rorty may worry that all attempts to understand another tradition risk imposing one's own understanding of that tradition upon it, it is ultimately the belief that traditions can meaningfully be brought into rational – and not merely accidental – conversation which makes MacIntyre's historicism less parochial and thus less relativistic than Rorty's.

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Recommended Literature for Further Reading

Angier, Tom. 2011. Alasdair MacIntyre's Analysis of Tradition. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 22 (4): 540-572. This article develops a series of internal critiques to MacIntyre's 'traditionalism' and suggests resources for improving MacIntyre's stance. Crucially, for our present purposes, it argues that MacIntyre avoids philosophically problematic forms of relativism.

Rorty, Richard. 1998. Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace. *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, 43-62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This article is Rorty's most direct attempt to reject the charge of relativism. It argues that Putnam illegitimately helps himself to a Peircean notion of truth as the ideal point of convergence of inquiry and remains overly committed to the notion of transcendent reason.

Roth, Paul. 1989. Politics and Epistemology: Rorty, MacIntyre, and the Ends of Philosophy. *History of the Human Sciences*. 2 (2): 171-191. This article presents a thorough and balanced account of Rorty's and MacIntyre's conceptions of the history of philosophy as a means of adjudicating between their respective moral theories. Ultimately, it argues that there are no rational grounds for preferring the one over the other.

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[1] A similar claim is made by Lutz (2004, p. 131) and Angier (2011, p. 559); although somewhat sympathetic with this appraisal, a more ambivalent stance is adopted by Roth (1989).
[2] See for example, Putnam (1990, p. 21) for Rorty and Feldman (1986, pp. 307-319) for MacIntyre.
[3] See MacIntyre (2008).
[4] For an in-depth reconstruction of MacIntyre's account of rational progress see D'Andrea, (2006, p. 406).
[5] While I lack the space to explain this here, I strongly suspect that the ultimate source of the disagreement exposed in this chapter between MacIntyre and Rorty can be traced to their respective *maîtres à penser* in the domain of scientific progress: while Rorty takes inspiration from Kuhn's (1962) socio-psychological description of scientific revolutions yielding incommensurable changes in scientific paradigms, MacIntyre was deeply marked by Imre Lakatos' (1970) less radical logico-methodological account of scientific progress.
[6] See, for example, Forstenzer (2018).