Power and the Polis: A Study in MacIntyrean State Theory

Benjamin Sehnert

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/classics_students

Part of the Classics Commons, and the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/classics_students/1

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classics Student Work by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.
Power and the Polis: A Study in MacIntyrean State Theory

AN HONORS THESIS

College of St. Benedict/St John’s University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of All College Honors

and Distinction

in the Departments of Classics and Political Science

by

Benjamin Sehnert

May 2012
It is not often that one hears of a political philosopher characterized as an Aristotelian advocating for "a politics of resistance," having combined a certain conservatism with radicalism, yet so it is with Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre's moral and political philosophy has been one of the foremost expressions of modern virtue ethics and Aristotelianism albeit of a rather individual variety. MacIntyre's status as a political philosopher is predominantly based upon his recommendations for a politics of community, which in turn draws upon Aristotle's ideal πόλις or city-state as a model; however, his advocacy for the restoration of Aristotelian communities in modern life is accompanied by a denunciation of modern-day political arrangements, such as the liberal state. Yet in spite of his preoccupation with matters political, MacIntyre himself does not seem to treat the realm of politics seriously as a legitimate field of its own, that is, as a realm related to but distinct from ethics. MacIntyre reduces politics to a mere subcategory of ethics, the sum of the institutions necessary for the achievement of human flourishing. This makes his theory of the ideal state\(^2\) attractive for ethical reasons, yet such a state is nearly impossible to implement on a political level. MacIntyre's problem is thus twofold; he proposes a theory of the state which paradoxically ignores the realities of the political world and likewise fails to describe adequately how an individual ought to proceed in the absence of those 'political' institutions which make a fully ethical life possible.

It is my contention that this situation might be ameliorated, even if it is not wholly dispensed with, by acknowledging the answers Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition provide with regard to the above quandaries. With such an acknowledgement, MacIntyre would not need to abandon his allegiance to Aristotle nor sell out to liberalism, yet he would need to accept that a political system,

---

2 Some might quibble with my description of MacIntyre's ideal political arrangement as a 'state' since MacIntyre usually reserves that term for the modern liberal states. It is also true that the term 'state' is a modern development and thus carries with it much baggage from the modern world (thus making it a rather unsuitable term to describe political arrangements modeled on those of antiquity). Nonetheless, if we understand 'state' in a very broad sense as a political unit which governs itself, I believe it can apply to MacIntyre's description of what he calls the political community.
other than those of his ideal state, is ‘legitimate’ even in the modern state. MacIntyre’s intransigence about the impossibility of participation in the governments of modern states has largely stemmed from his definition of the political as constituted by the practice, namely politics, through which “other types of practice are ordered, so that individuals may direct themselves towards what is best for them and for the community.” In MacIntyre’s ideal world, the term ‘political’ ought to extend only to those arrangements where the government orders certain practices in view of some agreed notion of human flourishing. As MacIntyre claims that the modern state does not engage in ‘politics’ as defined above and dogmatically denies that there is significant benefit from engaging with the modern state, it is unclear how he expects his communities of virtuous citizens to emerge other than through revolution or resistance: “Modern systematic politics, whether liberal, conservative, radical or socialist, simply has to be rejected from a standpoint that owes genuine allegiance to the tradition of the virtues, for modern politics itself expresses in its institutional forms a systematic rejection of that tradition.” Therefore, in both instances cited here, MacIntyre defines what is authentically ‘political’ by what is ‘ethical’ or what ‘owes genuine allegiance’ to the pursuit of the virtuous life. A necessary corrective to this narrow definition can be found in Aristotle and his predecessors who understood the ‘political’ to be characterized also by the exercise of power or force and the need for preservation. Once equipped with such an understanding of politics, MacIntyre might be able to transform his ideal state achievable only in speculative thought into a goal, however distant, which one can pursue within the contemporary power structure.

To demonstrate this, one must both understand the reasons behind MacIntyre’s own formulation of the ideal state and subsequently argue, on MacIntyrean grounds, why MacIntyre himself is inconsistent in his discussion of the ‘political.’ However, before this is possible, we must

---

first identify what it in fact means to argue something ‘on MacIntyrean grounds.’ If one is attempting to mount a challenge to MacIntyre, it would seem counterproductive to use a line of reasoning which MacIntyre would dispute for methodological reasons before actually arriving at the substance of the critique. Past critics of MacIntyre have not failed to notice weaknesses of his state theory and have highlighted it in their evaluations, yet because they come from various perspectives themselves and employ various methods of inquiry, they often interpret differently what exactly is problematic. Those critics whom I have selected can easily be divided into three groups: (1) those who believe MacIntyre to be a communitarian of the modern, post-Enlightenment variety, (2) those who believe that MacIntyre’s theory is not necessarily opposed to liberal principles, and (3) those who criticize MacIntyre more on practical and historical terms. It is an integral part of my own thesis that it is this third group which most perceptively investigates MacIntyre’s theory of the state as they at least make the attempt to argue against MacIntyre on his own terms.

In their reviews of MacIntyrean politics, commentators from the first camp make the complaint that MacIntyre is merely one of the many communitarians (i.e. those who generally value social ties and community as a necessary good for humans) who came to be influential in the latter half of the twentieth-century. However, the willingness of these critics to group MacIntyre within a single intellectual movement (even one so amorphous and ill-defined as modern communitarianism, characterized more by similar final positions than by similar reasoning in arriving at those positions) is indicative of their inability to come to terms with the radical nature of MacIntyre’s Aristotelianism. MacIntyre does not employ Aristotle because Aristotle’s views happen to agree with ideas which MacIntyre has previously formulated independently of Aristotle; on the contrary, MacIntyre arrives at Aristotle only after having developed his interpretive theory of tradition-dependent rationality. 

---

5 MacIntyre believes that reason cannot be exercised outside of a tradition of thought; therefore, there is no neutral position (free from all traditions) from which we may begin reasoning. We are dependent upon previous thought for providing the premises by which we reason; see below “History, Philosophy, Method.”
From there onward, he at least purports to argue from Aristotelian premises. Thus, because these critics fail to understand MacIntyre’s theory of tradition-dependent rationality, they misinterpret his proposals as being inspired by the “Romantic, counter-Enlightenment” rather than by Aristotle.\(^6\)

If MacIntyre is not a communitarian in the sense described above, then it is possible that he might be more liberal than he himself realizes.\(^7\) This is the contention of Keith Breen and Thaddeus Kozinski, yet beyond being of the second category of critics, there is no common ground between these two authors. Breen evidently hopes that MacIntyre will embrace certain aspects of liberalism or at least desist from attacks on the liberal tradition which “[border] awkwardly on the hyperbolic.”\(^8\)

On the other hand, Kozinski is a radical communitarian who sees MacIntyre’s (esoteric) liberalism as a weakness which must be dispensed with if any true realization of the political ideal is to be achieved. In both cases, the authors again fail to understand how MacIntyre’s Aristotelianism and his aversion to liberalism have been shaped by his beliefs on how philosophical inquiry should be conducted. For example, Breen’s suggestion that MacIntyre incorporate liberal principles into his Aristotelianism is exactly the kind of philosophical argument which MacIntyre thinks is misguided. One cannot pick and choose tenets of an intellectual tradition and graft them onto another; such principles cannot easily be detached from their original tradition and carried over into another without bringing additional baggage which will complicate the internal unity of a single tradition. A mixture of liberalism and Aristotelianism would be inconceivable to MacIntyre if carried out in the cut-and-paste way which Breen suggests.

---


\(^7\) By liberal, neither MacIntyre nor I mean liberal strictly in the American sense, i.e. as being synonymous with progressive, although American liberals would certainly come be included within the ‘liberal’ category. MacIntyre, I believe, would find most political parties in nearly all Western societies as incorporating ‘liberal’ elements in the sense that they all to some extent evolved out of the concern with the preservation of individual freedom and natural rights.

Those who critique MacIntyre above do not fully understand the different aspects of his whole philosophy and thus fail to acknowledge certain historical arguments from MacIntyre for his various positions. Such failings are less often found in the reviews by Thomas Hibbs and Gordon Graham of MacIntyre’s political teaching. These authors either focus on the Aristotelian tradition or premises clearly articulated by MacIntyre; thus, they take a different approach than the previous critics in working from within MacIntyre’s own intellectual tradition rather than launching attacks from without. Therefore, in my own treatment of MacIntyre, I have found this last approach most helpful in determining how to best present criticisms and recommendations for MacIntyre’s theory of the state. However, although Hibbs and Graham are instructive as examples, they often fail to develop in great depth how their argument is in accordance with MacIntyre’s own standards of how philosophical argumentation should proceed. I, therefore, hope to build upon what they have begun in identifying of what exactly MacIntyre’s method consists. What is obvious at first glance is that MacIntyre heavily relies on historical authors to justify his present positions. It therefore seems fitting to turn toward a discussion of the relationship between history and philosophical argumentation, specifically, the way in which MacIntyre himself understands this relationship (denoted by what I have called tradition-dependent rationality) and how this understanding shapes his own philosophical method.

**HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, METHOD**

History and philosophy have coexisted more or less in forms recognizably similar to their current embodiments since their emergence in the classical Greek world. One does not usually pause to consider whether Plato was a philosopher nor ask whether Herodotus or Thucydides wrote historical accounts; such propositions are not considered to be in doubt. Nonetheless, despite displaying continuity between their respective ancient, medieval, and modern forms, the relationship between history and philosophy themselves has for a large part of their existence been one of
antagonism or disinterest. The philosophical response to historical enquiry was for some time based upon Aristotle’s dismissal of history as being less scientific than poetry, “a mere collection of empirical facts.” For their part, the Greek historians did not seem concerned to justify their enterprise on a philosophic basis; Herodotus and Thucydides undoubtedly identified trends in history, but such identifications were limited as universal statements by the variability of the historical world. It was not until the late eighteenth century when philosophers began to take an increasing interest in the nature of historical studies, seeking to establish history as a science through philosophical argument. The nineteenth century completed the transformation of earlier historical practice, believed to be a mere recitation of past facts, into History, the realm of human thought and activity governed by universal laws, giving rise to the “familiar saying that the great intellectual work of the nineteenth century was the discovery of history.”

It is therefore striking that in an age which is heir to this discovery, scant attention is devoted to mediating the relationship between philosophy and history. One would be hard-pressed, I think, to find in a historical monograph or even a more comprehensive historical study a clearly formulated statement on the respective tasks of these two disciplines in interpreting the conceptual world of a past thinker. Whether one should ask ‘what did X think,’ ‘was X correct in thinking as he did,’ or yet some combination of both, largely depends on how a scholar answers the pressing questions surrounding philosophical historiography. MacIntyre himself addresses this issue in proposing what he feels to be a false choice:

Either we read the philosophies of the past so as to make them relevant to our contemporary problems and enterprises, transmuting them as far as possible into what they would have been if they were part of present-day philosophy, and minimizing or ignoring or even on occasion misrepresenting that which refuses such transmutation because it is inextricably bound up with

---

that in the past which makes it radically different from present-day philosophy; or instead we take
great care to read them in their own terms, carefully preserving their idiosyncratic and specific
character, so that they cannot emerge into the present except as a set of museum pieces.\footnote{11}

For multiple reasons, a full discussion of these issues can hardly be carried out within the pages of
this paper. Nonetheless, as noted above, I feel it incumbent upon myself to address such questions
in a satisfactory manner, not only for the provision of a rough methodological framework, but also
for the demonstration of the intimate connection between MacIntyre’s historicism and his
political/moral philosophy.

It is a great shame that in Anglo-American political thought, the term ‘historicism’ has
entered into English usage though the works of the Karl Popper and Leo Strauss, both of whom
deplore it as the forerunner of tyranny and nihilism. The term itself originated in nineteenth century
Germany to describe an intellectual movement among historians and historically-minded
philosophers, yet a brief reading of Strauss and Popper will demonstrate that they are clearly
describing different phenomena to their English-speaking audiences. Popper defines historicism as
“an approach to the social sciences which assumes that \textit{historical prediction} is [its] principal aim,”\footnote{12} a
definition which hardly does justice to the actual historicist movement in Germany. The selection of
“historical prediction” as the definitive mark of historicism demonstrates that Popper’s concern is
not with historicism proper but with the Marxist belief that history will predictably unfold in a
certain way, ultimately ending in a communist society. Strauss, as a German immigrant to the
United States, is undoubtedly much nearer than Popper to the mark in his treatment of what the
Germans understood to be \textit{Historismus} (held by Friedrich Meinecke to be nothing less than “\textit{eine der

\footnotesize


\footnote{12} Karl Popper, \textit{The Poverty of Historicism} (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.
größten geistigen Revolutionen, die das abendländische Denken erlebt hat"\(^\text{13}\)). For Strauss, historicism implies that “all philosophizing essentially belongs to ‘a historical world,’ ‘culture,’ ‘civilization,’ ‘Weltanschauung,’”\(^\text{14}\) yet his account of historicism is skewed by a deeply polemical tone. These conflicting and antagonistic presentations of historicism in political thought coupled with the advent of New Historicism in literary theory, a school of thought which employs the term but bears little resemblance to the original historicism, renders it nearly incomprehensible. A corrective is therefore necessary before attempting to locate MacIntyre within a coherent, unified historicist tradition.

Historicism might best be defined as the recognition that “everything in the human world - culture, values, institutions, practices, rationality - is made by history, so that nothing has an eternal form, permanent essence or constant identity which transcends historical change.”\(^\text{15}\) Leo Strauss makes the claim that “[t]he thoughts that guided the historical school were very far from being of a purely theoretical character. The historical school emerged in reaction to the French Revolution and to the natural right doctrines that had prepared that cataclysm.”\(^\text{16}\) Such a description of historicism (or the historical school) is inadequate in that it explains the rise of historicism as being due mainly to an emotional reaction to an historical event rather than a logical progression of thought. Strauss’s reason for the above account of historicism’s emergence is perhaps related to his effort to appear as though he is defending the legitimacy of modern natural rights against the stultifying effect of historicism on modern thought (as noted above, Strauss believes historicism is to blame for many of the woes of the modern world). By claiming that the early historicists were unreflective disciples of Burke and de Maistre (i.e. conservatives who valued tradition for tradition’s sake after the horrors of the French Revolution), Strauss can ignore the actual theoretical concerns of Herder, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and others who were behind the genesis of the historical school. If Strauss were to

\(^{13}\) “One of the greatest intellectual revolutions which Western thought has experienced.” Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, vol. 1 (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1936), 1.


\(^{16}\) Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 13.
admit the legitimacy of Herder’s discovery that thought and reason are dependent upon one’s particular language and culture (a fundamental belief of the historicists), it might call into question the ability of reason to find truths that apply universally to people of various cultures and languages. Among what had previously been considered universal and rational norms is included the modern belief in natural rights, to say nothing of the sentiments expressed in the Declaration of Independence which Strauss professes to defend. Strauss is more correct in maintaining that historicism is not, or (more properly) should not be, supported simply by historical evidence; one sees such an approach in the naïve historical or cultural relativism of the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, for example. In other words, the observation that cultures throughout time and place differ from one another in their beliefs and practices does not justify the rejection of possible universal truths; one of these cultures may have ‘true’ beliefs or could discover ‘true’ beliefs despite the fact that others disagree with them. Mature historicism, on the other hand, is rooted in a philosophic critique of eighteenth-century trust in universal truths and thus bases its thesis of the historicization of thought on philosophic principles rather than the observation of differing cultures.

Those English-speaking scholars who subscribe to the teachings of the historical school often find fault with analytic philosophy for being insufficiently historical in its outlook. The analytic school, it is suggested, has a bifurcated view of philosophical history due to its assumption that modern philosophical analysis of language has swept aside all previous forms of philosophy. Therefore, a description of how past philosophers understood themselves is relegated completely to the realm of history; it has no utility for the modern philosophical enterprise. However, Charles Taylor grants to the analytics a certain use of past philosophers: “Past authors may be read, but they

17 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 9-10.
18 Philosophical school predominantly in America and Britain which emphasizes the importance of logic and the philosophy of language.
19 Cf. John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 329: “We don’t study [Hume, Leibniz, and Kant] in the hope of finding some philosophical argument, some analytic idea that will be directly useful for our present-day philosophical questions in the way they arise for us. No, we study Hume, Leibniz, and Kant because they express deep and distinctive philosophical doctrines.”
are treated as if they were contemporaries. They earn a right to enter the dialogue because they happen to offer good formulations of one or another position which is worthy of a hearing. They are not explored as origins, but as atemporal resources.\(^2^0\) Returning to the two options as formulated by MacIntyre, it would seem that the analytics are interested only in the former option of reading authors anachronistically - they do not quite care how the authors understood themselves. However, the complaint expressed by MacIntyre and Taylor is not a novel one, having been made previously against the ‘realists’ by R.G. Collingwood.

Collingwood identifies the realist school as a group of Oxford philosophy professors who maintained that one simply apprehends basic truths about the real world.\(^2^1\) His objections to the ‘realists’ stemmed from their inability to grasp essential differences between concepts at varying points in history; their historical myopia in discussing the definition of the state, ‘ought’, matter, and causation was tantamount to translating the Greek τριήρης (trireme) as ‘steamer’. In Collingwood’s mind, they simply could not conceive that Platonic terminology, as understood by Plato, was not easily integrated into the realist discourse of the state: “Take Plato’s Republic and Hobbes’s Leviathan, so far as they are concerned with politics. Obviously the political theories they set forth are not the same. But do they represent two different theories of the same thing?\(^2^2\)” The question posed here asks whether Hobbes and Plato (and ultimately the modern reader) participate in a conversation about what political arrangement is the best or rationally justified for human beings at all times and in all places. On the one hand, it might be misguided to make the claim that Plato, as an ancient Greek, could never conceive of the Hobbesian state, or that Hobbes, as a seventeenth-century Englishman, could never understand what Plato meant in describing the Greek city-state. The acknowledgement that authors are able to understand concepts foreign to their own era might

justify a certain amount of optimism that Plato and Hobbes were aware of multiple alternatives to a single problem and thus were providing different accounts of the ideal politics. On the other hand, although we should not deny Plato the ability to conceive what is expressed in Hobbes’s formulation of the state, it would seem that political arrangement offered by the Hobbesian state would be irrelevant to the problems of his own time. Plato’s *Republic* was an answer to concerns from his own era; Hobbes was also providing an answer to contemporary questions with his description of the state in *Leviathan*. It is then doubtful whether they are indeed providing answers to the same question. Collingwood answered as follows:

```
Can you say that the *Republic* gives one account of ‘the nature of the State’ and the *Leviathan*
another? No; because Plato’s ‘State’ is the Greek πόλις, and Hobbes’s is the absolutist State of the seventeenth century. The ‘realist’ answer is easy: certainly Plato’s State is different from Hobbes’s, but they are both States; so the theories are theories of the State. Indeed, what did you mean by calling them both political, if not that they were theories of the same thing?

It was obvious to me that this was only a piece of logical bluff, and that if instead of logic-chopping you got down to brass tacks and called for definitions of the ‘State’ as Plato conceived it and as Hobbes conceived it, you would find that the differences between them were not superficial but went down to essentials.23
```

From these observations and further study, Collingwood was convinced that *all* questions arise from one’s historical situation and thus deduced that there are no perennial problems of philosophy, a deduction which the realists (and Strauss) apparently dispute. To believe in ‘eternal problems’ is to ignore a reality in which all problems are generated from one’s socio-historical context. Yet for those who believe in eternal problems or the analytics who “take themselves to be the first to have understood what philosophy is,”24 it would seem that the charges of historical inaccuracy can only

---

go so far in convincing them that their approach is *philosophically* unsound. Many major analytic philosophers are known for maintaining propositions which oftentimes directly contradict the fundamental premises of the historicist outlook; Gottlob Frege, the father of analytic philosophy, reacted against Herder’s theory of language-dependent thought, “backing off from the bold claim that thought is *essentially* dependent on and abounded by language and substituting for it the weaker claim that the dependence in question is only a contingent feature of the thought of human beings.”

Thus, although the arguments for historicism are hardly universally accepted, for those who wish to synthesize historical and philosophical concerns, the historicism of Taylor, MacIntyre, and Collingwood presents an attractive alternative.

Since he understood the nature of reason (and thus truth) to be largely determined by one’s historical situation, R.G. Collingwood aimed to have the philosophical question of truth be subsumed under the historical question of accuracy, that is, accuracy in determining what past peoples and thinkers believed to be true. However, this does not mean that the historical scholar is also unable to ask whether a certain view is correct: “But this did not mean that the question ‘was Plato right to think as he did on such and such a question?’ was to be left unanswered. As well suggest that the question ‘was Phormio right to row round the Corinthians’ circle?’ must be left unanswered because it goes outside the province of naval history, whose only concern with Phormio is to find out what he did. What lunatic idea of history is this, which would imply that it is history that Phormio rowed round the Corinthians, but not that he beat the Corinthians by doing it? For Collingwood, history (which he defined as being solely the history of thought) is a continuous series of questions and answers. In order to judge whether Plato was correct in answering as he did, the scholar must judge whether he answered the question correctly as he understood it. It thus

---

27 Ibid., 110.
follows that history is a re-enactment of past thoughts: “Historical knowledge is the re-enactment of a past thought encapsulated in a context of present thoughts which, by contradicting it, confine it to a plane different from theirs.” Collingwood rejects the positivistic aim of Leopold von Ranke to describe history ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen’ (‘as it actually was’), for by that method, one is bound to treat history as though it were a natural science. One collects individual historical ‘facts,’ e.g. ‘Aristotle was the son of Nicomachus’ or ‘Tiberius was the second emperor of Rome.’ Yet if the analogy is with natural science, one is then unable to pass judgment on a set of discrete historical facts; one does not judge whether or not it is good that water is a combination of hydrogen and oxygen molecules. Thus Collingwood proposes instead an organic view of historical thought where “a process $P_1$ turns into a process $P_2$” as it travels through the question-answer paradigm; if history is process which continually morphs through a series of questions and answers, Collingwood believes that the historian is able to render judgment on whether a certain development in history was justified.

Strauss’s response to Collingwood in his article “On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History” is expectedly antagonistic, so much so that Strauss frequently misreads Collingwood and attributes views to him with which Collingwood explicitly disagrees. Nonetheless, Strauss raises questions about Collingwood, which if anything aid the acquisition of a richer understanding of Collingwood’s philosophy. Strauss is mainly concerned with Collingwood’s ability to pass judgment on what is progress and what is decay in history. Certainly, if history is rational, it would seem that every decision is progressive in light of the fact that historical actors succeed in answering the questions of their age in a rational manner. Collingwood himself indicates this: “The present is our own

---

29 Ibid., 98.
30 As an example, Strauss claims that “Collingwood’s attitude towards the thought of the past was in fact that of a spectator who sees from the outside the relation of an earlier thought to its time” (575). This is a gross mischaracterization of Collingwood’s doctrine of reenactment which expressly denies that we can interpret the past as an objective, external spectator. See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 282-302.
activities; we are carrying out these activities as well as we know how; and consequently, from the point of view of the present, there must always be a coincidence between what is and what ought to be, the actual and the ideal. The Greeks were trying to be Greeks; the Middle Ages were trying to be medieval; the aim of every age is to be itself; and thus the present is always perfect in the sense that it always succeeds in being what it is trying to be.”\textsuperscript{31}

Nonetheless, there is also room for the historian to judge certain historical trends as progressive or decadent by applying the standards of his own era. In writing of the historian Tacitus, Collingwood discerns “defeatist philosophies which, starting from the assumption that the good man cannot conquer or control a wicked world, taught him how to preserve himself unspotted from its wickedness … Tacitus has attempted a new approach, the psychological-didactic; but instead of being an enrichment of historical method this is really an impoverishment, and indicates a declining standard of historical honesty.”\textsuperscript{32} Whether or not Collingwood is correct in his description of Tacitus, Strauss finds it evident that Collingwood does not understand that the political situation in which Tacitus lived might indeed have been a ‘wicked world’ because Collingwood excludes “the possibility of unqualified decay.”\textsuperscript{33} Therefore, Collingwood is too hasty in passing judgment on Tacitus, ignoring the legitimate political reasons for the way in which he wrote history. Strauss is undoubtedly correct in noting that Collingwood is perhaps lax in applying his own standards of re-enactment (for example, coming to understand \textit{why} Tacitus wrote in the way that he did), yet that does not preclude the historian from then judging the methods of the past historian by the standards of his own era. And there is one proposition in Collingwood which seems to take on a nearly absolute character by which all history must be judged: the truth of scientific history or historicism itself.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 40.
The problematic nature of this aspect of Collingwood’s philosophy is not explicitly noted by Strauss in his review essay. It is what Strauss understands to be Nietzsche’s historicization of historicism which radically undercuts the universal outlook that historicism ascribes to itself, thus resulting in radical historicism. As noted previously, historicism made the philosophical claim that there were no universal truths: all ‘truths’ were derived from one’s reason, which in turn was limited by one’s language and culture. However, if historicism claims that all thought is historical, then the idea of historicism itself must not be exempted from this judgment. Historicism is not a universally valid truth, but one which emerged from a certain cultural context, namely, western European culture:

The radical historicist refuses to admit the trans-historical character of the historicist thesis. At the same time he recognizes the absurdity of unqualified historicism as a theoretical thesis. He denies, therefore, the possibility of a theoretical or objective analysis, which as such would be trans-historical, of the various comprehensive views or ‘historical worlds’ or ‘cultures.’ This denial was decisively prepared by Nietzsche’s attack on nineteenth-century historicism, which claimed to be a theoretical view ….

The thesis of radical historicism can be stated as follows. All understanding, all knowledge, however limited and ‘scientific,’ presupposes a frame of reference; it presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view within which understanding and knowing take place. Only such a comprehensive vision makes possible any seeing, any observation, any orientation. The comprehensive view of the whole cannot be validated by reasoning, since it is the basis of all reasoning. Accordingly, there is a variety of such comprehensive views, each as legitimate as any other: we have to choose such a view without any rational guidance.34

Under a historicist framework, Collingwood was able to argue against the thesis that “the isolation of the various cultures is as complete as that of the Leibnitian [sic] monads.”35 Put simply,

---

34 Strauss, Natural Right and History, 26-27.
Collingwood believed that the methodology of re-enactment supplied by historicism allowed one to understand different cultural viewpoints and see them all as expressions of the same rational process. All human thought, whether it be Athenian or Andean, forms a unified whole which is accessible to the historian. Yet when it is realized that historicism does not stand above the various viewpoints but is itself one viewpoint among others, no unifying principle is present to judge among the various Weltanschauungen. It would seem that there is nothing to prevent a complete descent into nihilism, or rather the realization that no belief is more or less rationally justifiable than any other. Every philosophical or methodological system is just one view among many, and there is no possible way of judging which is correct.

MacIntyre’s theory of tradition-dependent reasoning is, in many ways, an answer to those who believe that the inevitable endpoint of historicism is indeed nihilism, opposing his theory to those of Nietzschean relativists such as Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty (who do indeed maintain that there is no standard of rationality by which one can justify believing that one view is more true than another).\(^{36}\) For despite the fact that Collingwood’s historicism cannot remain preserved in toto after Nietzsche, MacIntyre continues to claim that, with regard to historical enquiry, “my own greatest debt in this area was to R.G. Collingwood, although my understanding of the nature and complexity of traditions I owe most of all to J.H. Newman.”\(^{37}\)

The main differentiating point between Collingwood and MacIntyre is that the latter is quite comfortable with allowing historicism to be one view among many rather than considering it to be the universally true view. On the other hand, MacIntyre also affirms that there is yet a way of judging between seemingly incommensurable rival traditions or viewpoints.


\(^{37}\) MacIntyre, After Virtue, xii.
The first step in the evaluation of another tradition is “to come to understand what it is to think in the terms prescribed by that particular rival tradition, to learn how to think as if one were a convinced adherent of that rival tradition.”\(^{38}\) In so doing, one might be able to identify problems and incoherencies within the tradition as understood by that tradition. Once identified, “rational superiority is to be found in the circumstances in which one tradition explains the persistent difficulties encountered by another better than the other can itself, and in ways that the adherents of the less successful tradition can recognize.”\(^{39}\) It is for these reasons that MacIntyre can do what Collingwood could not, namely “consider the possibility that progress may consist in separating recent achievements from their present framework and integrating them into an earlier framework which must be recovered by historical knowledge proper.”\(^{40}\) MacIntyre’s rejection of the modern ‘liberal’ tradition and subsequent integration of Aristotelianism with a philosophy of history is just such of an example of constructing a tradition out of past frameworks and present ‘achievements’ in order to avoid the difficulties faced by another tradition.

Questions must arise, though, when MacIntyre’s thought comes under closer examination; one such question is “how are masters of a tradition to ascertain what the story of their tradition is and their place in it?”\(^{41}\) Secondly, MacIntyre does not discuss in great detail how one comes to interpret the language of another except through a historical interpretation. He does not seem to account adequately for those traditions which may not conceive reason as being historical, i.e. embedded in a historical culture and language, thus entailing a rejection on their part of any historical ‘explanation’ of their current problems. MacIntyre’s response to the latter objection would be founded in the observation that “the discontinuities of incommensurability [occur] within a

\(^{38}\) MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, xiii.


framework of continuity”; although each tradition may differ in its questions and rationality, they largely deal with the same subject matter, providing some common ground through which dialogue and interpretation is made possible.\textsuperscript{42} One is able to learn the language of another tradition because there are certain areas of resemblance which provide a sufficient amount of continuity between otherwise incommensurable worldviews.

In addition to the continuity described above, most traditions would allow, I think, that rationality, regardless of the exact form it takes, is expressed generally in answers to questions that occur through time. Therefore, many traditions understand that they have arrived at their present beliefs through a series of theoretical modifications that took place in the past; as an example, modern libertarians might look back to John Locke, Ayn Rand, Friedrich von Hayek and other past libertarian-minded thinkers as paving the way to their present position. Even so, if the advocates of one tradition feel that they have ‘solved’ the problems of another, MacIntyre does allow that “the protagonists of a defeated tradition may not recognize, and may not be able to recognize, that such a defeat has occurred.”\textsuperscript{43} In no way does this lessen the fact that the dissolution of a rival tradition and its absorption into another was legitimate and rationally justified. There may be those who consider themselves as wholly original thinkers, not being located within any particular tradition; they maintain that their beliefs are simply ‘true,’ have not developed through time, and will not continue to develop. The question then becomes whether it is legitimate to interpret such people as belonging to a historical tradition even if they do not realize that they are part of a tradition. Since MacIntyre holds that it is legitimate to interpret such people as belonging to a tradition, he can be criticized as ascribing to a crypto-Hegelianism, i.e. despite denying a belief in an absolute and universal standpoint, he treats the concept of a ‘tradition’ as if it is universally applicable and should be recognized as such by all traditions. In response to this criticism, MacIntyre affirms to the

\textsuperscript{42} MacIntyre, “The relationship of philosophy to its past,” 45.

\textsuperscript{43} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, xiv.
contrary that “the concept of a tradition, together with the criteria for its use and application, is itself
one developed from within one particular tradition-based standpoint.” With regard to the question
of how to define what belongs within a tradition, the definition of tradition must be internal to the
tradition which has generated the concept of tradition itself; therefore, the tradition which invents
the concept of a ‘tradition’ may proceed in defining what is part of its own tradition but also how
other traditions are constituted (such as, the liberal tradition, the Confucian tradition, the
Augustinian tradition, etc.), even if such schools of thought do not consider themselves to be
traditions.

Having arrived at a picture of what a MacIntyrean approach to philosophical historiography
might look like, it is now for me to elaborate its significance for the large majority of this paper.
Primarily, the above reflections have determined the approach I have taken toward the
interpretation of Aristotle and other Greek thinkers. Instead of seeking to elicit from these thinkers
certain propositions which might answer the demands of modern logic (or worse yet, imposing such
logical structures upon ancient and medieval texts), I have attempted to read these authors as being
members of “socially, culturally and intellectually alien periods in the history of philosophy.”
This does not imply that these authors were mindlessly reporting the customs of their age, yet their
position in history did provide a framework within which they carried on their philosophizing. By
appropriating MacIntyre’s idea of ‘traditions’ for my own analysis of past thought, I have found a
way in which I can satisfactorily address the normative concerns of a political theorist as well as the
historical aims of a classical historian. Nonetheless, I am limited in this aim for reasons of space;
although some historians of philosophy have queried whether Aristotle’s ethical theory is detachable
from his metaphysics or biology, I will not be able to delve into a treatment of his metaphysics

---

44 Alasdair MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to my Critics,” in After MacIntyre, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre
45 MacIntyre, “The relationship of philosophy to its past,” 34.
(although I doubt that for Aristotle it would be possible to so easily separate politics and ethics from metaphysics and biology as they are different facets of a rational whole). I therefore will restrict my remarks to their views on the ‘State’ (however that might be conceived), trying to understand it in context as best as I am able. Secondly, MacIntyre’s theory of tradition in itself is intimately tied up with his ethical and political theories in that “his account goes beyond Aristotelianism precisely in its appeal to history.”

One cannot critique MacIntyre’s own theory of the state, as I wish to do, without realizing that his theory of the state is the summation of his own tradition. A philosophical critique of MacIntyre’s state theory is therefore at least partly a historical critique.

**THE ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION**

Having established that a thorough treatment of MacIntyre’s own state theory cannot be accomplished without the rational structure of an historical tradition, I find it necessary to define what constitutes the tradition within which MacIntyre places himself. In both *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre begins his investigation of the Aristotelian tradition with the Greek Dark Ages (1200-800 B.C.) and closes with Aquinas, albeit with notable gaps in the historical narrative. In the process of explaining how MacIntyre comes to articulate his theory of the state, I will therefore draw only upon those periods which MacIntyre himself discusses, with a heavy emphasis on Aristotle. Additionally, although MacIntyre does consider himself a Thomist, I find that his theory of the state can largely be understood by appealing directly to Aristotelian philosophy; the inclusion of Thomas Aquinas is thus rendered to be unnecessary for my own purposes. Nonetheless, in being guided by the chronological parameters set by MacIntyre, I will not merely repeat what he has already said about the historical narrative; instead, I will seek to buttress his own argument by drawing upon pertinent historical examples which he has not included in his writings. As outlined in the previous section, a tradition must seek to build upon all that has

---

46 Graham, “MacIntyre on Philosophy and History,” 30.
historically shaped the thoughts of key thinkers of that tradition; therefore, by investigating certain authors and texts within tradition more closely than MacIntyre does, I hope to show that MacIntyre ignores certain teachings which are essential to a full understanding of the Aristotelian tradition.

Our two main sources for life at the end of the Greek Dark Ages are the poets Hesiod and Homer. Hesiod, in *Works and Days*, provides modern readers with a unique glance into the society and beliefs of Greece in the eighth century B.C. Homer differs from Hesiod in that he is clearly attempting to describe a society which existed some time before him, yet “aspects of that imaginary world - its interests, passions, ideologies, and to some degree its social institutions - must have conformed to [his] audience’s real-life experiences.” As both Hesiod and Homer indicate, Greek society was under the control of rulers called, in Epic Greek, βασιλῆς (*basilēs*). Although this term underwent a great deal of evolution (by the Byzantine Era, it means ‘emperor’), it apparently first meant something comparable to ‘chieftain.’ In such a society, constant warfare was common: “raids not only enrich[ed] the raid leader and his men, but also serve[d] as a test of their manliness, skill, and courage, and thus [brought] honor and glory.” It was in this milieu that concepts of justice and goodness were, unsurprisingly, tied intimately to ideals of warfare. Damaging another’s honor must be answered by retribution on the part of the injured party. Such a system of retribution falls under the dominion of Zeus, who not only legitimizes or brings about retribution but justifies the rule of the βασιλῆς, for it is Zeus who has marked out the natural and social order of the world. In this world, two Greek terms were of great importance in determining not only what is just but also how to proceed when the prescribed order of the world has been in some sense ruptured: θέμις (*Themis*) and δίκη (*dikē*). Both words, as noted by MacIntyre, come from verbal roots, the former from τίθεναι (*tithenai*) “to put, place” and the latter from δεικνύναι (*deiknunai*) “to show, make

---

48 Ibid., 69.
known.” With this in mind, we might define ‘θέµις’ as the order which has been decreed or ‘put in place’ by the gods, most importantly Zeus, and ‘δίκη’ as the manifestation and enforcement of that order. The chieftains perform a fundamental role in this order, having been entrusted by Zeus with the ‘θέµιστες’ (themistes), those divinely ordained “customs, usages, principles of justice.” However, the gods also ensure that the chieftains themselves adhere to the divine ‘θέµιστες’ for “ο ὁ βίος εὐγενικὸς κρῖνως θέµιστας, δὲ δὲ δίκην λάσωσι θεογονίας” are punished with floods and tempests.

It is of course the case that people will not always be in violation of the divine order of society; they will often adhere to the expectations of one in their respective social position. The Greek Dark Ages thus provides us with type of moral vocabulary (for example, ‘good’ and ‘virtue’) which would continue to be used in Aristotelian philosophy. MacIntyre describes the relationship between positive ethical terms with the concept of δίκη as follows:

To do what my role requires, to do it well, deploying the skills necessary to discharge what someone in that role owes to others, is to be agathos. ‘Agathos’ comes to be translatable by ‘good’ and ‘arete’, the corresponding noun, by ‘excellence’ or ‘virtue’; but since originally to be agathos is to be good at doing what one’s role requires, and since the primary all-important role is that of the warrior-king, it is unsurprising that ‘arete’ originally names the excellence of such a king … ‘Arete’ comes, of course, to be used of qualities other than those of warrior-kings, but in the Homeric poems it still names only qualities which enable an individual to do what his or her role requires. Yet these are qualities praised not only because they enable an individual to do what his or her role requires, but also because they enable one both to act in accordance with what his or her role requires and to preserve and restore dikē.

51 Il. 16.387-388; “Those who judge crooked θέµιστες in the agora and drive out justice, not heeding the vengeance of the gods.” Cf. Hes. Works 250-251.
Thus, to be good or ἀγαθός (agathos) is to be successful in fulfilling a certain role. As the role of a warrior was most important during this period, it is hardly surprising that the term continued to have the possible meaning of ‘courageous’ through the classical period. \(^{53}\) Additionally, the corresponding noun, ἀρετή (aretē) is itself related to the adjective ἄρσην (arsēn), ‘masculine,’ thus indicating that qualities of masculinity and physical strength were valued above all else. Nonetheless, although MacIntyre is undoubtedly correct in maintaining that these terms pertained mostly to the virtues of warriors, one should note that in the Odyssey, Penelope claims for herself a certain ἀρετή, demonstrating that even in the time of Homer the term was beginning to be used for roles other than that of a male warrior. \(^{54}\)

Hesiod’s concern in the Works and Days is less grand than those of Achilles and Hector, yet his account of the laziness of his brother Perses as well as the injustice of the local βασιλῆς draws on generally the same Weltanschauung as that of Homer. He was neither one of the chieftains nor a person of any great social stature; instead, Hesiod was “a peasant farmer, dependent for justice on those whom Zeus had entrusted with the function of guarding the themistes; and when he found that justice was denied him, he naturally reproached the basileis with their failures to carry out their duties.” \(^{55}\) However, Hesiod elaborates on the Homeric account in two important ways. First, he admonishes the chieftains or magistrates not to forget that Zeus does not fail to notice ὁδὴν δὴ κατὰ τὴν δίκην πόλις νέργει. The πόλις (polis) or ‘city-state’ becomes for Hesiod a place where justice is enforced; rather than being simply the decree of a chieftain of a roving band of warriors, δίκη is now situated within the city. Secondly, Hesiod makes the differentiation between the world of humans and the world of beasts, claiming that justice has been granted by Zeus to

---

\(^{54}\) Od. 18.251.  
\(^{56}\) Hes. *Works* 268-269; “What kind of justice a city encloses within it.”
humans and not to the beasts that eat one another. There is no justification provided for such a statement; it is obviously understood to be a self-evident statement rather than one which Hesiod would feel the need to defend. Nonetheless, later writers would feel compelled to defend the notion that humans radically differ from animals with regard to their ethical responsibilities in response to those who challenged such a sentiment.

The abolition of the chiefdoms which defined the world of Hesiod and Homer as well as the emergence of a philosophic mindset among the Greeks posed a challenge for the conventional ways of explaining not only ‘δίκη’ but human society in general. The Presocratic philosopher Heraclitus might have represented the early stages of such a challenge when he made the claim that “δίκην ἔριν” - that “justice is strife.” Heraclitus is certainly drawing on previous aspects of Greek thought: “As in Anaximander, Dike stands for world order, and as in Homer, she is protected by the Erinyes.” Yet it is modified in such a way as to render previous explanations of the nature of justice irrelevant. If justice, or the order of the world, is merely strife and the claims of a chieftain to knowledge of divine ordinances were now thoroughly discredited, there would seem to be little to justify belief in anything other than a purely egoistic doctrine of individual gain. This, apparently, is exactly what happened among certain members of Greek society who came to be known as the Sophists. Their distinction between ‘νόµος’ (nomos) and ‘φύσις’ (physis), roughly a distinction between positive (i.e. man-made) and natural law, aroused great interest not only among intellectuals but also among members of the aristocracy. For if nature is defined by strife, there would seem to be little to justify the faith of Hesiod in believing there to be a radical difference between the world of beasts and men. Humans have indeed invented law for themselves, yet if law is something that is merely conventional rather than essential for man, why should one obey, especially when doing so is outside

57 Hes. Works 276-279.
58 Origen, contra Cels. VI.42.
what is natural? The ultra-conservative Aristophanes lampoons such a position in the *The Clouds*, where the young Sophist Pheidippides says to his father, whom he wishes to physically assault:

“σκέψαι δὲ τοις λεκτρυόνας καὶ τὰλλα τὸ βοτα ταυτί, ὡς τοις πατέρας μύνατι: καίτοι τί διαφέρουσιν ὑμῖν ἀκεντοι, πλὴν γὰρ τι ψηφίσματο σφάξουσιν;”

To which his father replies:

“τί δέ τι, ἵππις τοις λεκτρυόνας παντα μιμεῖς, οἶκκα σθίεις καὶ τὸν κόπρον καὶ παραξύλου καθεύδεις;”

Aristophanes clearly believes the position of the Sophists to be laughable, yet their challenge to Greek society was undeniably potent.

It might be instructive to pause in the historical narrative to question why the above outline of Greek thought and history is necessary for an understanding of Aristotle. Certainly, the various positions above, such as the belief in invisible *Erinyes* actively exacting vengeance from humans, are not first principles of Aristotelian philosophy nor do they seem to relate directly to a theory of the state. Nonetheless, I think it important for several reasons, three of which I list here. First, the terms which we employ in language are accompanied by connotations which we tacitly understand to be present. Such connotations are largely the product of that word’s history. Therefore, in order to understand what ‘δίκη’ means for Aristotle, we must trace its history; by applying our own notions of justice to this term, we would ignore crucial aspects of its meaning in Greek thought.

Second, insofar as I am subscribing to Collingwood’s idea of thought evolving through a series of questions and answers, it is necessary to formulate the ‘questions’ faced by Aristotle not simply by looking at his text to see which questions he explicitly states there. Rather, we must look to the historical situation to see whom he was arguing against, what their exact position was, and so forth. Questions arise in a context rather than popping into one’s mind *ex nihilo*. Finally, this brief history of Greek political thought up to Aristotle does not appear to include how the Greeks believed a

---

60 Aristophanes *The Clouds* 1427-1429; “Consider the roosters and the other beasts here, how they retaliate against their fathers; and how do these differ from us, except that they do not write decrees of the assembly?”

61 Aristophanes *The Clouds* 1430-1431; “Well, why then, since you imitate roosters in all things, do you not eat dung and sleep upon a wooden beam?”
‘state’ ought to be constituted. This historical summary would indeed be irrelevant to state theory if ‘δίκη’ had remained divorced from the πόλις in Greek thought, yet as these two concepts became fused together in archaic Greece, we can locate a rudimentary state theory among the Greeks in that the legitimate state must mirror the cosmic order of justice. Similarly, just as the individual in the Greek Dark Ages was a part of an organic social structure in which he or she achieved ‘ἀρετὴ’ in fulfilling a certain social role, the individual citizen ‘grows’ out of and finds purpose in the life of the πόλις. Nonetheless, the challenge of the Sophists brought to light certain questions about the nature of force and power within. Therefore, we should read Aristotle as developing and elaborating upon all such considerations (both of human flourishing and of the brute reality of the strife-ridden political world) in constructing his own theory of the state; he does not adopt these principles wholesale but rather attempts to reformulate them according to the dictates of reason and logic as he discusses them in both the *Ethics* and the *Politics*.

The nature of Aristotle’s ethics can be legitimately described as being eudemonistic; he is concerned with ‘εὐδαιμονία’ (eudaimonia) or what is usually translated as happiness. Such a translation is lacking however, for we think of happiness now as being a particular emotional state. Aristotle does not intend any such meaning in his use of ‘εὐδαιμονία’; he equates it with “τὸ εὐδαιμονεῖν.”62 Therefore, I find a more proper translation to be ‘flourishing.’ Even so, granting that this is an investigation of Aristotelian *ethics*, one might ask what relevance this has for MacIntyre’s theory of the state. Indeed, why do we not instead begin our investigation of Aristotle with his political observations? Aristotle himself answers this question in a passage in the *Politics* where he writes, “πῶς τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν τὰν αὐτὴν εἰσίναι γαρ τὸν τοῦ ἄνδρον καὶ τῆς πόλεως πρὸς τὸν τοῦτον λοιπὸν.”

---

62 Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* I.viii.4; “living well and acting well.”
πάντες γραμμόν ἐναντίον τῆς θυμόν τῆς

MacIntyre strongly echoes this belief that politics reflects ethics in his claim that “within the Aristotelian framework the one task [ethics] cannot be discharged without discharging the other [politics].” Whether or not all Aristotelian political science is simply a subcategory of ethical inquiry remains to be seen; however, MacIntyre clearly believes that it is. Therefore, if one is to understand the nature of the Aristotelian (and MacIntyrean) ideal state, one must come to understand the meaning of ‘εὐδαιμονία’ for the individual human.

Such a state of flourishing for the individual is desired for its own sake for it is “καλλίστον καὶ ὑπερήφανον πάντων ὑπεράνοια δίστον.” Since such is the nature of ‘εὐδαιμονία’, it also qualifies as the ultimate end of man in that the ultimate end “ἐν ηγεμονία τοῦ γαρ αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῦ ὑπερήφανον.” Having established early in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the ultimate end or function of man is to flourish (in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle simply assumes it), he turns toward providing a definition of ‘εὐδαιμονία’ which goes beyond the general idea of living well. If flourishing is the end of man and the end of man is also his function, we must first determine the function of man before we can begin to formulate definitions. Aristotle here invokes the question about how humans differ from the rest of the animal world which had been a key question for the Sophists, who are portrayed in Greek literature as denying any fundamental differences between beasts and mankind. Yet unlike the Sophists, Aristotle finds that humans differ from animals by virtue of possessing “πρακτικὴ τις τοῦ λόγου ὁ Χοντός.” Yet by making this identification of what is unique to humans, Aristotle does not limit human life to this ‘function’:

---

63 Aristotle *Pol.* VII.ii.1; “And it is remaining to say whether flourishing of every individual of mankind is to be said to be the same [as that] of the city-state or not the same. But this is clear. For all would agree that it is the same.”
64 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 82.
65 Aristotle *Eud. Eth.* I.i.1; “the finest and best and pleasantest of all things.”
66 Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* I.ii.2; “might be the good, even the best.”
In confining the human function to a life of action of the rational part, Aristotle does not exclude all animal or vegetative activities. He assumes only that rational activity is the distinctive and essential feature of the human soul, and that this organizes the human being’s other activities in the way perception organizes a non-rational animal’s other activities. The life of action will include other activities besides the activity of reasoning; but in a human being they are essentially guided by reasoning.68

With this understanding of reason’s regulation of the human soul, Aristotle’s desire to provide a definition for ‘εδαιµονία’ can now be satisfied. After two suggestions, he arrives at the definition of flourishing as “ψυχήνεργεία … κατορετήν.”69 The connection between this definition and the definition of man’s function may not be apparent; therefore, an elucidation is perhaps required. The term used here, ‘νέργεια’ (energeia), is derived from the Greek word for function, ἐργον (ergon); literally, it means ‘that-which-is-in-the-function’. Hence, I have rendered it as ‘active function,’ for flourishing does not consist merely in passively knowing the function of man but actively exercising that function - participating in that function. Additionally, this active function of the soul (i.e. the practical life of the part of the soul possessing reason) must be done “κατορετήν” or according to virtue. As noted above, ‘ορετή’ in the Greek world was understood as excellence in a certain role; it is not something which has an existence independent of a certain role or function. In this case, human flourishing is dependent upon the fulfillment of one’s function as a human being as well as possible, that is, with excellence.

As human flourishing has been defined as the active function of the soul in accordance with most perfect virtue, it is necessary to delineate the parts of the soul in order to understand its function. There is a division between the vegetative, appetitive, and rational parts of the soul; the similarity to Plato’s tripartite division of the soul should be apparent. However, Aristotle asserts that

---

69 Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* I.vii. 15; “the active function of the soul according to virtue.”
the appetitive is not wholly irrational, for it can be governed by rational principle. Since the human function is intimately connected with the rational part, virtue consists of two main parts: that which is concerned with the excellence of the rational part itself (intellectual virtue) and that which is concerned with the rational part’s governance of the appetites (ethical virtue). The latter is titled ‘ethical’ because it is formed through θος (ethos) or habit; in contrast, the intellectual virtues are cultivated through instruction and teaching. However, ethical habituation is not a straightforward process where one need only repeat certain actions before one becomes fully ‘habituated’. Instead, a dialectical process, involving two elements which continually modify and improve upon the other, is necessary for the formation of ethical virtue, a process which is dependent upon the intellectual virtue of φρονήσις (phronēsis), meaning ‘prudence.’

MacIntyre makes explicit what is here in Aristotle only implied, that is, that the “exercise of independent practical reasoning is one essential constituent to full human flourishing.” Since the ideal political community will aim to make human flourishing possible, it is by this standard, or rather, by the extent each ‘politics’ allows for citizens to deliberate over the relative status of goods as determined by their practical reasoning powers (i.e. Aristotle’s φρονήσις), that various political regimes are to be measured and judged. This is especially crucial as man cannot develop φρονήσις independently of the πόλις. Since Aristotle considers it impossible to be self-sufficient as an individual, a man cannot detach himself from society unless he is a god or wishes to descend to the level of the beasts (for, outside of society, he will predominantly be concerned with supplying the needs associated with the vegetative portion of one’s soul). Therefore, only a community can be self-sufficient as a whole, providing the resources necessary for flourishing: τὸ δὲ αὐτοῦ τεμήματος λέγομεν οὖν ἀνδρὸν, τὸ ζῶντι βίου μονώτην, ἐλλείψει καὶ γνωσίσι καὶ τέκνοις καὶ γυναικὶ.

---

71 Aristotle *Eud. Eth.* VII.xii.2.
Additionally, for the individual to partake of the self-sufficiency of the city-state, he must participate in political activity that directs and guides the community. Otherwise, the citizen is a dependent on the state, having no say in the course that the city-state, and thus his own life, will take. Thus, the ideal ‘πόλεις’ must allow for the participation of all its citizens, for political participation is necessary for the exercise of prudence and the achievement of self-sufficiency, both of which characterize human flourishing.

In developing an ideal theory of politics, MacIntyre relies on ethical concerns about creating and sustaining a community of independent practical reasoners. As noted above, independent practical reasoning is a *sine qua non* for human flourishing as conceived in an Aristotelian sense. However, we do not emerge at birth fully armed with the completely developed faculty of practical reason: “We become independent practical reasoners through participation in a set of relationships to certain particular others who are able to give us what we need.” Even so, once we have attained a position from which we may utilize our practical reason independently, we “continue to the end of our lives to need others to sustain us in our practical reasoning.” We can see how MacIntyre’s arguments here are simply a rewording of Aristotle’s own positions on subjects such as the necessity of prudence for the exercise of virtue as well as the impossibility for human beings to detach themselves from society and still live a ‘εἰς δείκτης’ life. Therefore, if independent practical reasoning (or prudence) is itself only possible under certain conditions, it is the purpose of politics to ensure that those conditions are present; for clearly “[a]n individualist and minimalist conception of the common good is then too weak to provide adequate justification for the kind of allegiance that a

72 Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* I.vii.6; “And we do not apply ‘self-sufficient’ to oneself alone, living a solitary life, but as a whole to parents and children and a wife and friends and citizens, since man is by nature a political [animal].”
73 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 99.
74 Ibid., 96.
political society must have from its members, if [that society] is to flourish.”  
If politics does not fulfill its ethical purpose in making flourishing possible for individual humans, MacIntyre finds that there is little reason to credit that politics’ claims to be legitimate and worthy of allegiance.

Both Aristotle and MacIntyre present conditions necessary for an ideal state; although MacIntyre does not directly elaborate on Aristotle’s presentation of the ideal (found in Books VII and VIII of the *Politics*), their two accounts of the ideal state share many resemblances by virtue of the fact that the two thinkers are more or less utilizing the same conception of human flourishing. Between *Dependent Rational Animals* and “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” MacIntyre identifies six conditions which an ideal ‘politics’ must meet in order for it to be considered legitimate, the first being the existence of “institutionalized forms of deliberation to which all those members of the community who have proposals, objections and arguments to contribute have access.”  
If one is to exercise practical reason, there must needs be a forum in which one may exercise it among society, without which practical reason cannot be developed nor sustained.

Secondly, regardless of which other virtues each communal tradition decides to value, every community must aim to inculcate the virtue of what MacIntyre vaguely calls ‘just generosity’ among its members. Although believing himself to be in disagreement with Aristotle, MacIntyre actually agrees with the philosopher when he brings into question the idea that a man or woman might be able to become self-sufficient. Aristotle’s reconfiguration of justice legitimated the role of the ‘πόλις’ as the seat of justice by deriving it from arguments about human flourishing. If, as Aristotle believes, individual flourishing only takes place when the individual integrates himself into the self-sufficient city-state, he must now exercise his virtue in a way which is directed toward the common good of the city-state (or at least in a way which is in harmony with the city-state). Aristotelian

---

76 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 129.
commentators have called the practice of virtue for the common good to be ‘general justice’ or what Aristotle identifies as the whole of virtue: “αὐτῇ ἀν ὁ δικαίωσιν ὁ μέρος ἡ δικαιοσύνη ὁ λόγιον, ὁ λόγος ἡ κακία.” By acknowledging the dependence of humans on the city-state, an individual’s own virtuous activity has become absorbed by the city-state. Virtue no longer is merely for the sake of one’s own flourishing; it contributes to the well-being and flourishing of the self-sufficient organism that is the ‘πόλις’.

Therefore, in MacIntyre’s own understanding and expansion of this principle, every human agent is to some extent dependent upon a system of giving and receiving which sustains human relationships for the reason that an individual will always be a part of some greater social entity. The problem which faces MacIntyre is that no already existing virtue is particularly fitting for the practices of giving and receiving; “we will find that neither ‘generosity’ nor ‘justice’, as these have been commonly understood, will quite supply what is needed, since according to most understandings of the virtues one can be generous without being just and just without being generous, while the central virtue required to sustain this kind of receiving and giving has aspects both of generosity and justice.” In a somewhat eccentric digression, MacIntyre points to the Lakota concept of *wanantognaka*, described as a fusion of generosity and justice. However, he returns to Aquinas who believed liberality to be a part of justice, thus preparing the way for the virtue of just generosity.

This virtue is transferred to his third condition in that we must extend our practices of giving and receiving to the chronically ill, the handicapped, the unborn, and the elderly among other groups: “[T]he political structures must make it possible both for those capable of independent practical reason and for those whose exercise of reasoning is limited or nonexistent to have a voice

---

77 Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* V.1.19-20; “This justice is not a part of virtue but the whole of virtue, and the opposite, injustice, is not a part of vice but the whole of vice.”

78 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 120.
in communal deliberation about what these norms of justice require.” In this respect, he differs significantly from Aristotle, who recommended that deformed infants not be reared in his ideal ‘πόλις’. MacIntyre’s justification for differing from Aristotle lies in the realization that we are all dependents in some respect and thus owe considerations of ‘just generosity’ to all those born within the state (not only those who have the physical capacity to flourish). These measures direct human beings toward a basic consideration of the common good inasmuch as it aids the fostering of practical reason.

MacIntyre’s first three requirements are for the most part embodied in the fourth, the necessity of natural law. The oddity of this suggestion (as the three requirements explained above are not usually considered to be part of natural law) is rendered more comprehensible when one examines what exactly MacIntyre means by the ‘natural law.’ Unlike Aquinas or any other prominent modern interpreter of Thomist natural law theory, MacIntyre holds the natural law to be procedural precepts: “they are justified as those precepts that all agents must observe in order to engage in common enterprises, which are, we should keep in mind, always at least in part enterprises of common inquiry.”

Natural law precepts are to be regarded as absolutes despite the fact that it is conceivable that in certain situations procedure might demand otherwise. They also may not only command of us certain actions but also demand that we possess certain virtues (such as just generosity described above). With this in mind, it is far easier to understand the all-encompassing role which natural law plays in MacIntyre’s political philosophy.

MacIntyre’s fifth principle, which requires small political communities, is intertwined with those which have been previously discussed, for if one is participate in practical deliberation within a political setting, that setting must be limited to a community. Regarding Athens, historians have had

---

79 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 130.
80 Aristotle, *Politics* VII.xiv.10.
81 Mark C. Murphy, “MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy” in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. by Mark C. Murphy (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 167.
varying notions as to its population during its height under Pericles: “A.W. Gomme long ago
calculated a citizen population of 43,000 … M.H. Hansen has more recently suggested … a citizen
population as high as 60,000.”\textsuperscript{82} However, the large majority of ‘πόλις’ did not approach such a
number, traditionally being composed of approximately 1,000 citizens. The size of the ‘πόλις’ was
apparently a determining factor as Aristotle himself says that any population which exceeds 100,000
does not qualify as a city-state.\textsuperscript{83} Although the Greeks were well aware of larger political units, such
were not considered ‘πόλις’ although in a few instances (namely, in drama and other forms of
literature not intended as objective descriptions of politics) we find that the term is used for the
Persian Empire.\textsuperscript{84}

The populations of modern states far exceed the figures above and are simply too large for
the interaction and institutions necessary for genuine practical deliberation to take place: “[Political
societies] need to be small-scale so that, whenever necessary, those who hold political office can be
put to the question by the citizens and the citizens put to the question by those who hold political
office in the course of extended deliberative debate in which there is widespread participation and
from which no one from whom something might be learned is excluded.”\textsuperscript{85} This echoes Aristotle’s
recommendation that there be “τὰς περβολὰς ρος, κ τὸ ν ὄγων δε ν διον.”\textsuperscript{86} Such
‘facts’ include the need for rulers to know the ruled and for the citizens to be acquainted with the
characters of their fellow-citizens so that they might more effectively choose virtuous officials.
Therefore, the state must be large enough to be self-sufficient, but small enough so that there is a
certain degree of familiarity and opportunity of participation among the citizens.

\textsuperscript{82} Robin Osborne, \textit{Athens and Athenian Democracy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 246.
\textsuperscript{83} Aristotle \textit{Nic. Eth.} IX.x.3.
\textsuperscript{84} Aesch. \textit{Pers}. 213, 511-512; Xen. \textit{Cyr}. 1.3.18, 1.4.25, 1.5.7.
\textsuperscript{85} MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” 248.
\textsuperscript{86} Aristotle, VIIiv.7; “a limit of the excess [of population, which is] easy to see from the facts.”
There, however, is an additional reason for which MacIntyre proposes that politics might be best realized in small communities. Such communities, in order to avoid the rampant pluralism of modern society, must to a certain extent be founded on a common culture and understanding of goods. MacIntyre does not, therefore, understand himself as believing in community for community’s sake as he characterizes the tradition of neo-Tocquevillian pluralists or communitarians who still incorporate too much of the liberal tradition into their theories: “I see no value in community as such - many types of community are nastily oppressive - and the values of community, as understood by the American spokespersons of contemporary communitarianism, such as Amitai Etzioni, are compatible with and supportive of the values of liberalism that I reject.”

MacIntyre here contrasts his own belief about the necessity of community (as the social arrangement where prudence and virtue might best be exercised) with other communitarians (Etzioni, the founding father of communitarianism, is named here) who view community more or less as a psychological need which has been neglected by, but is not incompatible with, modern liberalism. MacIntyre ends with his stipulation that the politics of ‘acknowledged dependence’ can exist only where genuine free markets also can be found (rather than what commonly pass as ‘free markets’): “Genuinely free markets are always local and small-scale markets in whose exchanges producers can choose to participate or not. And societies with genuinely free markets will be societies of small producers … in which no one is denied the possibility of the kind of productive work without which they cannot take their place in those relationships through which the common good is realized.”

What I have taken to be MacIntyre’s six requirements for a legitimate ‘politics’ (participatory institutions, just generosity, representation for dependents, natural law, a small population, and small-scale free markets) are clearly interrelated, as noted in the discussion of natural law. From

---

87 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, xiv.
88 MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” 249-250.
what has been shown, it is clear that they arise from a concern about how best a political society might be organized around the goal of achieving human flourishing for its citizens. Yet, although MacIntyre might present a unified (one would not err to call it Utopian as MacIntyre himself admits\(^89\)) political theory, it leaves much to be desired in its recommendations for how one proceeds in the current world order. Can the deliberation within the local community appropriately be called ‘politics,’ especially if the state still exists above various communities? Before these questions can be answered, we must first identify what is the main reason behind MacIntyre’s own rejection of the modern state as a legitimate example of the ‘politics.’

The exercise of prudence which MacIntyre (and Aristotle) find to be necessary in the ideal political community is noticeably lacking in the modern liberal state.\(^90\) Any state which to some degree displays the corrosive effects of modernity (which includes, according to MacIntyre, lack of moral and philosophical coherency) in its governing institutions comes under condemnation; this of course does not make the inverse (‘pre-modern states are never condemned’) true. MacIntyre is not proposing that Afghanistan under the Taliban was a legitimate state because it was relatively untouched by the modern world. Yet the modern nation-state is in a particularly bad position because it does not even possess the resources to reform itself; since the liberal state (because of adopting a position of neutrality in situations where there is a dispute between rival moral views) cannot conduct its policy according to a single moral and philosophical framework, its government is characterized by endless infighting amongst different groups between which it pretends to moderate from an objective position. Thus, since it cannot justify its existence through its dedication to human flourishing (i.e. in an Aristotelian sense), the government of the state justifies

---

\(^{89}\) MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 145.

\(^{90}\) As a word of clarification, it should be noted that MacIntyre often uses the term ‘nation-state’ to refer simply to the modern (liberal) state; he apparently does not intend to limit his remarks to states which are generally considered to embody a nation (that is, a group of people who are united by an historic culture and/or ethnicity) such as Italy or Poland. It is clear that he also wishes to indict states such as South Africa and the United States, even though these do not correspond to a single ‘nation’.
its existence through the provision of certain services to its citizens. In one of his better known passages, MacIntyre characterizes the modern state as follows:

The modern nation-state, in whatever guise, is a dangerous and unmanageable institution, presenting itself on the one hand as a bureaucratic supplier of goods and services, which is always about to, but never actually does, give its clients value for money, and on the other as a repository of sacred values, which from time to time invites one to lay down one's life on its behalf. As I have remarked elsewhere … it is like being asked to die for the telephone company.91

MacIntyre elsewhere describes modern states as “large, complex and often ramshackle [sets] of interlocking institutions, combining none too coherently the ethos of a public utility company with inflated claims to embody ideals of liberty and justice”92 and furthermore as “oligarchies disguised as liberal democracies.”93 As his exposition continues, it is clear that MacIntyre subscribes to a theory of the modern state akin to Weberian thought (holding that the state is defined by its use of force). Rather than being the political forum in which prudence might be exercised by all citizens, the modern state is rule by the few through force.

Similarly, since prudence governs the collective pursuit of virtue or of various goods for the soul, the modern state’s emphasis on individual freedom and value-neutrality makes it a particularly bad political arrangement, for it has little interest in virtues and values. The liberal state cannot legitimately espouse certain values for all those under its authority; it must be value-neutral and adopt a cold scientific outlook in assessing policy. This is because the liberal state is based upon the belief that the discovery of universal values is impossible; therefore, the state should refrain from imposing arbitrarily chosen values upon its citizens as much as possible. Behind the façade of the rhetoric of freedom and pluralism there lies the reality of a bureaucratized Weberian state, isolated

---

91 MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to my Critics,” 303.
92 Alasdair MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” 236.
93 Ibid., 237.
against its citizens and any coherent articulation of values. Zweckrationalität (rationality directed toward identifying profitable courses of action) has seemingly dispensed with Wertrationalität (rationality concerned with value-judgments). However, although MacIntyre would think it philosophically unjustifiable, the liberal state often does adopt certain moral positions (such as valuing freedom and equality), and those who espouse them might be sincere. Yet there is no philosophical justification for doing so; therefore, it makes appeals to values such as freedom and equality no more rationally justifiable than appeals to the Bible for political values. Even the German Rechtstaat (a state supposedly guided by law and justice) was revealed by Weber to be a smoke-screen, obscuring the fact that “the legally prescribed purposes of bureaucratic regulation are false purposes, which entrap human beings within false orientations and alienate them from the conditions of their freedom.”

The idea of the modern liberal state therefore ends in a paradox: it forces unjustified values (however pleasant they may sound to us) upon its citizens, thus threatening to undercut even the freedom the modern state was intended to guarantee: “The consequence of Weber’s [relativism] is that in his thought the contrast between power and authority, although paid lip-service to, is effectively obliterated as a special instance of the disappearance of the contrast between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations.” By this, MacIntyre means that without any values there is no reason to justify even the existence of the state apart from the use of blunt power. If one espouses a form of relativism like Weber’s, there is no reason to value freedom over slavery. Therefore, if the state claims to value freedom, it is doing so irrationally and thus forces that value upon its citizens. Since one cannot prove through reason that freedom is a value that ought to be valued by all people, the state must attempt to manipulate its citizens into believing that freedom is of value, either through rhetorical or physical force. Thus, as MacIntyre says, all relationships

between the state and its citizens become relationships of manipulation rather than ones based on rational justification. The state, rather than being the guardian of the values of law and justice, is instead the guardian of only its own interests. The value-deprived foundation upon which modern state theory is constructed cannot but collapse under the pressure of justifying state legitimacy and liberal values, bringing the superstructure with it down into the abyss of nihilism.

Therefore, the modern liberal state obviates the exercise of prudence in the public sphere because it does not even a philosophically coherent articulation of values; it hardly qualifies as MacIntyre’s (or Aristotle’s for that matter) ideal state. Yet what if the state was not liberal? What if it did indeed articulate a single moral position? This is an alternative proposed by Thaddeus Kozinski. Kozinski himself questions “why precisely is the nation-state incompatible with genuine political activity? In certain places, MacIntyre explains it in terms of population, its great size precluding it from embodying a consensus on a particular tradition of rationality and conception of the good; but in other places, he speaks in qualitative terms, suggesting that it is the state’s complex, bureaucratic structure that prevents it from performing genuine political activity. If size is not the essential problem then could the state embody genuine political activity in the event of a nation-wide consensus on a particular conception of the good?”

However, Kozinski has neglected to recount or does not understand the reasoning behind MacIntyre’s demand for a small community, for MacIntyre justifies the limited size in quantitative terms. If the state is too large, then it will lose the necessary connections between its citizens but also the size necessary for all citizens to participate in deliberating about what is best for the political community. Therefore, insofar as many modern states (especially in the West) can be considered ‘liberal,’ they fail to have the resources necessary to qualify as ideal states. Yet even those that are not liberal may not qualify as ideal states because of their large size.

---

The modern reader of MacIntyre thus finds himself in a predicament: if one is convinced by MacIntyre’s argument about human flourishing and the ideal state, how does one go about attaining that ideal (since it is clearly not in existence among us)? MacIntyre makes it very clear that the modern state and its politics must be rejected. And yet, how is one expected to form (or at least strive for) ideal political communities without some cooperation from the modern state? Additionally, once these communities are formed, what is the relationship between the state and the community? MacIntyre claims that the community will treat the state as “an ineliminable feature of the contemporary landscape” and subsequently “will not despise the resources that it affords.”

Such an explanation, though, is vague and still does not fully explain the desired end or the details of the relationship. This failing in MacIntyre’s political theory would undoubtedly be what critic Keith Breen describes as a ‘Manichean’ division between state and community, that is, Manichean in the sense that it divides the world into an eternal battle between the evil state and the good community. The relationship between the two is not conducted under clear and determined guidelines but rather as “a battle of fire and ice.”

The questions which arise from a consideration of the ideal MacIntyrean (and Aristotelian) state are ones that are not purely ethical. We are not compelled to ask at what we ought to aim; that has already been made manifestly clear by MacIntyre’s discussion of ethics and virtue. What we do need to ask is what we can do in our present circumstances to aim at the ideal state or, rather, which courses of action are within our power. This is of course highly dependent upon the regime type under which one lives. One must not lose sight of the fact that if the cultivation of the virtues can only be pursued in a certain political arrangement, politics is then to some extent prior to ethics and cannot simply be taken to be as the public embodiment of a moral code. Politics is concerned with

---

97 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 133.
MacIntyre’s own narrow interpretation of the essence of ‘politics’ as being an extension of ethics is easier to understand in light of his selective treatment of the Aristotelian corpus. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle repeatedly informs the reader that the study of the human good is a branch of the science of politics, for “χρωµένης δὲ ταύτης ταύτας λοιπὰς πρακτικὰς τὰς τὰ πιστημῶν, τὸ δὲ νομοθετεῖν τις πράττειν καὶ τίνων πέχεσθαι, τὸ ταύτης τέλος περιέχοι τὸν τὸν ἄλλον, τοῦτο τὸ τὸν ἐν τῇ νοθρώπιν νὰγακαὶνον νὰ γράφον.”99 Political science itself is but a subcategory of prudence and concerns itself with public deliberation concerning various goods and ends. However, in the *Ethics*, there is little discussion about how the actual structure of the ‘πόλις’ affects the citizens’ exercise of virtue and prudence; it is simply assumed that it does. A more thorough account of this subject matter, questions regarding ‘τὰ πολιτικὰ’ (*ta politika*) or literally those-things-which-relate-to-the-city, can be found in Aristotle’s work *The Politics*. MacIntyre himself favors the *Nicomachean Ethics* in his account of the Aristotelian tradition, neglecting much of the *Politics* where it does not agree with the positions outlined in his treatise of choice. This might be justified by looking at Books VII and VIII of the *Politics* (his description of the ideal πόλις) where Aristotle repeatedly says in one form or another that “τὸν αὐτὸν βίον ναγκακαὶνον ἐμναὶ τὸν χριστὸν κατὰ τῶν νοθρώσων καὶ κοινὸς ταύτας πόλεσι καὶ τοῖς νοθρώσω.”100 Thus, if one has established what is best for an individual human, political matters are subordinated to these ethical concerns in that the sole concern of politics is to engineer a political arrangement where flourishing is promoted. Yet as I have previously indicated, if the good life is not only

---

99 Aristotle *Nec. Eth.* I.i.4; “Since [political science] uses the rest of the sciences, and legislates what it is necessary to do and what things to keep away from, the end of [political science] would include the ends of the others; thus this [end] would be the human good.”

100 Aristotle *Pol.* VII.iii.6; “it is necessary that the same life is best for each [individual] of humanity and collectively for cities and mankind.”
promoted but only possible in the ideal state, it would seem as if politics is prior to ethics; one first needs the ideal state before the citizens can become virtuous men and women. Therefore, the problematic features of MacIntyre’s theory might be lessened upon investigating what Aristotle had to say about the πόλις as an entity having an existence and significance independent of ethical concerns.

My approach, then, to a portion of the Aristotelian tradition not thoroughly considered by MacIntyre will notably differ in its goals from the one regarding the *Ethics*. The foremost aim of the outline below will be to seek answers to the questions raised in the description of MacIntyre’s theory of the community. As has been noted, MacIntyre has failed to provide a satisfactory account of the relationship between the community and the modern state in two main respects. First, MacIntyre has failed to elaborate upon what the ideal relationship would be between the two institutions: although he admits that the community is dependent upon the state for security and resources, his account of how the community “will always also have to be wary and antagonistic in all its dealings with the politics of the state” dooms his ‘ideal’ political situation to be one of eternal conflict. Of course, MacIntyre’s actual ‘ideal’ might be a situation in which the state has completely disappeared, but then questions arise as to who provides the resources and, more importantly, security to the community once the state is gone. Additionally, even if one were to admit that the disappearance of the state would be the most desirable outcome, it seems that in our present situation there is no sign that the modern state is about to wither away. As the state is an ‘ineliminable’ feature of the political landscape and members of the community therefore are compelled to conduct business with it, not only to secure resources, but also to obtain recognition for themselves as forming a legitimate political unit, MacIntyre needs to provide a satisfactory explanation about how that interaction fits into his larger state theory, that is, beyond describing it as being necessarily ‘antagonistic.’

---

101 MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” 252.
the modern liberal state differs tremendously from various ancient political institutions, I believe that authors within the Aristotelian tradition, most importantly Aristotle himself, address some of these concerns and can assist MacIntyre in formulating answers to these pressing issues.

Aristotle explicitly articulates his belief of the relationship between individual and city-state in the first book of the *Politics* where he writes “καὶ πρῶτον δῆ τῷ φύσει πόλις ὅ ὁ ὀχί καὶ καὶ καστὸς μὲν στίν.” This statement effectively flips MacIntyre’s own beliefs about the priority of ethics to politics upside-down, for the good of the city-state is understood to be greater than that of the individual:

[I]t would be absurd to assign the good of a part more importance than the good of the whole, because no part can fare well in isolation from the whole to which it belongs. A hand separated from the body cannot flourish as a hand because it no longer is one. Similarly an isolated human being cannot fare well because he can no longer exercise the capacity without which he would not be classified as human. Or, if he can carry on just as well, despite his isolation, then he is not a human being after all.

Therefore, because a human being is incapable of flourishing outside of a city-state, the individual has a vested interest in seeing the πόλεις survive. Certainly, the individual also wishes that his or her city-state might approximate the conditions for the ideal πόλεις, but for that to happen, the city-state must first exist. One might even be required to utilize less than virtuous means in ensuring that one’s city-state survive.

Aristotle develops this thought further in Book III with what Hibbs has called the distinction between the good man and the good citizen: “In his reaction against the modern separation of ethics from politics, MacIntyre seems at times to go to the other extreme, to fuse his politics to an ethical conception of the good life. How Aristotelian is such a fusion? While closely

---

102 Aristotle *Pol.* I.i.11; “And the city-state is prior in nature to the household or each of us.”

related, politics for Aristotle is not simply an elaboration or expansion of ethics. The *Ethics* depicts the model of the good man, whereas the *Politics* operates with the distinction between the good man and the good citizen. No such distinction seems to be operative in MacIntyre’s political thought.”

In the ideal regime, the good man and the good citizen are identical as the whole state has been designed for that end. However, in imperfect political arrangements, such is clearly not the case. If the good citizen is concerned with the city-state and the good man is concerned with his own flourishing, they will conflict when the city-state does not take for its goal the promotion of human flourishing. Additionally, the citizen’s concern with the city-state is not an impulse to improve his own state’s constitution by swiftly forcing it to become the ideal state. On the contrary, the good citizen is concerned most of all to *preserve* the city-state and ensure its security: “μοίως τοίνυν καὶ τὸν πολιτείαν, καίτερον νομοίων ντων, μισθωρία τῆς κοινωνίας τὸν φύσιν καὶ στί, κοινωνία δὲ στὶν πολιτεία: διὰ τὸν ὑγείαν ναρκωτικὸν εἰς ναν διότι πολίτου πρὸς τὴν πολιτείαν.”

Improvement of the constitution is only legitimate when overseen by a prudent ruler who believes it will ensure greater stability and security; for example, “a citizen who helps transform a moderate oligarchy or a moderate democracy into a polity is doing exactly what needs to be done in order to preserve his constitution. He is making his mixed constitution a better mixture, because the better the balance between rich and poor, the stronger and more stable the city.” However, such reform is bound to be gradual and proceed incrementally rather than at once (as that would be destabilizing).

The utopianism of MacIntyre’s own political teachings is quite surprising in light of this description of Aristotle’s realism. However, one might object that Aristotle’s focus on the πόλις is
itself ‘utopian,’ “given that his own political status was that of subject to the Macedonian kings.”

And Aristotle is sometimes spoken of as nostalgic for the days in which the Greek city-states were independent rather than dominated by the Macedonian empire. However, one must ask whether or not this agrees with what we know of Aristotle and Greek history. For contrary to what apparently is the common opinion, Philip of Macedon did not destroy the democratic apparatus of every Greek city-state in the period after the Battle of Khaironeia. Instead, Philip’s main action post-Khaironeia was to organize the Greeks under the League of Corinth, the purpose of which was “to maintain a common peace in Greece and to retaliate against the Persians for the invasion of 480 BC and other acts of aggression against Greeks.”

Although the Greek city-states lost much of their autonomy with regard to foreign policy, some city-states such as Athens retained most of their democratic features, “in particular the sovereignty of the Demos and the equal right of all citizens to participate in the assembly and the law-courts … until the imposition of an oligarchic constitution, in particular a property qualification for citizenship, by the Makedonian Antipater in 322.” Aristotle himself might have strongly approved of the League, not only by virtue of being closely connected with the Macedonian royal family but also because his ideal state ought to be more concerned with internal affairs rather than external ones.

A further reason why Aristotle would have approved of the League nor been alarmed that it signaled the end of the πόλις is that it was structured in a way similar to many federal states in the northern half of Greece. Indeed, Aristotle himself was a member of such a federal state (his native city of Stageira was a member of the Chalcidice federation). A federal state, τὸ κοινόν (literally, ‘that which is common’) was characterized generally by a division of labor in which “foreign affairs and diplomacy belonged primarily to the federal government” and local government controlled local

---

110 Aristotle *Pol.* VII.iii.6.
affairs. Additionally, we have a curious comment made by Aristotle concerning the Greek city-states in his discussion of the ideal state which reads: “διόπερ λεύθερον τι διατελέσας καὶ βέλτιστα πολιτεύόμενον καὶ δυνάμενον ὁρχεῖν πάντων, μὴ τυγχάνον πολιτείας.” It is very possible that Aristotle is here referring to the League of Corinth and its effectiveness in uniting the Greeks against the Persian Empire under the Macedonian hegemon. However, even if Aristotle does not mean to refer specifically to the League of Corinth, he is clearly well-disposed toward some kind of political unification among the Greek city-states. Unlike MacIntyre, Aristotle can allow for larger political units than the πόλις; although the πόλις must remain to fulfill certain functions, it can be easily incorporated into larger political arrangements with which it is not constantly at odds.

The significance of the above for MacIntyre cannot be overstated. The Aristotle of the Politics is able to add a new dimension to the discussion of the state which to some extent legitimates interaction with the modern state in order to pursue the security and stability of one’s community. MacIntyre’s revolutionary brand of Aristotelianism does not agree well with the gradual, reformist mentality which we find in the Politics; Aristotle is much more willing for his rulers to head unjust regimes and acknowledge them as good citizens for their preservation of such regimes. In this way, Aristotle provides the reader with justification for seeking political ends through the avenues offered by the modern state. Additionally, Aristotle’s theory is itself compatible with an integration into some kind of federal system. MacIntyre’s emphasis on the community as the sole political unit of any worth possibly blinds him to the willingness of the Greeks generally and Aristotle in particular to acknowledge the functional utility of federal states for ensuring the security of ‘πόλεις’.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

---


112 Aristotle *Pol. VII.vi.1*: “Thus [the Greek race] continues free and having the best forms of government and capable at ruling all, attaining a single constitution.”
In conducting the above examination, I have tried to meet MacIntyre on his own terms by outlining how his method of doing philosophical historiography is bound up with his moral theory. I did not attempt to suggest certain modern theories which might best assist MacIntyre in solving the incoherencies and problems within his state theory. Rather, I returned to the Aristotelian tradition to find perfectly valid answers which MacIntyre has ignored, answers about citizenship, the imperfect state, and the nature of politics. For example, MacIntyre has suggested that modern states are nothing other than “oligarchies disguised as liberal democracies”\(^{113}\); he thus recommends that members of a community reject the politics of the modern liberal state. However, is such a recommendation Aristotelian? I think that it has been shown that although Aristotle did not abandon his ethical ideal as the ultimate end toward which one should aim, he realized that a good citizen must seek the preservation of the state rather than its overthrow. Thus, pending the emergence of communities which qualify as ideal political communities, citizens of modern states may contribute to the life of that state in which they live and possibly direct it toward the ideal state, if that can be accomplished without destabilization.

Additionally, Aristotle’s theory is not inherently antagonistic to a federal system of government in which the city-states retain many of their privileges while ceding their foreign policy to the federation. It seems that in an ideal world where political communities require resources from a larger political organization, yet seek to maintain a certain amount of independence in their pursuit of the good life, the federal state proves fitting. Of course, these suggestions provide at best a structural skeleton, the substance of which will vary according to the political situation. Yet that is exactly what Aristotle realized in his *Politics*; by refusing to focus exclusively on the ideal state, Aristotle demonstrates that political science, in studying the nature of power across a wide range of government types, can offer guidelines of how to act in oligarchy (in contrast to a democracy and *vice* 

---

\(^{113}\) MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” 237.
versa). Of course, the systems of government of the modern world differ tremendously from the ancient world. Therefore, rather than rejecting the modern state as utterly corrupt and then ignoring it, he or she who wishes to aim for the ideal community must make a study of the modern state and its politics. To do so is not to reject any ethical ideal; on the contrary, it is to accept that in aiming at an ethical ideal of human flourishing, every human must learn to balance their obligations as a good man and as a good citizen.

In summation, I find Alasdair MacIntyre to be a man obsessed with the πόλις, for it is only in the πόλις that man achieves flourishing as a practitioner of virtuous activities and deliberator about the common good. Certainly, there is much to be admired in MacIntyre’s description of the ideal community, and I believe there is nothing in what he has written to prevent that political institution from being the primary one in a theory of the state. However, if MacIntyre is endeavoring to propose a realistic program for the return to a community-centered life, he will need to go beyond the πόλις and accept the legitimacy of other political institutions. In so doing, he will not betray his own Aristotelian premises; rather, I feel he will be more faithful to a view of Aristotelianism more comprehensive than his narrow reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As we have seen, by turning to Aristotle’s *Politics* and others in the tradition, MacIntyre can draw on a wide array of classical resources which can aid in the construction of a more coherent political theory
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Murphy, Mark C. “MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy” in Alasdair MacIntyre, edited by Mark C. Murphy, 152-175. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.


