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# Tradition-based Rationality

By Dr. Brad J. Kallenberg

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The term “tradition-based rationality” derives from the works of Alasdair MacIntyre. Human reasoning, argued MacIntyre, is both *tradition-constitutive* and *tradition-constituted*.

By the first phrase he means that all reasoning, especially moral reasoning (i.e., thinking about what “good” means), involves people sharing a *conceptual* language (rather than a *natural* language like English or Chinese). For example, think of how widely three persons may differ on their use of the word “good” when applied to their jobs. The driver of a beer truck will claim his job is “good” because he is paid well; he is resoundingly welcomed wherever he goes; and he has predictable hours, time off, perhaps even pension benefits and discount on beer. In contrast, imagine a woman who has surrendered a lucrative upper management job to become the coordinator of tutoring and after-school programming in an urban school district. The job is tough, the hours are long, and the pay is poor. But she insists, “I have a good job.” In strong contrast with both of these stands Mother Teresa of Calcutta, whose “job” neither paid well nor, truth be told, made predictable differences in the lives of the dying lepers whom she hugged (sometimes yes, sometimes no; hard to tell). Still, Mother Teresa would also insist that she had a “good” job.

Each of these persons can compose a sentence in English, “I have a *good* job.” But they do not speak the same conceptual languages. Nor could these three settle among themselves whose job is “most good” by using the word “good,” because “good” means something radically distinct in each case. The driver’s pursuit of personal perks cannot be compared with the coordinator’s goal of “making a difference,” neither of which can be compared with Mother Teresa’s quest “to resemble Jesus come what may.” The driver and the coordinator may *come* to appreciate Mother Teresa’s meaning, but that will require of them a radical change in outlook (called “conversion”).

One learns a conceptual language not by reading a dictionary, but by immersion in a way of life. One comes to read music with comprehension while learning to play an instrument (or sing in a choir) with other musicians. So too for the language of theology. By participating with others in those activities in which the word “God” is at home — activities such as praying, confessing, thanking, evangelizing, worshiping — one will slowly become fluent in the language of God.

To share a conceptual language is to share a form of life. To share a form of life is to be a community, (Latin, *comunus*, co-world). Being a community involves, among other things, perpetually teaching the children which goods are real, and therefore worth pursuing. Getting this pursuit right takes more than a single lifetime. So in a very real sense the living community needs to include those former members who are no longer living. Such a multiple-lifetime community is what MacIntyre calls a “tradition.” In *After Virtue*, he defines tradition as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument.”<sup>1</sup>

The “argument” he refers to is none other than the ongoing discussion over what words like “good” (and “good news”) mean. Adherents to a living tradition show their understanding of such terms by the way that they talk and live with each other. For example, Christians understand “Good News” to entail daily acts of forgiveness. Christians’ forgiveness of each other ought thus to be regular enough for outsiders to recognize it in the pattern of Christian interactions. (Likewise, Christian communities that are devoid of such daily acts of forgiveness display that their concept of forgiveness is *empty*.) In MacIntyre’s terms, the Christian concept of “forgiveness” is “socially embodied.” Because this discussion and living out of the “Good News” carries forward from one generation to the next, the argument is both “historically extended” and “socially embodied.”

In sum, human reasoning is *tradition-constitutive*, because the entire web of conversations across time, conversations which employ the same concept of “good,” *constitutes* a living tradition. MacIntyre’s second phrase, namely *tradition-constituted*, follows from the first. Human reasoning is always (can never but be) located within some tradition or other. Of course, this fact poses challenges for a tradition like Christianity whose good includes sharing a message to adherents of *rival* traditions. To recall the earlier example, the three uses of “good” in “I have a good job,” cannot be translated from one conceptual language to the next. One can only understand a rival concept by being an *insider* to the tradition that uses the term. (In a later book MacIntyre explains how becoming an insider may be aided by employing the kind of imagination an anthropologist uses when studying a new tribe.<sup>2</sup>

But notice that *imagination* is not *translation*. Incommensurable terms have no synonyms in the other tradition. So understanding is not achieved by translation. The message of “Christ crucified” remains pure lunacy to Greek thinkers (1 Cor 1:23). Nevertheless, one may possibly, if slowly, become fluent in the rival conceptual language.) The conclusion is this: Living conceptual traditions are themselves the “the repositories of standards of rationality ... which are crucial to moral deliberation and action.”<sup>3</sup>

Said negatively, apart from the shared life within some particular tradition, “there is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument.”<sup>4</sup>

Said positively, the sharing of a conceptual language enables sharers to understand each other about what things are good, about what human life is for.

## For Further Reading

- *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, edited by Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg and Mark Thiessen Nation. 729. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997.
- *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. Alasdair MacIntyre, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984
- *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* Alasdair MacIntyre, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.. Cp. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12, 3545.

<sup>2</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition: Being Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> John Horton and Susan Mendus, "Alasdair MacIntyre: *After Virtue* and After," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>4</sup> [MacIntyre, 1988 #2601350]