

MacIntyre's Damascus: In the Province of Philosophy of Social Science

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MacIntyre's early writings include a series of papers, primarily published from the late nineteen-fifties to the early seventies (1957, 1958, 1960, 1962, 1965, 1966a, 1966b, 1967a, 1967b, 1967c, 1968a, 1968b, 1969, 1970, [1971]1978, 1974), but continuing throughout his career (1977, 1978a, 1978c), in the ill-defined domain of the philosophy of social science, a number of other writings (1986a, 1986b, 1991, [1993]1998), including *After Virtue* (1981), that rely in various ways on social science concepts, and a long series of book reviews of social science and social theory texts (1978b, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c, 1995). One view of the cluster of early papers is that they are juvenilia that have little to do with the phase of his work that begins with the publication of *After Virtue*. This does not square very well with the fact that MacIntyre never stopped writing papers of this kind, or that he continues to refer to the inspiration of such figures as the anthropologist Franz B. Steiner, or with the fact that MacIntyre continues to describe his project in terms from social science, such as "social structure." Nor does it square with the actual content of the notion of tradition as practice, which, as he develops it, is a social theory in which the traditional concerns of identity, selfhood, and intelligibility are understood in terms of social interaction (esp. in 1986a and 1986b). Many of the key issues that the later papers address are contained in his 1962 paper "A mistake about causality in social science," which I will show, was an important seed bed for his later thought.¹ The concept of practices MacIntyre developed was itself a social theory: the "philosophical" conclusions are dependent on its validity as an account of practices as a social phenomenon. There is a question of philosophical or social theoretical method that bears on the status of this theory, one of which is critical: the validity of a form of argument that figures throughout MacIntyre's work, in which characterizations of a topic, "identifications," are used to exclude alternative explanations. In the end, I will argue, arguments of this form are intrinsically misleading or incomplete.

The Fifties

The technical philosophical problem that was at the core of MacIntyre's early writings was the problem of reasons and causes. Anthony Kenny later summarized the conventional account during this period as follows:

When we explain action in terms of desires and beliefs we are not putting forward any explanatory theory to account for action. It is true that desires and beliefs explain action; but the explanation is not of any causal hypothetical form. It is not as if the actions of human beings constitute a set of raw data— actions identifiable on their faces as the kinds of actions they are— for which we may seek an explanatory hypothesis. On the contrary, many human actions are not identifiable as actions of a particular kind unless they are already seen and interpreted as proceeding from a particular set of desires and beliefs. (1978: 12)

This account was the alternative to, and led to the discrediting of, the idea that reasons explanations were a variety of causal explanation. Reasons explanations were descriptions in intentional language of a set of events that the description connected. To be “identifiable as action,” in Kenny’s language, implied proceeding from particular sets of beliefs and desires. The reason the set was “particular” was that the connection between them and the actions which “proceeded” from them was not caused but logical: the beliefs and desires were reasons for particular actions that also explained the actions. When MacIntyre later wrote of the stock of action descriptions in a society, he meant these descriptions of what is “identifiable as action.”

What is the status of these descriptions or identifications? An earlier tradition, exemplified by Weber, had put them on the side of the interpretation of meaning, which was taken to be consistent with, and not exclude, causal explanation. The key to the new account of action explanation was that they did exclude them. MacIntyre’s first major straight philosophy publication, “Determinism” in *Mind* (1957), vigorously upheld the claim that

to show that behavior is rational is enough to show that it is not causally determined in the sense of being the effect of a set of sufficient conditions operating independently of the agents deliberation or possibility of deliberation. So the discoveries of the physiologist and psychologist may indefinitely increase our knowledge of why men behave irrationally but they could never show that rational behavior in this sense was causally determined” (1957: 35).

“Reasons” explanations, in short, are probative with respect to the truth of causal claims, and, in the absence of unusual circumstances, exclude them: if action is rational, is it not caused.²

MacIntyre’s first philosophical book, *The Unconscious* (1958) was an attempt to extend the notion of intentional language and the idea of description to account for another class of action explanations thought to be causal, those involving the mechanisms of Freudian theory. He argued that Freud had misconstrued his own achievement by making them into a scientific theory and construing his explanations as depending on the discovery of a new causal realm. But his real achievement was largely a matter of extending intentional language to encompass unconscious motivations. MacIntyre argued that Freud’s own construal of these explanations as causal was a misinterpretation (1958: 71-74). MacIntyre did not argue that the attempt to provide a casual, theoretical account of behavior was in principle mistaken: theorizing about unobservables is legitimate, and theorizing about the unconscious in the normal fashion of hypothetico-deductivism would be legitimate as well (1958: 46). The question is one that can be answered by analysis: whether Freud’s explanations are in fact of this type, and the answer is

that they are not. Freud thinks of his unconscious motives as causes, but “in practice, when Freud assigns an unconscious motive to an action he ascribes a purpose” rather than a cause, though a purpose which is inaccessible to the patient (1958: 61). Thus in practice Freud what has extended into the realm of the unconscious is not causality, but intentionality, and in his treatments “the adducing of logically relevant considerations plays an essential part (1957: 36). Because the notion of unconscious intention is not causal it does not require the “unconscious” as a causal entity, and thus does not require the theory (1957: 96-7). Freud’s usages conceal this. “Repression,” for example, appears to be a causal concept, but it is not: it is a metaphor used for descriptive purposes (1958: 79). The theory of the unconscious, understood as a scientific theory, was, MacIntyre argued, gratuitous: the discovery of unconsciously motivated actions, which he accepted as an important achievement of psychoanalysis, did not require such a theory, nor did it require Freud’s complex causal machinery of the mind. The case against the theory is thus an application of the standard account of theoretical entities in philosophy of science.

Showing that Freud’s explanations can be construed in intentional terms serves to show why the elaborate and highly questionable structure of mental entities in the theory are not required by the explanations he actually gives. This is a form of the argument that identifying an action as intentional excludes the possibility of causal explanation, or theory, but it is different from certain famous versions of this argument, a difference that is important throughout MacIntyre’s discussions of social theory. The difference figures in the contrast between *The Unconscious* and Peter Winch’s *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*. Each appeared in 1958, in the same year and in the same series of little red books (Routledge and Kegan Paul’s “Studies in Philosophical Psychology”). Winch’s book was destined to become a classic. In it, he had boldly extended the “reasons” side of the reasons and causes arguments by arguing that only those reasons that were part of an activity, part (to use MacIntyre’s language, of the stock of descriptions available to its participants) could figure in an explanation of the activity. This argument depended on the constitutive role of agent’s concepts in the formation of the intention to perform a particular act. The character of these concepts, as concepts precluded causal explanation, which required concepts of a different type, suitable for generalization.

Causal accounts of actions typically appeal to the notion that the action can be described and categorized independently of the reasons of the agent. In an example that Winch took from Pareto, Christian baptism is described as a lustral rite. Winch argued that this description was an error: the action thus described was falsely described, because it was not the action intended by the agents; the intended action was intended in the form of the Christian concept of baptism. An explanation of lustral rites does not explain the actions of the believers because it is not a description of what they did, in the strict sense of matching the conceptual content of the actions as they were conceived by the participants. Winch’s book extended this line of argument to other figures in the social sciences, showing that they fell afoul of the problem of the constitutive conceptual relationship between the identification of actions and the content of the intentions of the agent. Winch drew the full implications of this argument, and they were radical. To explain the acts of Homeric heroes, or believers in Witchcraft, is to identify the actions in their conceptual terms and then to explicate their concepts. In explaining by explicating concepts one comes to an end, and this was, for Winch, also the end of social science, and its sole end. The goal of causal knowledge of the world of action, the goal of the social sciences, was incoherent, and that social science properly understood was a branch of philosophy, because it was a form of

conceptual analysis.

The tensions produced by this extension of the idea that reasons explain, and explain in some exclusive sense, are multiple and complex, and they appear between MacIntyre and Winch even at this early point. The argument that the concepts contained in intentions were constitutive of action fit problematically with the notion of rational action more narrowly construed, as MacIntyre had construed it in "Determinism." It was plausible to define rational action in the strict sense of rational decision as uncaused, as MacIntyre did in his paper. But MacIntyre's argument there was very limited, in one respect: he did not identify any large actual class of actions as rational according to his definition, and indeed, it would be consistent with his argument in that text to claim that the content of the category of rational action was vanishingly small. The idea that "rational action" involved the adducing of reasons, which figures in *The Unconscious* and "Determinism," was different and had different implications. Argument, like analysis, is potentially interminable, and in any case raises questions about the ultimate grounds of argument. These questions had relativistic implications, since ultimate grounds for us might not be ultimate grounds for someone else. So did the idea suggested in Anscombe's *Intention* ([1957]2000) that the relevant "reasons" were practical syllogisms, an idea which in any case fit poorly with the idea of rational decision-making. The "constitutivity" argument went even further. To define all action as uncaused by virtue of the fact that it is conceptualized by agents led to radical conclusions, conclusions that conflicted with the ordinary usage it purported to analyze.

The link between intention and action, in ordinary usage, is sometimes weak, even if it is backed by practical syllogisms. Weakness of will, multiple relevant motives, and sheer inconsistency are features of human action. Here it does seem reasonable to ask what the real reason was for an act, something that reference to practical syllogisms does not answer, but "cause" might. The idea of ordinary usage, in any case, raises the question of whose usage. Some reasons explanations, especially those in other cultures, seem to be, by our lights at least, systematically false, defective, or unintelligible: the beliefs behind the reasons are false, the categories in which they are expressed (such as Aristotle's categories of food types) are defective, and the cosmologies which underwrite the categories are little better than superstitious gibberish. Even the basic inferences made by agents in these societies (inferences we can apprehend them as making, and even supply the "rules" by which they are made) are not "reasons" for us. Do these reasons explanations— which undeniably are constitutive of the intentions of the agents— count as adequate explanations, or as genuine reasons? Is "of course, he is warding off evil spirits" an explanation? This is not as simple a problem as it appears.

In the first place, this argument creates a problem with the implications that MacIntyre drew from his discussion of rational action. There, very strong truth claims are being made for the significance of reasons descriptions-- claims to the effect that giving a reasons explanation warrants claims about causation-- negative claims, claims to the effect that some action was not "caused" because it was done for a reason. If we accept that a pure rational decision is by virtue of its character, uncaused, does this extend more broadly to any action "constituted" by an intention? Is it really the case that psychologists could discover nothing that had any bearing on, for example, the reasoning involved in the practice of ancient Mayan kings of bleeding their genitals in public, the actions of criminals, or reasoning about sexual desire, or crowd behavior? This is implausible in the extreme— in effect, it amounts to the claim that social science is

unexplanatory gibberish but the practical syllogisms of believers in witchcraft are genuinely explanatory; that ordinary historical explanations of such things as the causes of the Great War were impossible in principle, and that history as practiced by historians was therefore bunk; and that comparisons between institutions were inadmissible, for they violated the constitutivity principle. MacIntyre believed none of this. Indeed, he served as a kind of go-between, continuing to attempt to make the claims of philosophers square with the claims of social scientists, for example in his 1960 paper "Purpose and Intelligent Action," which attempts to make sense of the notion of intelligent action in a way that fits both the concept of action and the results of intelligence testing research. The large problem of the relation of social science explanations to intentional action was still there to be solved.

MacIntyre Contra Weber on Rationality

MacIntyre's first major paper on social science itself was "A Mistake about Causality in Social Science," published in 1962. It represented an extension of the strategy of "Determinism" and *The Unconscious* to this larger problem, and to a figure with whom MacIntyre continued to wrestle throughout his career-- Max Weber. The "mistake" to which the title refers is Weber's. Weber had constructed historical explanations of beliefs, such as the particular "economic ethic" that he described under the rubric of "the spirit of capitalism" by constructing a causal account of the nature of the influence of certain other kinds of ideas, namely the ideas of vocation, predestination, and worldliness that were a part of Calvinistic Protestantism. The explanation as formulated by Weber himself is "causal," and this is part of the mistake. It depends on the claim that there is distinctive psychological connecting link, namely a state of anxiety in the minds of believers, that supplies what Weber thought was the distinctive motive force for capitalist activity of a new kind, in conformity with the novel "ethic" he identified.

Here was an explanation, or apparent explanation, rich in the kind of difficulty that a serious application of the reasons and causes distinction needed to address. It carried with it other intriguing baggage, of special relevance to MacIntyre: Weber's account of capitalism had been routinely treated, in the fifties, as the counterpoint to, and refutation of, of the "materialist" view of capitalism and of history generally. The conclusion of Weber's account of the historical course of rationalization had an even more interesting set of implications. His argument that Calvinistic Protestantism represented a rationalization of the Christian tradition, as MacIntyre saw, was a natural counterpart to the conclusions reached by Protestant theologians like Karl Barth, whom MacIntyre had other reasons for attacking. For Weber, in the course of the process of rationalization, of which the "disenchantment of the world" was a consequence, the "superstitious" elements of the Christian tradition were gradually stripped away.

MacIntyre does with Weber something similar to what he did with Freud: he reconstructs Weber's explanation by turning it into a pure issue of rationality and contradiction, thus dispensing with the need for cause. Where Weber interpreted the early Protestants as being caught in the grip of a consistent theodicy which had anxiety as a consequences and which had the further causal consequence of strongly reinforcing a particular pattern of reasoning, the "ethic," MacIntyre saw them as in the grip of a theological contradiction, which they resolved rationally. The two lines of argument can be compared very simply. For Calvin and for a rational Calvinist, the recognition of God's omniscient and omnipotence not only posed the usual

problem of the existence of evil, the traditional problem of theodicy, but posed it in a very particular form. The revelatory writings taught that there was heaven and hell, and it followed from this that some people were damned or going to hell and other people were saved or going to heaven. We as humans do not have knowledge of whether we are going to heaven or hell. God being omniscient knows in advance whether we are going to heaven or hell. This is the basis of the doctrine of predestination. It could be that God grants us free will, and it could also be that we in some sense are allowed by God to earn salvation through the doing of good works. But this “allowing” and “earning” is in the end essentially a sham, simply because God in his omniscience already knows who will be saved by their “good works.”³ In the end, our salvation is entirely a matter of God’s grace; we cannot “earn” it on our own and certainly not by good works. For Weber this was the transparent consequence of making the Christian theodicy consistent, and it had a predictable causal effect: believers had a deep anxiety about whether they were predestined to election or damnation.

MacIntyre ran this argument the other way around. Good works, he argued, were enjoined in the revelatory writings. Protestant theology thus was placed in the untenable position of arguing that what the revelatory writings commanded was in some sense irrelevant to God and God’s nature (which they supposed themselves to have theological access to through their own theorizing). This contradiction between theology and revelation could only mean that the Calvinists were mistaken about God’s nature and that Protestantism was a false doctrine. They found a way out of this contradiction by embracing the notion of good works in practice while denying it in theory.⁴ Thus, contra Weber, *Protestantism* rather than Catholicism arises out of irrationality and contradiction. The consequences of this contradiction, and people’s response to it, is thus explained not through the kind of psychological mechanism that Weber invokes but rather through the logical fact of contradiction, something that occurs at the level of belief, and also needs no further explanation, because it is “rational” to resolve the contradiction.

MacIntyre’s argument is relentless in placing his historical account on the reasons rather than the causes side of the line. “The relationship which [Weber] in fact manages to pinpoint is indeed a rational one. Weber in fact presents us with capitalist actions as the conclusion of a practical syllogism which has Protestant premises” (MacIntyre 1962: 55). Weber’s concern with causal alternatives-- the cases of India and China-- “is entirely out of place” (MacIntyre 1962: 55). The statistical material Weber presents is relevant, but only in that it shows that there were people whose behavior corresponded to the practical syllogism, that is to say people who conformed to the description, not as evidence of causal connection in the Humean sense. The fact of conformity to the description is sovereign, and causally probative: because it is rational to resolve the contradiction as MacIntyre constructs the practical syllogism there are no causal facts of the matter. The “mistake” made by Weber, and by social scientists more generally, is to think otherwise.

This is an application of the claim MacIntyre made in “Determinism,” but one for which we can see how much might fall into the category of rational action for MacIntyre. The sharp line MacIntyre draws in that text between behaving irrationally and behaving rationally, in which rational behavior is the case in which the agent would change the course of action if and only if “logically relevant considerations” were adduced, now is extended to an example that is more realistic, the case in which the agent has various reasons, and the determinants that select what

the operative reasons are from these available reasons, may be (and were hypothesized by Weber to be) conditions, such as anxiety, that are unlike “reasons” or “information” – the terms MacIntyre uses in “Determinism”(1957: 35). MacIntyre’s response was to acknowledge the problem of inconsistency between beliefs and actions itself. Real human action rarely works as neatly as the simple relation between a belief, a good, and an action modeled in the practical syllogism-- Dry food suits any man, here’s some dry food → the action of eating it (1962: 53). But, the model does solve a problem. It accounts for the constitutive, or “internal and conceptual” character of the intention-action relationship. The idea that practical syllogisms provided logical backing for the intention-action link allowed MacIntyre to assimilate action explanations to the decision-oriented model of rational action in “Determinism.” This avoided the claim that action was shown to be uncaused simply by virtue of the fact that it was conceptually constituted. It also allowed him to make sense of the problem of false practical syllogisms. He argued that we can imagine a dialogue with the practical syllogizer in which the beliefs of the agent can be revealed, and the false ones corrected. When the subject in this dialogue “insists on simply affirming the premises and denying the conclusion, he becomes unintelligible: we literally do not know in the one case what he is saying or in the other case what he is doing” (1962: 53). The use of “intelligible” is telling, for it persists-- twenty-four years later MacIntyre was still wrestling with the notion of intelligibility (1986). Here, the later conclusions are foreshadowed. This style of explanations comes to an end not in concepts, but in the intelligible agent.

Weber’s explanation had singled out one strand of the plethora of desires, beliefs, and decisions that early capitalists made, and tried to explain why this strand proved to be so causally significant. This was a question that MacIntyre’s approach could not address, except through the insistence that the strand of reasoning he described was the only possible account, given the evidence, rather than *a* possible account, that evidence would decide between.

One may observe again here a characteristic of MacIntyre’s style-- his reliance on a particular kind of “winner take all” reasoning, which we may characterize as “exclusive identification.” He himself characterizes this form of argument, in a different context in the same paper, by saying that “what I have been concerned to do is to *identify* rather than to *explain*. But if one accepts this identification then we will have to take out a widely accepted class of explanations” (1962: 69). The new context is the problem of alternative conceptual schemes, and here we see MacIntyre attempt for the first time to provide a systematic alternative to Winch. MacIntyre’s approach concedes one of Winch’s points about the conceptual constitution of action, that “if the limits of action are the limits of description, then to analyze the ideas current in society is also to discern the limits within which action necessarily moves in that society” (1962: 60), from which he draws the conclusion that “the theory of ideology appears not as one more compartmentalized concept of the sociologist, but as part of his central concern with society as such” (1962: 60). However, consistent with his earlier accounts of rational action as action open to the adducing of reasons, he argues that the descriptions in the stock of descriptions available in a given social group at a given time “occur as constituents of beliefs, speculations, and projects and as these are continually criticized, modified, rejected, or improved, the stock of descriptions changes. The changes in human action are thus intimately linked to the thread of rational criticism in history” (1962: 60). This in turn becomes the

distinction between two types of ideology.

One is represented by the Azande, who had been discussed by Michael Polanyi in his *magnum opus Personal Knowledge*, also published in 1958. The Azande were striking for having had a conceptual system in which witchcraft beliefs were central, and which had *ad hoc* answers to any evidence that might be given against it, and was thus closed to criticism. MacIntyre claims that in primitive societies closure is characteristic: “they have their concepts and beliefs; they move in a closed conceptual circle” (1962: 63). But while “All primitive societies, especially isolated ones, tend to be closed. . . . Most later societies are open; there are established modes of criticism” (1962: 63). MacIntyre draws the line between “open” and “closed” in such a way that Marxism is not a closed scheme, but Stalinism was. The difference is that Stalinism represented “a concerted attempt to delimit the available stock of concepts and beliefs and at a certain point to return to a closed circle” (1962: 63). We can distinguish the two kinds of case because in the latter this can be done only by recourse to irrational devices that exclude rational alternatives. Closure, in short, can occur “rationally” only for primitive societies which have never known openness, but elsewhere closure can be forced, or irrationally induced. This is an intriguing move, in light of what follows, not least in that it suggests that “ideology” always has an act of “irrationality” in its historical pedigree. MacIntyre argued that Stalin’s terror, which could “remove physically all traces of alternative” arguments, was necessitated by the fact that ideological closure not possible in a modern industrial society. Even in Stalin’s Soviet Union, there were the Old Bolsheviks, “who in their own theories and practices, were the bearers of an alternative wider conceptual scheme (it is in the light of our canons of rationality that we can see it as wider), which prevented consciousness being closed to non-Stalinist alternatives” (1962: 68). Terror, he thought, is bound to fail, even though in Stalinist terms “the whole thing is rational; it can only be challenged by leaving this closed circle” of ideas (1962: 68-9). This “identification” of Stalinism as rational on its own terms meant that classes of explanation that appealed to such notions as “cult of personality” are wrong (1962: 69). But it did not mean that it was immune to explanation, since the devices that sustained it are irrational by our standards.

Enter Kuhn

The cultural *tsunami* that was Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) was published in the same year as “A mistake about causality in social science.” Kuhn’s argument maps on to the problem of the Azande as follows: science is like a primitive society, in that its concepts also move, for long periods of time, in a closed circle. Anomalies are dismissed, just as they are by the Azande, with *ad hoc* explanations-- of the failures of the oracles, for the Azande, and of unexplained but possibly relevant results, for scientists within their paradigm. The rational alternatives to the existing paradigms that emerge are treated by scientists not with openness, but with endless attempts to exclude them from serious discussion. These attempts seem irrational only in retrospect, once a scientific revolution has occurred which replaced the past closed system with a new one. The revolution itself is not and cannot be a matter of rationally considering alternatives, at least if they are fundamental alternatives, because the only relevant “rational” criteria are internal to the closed system of concepts. In this respect scientists are in the same position as the Azande. There is no such thing in the history of science as an explanation to

the effect that some belief is true or rational simply because it is true or rational. It is only true or rational according to our standards or theirs, and there is no way of explaining our standards as rational-- to say they are rational simply because they are is itself an instance of reasoning within a closed circle of concepts. The open/closed distinction is a sham, or perhaps it would be better to say a relative distinction, which operates internally to a system of concepts, not between them. The only way out of a paradigm was by a "revolution" that could not be construed as rational in the past paradigm, and the past paradigm could not be properly understood in the language of the new.

MacIntyre's discussions of Stalinism and the Azande, his insistence on the conceptually relative character of action-explanations as always rational and always restricted to the "stock of descriptions" in the explainee's society, his apparent equation of our standards of rationality with rationality as such, his invocation of Popper's distinction between open and closed, and his depiction of Stalinism as an attempt to secure closure read in retrospect like a man walking into a trap.

MacIntyre argued that "the beginning of an explanation of why certain criteria are taken to be rational in some societies is that they are rational." Presumably he meant that "our" society was among these societies, for in the next sentence he adds: "And since this has to enter into our explanation we cannot explain social behavior independently of our own norms of rationality" (1962: 61). MacIntyre characterized changing someone's views by argument as follows: I appeal to impersonal canons of rationality and the relationship between us can only be elucidated by an account of the established features of rule-following" (1962: 68). This suggests that he thought at this time that that impersonal standards of rationality were universal, their application governed by locally established procedures of rule-following. He might have avoided making such an assumption simply by leaving out the notion of "criteria" of rationality or the idea that we have "our own norms of rationality." Instead, by making an unargued identification of "our own norms of rationality" with rationality as such MacIntyre opened the door to the full form of the puzzle of rationality and relativism: appealing to "our norms" makes the explanations explanations for us; appealing to rationality as such raises the question of how we are to affirm our criteria of rationality without circularity.

The term paradigm included the notion of a rational standard among its multiple meanings, and Kuhn's discussion made it clear that when scientists made substantive judgements of rational adequacy of evidence, and of whether an anomaly was significant in science they relied on paradigms. Within paradigms justification was circular-- evidence supported the paradigm, but the paradigm defined what counted as evidence; paradigms were validated by explanatory and predictive successes, but they defined what counted as explanation and what success amounted to. But Kuhn's case was historiographic and historical: for him incommensurability was simply a fact, shown by the reactions of incomprehension of scientists adhering the old paradigm in the face of the new paradigm. Moreover, according to Kuhn, what MacIntyre in this paper characterized as unusual and "slightly self-contradictory" (1962: 63) about ideological thinking, namely the attempt to close the circle of concepts, to "prevent any criticism which does not fall inside the established conceptual framework" is what scientists normally do in the course of solidifying the triumph of a paradigm and dealing with anomalies.

The naive idea that divergence in conceptual schemes was error, that there was

unproblematic progress with respect to rationality, or truth, in the course of the replacement of conceptual schemes or in the comparison of divergence schemes, validated by personal canons, was over with Kuhn. For better or worse, this was a cultural transformation, to which MacIntyre, and every other thinker of the era, was compelled to respond. To fail to do so would lead to a relativism in which Stalinism was merely another paradigm with its own rationality, and in which our judgements of the non-rationality of its methods of self-justification or closure would be merely expressions of “our” paradigm. The distinction between ideology and rational adequacy would collapse. Reasons explanations of action would be explanations only for us. But vindicating “our” standards faced its own problems. A claim that the explanation of the fact that certain criteria are taken to be rational by us is that they are rational would simply be circular— a justification of our standards by reference to our standards. The Azande and Stalin could say the same.

Winch’s New Challenge

MacIntyre had no wish to escape from this problem, which, in various guises was to be the central subject of his later career. Winch posed a new problem, a problem of the logical conditions of understanding. Winch now argued that there could never be grounds for judgements of rationality of the beliefs of other cultures, no matter how outré the beliefs, because such judgements about beliefs seem necessarily to involve pressing the concepts in question where they would not naturally be taken and thus misconstruing them. The case was the now familiar Azande. The facts of the matter, reported by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, were these. The Azande employed a particular method for answering a wide variety of questions. They asked a question which could be given a yes or no answer while they poisoned a small domestic fowl. If the bird lived, the answer was “yes”; if the bird died, the answer was “no.” The method was used for making decisions but also for answering causal questions such as: “Is Prince Ndoruma responsible for placing bad medicines in the roof of my hut?” (Winch 1970: 86). Oracles, however, can conflict: the implications of the oracular pronouncements are often inconsistent with one another, and future experiences do not always square with predictions. Witch powers were supposed by the Azande to be hereditary, so discovering through the oracle that someone is a witch implied that the person’s whole family line are witches. But other oracles might, and do, contradict this by answering “no” to the question of whether a given person is a witch. The Azande supplied various explanations for the failure of oracles, for example, that a bad poison was used or the ritual was faulty. These *ad hoc* explanations were, as the Europeans who studied them understood, not sufficient to overcome the endless contradictions that belief in oracles produced.

The way in which Evans-Pritchard had described the Azande involves a basic principle of logic, the principle of non-contradiction, a principle that had figured among MacIntyre’s “impersonal canons of rationality.” But it is not clear, as Winch points out, that Evans-Pritchard is entitled to do so in this case. Evans-Pritchard’s challenge is first to *understand* the concepts of the Azande and that judgments about contradiction seem to depend on correct understanding. Our understanding of concepts is first a matter of understanding how they are used. In the case of the Azande, as Evans-Pritchard himself tells us, the people who engage in the practice of oracles

do not have any interest in the problem of contradiction, or indeed any theoretical interest in the subject. For Winch, this suggests that there is no mystery about the contradictory character of Azande thinking, only an error that creates a false problem. It is the interpreter, Evans-Pritchard, who is in error, and his error is conceptual: he wishes to use the concepts in ways that the Azande do not use them. Evans-Pritchard is guilty of attributing to the Azande a concept other than the one they use. Pushing the concept into uses that are unnatural to the Azande, to the point of contradiction, is the same as misconstruing the concept, and the appearance of contradictions in a reconstruction of their thought shows no more than that the reconstruction is faulty.

So Evans-Pritchard failed to understand the Azande, and consequently failed to describe their mode of thought. This seems to mean that understanding these concepts precludes judgments about their beliefs or assertions about the rationality of these beliefs, and that, in the case of concepts that figure in developed forms of life, to make a claim that the concepts are “irrational” amounts to misunderstanding them as they are used by the participants in that form of life, where in fact their use in practice does not lead to collapse in the way that a contradiction leads to the collapse of a theory. In short, claims about the “rationality” of other cultures or their contents are inevitably misdirected-- directed at a false reconstruction of the concepts of the other culture rather than the concepts as the people of the culture employ them. MacIntyre began promptly and explicitly to extricate himself from the trap created by Winch’s arguments by abandoning some of his earlier arguments and acknowledging some previously, unacknowledged conflicts. The strong version of the constitutivity argument, with which MacIntyre flirted in 1962 (cf. esp. 1962: 60-2), it was now evident, had relativistic implications: if identification of action was explanation, and identification could only be on the terms of the society in question, we would be limited to these explanations; rational criticism, which MacIntyre had then thought allowed freedom from these limitations, did not escape the circle of local concepts; the exclusion of all other explanations of action meant that we are deprived of any means to account for their beliefs. To say that Stalin’s methods were irrational was not merely to apply our standards of rationality, but to misunderstand his. Appealing to impersonal canons assumes understanding; showing his beliefs are contradictory shows we have not understood.

MacIntyre’s new approach appears in his 1967 paper “The idea of a social science” and in “Rationality and the explanation of action,” which he included in *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (1971). Each of these was in large part a commentary on Winch. MacIntyre now argued that the reasons and causes distinction was overdrawn, and that his previous view of the significance of some of the key arguments in the reasons and causes literature was mistaken: “we shall be in conceptual error if we look in the direction of the causes of the physical movements involved in the performance of the actions. It does not follow that there is no direction in which it might be fruitful to search for antecedent events that might function as causes” ([1971]1978: 200, see also 215).⁵

The hypnosis example reappears, now to make a novel point, *against* Winch’s use of the identification argument. MacIntyre now argues that possessing a reason, which is what the identification establishes, is not enough for explanation--, possessing a reason may be a state of affairs identifiable independently of the performance of the action. Recall that in “Determinism” MacIntyre had used the example in support of the claim that the agent’s action in this case was not “rational behavior” and that “to show that behavior is rational is enough to show that it is not

causally determined in the sense of being the effect of a set of sufficient conditions operating independently of the agent's deliberation or possibility of deliberation" (1957: 35). In the case of the hypnotized person, it is causally determined, and consequently considerations of rationality do not apply. In the later paper, the issue is whether a given reason is "causally effective" and this is a question that presupposes that the hypnotized subject possesses a reason, but one that is not the cause of the action. In this case the question of whether the reason caused the action "depends on what causal generalizations we have been able to establish" (1967: 117). So Weber, it now appears, was correct in his methodological self-conception, at least in this respect: the question of whether a particular belief is the cause of a particular action is not a category-mistake.

In the passage in which MacIntyre connects the problem of reasons to the problem of the status of non-relative social science concepts, he is still concerned to vindicate the notion that there can be cross-cultural generalizations, a commitment he soon curtailed. But he also has his eye on two other issues which had figured in "A mistake about causality in social science" (1962): the problem of explaining the change from one set of beliefs to another, and the problem of false consciousness, which MacIntyre understands in this context to be a form of the problem of error about the actual causes of one's actions as distinct from the rationalizations one provides for them, as well as the problem of erroneous belief, such as the witchcraft beliefs in the time of King James, and among the Azande. The problem here was whether rationality, the criteria of rationality of a society, falsity in the sense of false consciousness, and coherence, to list a few of MacIntyre's favorite usages, could be extricated from the closed circle of concepts or were simply part of the circle. The problem was not Kuhn's or Winch's alone, nor was it merely a matter of the philosophy of social science. MacIntyre now addressed it in the form of religion and the familiar Christian puzzle, Tertullian's paradox that understanding was a precondition of belief but belief was a precondition of understanding, which he turned on its head in a surprising way.

The argument of "Is understanding religion compatible with believing?" (1970) starts with the *religious* form of the problem of incommensurability: are the skeptic and the believers talking about the same thing? Or, as some Protestants would say, is it that the skeptic has not rejected Christianity, but instead failed to understand it, and thus rejected something else? This latter argument depends on a strong notion of understanding that implies acceptance, or at least "sharing." But, as MacIntyre notes, "anthropologists and sociologists routinely claim to understand concepts they do not share. They identify such concepts as *mana*, or *taboo*, without themselves using them-- or so it seems" (1970: 64). The problems are parallel, and also, MacIntyre shows, so are the solutions: anthropologists wind up with various approaches that parallel positions in the philosophy of religion. The key case is again Evans-Pritchard, whose *Nuer Religion* (1956) describes the concept of *kwoth*, and, as MacIntyre puts it, by identifying the rules governing its use in a "social context of practice" is "able to show that the utterances . . . are rule-governed" (1970: 65). MacIntyre's point is that while this enables him to "show us what the Nuer idea of intelligibility is," and "why the Nuer think their religion makes sense . . . this is not to have shown the Nuer are right" (1970: 65).

Can we judge intelligibility, incoherence, and so forth independently of the Nuer-- or alternatively the Christian believer-- and arrive at the conclusion that their beliefs do not make

sense? Or is this necessarily to have failed to understand them, as Winch supposed? If the idea of one overall norm of intelligibility is a metaphysical fiction, is the only alternative total relativism? The point was of course at the core of philosophical discussion generally in the last quarter of the twentieth century, so it is all the more striking that the page following MacIntyre's elaboration of this problem, he appeals to Franz Steiner's discussion of *taboo*.⁶

The point MacIntyre makes against Winch in elaborating the problem is that "criteria have a history," which bears directly on "the suggestion that agreement in following a rule is sufficient to make sense" (1970: 68). *Taboo*, it appears, is a concept that we can provide rules for using, but can't, at least on the basis of current usage, make meaningful, intelligible, rational, and so forth (1970: 68). On the basis of present usage alone, we might say that taboos are prohibitions for where there is no further reason, and as he jokes, "the temptation to tell anthropologists that taboo is a non-rational quality would be very strong to any Polynesian who had read G. E. Moore" (1970: 68). Steiner's solution, as MacIntyre construes it, is to say that *taboo* formerly did make sense, but that the usages recorded by anthropologists no longer do. As MacIntyre puts it, Steiner has "constructed from the uses of taboo a sense which it might have had and a possible history of how this sense was lost" (1970: 68). With this phrase, one sees the key insight of *A Short History of Ethics* and ahead to *After Virtue* and the rest of the later project. Where does it leave us with religion? As with ethics, we must accept the realization that our troubles with our concepts in the present are a matter of their separation from the embodied social practice, and the history in which they made sense. In the case of religion it leads to MacIntyre's novel conclusion that Christians don't understand the religion they profess. Barthian theologians, G. E. Moore, and taboo thinkers are in the end no different.

Steiner's account of taboo is one in which something intelligible, namely the sense of the dangers of things and places, turns into something unintelligible— apparently pointless prohibitions— which can be understood only by constructing their historical origins in the context of which they are intelligible. The trope recurs in MacIntyre's thought in many forms, notably the problem of morality, in *A Short History of Ethics* (1966a), which accounts for moral theory as a means of making sense of substantive moral notions whose original moral context of social practice has disappeared. Thus, with Stoicism, where virtues which made a particular kind of sense in a social order in which practicing these virtues had visibly good results, in the disordered public world of the Roman Empire, had to be practiced, if they were practiced at all, without regard to consequences, as purely private virtues-- a notion that would have been oxymoronic for Aristotle (1966a: 100-109). Here we see Steiner's basic strategy brilliantly applied: to make sense of the Stoics: it is not enough to find intelligible analogues between their beliefs and beliefs in our own culture that are already intelligible to us. As a matter of interpretation this may be sufficient, as a matter of history it is not-- history, in this case, the history of moral ideas and moral philosophy would become a parade of bizarre inventions. What is needed is a rational reconstruction of the irrational which makes the inventions intelligible as attempted solutions to real problems at the level of ideas— problems such as what is the authoritative basis of morality in the face of diversity in practice— and existential problems— such as how to use one's power in a violent and disordered society in which acting on old ideas of decency produces defeat and suffering.

The same kind of arguments cannot of course apply to science, or to any ongoing

tradition of inquiry in which coherence is not lost. But these too “have a history” and in these cases, a certain kind of history has a crucial role. The argument against Kuhn that MacIntyre deployed in “Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative and the philosophy of science” (1977). The paper deals with the issue of commensurability, which had been critical to the philosophical impact of Kuhn. Paul Feyerabend, in 1962, published a lengthy paper in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* III that made the issues very explicit: the traditional account of theoretical advance involved subsuming old theories under new ones, and this required meaning invariance, i.e. that the terms had the same meaning in both theories-- Feyerabend argued that they did not. Without a logical account of the connection between theories, the “logical” analysis of theory change was doomed, and soon unraveled. The “revolutions” account presented by Kuhn implied that successive paradigms were not *stricto sensu* about the same things. But scientists thought their theories were, and also that they were advances.

MacIntyre argued that the scientists’ historical accounts, narratives of scientific change, were themselves part of science properly understood, and that the value of a theory in science depends on, and is shown by, its role in narratives of progress.

The criterion of a successful theory is that it enables us to understand its predecessors in a newly intelligible way. It, at one and the same time, enables us to understand precisely why its predecessors have to be rejected or modified and also why, without and before its illumination, past theory could have remained credible. It introduces new standards for evaluating the past. It recasts the narrative which constitutes the continuous reconstruction of the scientific tradition. (1977: 460)

Tradition

Tradition, continuously reconstructed by narrative, was MacIntyre’s solution to the puzzle of rational continuity in Kuhn. The question of whether “only standards to which anyone can appeal in judging what is a good and what is not are the standards embodied in the ordinary language of each particular group” (1992: 18) was left to be solved. Whether MacIntyre solves them or exacerbates them is a matter of dispute: Winch believed he did not solve them (1992) There is, however, another question that arises, on MacIntyre’s own terms, about the status of this account of tradition in its aspect of social theory, and this is a question that may be more fruitful. The concept of the scientific tradition was associated with Michael Polanyi, and MacIntyre was at pains to distinguish his views from Polanyi’s. For MacIntyre, “what constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations. If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew” (1977: 460). Similarly for science. Degenerate traditions, in contrast, erect epistemological defenses which enable [them] to avoid being put into question by rival traditions. Liberal Protestantism, some forms of psychoanalysis, and modern astrology are examples (1977: 461). Psychoanalysis, Marxism, astrology, all are Polanyi’s examples as well, as is the argument that “any feature of any

tradition, any theory, any practice, any belief can always under certain conditions be put in question, the practice of putting in question, whether within a tradition or between traditions, itself always requires the context of a tradition” (1977: 461-2; Polanyi 1958: 269-97). If we are to accept MacIntyre’s account as the best or only account, we need grounds to do so-- grounds that rule out rivals, or show their inferiority. In the smaller intellectual space of theories of tradition, there are alternatives, and MacIntyre has a case against them. To understand the case we must understand the rivals. Polanyi, according to MacIntyre, erred because

he does not see the omnipresence of conflict-- sometimes latent-- within living traditions. It is because of this that anyone who took Polanyi’s view would find it very difficult to explain how a transition might be made from one tradition to another or how a tradition which had lapsed into incoherence might be reconstructed. Since reason operates only *within* traditions and communities according to Polanyi, such a transition or reconstruction could not be a work of reason. It would have to be a leap in the dark of some kind. (1977: 465, emphasis in the original)

“Natural science can be a rational form of enquiry if and only if the writing of a true dramatic narrative-- that is, of history understood in a particular way-- can be a rational activity. Scientific reason turns out to be subordinate to, and intelligible only in terms of, historical reason” (1977: 464).

Michael Oakeshott’s “Rationalism in Politics” was published in 1948. It is striking that the example of Stoicism was discussed, in largely the same terms and in the same way as MacIntyre, by Oakeshott in the late twenties (Cowling 1980: 253). Michael Polanyi published *Science, Faith and Society* in 1946, *Personal Knowledge* in 1956, and in between published a stream of articles and commentary. T. S. Eliot’s *Christianity and Culture* (1949) defended a notion of the European tradition as essentially Christian. One of the major themes of several of these works was the rehabilitation of the contribution of medieval Catholicism to the forming of this tradition. Christopher Dawson, editor of the *Dublin Review*, wrote *The Making of Christian Europe* (1932) and engaged closely with the London scene. Even such figures as Popper were briefly caught in this current. His paper “A rational theory of tradition” appeared in 1947.

MacIntyre’s comments on this tradition are infrequent, but interesting, and they cluster in the late seventies, though Popper’s article was mentioned in 1962 (1977: 465-6, 468; 1978c: 26-7). He had been caustic about Polanyi, whom he considered to be a Burkean, a term MacIntyre used to designate a kind of conservatism that was the intellectual analogue of Stalinism-- a concept of tradition which was closed and “unitary.” One may observe that this comment is misplaced as applied to Polanyi, who made the point that the relevant cultural ideal was “a highly differentiated intellectual life pursued collectively” (1962: 219), a continuous network-- of critics” (1962: 217). Similarly for the tradition of tradition as a whole: T. S. Eliot argued that too much unity was a bad thing (1949: 131). Oakeshott would have argued that the notion of closure as applied to tradition is a capitulation to the French Revolution’s notion of tradition that the tradition tradition rejects. Indeed, it may be the case that the notion of unity in this tradition is weaker than MacIntyre’s own.

Others have pursued the question of the similarity between MacIntyre's concept of tradition and its rivals (for example John Flett 1999-2000). The more pressing question is one of method. Given that there are rivals, at least one of these rivals, MacIntyre's, presents itself as not only different but superior, how are we to assess this claim? Here we come to a small puzzle. MacIntyre himself employs a variety of standards, depending on what sort of claim is being assessed, and in his relatively rare remarks on alternative concepts of tradition there are two kinds of argument. One, to which I will return, is an identification which excludes alternatives. The other is to assess the theory as any other theory in science or social science is assessed, to see whether it accounts adequately for the appearances it is designed to account for without adding too much problematic baggage.

The concept of practices is a straightforward example of a theoretical deployment: it is a theoretical entity posited to account for various features of human activity. It is supported by its consistency with other things that we know about human activity, with what is known about human psychology, and so forth. We can ask the usual questions about these theoretical entities in the usual way. These are not, for MacIntyre, questions from outside. His own writings, from *The Unconscious* to his writings on social science in the eighties, provide ample grounds for holding him to this test. He argues that it could not have been known *a priori* that the project of Durkheim and of positivist sociology would fail (1986: 92). And this means that nothing *a priori* guarantees the validity of alternatives either. Philosophy is not autonomous in this respect: philosophical doctrine can be evaluated only as contributing to specific inquiries (1986: 87).

It will seem like an evasion to say that an assessment of MacIntyre's approach to tradition, or that of any of his rivals, in these terms is not a simple matter. The problem is tangled up with some of the central mysteries of present thought, notably the problem of normativity, of whether there is such a thing to be explained, and what would count as an explanation. The problem of theoretical baggage is largely a problem relative to this. The features of MacIntyre's account, its teleology and its doctrine of internal goods, which are shared with some other accounts of tradition, that constitute its heaviest pieces of baggage, are there because of it. I do not propose to solve it here. But I will observe that kind of argument in MacIntyre, "identification," which leads to the exclusion of alternatives, might be taken as an alternative, both as an approach to vindicating MacIntyre or to interpreting his own arguments for his concept of practice and tradition. One may question whether this is a form of argument at all, or at least a complete one: identification, one may say, is never theoretically innocent. There are no appearances that we may simply "identify," no prerogative interpretations which exclude all others. Nevertheless, the way in which MacIntyre makes his case, for example in "The intelligibility of action" (1986b), his most complete discussion of the traditional concerns of social theory (which has a similarity to G. H. Mead and Charles Horton Cooley on the self [cf 1986b: 77]) rests almost entirely on an identification of the concept of intelligible action that is shown to require practices thus good reasons, and thus the concept of the good (1986b: 75) and to exclude such things as intelligible action by machines, which "lack the relevant kind of history and the relevant kind of social relationships" (1986b: 79). He says, correctly, that this is not a "demonstration of a conceptual truth to the effect that intelligible action cannot be predicated of machines" (1986b: 79). But it, and the case for tradition as a whole, seems to fall into the long series of arguments in which MacIntyre's identifications of what is to be explained do the work

of excluding rivals.

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Notes

1. One of the features of his style that is illustrated by his work on the issues of social science as a whole is the use of the outlying province of philosophy of the social sciences, as a base for attacking the fashionable issues of the metropole (cf. 1978c: 21).
2. Of course there are qualifications-- the probative force of the identifications is not absolute. It may, MacIntyre suggests, that there are unnoticed glandular conditions which would validate the claim that an action was really caused rather than rational. (1957: 35-36).
3. This line of reasoning has a fascinating history. The Catholic side of the problem has recently been reconstructed by Leszek Kolakowski in his book on Pascal and his context, entitled *God Owes Us Nothing* (1995), which deals with Jansenism. The phrase "God owes us nothing" cuts to the heart of the problem. There is no such thing as cashing in on God's promises of salvation simply because as omniscient and omnipotent the notion of owing does not apply, and the idea that we can bind God to promises in this way is absurdly presumptuous.
4. MacIntyre's argument is this: "Weber describes this as if the psychological pressure of the need to know if one were saved had distorted the logical consequences of Calvinism. But in fact Calvinism and Calvin himself had always had to accommodate the commandments to good works in the Bible. Calvin was committed to the following propositions: 1. God commands good works; 2. It is of the highest importance possible to do what God commands; 3. Good works are irrelevant to what is of most importance to you, your salvation or damnation. It is a requirement of logic, not of psychological pressures, that one of these propositions be modified; the alternative is contradiction. Moreover, unless it is the third proposition which is modified,

preaching and legislation on morals, two central Calvinist activities, which are also rationally backed up by doctrine, lose their point” (MacIntyre 1962: 55)

5. MacIntyre returns to the problem of causality in the social realm and history in “Causality in history” (1986). Weber’s account of the causes of the Great War, taken from a letter MacIntyre does not identify, which targeted Slav expansionism as the key contributing cause, is taken as an example of a bad explanation. The Marxist view that the war was inevitable, given certain long standing conditions, is claimed by MacIntyre to be correct. The methodological grounds on which the claim is made, however, involve a revision (and application to history) of the account of legal causality in Hart and Honoré (1959). The new revision is actually very close to Weber’s own views, with this difference: Weber regarded causal claims of this kind as claims that the presence of a given factor, relative to a reference class of pre-selected factors, increases the probability of the outcome, and thus saw all causal claims of this type as relative to the selection of the reference class; MacIntyre argues, consistent with this model, that the particular cause Weber selected did not meet this criteria, since the outcome would have happened anyway, but seems to have failed to see that the claim that the reference class produced the inevitable (presumably meaning “very high probability) result of war itself is a causal claim that needs to be warranted by comparison to a pre-selected reference class, and thus misses Weber’s point: that this selection, like all such selections, is a result of the historians interest, and not given in history.

6. The significance of this text, which figures in a central passage in *After Virtue*, is pointed up much later, in MacIntyre’s interview with Borradori, in which he discussed the influence on his thinking of Steiner, an anthropologist, but dates this influence, interestingly, to the early fifties. MacIntyre says:

pointed me toward ways of understanding moralities that avoided both the reductionism of presenting morality as a mere secondary expression of something else, and the abstractionism that detaches principles from soundly embodied practice. Rival forms of such practice are in contention, a contention which is neither only a rational debate between rival principles nor a class of rival social structures, but always inseparably both. (1991:143-4)