

Nicholas, Jeffery L., *Reason, Tradition and the Good: MacIntyre's Tradition-Constituted Reason and Frankfurt School Critical Theory*¹

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Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophy is marked by his critique of modernity as one would find in his landmark book *After Virtue* (2nd Edition, 1984) and its two major sequels *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), as well as the *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990). MacIntyre thinks that the current problems which saddle contemporary ethics can be traced to the priority accorded by modernity to human subjectivity. The liberal tradition whose evolution MacIntyre examines in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is a by-product of this modern proclivity. Under the sway of modernity, one can only expect the continuous bifurcation of ethical inquiries as well as moral practices and in the absence of standards which can mediate and mitigate such fragmentation, advocates of ethical relativism find it easier to justify their claims. This is exactly the threat which MacIntyre wishes to address with his recovery of Thomistic tradition. In his works and teaching practice, St. Thomas Aquinas shows how the interface of a variety of traditions is possible without losing sight of some objective ground. Following St. Thomas' lead, MacIntyre develops a notion of reason that is tradition-constituted. For him, reason is always rooted in a continuum characterized by conflicts and exchanges from which reason itself evolves. Tradition-constituted reason is radically different from the Enlightenment perspective which takes reason as universal, utilitarian or context-free. For MacIntyre, reason is historical, something that is active and enacted through the practices of individuals and communities. These practices are what Nicholas describes as "exemplars" of reason. He further explains that: "The exemplars and paradigms of tradition are its very standards of reason."² A crisis ensues when such shared or common

¹ Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. 264 pp.

² *Ibid.*, 148.

standards are set aside by modernity in favor of pure subjectivity taken either as transcendental ego (Kant), passion (Diderot and Hume), or will (Sartre).

It is important to note that MacIntyre is not solitary in this particular reading of modernity and it is to Nicholas' credit to have identified the kinship of MacIntyre's thought with the philosophical tradition of the well-known exponents of critical theory, the Frankfurt School. Readers of MacIntyre can immediately point out his Marxist past as one of the things which can justify his comparative relation with the critical theorists but as one may read from Nicholas' book, the similarity is not as seamless as it seems. The crux of the comparison lies on the notion of reason shared by MacIntyre and Max Horkheimer. Horkheimer advocates a concept of reason that is objective by nature. Echoing Horkheimer in the latter's *Eclipse of Reason*, Nicholas explains: "The primary characterization of objective reason is that it is a reason that accesses a higher realm. This realm lies beyond the subjective interests of human beings to the extent that (a) it finds particular meaning and good in the universe (b) to which it reconciles the subjective interests of individual human beings. With objective reason, human beings can, because of this access, judge their ends as worthy or unworthy."³ What is readily apparent in the preceding excerpt is Horkheimer's attempt to highlight a concept of reason against modernity which, via the priority of subjectivity, restricts reason to the function of instrumentality. Against this background, Nicholas offers his distinction between reason and rationality. Reason, according to Nicholas, is broader, evaluative and critical whereas rationality is more reductive, calculative and utilitarian in its orientation.⁴ Horkheimer's critique of subjective rationality is paraphrased by Nicholas in this manner: "In this modern period, according to Horkheimer, the notion of self-interest becomes dominant in society. At one time, self-interest was seen as part of the objective order. During the liberalistic period, however, self-interest subdues all other motives considered fundamental to the functioning of society. The imperialism of the principle of self-interest deprives for social cohesion of persuasiveness. Society exists insofar as it serves the interest of the individual. The cohesion of society proves necessary only in service to the self-interest of the individual."⁵ Notwithstanding the foregoing account, Nicholas makes it clear that Horkheimer is not completely dismissive of subjective rationality nor does he think reason can be limited to its objective dimension alone. Horkheimer, in fact, is equally uneasy with contemporary revivals of objective ontology like positivism and neo-Thomism due to their

³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

weak critical element as well as their inherent conformist tendencies.⁶ It should be noted, as argued by Nicholas, that for Horkheimer, reason is inherently dialectic, neither exclusively subjective nor wholly objective and it is in the recovery of this dialectical character that reason becomes emancipatory. Nicholas further adds that Horkheimer's notion of reason stands poles apart from that of Jürgen Habermas. By invoking the critique of Habermas employed by Charles Taylor, Nicholas points out that Habermas' theory of communicative rationality is most likely to fail due to its uni-dimensional focus on the formal element of rationality and its native inability to evaluate human ends.⁷

Given MacIntyre's tenuous appreciation of the Frankfurt School, particularly Herbert Marcuse,⁸ one may consider as both bold and insightful Nicholas's attempt to tie up Horkheimer's notion of substantive reason with MacIntyre's own critique of modernity. Nicholas locates the nexus between Horkheimer and MacIntyre in their common aim of tempering the individualist/subjectivist hegemony of modernity. As Nicholas sees it: "Thus, for MacIntyre one of the problems with modernity lies in its ability to make real moral judgments or evaluation about ends—that is, judgments and evaluations susceptible to rational scrutiny. Similarly for Horkheimer, one of the problems of modernity lies in the inability of the individual to make reasonable judgments about ends. They both want to address the inability of individuals in modernity to evaluate ends except insofar as those ends are means to another end that is itself not subject to scrutiny."⁹ This notion of substantive or objective reason resonates with the position of MacIntyre, particularly in his book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, where he makes a categorical espousal of Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. Not only is reason substantive for MacIntyre, it is likewise tradition-constituted, that is, in common with Horkheimer's concept, grounded in history. But as pointed out by Nicholas, their commonality notwithstanding, MacIntyre "stops short of a conception of reason useful for a critical theory of society."¹⁰ In the same paragraph, he likewise argues that: "Although MacIntyre suggests that an essential relationship exists between reason and good, he does not elucidate that relationship...a critical theory of society must spell out that relationship in order to realize a conception of reason useful for purposes of emancipation."

This, I suppose, is the most curious part of Nicholas' book, that is, his assertion of the gap between reason and good which he perceives in

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

MacIntyre's critique of modernity. I can only guess that Nicholas considers insufficient MacIntyre's discussion of the connection between reason and good in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* as well as his notion of the unity of life characterized by the coherence between reason, practices, virtues and ends found in *After Virtue* and which Nicholas himself illustrates in his accounts of how tradition-constituted reason plays out in the Roman Catholic, Azande magic and Lakota communities. The position of Nicholas suggests that the merit of emancipatory discourse, like the strand of critical theory which Horkheimer represents, is hinged on the definition of the close conjunction between reason and good, a position which, at first glance, is more Platonic rather than dialectic, at least in the sense that Horkheimer and Adorno propose to use the word.

Congruence is evident between Horkheimer's and MacIntyre's notion of objective reason as shown by Nicholas and so are their points of divergence. This is best captured by his punctuation of the disparity in the focus and emphasis of the philosophies they espouse. MacIntyre's arguments, animated as they are by his Aristotelian-Thomistic leanings, are unlikely to sit well with critical theorists but that does not make his critique of modernity, particularly of the predominance of liberalist culture and the complicity of the modern state inferior in its theoretic and critical force.

In general, Nicholas' book provides a rich and eloquent elaboration of MacIntyre's notion of tradition-constituted rationality, and the three traditions he chooses to showcase his point clearly depict the possibility of asserting objectivity against the horizon of contemporary pluralism. Throughout the book, Nicholas does not hide his intellectual sympathy with MacIntyre but neither does he allow such affinity to weaken his critical agenda. Through his expansive familiarity with the contemporary philosophical terrain side by side his thorough knowledge of the featured specimen traditions, Nicholas succeeds in providing an enlarged and more nuanced context of MacIntyrean critique of modernity. In this, Nicholas puts himself closer to the spirit and practice of philosophical inquiry of which Alasdair MacIntyre himself is a leading exponent.

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