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MacIntyre and the Polis

Abstract: This paper traces Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the development of the Greek polis as presented in *A Short History of Ethics*, *After Virtue*, and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*. The paper argues for the centrality of Aristotle's conception of politics as an architectonic art to this account. It explores the foundations of MacIntyre's presentation of moral rationality in Homer and offers the poems of Hesiod as an aid to understanding MacIntyre's view of the post-Homeric crisis in Greek ethics. Aristotle is then invoked to show how MacIntyre represents the polis as a classical response to that crisis.

Accounts of the development and nature of the Greek polis are central to the histories of ethics offered by Alasdair MacIntyre in three of his books: *A Short History of Ethics*, *After Virtue*, and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*. This paper locates the cumulative account that emerges from those books[1] in the larger context of MacIntyre's historical picture of moral tradition and in particular argues for the importance of the Aristotelian conception of politics to understanding the way in which MacIntyre presents the history of Greek ethics in the archaic period. Its contention is that the following passage from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* presents a historical thesis that serves as the organizing spine for MacIntyre's treatment of Greek ethics before, during, and after the rise of the polis:

> "The only form of community which could provide itself with such a standard [one that could adjudicate among different sorts of excellence] would be one whose members structured their common life in terms of a form of activity whose specific goal was to integrate within itself, so far as possible, all those other forms of activity practiced by its members and so to create and sustain as its specific goal that form of life within which to the greatest possible degree the goods of each practice could be enjoyed as well as those goods which are the external rewards of excellence. The name given by Greeks to this form of activity was 'politics' and the *polis* was the institution whose concern was, not with this or that particular good, but with

[1] It is not my intention to minimize the ways in which MacIntyre's views, including his view of the polis (see Kelvin Knight's remarks 2007, 178–179) have changed over the years. I concentrate here on those features I regard as common to the three accounts.

> human good as such, and not with desert ot achievement in respect
> of particular practices, but with desert and achievement as such."
> (MacIntyre 1988, 33–34)

This paper aims to show how MacIntyre builds his history of Greek ethics in such a way as to demonstrate the necessity of the *polis* for the resolution of the problems posed by the loosening of the social bonds depicted in the Homeric epics. This history falls into three stages: the Homeric (the social world represented in Homer's poems about the heroic past), the archaic, and the classical (the world of the developed polis). The paper traces MacIntyre's historical argument through these stages and examines how he articulates them with one another, with the purpose of showing how these articulations reinforce the conception of the polis's function advanced in the quotation above. Along the way, it considers the threat posed by rival accounts of Homeric ethics to MacIntyre's broader historical claims and proposes that the non-Homeric literature of the archaic period, and the writings of Hesiod in particular, can help us better understand MacIntyre's account of the reasons for the rise of the polis.

The striking metaphor that opens *After Virtue* famously draws a parallel between the moral conditions of modernity and the states of scientific knowledge that might prevail after a catastrophe had wiped out natural science, states in which "those contexts which would be needed to make sense of what they [the 'scientists' of the post-catastrophic world] are doing have been lost, perhaps irretrievably" (1981, 1). The intellectual context that MacIntyre believes is needed to make sense of the concepts deployed in modern moral philosophy is, of course, the account of the virtues provided by Aristotle. MacIntyre makes clear his agreement with the widespread scholarly view that Aristotle's ethical theory is in turn securely founded in the social and political conditions of the Greek polis. "Aristotle," he writes, "takes himself not to be inventing an account of the virtues, but to be articulating an account that is implicit in the thought, utterance and action of an educated Athenian." (147–148) But this commitment to developing and formalizing prephilosophical ethical notions presses us to ask which notions exactly qualify as raw material for this process. Does the "thought, utterance and action of an educated Athenian" of the fourth century form a consistent and unified whole, one whose tacit presuppositions can be elicited from that practice and formulated as moral theory? MacIntyre's comments elsewhere suggest both affirmative and negative answers to that question. On the one hand, he speaks of Aristotle's view of the human being as "rooted in the forms of social life to which the theorists of the classical tradition give expression" (1981, 58–59). The "classical tradition" is here conceived as unitary, and its theorists give philosophical shape to the standards defined by a particular set of social forms. We have to counterpose to this idea of a classical tradition in ethics MacIntyre's statements about the moral diversity of fifth- and fourth-century Athens, which in his account is characterized by widespread controversy that comes about, he writes, both "because one set of virtues is counterposed to another" and "also and perhaps more importantly because rival conceptions of one and the same virtue coexist" (133). In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* he writes that "we

inherit from the conflicts of the social and cultural order of the Athenian *polis* a number of mutually incompatible and antagonistic traditions concerning justice and practical rationality" (1988, 13). Classical Athens thus exhibits similarities with MacIntyre's modernity, in which exponents of rival moral traditions futilely dispute ethical questions using a vocabulary whose referents have become multiple and irreconcilable. How far this similarity extends is a question that must be answered in reconciling this picture of democratic Athens with the idea of a classical tradition as the foundation of Aristotelian virtue theory. What distinguishes what we might call the Greek modernity of the "classical tradition" from the radical moral incoherence of post-Enlightenment modernity? An answer to this question must begin with a discussion of the origins of the moral conflict particular to the developed polis, origins that lie, for MacIntyre, in the disintegration of the heroic morality given expression in Homer's poems.

In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, MacIntyre maintains throughout all three of the books under discussion, moral evaluation is inseparable from factual description that employs predicates denoting such qualities as bravery and kingliness. "The alleged logical gulf between fact and appraisal," he writes in the *Short History of Ethics*, "is not so much one that has been bridged in Homer. It has never been dug. Nor is it clear that there is any ground in which to dig." (MacIntyre 1966, 7) Furthermore, there is for each social role, in the society depicted by Homer, "a clear understanding of what actions are required [...] A man in heroic society is what he does" (MacIntyre 1981, 122). Moral disagreement, then, is limited to questions about the extent of the particular excellences to be ascribed to an individual, not about the effect of those excellences on our evaluation of him. Furthermore, the list of expected excellences is fixed by the social position of the individual under evaluation. "Morality and social structure are in fact one and the same in heroic society," MacIntyre writes (1981, 123). This view of Homeric ethics draws on the work of Moses Finley, whose sociological analysis of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* sought to make apparent the degree to which economic and social relations in the world depicted by the poems constitute a unified whole, within which all moral evaluation takes place (Finley 1954). In this world in which the circulation of goods took the form of gift exchange founded upon relations of kinship and guest-friendship, "the heroic code was complete and unambiguous, so much that neither the poet nor his characters ever had reason to debate it" (Finley 1954, 115). MacIntyre, in his chapter on heroic society in *After Virtue*, reiterates the Finleyan view thus: "There is only one set of social bonds. Morality as something distinct does not yet exist. Evaluative questions *are* questions of social fact." (1981, 123) There was indeed, in this conception of Homeric society, discussion of points of fact or tactics, but disagreement about the good there could never be, since no such independent concept could be extricated from the social structure within which all forms of human activity were embedded.

So much of MacIntyre's subsequent argument about the polis depends upon this picture of heroic society that it might be worthwhile to examine some of the controversy Finley's views have generated and to test MacIntyre's conclusions about Homeric morality against some passages in the poems that have been foci of resistance to those views. Several areas of investigation suggest themselves. We

might review junctures at which the heroic standards of evaluation outlined by Finley seem to be superseded by a different code with an entirely different social perspective; Joseph Bryant points out that "the swineherd Eumaeus, Odysseus' loyal servant [. . .] though a slave, is given the epithets *dios* ('divine' or 'godlike') and *esthlos* ('noble' or 'good') on several occasions (XIV.3; XV.301; XV.558) and is said to lead an *agathos bios*, a noble or 'good life' (XV.491)" (1996, 482 n.10). This question is muddied by mention of Eumaeus' royal birth (*Od.* 15.413), but it would be difficult to show how his life as a swineherd involves the heroic excellences for which such descriptions are generally awarded. It was Finley's practice to attribute to interpolation during a later, 'Hesiodic' age those passages in the poems, particularly in the *Odyssey*, that raise difficulties for his interpretation (see particularly 1978, 44–45 and 97), and such may have been his view of these passages. Finley's view of practical reasoning in Homer, a view central to MacIntyre's use of the poems, has likewise been challenged, most persuasively by Malcolm Schofield (1986), who takes exception to Finley's claim that "never in either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* is there a rational discussion, a sustained, disciplined consideration of circumstances and their implications, of possible courses of action, their advantages and disadvantages" (Finley 1978, 116). Taking as his text an improvised council of war between Agamemnon, Nestor, Odysseus, and Diomedes (*Il.* 14.27–134), Schofield argues (1986, 246– 250) that the description negated in Finley's denial matches what the Greek leaders are actually shown to do. It might appear that if Schofield is right about the character of this debate it becomes difficult to sustain MacIntyre's claim in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* that "means-end reasoning in the Homeric poems has, compared with later times and places, a restricted function" so that "in a secondary way they [agents in the poems] derive conclusions about what to do next, but they are able to do so only because they already know independently of their reasoning what action it is that they are required to perform" (MacIntyre 1988, 19). One way to reconcile Schofield's argument with MacIntyre's would be to concentrate on an aspect of the debate to which the former gives little attention, namely the reasons adduced by Agamemnon for his "characteristically disastrous" (Schofield 1986, 249) proposal to save the Greek ships from imminent Trojan threat by putting them out to sea. He introduces this suggestion as follows:

> "It is no doubt sure to be dear to Zeus of exceeding might that the Achaeans should perish here without renown, away from Argos. For I knew it when he willingly helped the Danaans, and I know now when he exalts them like the blessed gods, and has bound our strength and our hands. Come, let us all obey, as I bid." (*Il.* 14.69–74)[2]

Agamemnon rests his plan on a particular kind of knowledge claim, a claim to be acquainted with the will of Zeus. Hugh Lloyd-Jones has argued (1971) that this deity's function from the *Iliad* on is a morally regulative one, in which the

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[2] The text used of the *Iliad* is that of T. W. Allen (Oxford, 1931). Translations throughout are my own unless otherwise noted.

god "defends the established order (*dike*) by punishing mortals whose injustices disturb it" (27). His favor and displeasure, then, are not the simple product of whim, but rather expressions of the all-encompassing divine justice that MacIntyre refers to when he writes that "the use of the word 'dike', both by Homer and by those whom he portrayed, presupposed that the universe had a single fundamental order, an order structuring both nature and society, so that the distinction which *we* mark by contrasting the natural and the social cannot as yet be expressed" (1988, 14). Agamemnon withdraws his proposal after a heated challenge from Odysseus, who avers that moving the ships to safety will erode morale (*Il.* 14.83–108). He does not directly contradict Agamemnon's claim to know what Zeus intends, but instead refers to the Greek warriors as those "to whom Zeus has given to carry painful wars from youth to old age, until each of us dies" (*Il.* 14.85–87). He thus founds his attack on Agamemnon's plan upon a parallel claim to understand Zeus's decrees. The claim that it is by the will of Zeus that the Greeks toil endlessly in war serves only to neutralize Agamemnon's theological argument, though; Odysseus' positive alternative derives its argumentative propulsion from the statement that removing the ships is a tactical blunder that will issue in the fulfillment of the Trojans' wish that the Greeks be destroyed (14.97–99). This debate, then, is apprehensible both in Schofieldian and in MacIntyrian terms: it is indeed a rational discussion in which various courses of action are weighed against one another, but it is also clear that this means-end reasoning is "restricted" in MacIntyre's sense of not providing an answer to the question "What am I to do?" (MacIntyre 1988, 19). We should note, though, that although the answers to that question do lie securely beyond the scope of the reasoned debate in Book XIV, they are, first, very broad answers indeed ("Yield to the will of Zeus", "Prevent the Trojans from gaining victory") that are not immediately linked to a course of action but rather admit of several plausible means of attainment and, second, are multiple in a way not fully compatible with the heroic code as conceived of by Finley and MacIntyre. The conflict between Agamemnon's alleged knowledge of Zeus's will and Odysseus' reassertion of the heroic imperative to achieve success in battle is, as we have seen, not a direct one, because Odysseus deflects Agamemnon's claim about Zeus with one of his own, but it remains true that the discussion is transacted with reference to two different norms whose hierarchical relation to one another is not clear.

How grave an obstacle this multiplicity of ends presents to MacIntyre's historical thesis depends on the outcome of a related question on which Schofield challenges Finley, that of the normative nature of the heroic code by which Homer's chief characters live. Schofield's quarrel here is with Finley's assertion, quoted above, that the heroic code in Homer is "complete and unambiguous" and his related claim, quoted by MacIntyre in his chapter on heroic society in *After Virtue* (1981, 122) that "the basic values of society were given, predetermined and so were a man's place in the society and the privileges and duties that followed from his status" (Finley 1978, 117). Schofield first notes that *euboulia*, or the quality of dispensing good counsel, is a heroic virtue in the *Iliad*, "regarded as a pre-eminent excellence of kings and heroes" (1986, 229). Its practice, that is, falls

entirely within the scope of the heroic code as defined by Finley. Next Schofield argues that "a commitment to *euboulia* already imports into the heroic code the possibility of a conflict of values" because "being reasonable must imply being ready to give weight to any considerations which deserve to be given weight. And how can anyone tell which these are until one has thought about them? It is a crucial assumption of and about rationality that one cannot: that there is or may be more to discover than one yet knows" (1986, 237). It is important to note that with this assertion the work of Schofield's argument is done and the examples that follow are strictly superfluous, since the conception of rationality he assumes here is entirely incompatible with Finley's historicist conception of Homeric ethics and, once accepted, forecloses the possibility of preserving that conception. It is also not susceptible of reconciliation with MacIntyre's view that in heroic society "all questions of choice arise within the framework; the framework itself therefore cannot be chosen" (MacIntyre 1981, 126). Let us then examine the set of scenes in the *Iliad* proposed as an example by Schofield to see what conclusions we can draw about the nature of the rationality at work there.

Several times in the *Iliad* Hector is admonished by his comrade Polydamas, whom the poet credits with the virtue of *euboulia* when he says that Polydamas "devised good counsel" (*Il.* 18.313). Polydamas twice advises Hector to refrain from battle, the second time (*Il.* 18.254–283) after Achilles has returned to battle. In each case, Schofield points out, "Polydamas' talk is all of advantage and safety and never of honour" (1986, 241). His argument in the council is that the Trojan army can be safe inside the city, but not on the plain where Achilles now poses a renewed menace. His argument thus puts survival above the opportunity to demonstrate heroic virtue in combat. In Finley's conception, prudence is a quality that lies outside the Homeric code and in potential opposition to it. To put prudential considerations above those of heroism is, according to Finley, an ethical failing in the world of the Homeric poems (Finley 1978, 117–118). The counsel of Polydamas is scornfully rejected by Hector and the other Trojans, but after a series of reversals Hector comes to repent of his obstinacy in an extraordinary speech:

> "Oh alas, if I enter the gates and the walls, Polydamas will be first to lay reproach upon me, he who bade me lead the Trojans towards the city, in the course of this deadly night, when godlike Achilles arose. But I did not obey. Indeed it would have been much better. Now when I have destroyed the host by my recklessness, I am ashamed before the Trojan men and the Trojan women with their flowing robes, lest some man baser than me say, Hector, trusting in his own force, destroyed the host. So they will say: but it was much better, as far as I was concerned, either to go face to face with lethal Achilles or to die myself gloriously in defense of the city." (*Il.* 22.99–110)

Hector retrospectively acknowledges the rightness of Polydamas' counsel; that is, he accords him the virtue of *euboulia*. It is true that his reasons for doing so are couched in the language of honor, in that they center around Hector's

expressed fear that he will with justification be spoken ill of by someone of inferior social standing. Schofield argues, though, that we must pay attention to the sources of this imagined disgrace: "losing men could not be a matter of losing face unless human life was regarded as precious in itself" (1986, 243). Hector's standards for assessing his own behavior here, then, take "advantage and safety" rather than honor as their evaluative axis, as do the standards he supposes his fellow Trojans to employ. Unless we believe that Hector and his community have jettisoned the moral framework shown to guide them throughout the poem, we must be prepared to accept Schofield's reversal of Finley's claim that the heroic code is "complete and unambiguous": "if narrowly defined in terms of honour, it is far from complete, but if it is more liberally construed, it is plainly not unambiguous" (Schofield 1986, 239). That is, we either must accept that the heroic code endorses the entertainment of prudential considerations for their own sake, or we must allow that the heroic code does not demand the entire allegiance of the hero or supply an end toward which he should strive in each situation conceivable within his social role, but rather that it can be supplanted by a variety of other considerations, among which the hero chooses on the basis of even broader moral principles not reducible to a heroic code.

Schofield's solution is to introduce a distinction derived from Stoic ethics between the 'goal' of an action and its 'intended result'. The intended result of warfare is, for Hector, the preservation of Troy, but its goal, the aim of its excellence, is the accumulation of heroic honor (243). This distinction enables Schofield to retain Finley's sociology of Homeric ethics while accounting for those passages, like the speech of Hector quoted above, in which concerns that seem foreign to the morality sketched out by that sociology seem paramount. This way of explaining Homeric morality allows for a dimension of conflict largely unaddressed by Finley, that between goal and intended result. It is this tension, Schofield contends, that imparts to the *Iliad* its tragic character. We might gauge the extent of MacIntyre's distance from what Schofield calls "the currently popular reading of the *Iliad* as a tragedy" (245) by the rarity with which MacIntyre uses "tragedy" or its derivatives to describe the poem or its characters in the three books under discussion.[3] His reading of tragedy, typified by his statement that "the Sophoclean self transcends the limitations of social roles and is able to put those roles in question, but it remains accountable to the point of death and accountable precisely for the way in which it handles itself in those conflicts which make the heroic point of view no longer possible" (MacIntyre 1981, 145), locates what is distinctive about the genre in the quality of conflict he ties to the social character of fifth-century Athens and thus is cautious in identifying archaic anticipations of what is genuinely tragic about tragedy.

The foregoing is not to suggest that MacIntyre is insensitive to the role played by moral conflict in the *Iliad*. "There are already in the *Iliad*", he writes, "tensions between what *arete* requires and what *dike* requires" (MacIntyre 1988, 26). Three features of this statement, however, minimize the conflict that Schofield and like-minded readers are anxious to emphasize. The first is the adverb "already", which

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[3] I am indebted to Alex Bavister-Gould for pointing out to me that this tendency is not absolute; see page 157 of *After Virtue*.

paints such conflict as proleptic of a later era rather than integral to the poem itself. The second is its situation in MacIntyre's text after the statement that "the Homeric poems themselves in the various chronological layers represented therein give expression to an ongoing history of conceptual change" (MacIntyre 1988 26). This developmental view has the effect, again, of rendering conflict marginal or accidental, in a manner parallel to Finley's assignment of 'Hesiodic' provenance to passages that seemed to him at odds with the dominant morality of the poems. Third, we should note that the sort of conflict acknowledged here and that treated by Schofield are quite distinct from one another. For Schofield's concern is not with conflict between *arete* and *dike* so much as with conflict interior to the concept of *arete* itself. He characterizes the disagreement between Hector and Polydamas as between the pursuit of heroic excellence on the one hand and on the other that excellence in good counsel that can, indeed must, test the moral ends of the heroic code against considerations that are entirely extraneous to it.

If this sort of clash between moral codes each of which enjoys no secure claim to predominance is, for MacIntyre, foreign to the spirit of the Homeric poems, it is prominent in his subsequent history of Greek ethics. MacIntyre's account supposes, then, a sharp discontinuity between the social and moral world of Homer's poems and the very different world of the Greek polis. The nature of this rift, and the ways in which it serves in MacIntyre's history to generate a need for the institutions of the mature polis, is perhaps best made clear by reference to Hesiod, an author little mentioned in the three books under discussion. His poems, though, can help us fill in for ourselves some of the elisions in the account of the polis those books supply.

If we were to extend to encompass Hesiod the main line of MacIntyre's argument in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* about the conflicts basic to the polis, we could note his treatment of the two different sorts of eris, strife, in the *Works and Days*:

> "For one [sort of strife] causes evil war and contention to wax, being hard-hearted. No mortal loves her, but they honor grievous Strife under compulsion by the will of the immortals. The other murky Night bore first, and the son of Cronos, seated aloft and dwelling in the ether, placed her in the roots of the earth, and she is much better to men. She rouses even the shiftless man to work. For a man desires to work when he looks upon his neighbor, a rich man who is eager to plough and sow and to place his house in order. Neighbor is envious of neighbor as he vies for wealth. This Strife is good for men." (*Op.* 14–23)[4]

We have here a distinction between two kinds of striving, that which consists in the cultivation of genuine excellences and is thus beneficial and that which involves no practices that are ends in themselves, only the attainment of external goods by violence. It is these two sorts of rivalrous zeal, one to shine by standards

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[4] The text used of the *Works and Days* is that of Friedrich Solmsen 1970.

internal to a practice and one to acquire external goods without reference to those standards, that will be canalized during the formation of the polis into the two sorts of cooperation, one aiming at excellence in particular practices and the other at the goods of effectiveness, that MacIntyre identifies as grounding the competing moralities of classical Athens.

Controversy about the relative values of these excellences themselves is prominent in Hesiod as well, though. Walter Donlan writes that "Hesiod's notions of ability and success (*arete*) and of the good man have no reference at all to the heroic conception of these. *Arete* consists in being a successful farmer; the good man (*agathos aner*) is one who is capable, efficient, prudent and cooperative within the narrow sphere of the agrarian life" (1980, 33). It is in this gulf between the world of Homer and that of Hesiod[5] that we should locate the origins of the "classical tradition" of which MacIntyre writes, and it is here that we find some clarification of MacIntyre's view of that tradition as simultaneously coherent and riddled by fundamental and irreconcilable disagreement. In Hesiod, *arete* is transformed from heroic excellence to excellence in a particular art, that of farming. Once the idea of excellence assessed by standards internal to a practice is carried from the pursuit of honor into other pursuits, the way is opened for the profusion of excellences in diverse practices that in MacIntyre's view lies at the center of the classical moral tradition culminating in Aristotle: see, for example, his statement in the 1998 preface to the *Short History of Ethics* that "whenever such practices as those of the arts and sciences, of such productive and practical activities as those of farming, fishing, and agriculture, of physics laboratories and string quartets and chess clubs, types of activity whose practitioners cannot but recognize the goods internal to them and the virtues and the rules required to achieve those goods, are in a flourishing state, then Aristotelian conceptions of goods, virtues, and rules are regenerated and reembodied in practice" (1998, xviii). We should note at the same time that this generalization from the heroic ideal, in which a single martial way of life defined goodness, to a variety of other excellences raises the question of which of these sorts of excellence, each grounded in a particular social role, defines the best sort of life. We can see this consequence in Hesiod's poems, which are vexed by the question of which kind of life enjoys priority over the others. This concern is most clearly visible in Hesiod's discussion of the power of the Muses in the *Theogony*:

> "Whomever of god-nourished kings the daughters of great Zeus honor and see being born, on his tongue they pour sweet dew and honeyed words flow from his mouth. All the people look to him as he settles causes with straight judgments. He who speaks steadily straightaway puts an end deftly even to a great quarrel. For on account of this are kings sensible, because they easily accomplish restitution when the people are deprived of good sense in assembly, winning them over with soft words. They propitiate him as a god with honeyed

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[5] Without making any judgment as to which poet preceded the other, we can note that for Hesiod the heroic age described by Homer is chronologically prior to that about which he writes, *Op.* 156-173.

> reverence when he comes upon a struggle, and he stands out among
> the assembled. Such is the holy gift of the Muses to human beings.
> For from the Muses and far-shooting Apollo men who are singers and
> players of the lyre come upon the earth, and kings are from Zeus.
> But he is blessed, whomever the Muses love. From his mouth flows
> a sweet voice." (*Theog.* 81–97)[6]

"Contrary to tradition", Hermann Frankel writes of this passage, "Hesiod has so
far expanded the sphere of the Muses as to embrace the power which governs the
words of a wise king who issues just decisions." (1962/1973, 107) The Muses, to
whom Hesiod claims a privileged connection (*Theog.* 22–35), here dispense the
gifts not just of poetic inspiration, but also of political flourishing. The arts of
government are converted into an auxiliary branch of the verbal arts in which
Hesiod claims mastery. Each sort of human excellence, now given the sort of
autonomy restricted in heroic morality to the characteristic excellence of the
aristocratic warrior, seeks to become not simply autotelic but architectonic as
well, to have the contributions made by arts and practices other than its own
defined as dependent upon and organized by that art of which it is the realization.
MacIntyre writes that by the time of classical Athens "the conception of a virtue
has now become strikingly detached from any *particular* social role" (1981, 132–
133). Hesiod gives us the opportunity to watch this process of detachment in
progress and to observe its wider moral ramifications.

This anarchy is the necessary background to MacIntyre's presentation of
the moral landscape of the mature classical polis. Rivalry among different arts,
irresolvable in their own evaluative terms, is contained by politics, identified by
Aristotle as the architectonic master art that organizes the others:

> "It [the chief good] would seem to belong to the most authoritative
> art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears
> to be of this nature; for it is this that ordains which of the sciences
> should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should
> learn and up to what point they should learn them; and we see even
> the most highly esteemed of capacities to fall under this, e.g. strategy,
> economics, rhetoric; now, since politics uses the rest of the sciences,
> and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we
> are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the
> others, so that this end must be the good for man." (*EN* 1.1.2, 1094
> a26–b7)

MacIntyre makes this function of the polis as an arena for the political master
art clear when he writes that for the classical Athenian "the milieu in which the
virtues are to be exercised and in terms of which they are to be defined is the
polis" (1981, 135). The polis contains and regulates the plural virtues and, by
giving hierarchical order to their practice, defines a moral order that is coherent
but not monolithic. Germane here is Peter McMylor's caution that "MacInty-
re's argument is fundamentally misconstrued if it is assumed to rely on upon a

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[6] The text used of the *Theogony* is that of M. L. West 1966.

seamless organic moral unity lodged in the past" (1994, 39). As we have seen, MacIntyre does indeed construe Homeric morality as something fundamentally very close to that unity, but the classical tradition he invokes incorporates a diverse array of moral views, often radically at odds with one another, and that tradition flourishes in the polis precisely because the invention of politics offers the possibility of reconciling moral diversity and moral order. McMylor goes on to note that for MacIntyre the key point about this tradition and indeed about premodern ethics generally is that "these views were embodied in communities, perhaps competing communities, that within themselves shared a common conception of what the pursuit of the good life was [. . .] [W]hat all these forms had in common was an ability to link the individual via a socially defined role with the pursuit of human goods." (1994, 40) Such roles can vary widely in flexibility and in ability to accommodate moral innovation; we have seen that MacIntyre believes the heroic role of Homer's protagonists to be sharply limited in both respects. To the moral structure of the polis, however, his account assigns the capacity to allow for fundamental differences in outlook without collapsing entirely or abdicating its function of connecting the individual to the pursuit of the good. Once we understand the role of politics in organizing autotelic excellences, we can see why MacIntyre lays such great stress on two aspects of Athenian life that seem superficially at odds with one another: on the one hand its heavy use of such agonistic social forms as the popular assembly, the law court, and the tragic stage, in which utterly divergent conceptions of the good are in various ways allowed to make opposed and irreconcilable moral claims on the Athenian citizen, and on the other hand the city's function as "a guardian, a parent, a teacher, even though what is learnt from the city may lead to a questioning of this or that feature of its life" (1981, 133). The centrality of politics to Athenian experience permits the safe flourishing of an entire range of excellences under the organizational penumbra of the city's shared political life. The classical moral tradition MacIntyre seeks to define turns out to be, in the most radical sense, a political tradition, one whose characteristic contradictions can be accommodated only within the sheltering confines of the polis.

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