

**Resolving disagreements
across philosophical traditions:
an Aristotelian-historicist methodology**

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Introduction

How may we appropriately resolve disagreements across widely different traditions of inquiry, especially when they seem to contradict each other? This question poses a problem in metaphysics, in ethics and in other areas of philosophy. As philosophical inquirers and historical beings we are always situated in some combination of traditions, and those traditions often contradict each other. Nevertheless, they still acknowledge contradiction as being a *problem*. This is the case even for many traditions seen as having a high general tolerance for paradox, like the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika Buddhists. The Prāsaṅgika Candrakīrti proclaims:

Now if, even with the injunction that there is a contradiction (*virodha*) with what he has admitted himself, the opponent does not back down, then because of his extreme shamelessness, he would still not withdraw even with [a further] reason or example. And we do not debate with a madman (*unmattaka*). (PP 15-3-16.2, my translation)

Yet examples of apparent contradiction are scarcely hard to find. Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* proclaims that worldly phenomena must have a defining substance to be intelligible; Mādhyamika thinkers like Candrakīrti and Śāntideva proclaim that worldly phenomena can have no essential being. Kant proclaims that we must assume free will to understand human action; for Śāntideva, free will is an illusion that leads us to unjustifiable anger. A metaphysically inclined reader can likely supply many more.

How may we best resolve such disagreements across traditions? This article will articulate and argue for a methodology rooted in *Aristotelian-historicist* tradition. This is a methodological perspective that attempts to be a synthesis of Aristotle's insights on philosophical method with those of the German historicist tradition. The best-known representative of this tradition is Hegel¹; it is also taken up in some respects by Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Canadian philosopher James Doull (see Peddle and Robertson 2003), among others. This article takes particular

1. For a discussion of Hegel's Aristotelianism, see Ferrarin 2001. Scott Meikle (1985) makes a strong case that Karl Marx is an Aristotelian in relevant respects as well.

inspiration from the works of Alasdair MacIntyre², although its differences from MacIntyre should become clear. It will attempt to make the case that the proposed methodological approach constitutes the best methodological theory so far about crossing the boundaries of traditions.

Historicist methodologies stress the importance of one's own historical situatedness and particularity, and I think the relevance of my own situatedness will also become clear as the article proceeds. So I will note that in addition to any commitments I have developed to Aristotelianism and historicism, I also consider myself a committed Buddhist. The article will not argue for a Buddhist position – there is not room here to even begin that argument – but will discuss the implications of that commitment for the proposed methodology. I view my previous work in Lele 2007 as exploring the relation between all three of these commitments, and the present work can be viewed on one level as an attempt to proceed beyond that work's inconclusive conclusion.

In making my case for this methodology I will attempt to proceed dialectically, arguing at first for successively stronger forms of historicism. I will begin by introducing the idea of historicism and making an argument for a weak form of historicism that begins from received opinion rather than a transcendent starting point. I will then introduce Aristotle's method of dialectical reasoning, which fits with this weak form of historicism, but argue that the historicism needs to be stronger to acknowledge the wider diversity of received opinion available and the ways in which traditions of inquiry work as coherent wholes. Indeed I explain, following MacIntyre, why such traditions may be incommensurable, with no shared standard of evaluation between them – but also articulating how incommensurable traditions may over time *become* commensurable with each other, making progress possible. I then critique MacIntyre's insistence that inquirers situate themselves within a single tradition rather than bring together multiple ones. Finally I examine the key question of how the methodology applies to itself, answering some

2. MacIntyre's relevant insights are spread out over a very large body of different works, as this article's bibliography should make clear. The most important work on the subject is MacIntyre 1991a, which unfortunately is not widely available.

objections and noting how the methodology differs from Hegel's by embracing fallibilism.

Historicism

I will begin with historicism, and the case for at least a weak version of it. By *historicism* I understand a tradition of inquiry with roots in Giambattista Vico but reaching its full flower in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany³, whose central idea is that everything that happens in history is explicable according to the methods of history. (Beiser 2007, 158) Philosophical reasoning, natural science and the field of history itself are all among these historical phenomena subject to historical explanation.

The methods of history, according to historicists, are not the methods of natural science. Where natural science inquires into necessary and universal laws, historical explanation emphasizes the contingent and particular. So by treating philosophy as a historical phenomenon, historicism introduces contingency into philosophy – against the necessitarianism of the classical rationalists, and for that matter of much contemporary analytical philosophy. (See Beiser 2007, 160)

Historicism therefore also introduces the importance of contingency and historical particularity into *science itself*, because natural science is itself a phenomenon that happens in history. Historicist philosophy of science – of which Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos are the most eminent examples – acknowledges that natural science is legitimately considered a strong example of successful rational inquiry: “Scientific behavior, taken as a whole, is the best example we have of rationality. Our view of what it is to be rational depends in significant ways, though of course not exclusively, on what we take to be the essential aspects of scientific behavior.” (Kuhn 1970, 144)

At the same time, historical and sociological studies of natural science have typically shown that natural science has not proceeded in the way its own advocates have claimed it does. Unhistorical advocates of science (including Isaac Newton

3. Historicists are often fond of organic metaphors – and Aristotelians may be even more so.

himself) have taken an *inductivist* view: they claim science proceeds by simply looking at the empirical evidence in particular situations and inferring its universal theories directly from that experience, by inductive generalization. But – so historical studies have claimed to show – this is not how scientists, even revolutionary scientists like Newton, have actually proceeded in practice. Lakatos (1978c, 210) argues that we can contrast “Newton, the methodologist, who claimed that he *derived* his laws from Kepler’s ‘phaenomena’, with Newton, the scientist, who knew very well that his laws *directly contradicted* these phenomena.”

This recognition does not have to imply a rejection of scientific rationality, however. Kuhn aptly advises: “if history or any other empirical discipline leads us to believe that the development of science depends essentially on behavior that we have previously thought to be irrational, then we should conclude not that science is irrational but that our notion of rationality needs adjustment here and there.” (Kuhn 1970, 144)

This article is not about natural science. It will, however, argue that philosophy can fruitfully follow the model of natural science – as historically minded studies have shown science to have been in practice, not as *a priori* theorizing would hope for science to be. To the extent that science actually *did* proceed according to an inductivist view, it could not serve as a model for metaphysics or ethics, because they are not primarily empirical disciplines. The more historicist models of Kuhn and Lakatos are a different matter, as we shall see.

Historicist theses in philosophy come at varying levels of strength. The weakest form of historicism claims merely that philosophers should start their inquiries from ideas and theories that already exist historically, rather than by casting skepticism on all of them in favour of some transcendent point that ignores them (as Descartes and Kant do). The strongest form of historicism is a relativism that proclaims there is no way to progress anywhere beyond one’s historically conditioned starting point. Kuhn, Lakatos and MacIntyre each take a position somewhere between the weakest and strongest form, as do I.

My inquiry here begins with the case for the weakest form of historicism. That is: philosophical inquiry must begin from a starting point situated in history and tradition. Whether it is Aristotle’s *endoxa* or *phainomena*, Gadamer’s *Vorurteilen* or analytical moral philosophers’ “intuitions”, philosophers begin with a set of ideas expressed in language and derived from previous reflection. This point

holds even – or perhaps especially – when we believe ourselves to be finding a starting point that is not tradition-constituted. René Descartes is perhaps the most famous example: he aimed to generate reflection entirely independent of tradition but failed. As MacIntyre notes (following Étienne Gilson), it was not merely that Descartes did not notice how his reflection required the French and Latin languages he had been taught; it was further that “much of what he took to be the spontaneous reflections of his own mind was in fact a repetition of sentences and phrases from his school textbooks. Even the Cogito is to be found in Saint Augustine.” (MacIntyre 2006a, 9) What seemed like a tradition-independent starting point was in fact generated from the resources of tradition. We can innovate and create new lines of thought, but we fashion new tradition out of materials provided by the old; Karl Marx knew this, as Descartes did not. (MacIntyre 1991b, 176) Descartes was a historically situated entity who wished to understand himself as something other than a historically situated entity, and thereby failed to understand himself.

Aristotle’s dialectical method

From that case for weak historicism we can move to Aristotle, whose dialectical approach is arguably historicist in that weak sense and no more. I turn here to an account of Aristotle’s dialectical method heavily indebted to Terence Irwin (1988), on whom MacIntyre also draws. I find Aristotle’s approach (as described here) persuasive as a starting point for philosophical methodology, with significant modifications and additions identified in later sections.

Aristotle explicitly claims that dialectic starts from *endoxa*, preexisting opinions, which are a key kind of appearances (*phainomena*).⁴ The purpose of dialectical reasoning is “to reason from *endoxa* about every problem propounded to us,” and also, “when standing up to an argument, avoid saying anything that will

4. Some earlier twentieth-century accounts and translations of Aristotle misread him by identifying the *phainomena* with “observed facts” rather than primarily *endoxa*, thus making him look considerably more empiricist than he is. (see Owen 1986)

obstruct us.” (T 100a18-21, trans. W.A. Pickard-Cambridge)

Which *endoxa* do we reason from? Not those held by children or the mentally ill, or even by “the multitude”, “for they talk at random about almost everything...” Rather, on any given topic “We ought to examine only the opinions of the wise; for it is out of place to apply reasoning to those who do not need reasoning at all, but experience.” (EE 1214b-1215a, trans. H. Rackham) This all of course raises the question of who we will judge to be wise, which Aristotle does not spell out, and which will become important later. But let us put that question aside for the moment.

Once one is aware of multiple *endoxa*, the way to progress (*euporêsai*) is to resolve puzzles (*aporiai*), which reveal themselves through apparent contradictions: “the equality of contrary reasonings would seem to be productive of a puzzle. For whenever we reason on both sides, and everything appears to follow by each of the contrary arguments, we are puzzled about which one we should act on.” (Topics 145b17-20, Irwin’s translation)

How can we resolve such puzzles? We should find a further account or line of argument (*logos*)

that will best explain to us the views held on these matters and at the same time solve the difficulties and contradictions. And this will be secured if the contradictory views are shown to be held with some reason. For such a line of argument will be most in agreement with the *phainomena*: and in the upshot, if what is said is true in one sense but not true in another, both the contradictory views stand good. (EE 1235b, trans. H. Rackham)

We can show, in other words, that an apparent contradiction is only apparent – that on a deeper understanding of the senses of the contrary arguments, they complement each other rather than contradict. This is not the only way to proceed, however. Our new line of argument *can* declare some *endoxa* false – but then we must show why they might have *seemed* true. As Irwin explains:

A correct theory must not only yield, explain, and support the true appearances; it must also explain why the false appearances might have seemed true even though they are false (P 211a9–11, EN 1136a23–b14, 1144b32–1145a2). Often it will do this in the course of solving the puzzles, by showing what is wrong, though plausible, about

one side of a puzzle. An explanation of the false beliefs is part of the dialectician's task since he wants a theory that accounts for all the appearances. It is also part of his task in relation to his audience. Dialectical argument is meant to convince us if we begin by believing the appearances. We are more readily and more fully convinced if our false beliefs can be explained rather than ignored; if they were not explained they might still appear to be sources of objections to dialectical arguments (cf. EN 1154a22–6, EE 1246a13). (Irwin 1988, 47)

So as well as showing that an apparent contradiction is only apparent, we can resolve puzzles by showing not only why one side was wrong but also why it *appeared right*. Either of these dialectical resolutions, note, can occur without reference to the larger historical context of the views in question and their situatedness in tradition. The process happens at the level of individual theories and arguments, not entire traditions.

For that reason, this method as discussed is only weakly in line with historicism, and indeed MacIntyre himself says Aristotle is not a historicist at all. (MacIntyre 1984a, 277) After all, Aristotle, like the classical rationalists, saw history as a low form of knowledge, below even poetry, because it dealt with contingent particulars rather than necessary universals (Beiser 2007, 159). We might well say that Aristotle could only be considered a historicist by comparison to Descartes, and the role of the *endoxa* diminishes if we turn to his demonstrative attempts to find first principles. But the label that we put on Aristotle is not so important. What matters more, I want to argue, is that Aristotle's method does require significant historicist additions and modifications to be complete.

Aristotelianism in dialogue with historicism

From a historicist perspective, the most basic problem with Aristotle's approach is the way it is limited to a single linguistic community. Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1988, n9), writing to critique historicists like MacIntyre, acknowledges that Aristotle "does not worry about questions of translation" when setting out the idea that one should collect the opinions of "the wise" on a given

topic. But especially with languages from different roots, the semantic range of most terms is likely to be quite different; Aristotle's *ousia* and Candrakīrti's *svabhāva* are not exactly the same thing. So Aristotle's picture of how we may find answers becomes complicated by the difficulty of identifying the questions.

We today have access to the writings of many more linguistic communities than Aristotle did. We also have thousands of years' worth of writing that has taken place since he composed. As a result it becomes difficult if not impossible, on any given topic, to consider the *endoxa* of *all* those we might consider wise, from Anaximenes through ibn Hazm to Xiong Shili. It is for this reason, I would argue, that it becomes important to start our inquiries where we are – to learn the arguments that have already shaped us to date and reason from those. Our inquiry should be tradition-centred in at least this sense. Thus it matters that I situate myself as an Aristotelian, a Buddhist and a historicist, for I draw on these traditions as I do not draw on Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta or Daoism. To someone who has been shaped more by traditions more alien to me, advancing this argument will be more complicated. I do not think such dialogue is impossible, though, and I will say more later about what it could involve.

Moreover, historicist philosophies of science have pointed us to the way that traditions of inquiry make scientific rationality possible. Kuhn and Lakatos note that theory choice in natural science is not as simple as empirical induction or even empirical falsification. In practice, when there is evidence disconfirming a theory important to their tradition of inquiry, scientists typically do not abandon that theory; rather, their first move is to explain it away. This claim was first formulated independently by Pierre Duhem and W.V.O. Quine, Quine claiming that "Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system..." (quoted in Lakatos 1978a)

The point of the Duhem-Quine thesis is that individual theories are always a part of a larger body of thought – contrary to Aristotle, whose stated approach is prepared to assess claims on a given topic individually. Lakatos calls this larger body of thought a research program (or programme); Kuhn most famously calls it a paradigm, but he also regularly uses MacIntyre's favourite term: it is a *tradition*. The idea of a tradition in this sense

depends, in part, on the acceptance of elements which are not themselves subject to attack from within the tradition and which can

be changed only by a transition to another tradition, another paradigm. Lakatos, I think, is making the same point when he speaks of the “hard core of research programs,” the part which must be accepted in order to do research at all and which can be attacked only after embracing another research program. (Kuhn 1970, 138)

The Duhem-Quine thesis, together with the huge quantity of available views in the contemporary world, recommends to us an approach that foregrounds our *traditions of inquiry* and their historical situatedness in a way that Aristotle did not. On this thesis progress in inquiry typically takes place within the context of given traditions – Aristotelian tradition potentially among them. The Duhem-Quine thesis also takes weak and strong forms. Lakatos embraces a weak version of the thesis which “only denies the possibility of a *disproof* of any *separate* component of a theoretical system.” (Lakatos 1978a, 97, emphasis in original)

A stronger version of the thesis, however, would take a more relativist form. There, traditions are self-contained units that are immune to criticism from outside, for the thesis “excludes any *rational* selection rule among the alternatives.” (Lakatos 1978a, 97, emphasis in original) Lakatos rejects any such strong claim; there is some question as to whether Kuhn does.

It would also seem that most traditions of inquiry themselves commit to a view that denies that strong thesis. Darwinian evolution presents itself as the *most* rational explanation for the functioning of biological organisms. So too, most traditions of ethical and metaphysical inquiry aspire to a truth and a universality that goes beyond such a relativist claim. The four *ariyasaccas* (Noble Truths) or *paramārtha satya* (ultimate truth) are not just “true for Buddhists”; they are taken to be a reality underlying everyone’s life, and what is distinctive about Buddhists is simply that they *recognize* this reality. As MacIntyre notes,

what makes the concept of truth distinctive is precisely that it holds or does not hold independently of points of view. To claim truth for some expression of the relationship of a mind to its objects or for that relationship itself is to claim that this is how things are, no matter how they seem from points of view. (MacIntyre 1991a)

Some would disclaim the need to theorize about truth beyond locally specific practices, as James Peterman does in his *Whose Tradition? Which Dao?* – a title alluding to MacIntyre. Peterman rejects MacIntyre’s comparative approach by

arguing that Confucius had no interest in the Aristotelian project of justifying his teachings theoretically:

Morally reflective persons, including Confucius, aiming to improve themselves within the context of a specific tradition, can with justification reject certain questions of theoretical justification because the questions do not make sense within the practical, moral context of that tradition. (Peterman 2014, 211)

But Peterman's project is limited by its focus on Confucius, as opposed to *Confucians*. Even if Peterman were correct that Confucius felt no need to justify his project theoretically, Mencius certainly did so, both against the anti-Confucians Mozi and Yang Zhu, and against Xunzi who articulated an opposing variety of Confucianism. The questions of Mozi and Yang Zhu *did* make enough sense to sense to Mencius that he felt the need to answer them. Peterman praises Confucius for not having a theory of *ren* 仁 or discussing its basis in human nature, but Mencius and Xunzi do this at length. It is bizarre to detach Confucius from his tradition in this way, given that he is an explicitly tradition-centred thinker: he calls himself a transmitter of the sages who preceded him, and nothing in his thought rules out the possibility of future sages (like Mencius) following him.

MacIntyre offers a similar response to Nietzschean perspectivists, who attempt to stand outside all traditions and wear them merely as masks:

The most obtrusive feature of this [perspectivist] kind of philosophy is its temporariness; dwelling too long in any one place will always threaten to confer upon such philosophy the continuity of enquiry, so that it becomes embodied as one more rational tradition. It turns out to be forms of tradition which present a threat to perspectivism rather than vice versa. (MacIntyre 1988, 369)

Still, what Peterman is right to highlight is the potential circularity involved in any attempt to reach across the boundaries of traditions. Aristotle's method takes it as important to

establish if possible all or, if not all, the greater part and the most important of the opinions (*endoxa*) generally held with respect to these states of mind; since if the discrepancies can be solved, and a residuum of current opinion (*endoxa*) left standing, the true view will have been sufficiently established. (EN 1145b, Rackham translation)

But such a view would not be shared by Mādhyamaka Buddhists, for whom everyday opinions, conventional truth, are forms of error and illusion that trap us in suffering. They say we should *want* to get rid of them – as would Aristotle’s Skeptic opponents. Our mature position should, in some respect, preserve *none* of the appearances, for similarly to Aristotle’s Skeptic opponents, they think a correct position is in a sense no position at all. Candrakīrti, in expressing the rather anti-Aristotelian metaphysical position that worldly objects have no essence (*svabhāva*), is faced with the objection that ordinary people disagree with that view; Candrakīrti replies that they are simply mistaken, like people who perceive illusory objects because they have vitreous floaters in their eyes. (PP 260.4-261.1)

Aristotle attempts to further establish what Irwin calls a “strong dialectic”, aiming to reach more strongly conceived first principles that Aristotle thinks must underlie all inquiry. Such first principles are the source of *demonstrative* arguments, as opposed to the dialectical arguments we have discussed so far. But as MacIntyre notes, in strong dialectic

that objectivity and knowledge is already itself understood in a specifically Aristotelian way as both presupposing and employing formal and teleological principles alien to many rival modes of thought, including the dominant modes of thought of Western modernity. So that once again our conclusions are to a significant degree already presupposed by the premises from which the argument begins. (MacIntyre 1991a, 108-9)

In this way Aristotle’s first principles may well seem unconvincing to Mādhyamika Buddhists and others who stand outside the set of *endoxa* from which he reasons. There is, then, a certain circularity surrounding each of the traditions of inquiry that we might be situated in. Such a circularity can lead us to impasses, of the sort that might tempt one to the stronger, more relativist Duhem-Quine thesis. MacIntyre explores such impasses under the rubric of *incommensurability*, to which I now turn.

Incommensurability

MacIntyre derives the term *incommensurability* from Kuhn. In MacIntyre’s

sense “incommensurability is a relationship between two or more systems of thought and practice, each embodying its own peculiar conceptual scheme, over a certain period of time.” (MacIntyre 1991a, 109) The reference to time is important because, as we will see in the next section, two traditions that happen to be incommensurable at one point in time can *become* commensurable as time passes.

What sort of relationship between systems is incommensurability? MacIntyre describes it primarily as a relationship of rival standards of truth and falsehood:

It is not that what is according to the one scheme true is according to its rivals false; it is rather that the standard or standards which determine how the true-false distinction is to be applied are not the same. And there is, during this stretch of time at least, no higher standard yet available to judge between these two rival standards. (MacIntyre 1991a, 110)

The last claim is important: there is no *neutral* standard strong enough to resolve these disputes. Such a standard would provide commensurability, but that is precisely what is lacking. The term “incommensurable” comes from mathematics, where it refers to the lack of a common unit of measurement.

The claim is not that there are no neutral standards *at all*. There are indeed some relatively unproblematic first principles “which are evident to all rational persons”; these include the principle of non-contradiction in logic, and the principle “that good is to be pursued and evil avoided” in ethics (MacIntyre 2006b, 160). The problem is not that such universal principles do not exist; it is that they are too theoretically thin or weak for us to draw any substantive conclusions from them without the thicker principles that are in dispute between traditions. Why? There are always different ways to characterize how the universal principles are to be applied, and these will be theoretically informed by tradition. This is Kuhn’s key claim about the natural sciences:

However obscurely presented, my own position has from the start been that the choice between theories (and also the identification of anomalies, a process which raises similar problems) has to be made by a very special sort of community; otherwise there would be no science. Much of what is special about such communities is, I have tried also to argue, the shared values of their members – they must prefer the simple to the complex, the natural to the *ad hoc*, the fruitful to the

sterile, the precise to the vague, and so on – a very usual list. Without such values the community's decisions would be different, and something other than science would result. I have also argued, however, that these values do not carry with them a set of criteria sufficient to dictate unequivocally their application in concrete cases. To a considerable extent they are acquired from the study of examples of past applications rather than by learning rules about how they are to be applied. Two men who employ the same values when choosing between competing theories may therefore differ vehemently about which theory is to be preferred. (Kuhn 1970, 146)

Likewise, even though traditions' standards may involve psychological and sociological theories with an empirical dimension (such as theories of human nature), the differences between them cannot simply be settled by appeals to "empirical data". As long as such data can be characterized relatively neutrally or independently, "in terms of reflexes and responses to sensory, linguistic, or other stimuli", they are "too meager... no more than matter still to be given form by characterization at that higher, more theoretical level." Once an empirical account of human functioning is meaningful, it is already theoretically informed. (MacIntyre 1990, 111-12)

It is this distinction, between weaker universal principles of inquiry and stronger tradition-specific ones, that Jennifer Herdt misses when she claims that MacIntyre's theory is tradition-neutral despite his claims to the contrary. She argues that MacIntyre is committed to acknowledging a principle which she calls "Rt" (an abbreviation for "rationality of traditions"). Rt states: "When a tradition B can provide a cogent and illuminating explanation of an epistemological crisis faced by rival tradition A according to tradition A's own standards, and B does not face a similar crisis, then rationality requires members of A to acknowledge the superior rationality of B." (Herdt 1998, 535)

Herdt then asks: when members of tradition A transfer their allegiance to B via an epistemological crisis, by what standard is that shift reasonable? She responds: "Not simply because of the power of B's theories and concepts but because of Rt, the general standard of the rationality of traditions, which dictates when a shift in more specific standards is required. Without this standard, which transcends the conflicting traditions, the shift of loyalty would be irrational."

(Herdt 1998, 536) So in Rt, has MacIntyre then not committed to exactly the sort of tradition-transcendent standard that he claims does not exist? No, because MacIntyre agrees that there *are* some formal standards of rationality that should be universally evident – that the issue is that it is rarely clear in particular cases how these standards are to be applied. I would argue that Rt is among just this class of statements, like the principle of non-contradiction or like “good is to be preferred to evil”: if another tradition explains everything better than yours does, of *course* you should move to that tradition. The more difficult question is what that means in practice. Micah Lott puts it well:

the most general, “weak” standards of rationality—such as consistency and comprehensiveness—which all rational traditions share, and the “stronger” rational standards, which vary from tradition to tradition. The more general standards are “weak” insofar as they are insufficient for deciding between incompatible views on issues of substance. The “strong” standards, on the other hand, do provide reasons for choosing between incompatible views. (Lott 2002, 326)

To clarify the claim of incommensurability further it may also be helpful to note what it does *not* mean. I turn here to May Sim’s (2004) intended critique of MacIntyre’s incommensurability thesis, which I believe shows a misunderstanding of the concept. Sim claims to be responding to MacIntyre when she says “To show how [Aristotle and Confucius] share a fundamental set of categories is also to show that there are grounds for a kind of commensurability and hence for the possibility of dialogue.” (Sim 2004, 59) But MacIntyre never says that incommensurability precludes *dialogue*. Indeed, he concludes the very article she responds to (MacIntyre 1991a) by calling for further dialogue between Aristotelian and Confucian traditions – of the sort I will be discussing shortly.

Nor does incommensurability of two traditions mean that “they are so radically disparate as to lack kindred concepts, or that they must necessarily find utterly unintelligible what the other advocates or repudiates”, a view that Sim also attributes to MacIntyre (Sim 2004, 76-7). Quite the opposite: for MacIntyre, intelligibility is a *prerequisite* for recognizing incommensurability, and it is through kindred concepts that traditions can be mutually intelligible. Aristotelian and Galilean physicists had to be able to agree what their subject matter consisted of in order to be able to disagree about it. Likewise in ethics, Confucians and

Aristotelians must be able to agree what it is that they think the other misunderstands. (MacIntyre 1991a, 110-11) It seems to me that the ideas that Sim aims to reject, MacIntyre would reject too; they are just not what he means by incommensurability.

I find the concept of incommensurability powerful because in my own previous work (Lele 2007) I found that the ethical disagreements between Śāntideva and Martha Nussbaum⁵ reached just this sort of intractability. Briefly, Śāntideva and Nussbaum disagree deeply on the place of external goods (such as wealth, relationships and honour) in a good life. I showed how Nussbaum's arguments against the Stoics on that topic were not persuasive against Śāntideva – but it was also not clear how Śāntideva's arguments would be persuasive against Nussbaum.

Nussbaum (1988) situates herself in a non-historicist Aristotelian position that MacIntyre claims he once found persuasive – and gives Nussbaum credit for stating that position better than he did (MacIntyre 1991a, 104 and 122n1). But like MacIntyre, I am not ultimately persuaded by her view. Nussbaum acknowledges the need for an Aristotelianism that addresses linguistic and cultural variation more thoroughly than Aristotle did, but she claims that nevertheless there are grounding human experiences that people across different traditions can agree on as a subject matter:

The grounding experiences will not, the Aristotelian should concede, provide precisely a single, language-neutral bedrock on which an account of virtue can be straightforwardly and unproblematically based. The description and assessment of the ways in which different cultures have constructed these experiences will become one of the central tasks of Aristotelian philosophical criticism. But the relativist⁶ has, so far, shown no reason why we could not, at the end of the day, say that certain ways of conceptualizing death are more in keeping with the totality of our evidence and the totality of our wishes for

5. A Buddhist and an Aristotelian, respectively.

6. Nussbaum characterizes historicist views like MacIntyre's, which I expect would include the view I am articulating here, as "relativist". I hope this article makes clear why I do not take that characterization to be accurate.

flourishing life than others; that certain ways of experiencing appetitive desire are for similar reasons more promising than others. (Nussbaum 1988, 261)

But what this passage leaves unexamined are the *standards* by which one judges desires or concepts. What exactly does “the totality of our evidence” mean, how does one characterize it? Surely that is just what is at issue across different traditions of inquiry. And so too, why do we leave “the totality of our wishes” as a standard? To most Buddhists, desires are deeply problematic; wishes of some description are exactly what traps us in suffering. A life that fulfills “the totality of our wishes” may in fact leave us worse off than in a life that does not. Nussbaum could certainly defend the above claim by arguing that these Buddhists are prioritizing the wish to end suffering as foremost within the totality, or that the aim of ending suffering is its own form of a flourishing life – but to do so would be exactly to make Kuhn’s and MacIntyre’s point, that at that point a standard like “the totality of our wishes for flourishing life” is so thin that it cannot reasonably serve as a standard without the widely varying thicker characterization of its nature that would be applied very differently by Aristotelians than by Buddhists.

Now it is significant that Lakatos himself rejects the concept of incommensurability, as he finds it in Kuhn. Lakatos effectively sees the idea of incommensurability as too relativist – as leading unacceptably to the strong version of the Duhem-Quine thesis. He is concerned that if traditions are considered incommensurable then:

There are no rational standards for their comparison. Each paradigm contains its own standards. The crisis sweeps away not only the old theories and rules but also the standards which made us respect them. The new paradigm brings a totally new rationality. There are no super-paradigmatic standards. The change is a bandwagon effect. Thus *in Kuhn’s view scientific revolution is irrational, a matter for mob psychology.* (Lakatos 1978a, 90-1)

I agree with Lakatos that such a position is unacceptable; MacIntyre does as well. I believe, however, that MacIntyre has successfully identified a way to preserve the idea of rational progress in the face of incommensurability, and I turn to it now.

When the incommensurable become commensurable

While MacIntyre retains the concept of incommensurability from Kuhn, he also retains Lakatos's emphasis on the rationality of scientific (and other) traditions of rationality. MacIntyre's key difference from Kuhn is to stress traditions' *internal* rationality and debate. Kuhn, like Edmund Burke and Michael Polanyi before him, sees tradition as "essentially conservative and essentially unitary", and therefore does not see "the omnipresence of conflict – sometimes latent – within living traditions." (MacIntyre 2006a, 16) But traditions have their own internal rational standards and logic according to which they conduct their inquiries, which allow for (and may even require) internal debate. That internal debate allows traditions to recognize their own flaws, on their own terms: "What some, at least, of those who have been educated into such a tradition may come to recognize is the gap between its *own* epistemological ideals and its actual practices." (MacIntyre 2006a, 18, emphasis in original) Such an internal failure, by the tradition's own standards, is what MacIntyre refers to as an epistemological crisis, which is typically identified as such only retrospectively. But it is at such a point of crisis that two distinct traditions can *become commensurable*.

In this way MacIntyre is able to preserve both the concept of incommensurability and the concept of rationality. It is possible to make rational progress toward truth between two traditions that do not share standards of rationality; a tradition's own standards can lead it to crisis, and once in crisis it can be rationally superseded, *on its own terms*. Commensurability and incommensurability are relative to time: two contradictory sets of standards might coexist over a long period of time without *yet* being able to supersede each other, but insofar as each tradition claimed truth, it "would be committed to holding that its opponents' positions could somehow or other be decisively shown to be inadequate, even if it was not yet in fact possible to do this." (MacIntyre 1991b, 178)

The key to such supersession is the tradition's internal anomalies: the points where the tradition is "exhibiting strains and becoming at least to some degree problematic on its own terms", under its own self-scrutiny as it develops. MacIntyre suggests that for both Confucianism and Aristotelianism, such a key problem is whether the tradition's guidance can continue to apply outside the context of social relationships in which it was originally developed (the Warring States, the *polis*)

(MacIntyre 1991a, 119-20). One might suggest that a comparable example for Christian tradition is the problem of suffering; for Madhyamaka Buddhists it could be the question of how the Buddhist path can be preferred to any other form of life when it is just as empty as they are. Each tradition has a history of attempts to resolve such problems, some more successful than others.

A commitment to intellectual honesty also requires a tradition to admit *its own* anomalies, as Lakatos also urges:

the only way to approach a point at which our own standpoint could be vindicated against some rival is to understand our own standpoint in a way that renders it from our own point of view as problematic as possible and therefore as maximally vulnerable as possible to defeat by that rival. We can only learn what intellectual and moral resources our own standpoint, our own tradition of theoretical and practical inquiry possesses, as well as what intellectual and moral resources its rivals may possess, when we have understood our own point of view in a way that takes with full seriousness the possibility that we may in the end, as rational beings, have to abandon that point of view. (MacIntyre 1991a, 121)

It is these characteristic anomalies that allow a tradition to supersede another by telling a historical narrative. What such a narrative must do is both show how the superseded tradition fails by that tradition's own standards, and explain *why* that tradition fails, in a way that the superseded tradition itself cannot (MacIntyre 1991a, 118). Aristotle can account for both Homer and Sophocles as they cannot account for themselves; we retain here the claim of Aristotelian dialectic that to properly show a false view false one must also show why it seemed true. But the superseding tradition is nevertheless changed by the process of superseding:

although one of the contending parties can vindicate its rational superiority, it can do so only by including within its own perspective a good deal of the substance of its opponents' claim; in this type of case often enough it is precisely in the ability of one of the contending parties to do this, in a way and to a degree that its opponent is unable to match, that the vindication of its claim to rational superiority lies. (MacIntyre 1984b, 35)

Living in multiple traditions

To this point I am in agreement with MacIntyre's account. But there is a significant point where I differ. MacIntyre typically characterizes this encounter between traditions as one where those already situated within one tradition encounter those already situated within the other, rather than one in which one is already situated within both. He often uses a rhetoric of combat, between "rival" traditions whose relation is one of victory and defeat. (e.g. MacIntyre 2006a, 20) One must choose sides, and then fight intellectually for one's own tradition, but accept honest defeat if that is the tradition's fate.

But what about those of us who are "betwixt and between" traditions? MacIntyre claims that such a person should "test dialectically the theses proposed to him or her by each competing tradition, while also drawing upon these same theses in order to test dialectically those convictions and responses which he or she has brought to the encounter." On this much I think he is right. But on his account the goal of this dialectical testing is for the individual "to acknowledge in which of these rival modes of moral understanding he or she finds him or herself most adequately explained and accounted for." (MacIntyre 1988, 398) Theoretically this "which" could grammatically mean plural "which ones", but the context of this section and MacIntyre's general methodological advice do not seem to indicate that this is his intent.

There are a number of problems with the advice to situate oneself within a single tradition and then address rivals. At a minimum, we need different traditions of inquiry in different disciplines, different *epistēmēs*. Kuhn understands paradigms and Lakatos understands research programs as discipline-specific; Lavoisierian chemistry is not Newtonian physics and vice versa, even though they are related. MacIntyre himself claims that ethics cannot be independent of biology, but despite his avowedly Thomist ethics he understands his biology in Darwinian terms (MacIntyre 1999, x, 11-12). He cites Larry Arnhart (1998) on the point that Aquinas and Darwin are compatible; whether or not Arnhart succeeds in that reconciliation, the point remains that by virtue of inquiring in these two different but related

disciplines, MacIntyre is inhabiting not one tradition but two.⁷ Even if one able to place these different sciences within a hierarchy so that one tradition remains supreme, as MacIntyre recommends in MacIntyre 2006b, each tradition cannot be deduced or derived demonstratively from the other; one intellectually inhabits both traditions and must find a way for them to coexist, rather than having one defeat the other.

Moreover, even within a single discipline (such as metaphysics or ethics), our historically given starting point is likely to contain the inheritance of multiple traditions. Here MacIntyre chides those moderns who

live betwixt and between, accepting usually unquestioningly the assumptions of the dominant liberal individualist forms of public life, but drawing in different areas of their lives upon a variety of tradition-generated resources of thought and action, transmitted from a variety of familial, religious, educational, and other social and cultural sources. This type of self which has too many half-convictions and too few settled coherent convictions, too many partly formulated alternatives and too few opportunities to evaluate them systematically, brings to its encounters with the claims of rival traditions a fundamental incoherence which is too disturbing to be admitted to self-conscious awareness except on the rarest of occasions. (MacIntyre 1988, 397-8)

This characterization seems to bespeak an anthropological blindness: inheriting multiple traditions, I would argue, is simply a part of the human condition. Many Muslims pray to local gods in a way that traditionalist scholars would portray as idolatrous; Buddhist temples in Thailand contain statues of Ganesh and Kuan Yin; Catholic societies retained the inheritances of pre-Christian paganism. “Fundamental incoherence” this may be, but it is hardly limited to liberal modernity; it is a feature of human life everywhere. Most of these traditions that we inherit will see incoherence as a bad thing, so it is worth trying to overcome it where it appears – but we must understand that that overcoming is a project, a goal

7. Furthermore, MacIntyre borrows elsewhere from Nietzschean genealogy (MacIntyre 2006b, 172-3), Marxist sociology (MacIntyre 2013, 482-3) and feminist theory (MacIntyre 1999, 3).

to achieve from a typically incoherent starting point.

In this respect consider Thomas Aquinas, founder of the tradition to which MacIntyre gives his own allegiance – and also the clearest example MacIntyre gives of a thinker able to resolve disagreement between incommensurable traditions, to make the incommensurable commensurable. Aquinas lived on the boundary between Aristotelianism and Augustinianism. Like most moderns, he found himself betwixt and between multiple traditions, incommensurable with each other: “the Aristotelian philosopher and the Augustinian theologians appealed to rival and incompatible standards both in evaluation and in explanation” and “there was no possible neutral standard” between them. (MacIntyre 2006a, 111) What in the modern context is “fundamental incoherence”, in Aquinas’s case turns into a unique advantage. What makes the difference was the work of his teacher Albertus Magnus, who had already done the deep work of understanding Aristotelianism and Augustinianism in each other’s terms. As a result Aquinas had

become, so to speak, a native speaker of two first languages, each with its own distinctive conceptual idiom. Such a person does not need to perform the tasks of translation in order to understand. Rather it is on the basis of his or her understanding of both conceptual idioms that the respects in which untranslatability presents barriers around or over which no way can be discovered can be acknowledged. Such persons are rarely numerous. They are the inhabitants of boundary situations, generally incurring the suspicion and misunderstanding of members of both of the contending parties. It was just such suspicion and misunderstanding that Aquinas incurred both from some Augustinians and from some Latin Averroist Aristotelians, and he incurred it precisely because he was such a person. (MacIntyre 1990, 114-15)

From this boundary situation, Aquinas’s dialectical testing did *not* follow the procedure that MacIntyre recommends for moderns in such a situation: he did not identify the one tradition that best accounted for himself and then try to “vindicate” it against its rivals. Rather, he remained within both as he tested them against each other, until he could make a synthesis that was fully both/and:

Aquinas integrated both rival schemes of concepts and beliefs in such a way as both to correct in each that which he took by its own standards could be shown to be defective or unsound and to remove from each, in

a way justified by that correction, that which barred them from reconciliation. Retrospectively, we can understand him as having rescued both standpoints from imminent, even if unrecognized, epistemological crises. (MacIntyre 1990, 114-15)

Aquinas still superseded, but only by developing a new synthesis that in some respects superseded *both* of the traditions that made it up:

both the achievements of Augustinianism and Aristotelianism had been integrated in such a way that what were, or should have been, recognized as the defects and limitations of Augustinianism as judged from an Augustinian standpoint and the defects and limitations of Aristotelianism as judged from an Aristotelian standpoint had both been first more adequately characterized and then corrected or transcended. (MacIntyre 1990, 120)

Between incommensurable traditions, then, there are at least *two* ways that MacIntyre describes a resolution: a one-sided victory that is able to explain the anomalies of an opponent, and a bilateral synthesis that is able to explain the anomalies of both. Given the inevitable multiplicity of traditions in which human beings find themselves, the latter strikes me as generally more promising. We still need deep philosophical translation work, of the sort conducted by Aquinas's teacher Albertus Magnus, to make this possible, but this becomes a real possibility with all the philological work of the past three centuries behind us. We are better off, I think, if we do not as MacIntyre says, but as MacIntyre's Aquinas does.

Reflexivity

A thorny question for any cross-traditional methodology is reflexivity: how does it apply to itself? This is especially acute for a historicist Aristotelian methodology of the sort that I (and MacIntyre) articulate. It cannot be a tradition-transcendental strong neutral standard of evaluating traditions, for its historicism proclaims that there is no such strong neutral standard. But if the theory is *not* tradition-transcendent, one wants to ask what is it good for.

Peter Seipel tries to portray MacIntyre's broader theory *as* tradition-

independent – despite MacIntyre’s express claims that it isn’t⁸ – because otherwise “the implication is that *After Virtue* is little more than a defense of Aristotelianism directed at other Aristotelians...” (Seipel 2015, 262) Contra Seipel I take MacIntyre’s methodology to be explicitly Aristotelian, just as it claims to be, and I follow MacIntyre in proclaiming my own methodology Aristotelian. But Seipel is right to raise a question here. If the methodology *is* itself Aristotelian, what good is it for people who are not already committed to Aristotelianism?

MacIntyre claims that “the Aristotelian moral tradition is the best example we possess of a tradition whose adherents are rationally entitled to a high measure of confidence in its epistemological and moral resources.” (MacIntyre 1984a, 1561) But to say this is to invite Robert Wachbroit’s question: who exactly is this “we”?

If the “we” refers only to people who belong to our moral tradition, then the problem of relativism remains: Why should our best example cut any ice with those of another moral tradition? If the “we” refers to everyone, regardless of what moral tradition they find themselves in, then relativism has given way to imperialism. Although there are no moral principles which are independent of the social content of any moral tradition, *everyone* should nevertheless align themselves with the Aristotelian moral tradition. (Wachbroit 1985, 1561)

It is a good question that deserves an answer. My answer (which I believe would also be MacIntyre’s) is: *it is possible for a tradition to possess a correct account of the nature of other traditions*. Given Wachbroit’s concerns about relativism, it should not be a great stretch to think one tradition right and others wrong, *about* the nature of traditions. It is just that that this rightness turns out to be more difficult to establish than expected. The claims of the theory are justified on

8. For example: “I am irremediably anti-Hegelian in rejecting the notion of an absolute standpoint, independent of the particularity of all traditions. I therefore have to assert that the concept of a tradition, together with the criteria for its use and application, is itself one developed from within one particular tradition-based standpoint. This does not preclude its application to the very tradition within which it was developed. Nor does it preclude its being used to frame universal claims about all traditions.” (MacIntyre 1994, 295)

the grounds of Aristotelian and historicist tradition – as the theory claims all theories must be – but it aims to be a valid description of traditions in general. As Lott (2002, 334) notes, the *conditions for rational justification* are tradition-dependent, but the *range of application* is universal.

What about those who do not accept the tradition's grounds for rational justification? As Aristotelians, MacIntyre and I *believe* that a story of this sort is the best story so far for everyone, and we would like to convince others of that because we believe that it is true. Others may not be justified in believing that *yet*; it is our job to convince them. In modern Western societies which have a long Aristotelian and historicist inheritance, many may well find the claims of these traditions making sense when introduced to them – as I have tried to do so far in this article. For others, who have allegiance to contrary traditions, convincing may require a procedure of supersession as articulated above.

The philosophical methodology here is not far removed from Lakatos's methodology of research programs – a methodology aimed at natural sciences, but also applicable to itself, a meta-methodology. (see Lakatos 1978b, 131-2) No tradition of inquiry, in the natural sciences or philosophy or history, can ever be proved definitively right, but one can make progress through supersession – guided by the regulative ideal that a tradition of inquiry can be correct. This ideal sets Aristotelian-historicist inquiry apart from both the “encyclopedia” approach which tries to find a truth independently of tradition, and the “genealogy” approach that does not aspire to correctness. (See MacIntyre 1990)

So the theory does indeed advocate the view that Wachbroit, in a breathtakingly overblown rhetorical move, refers to as “imperialism”: we do think that everyone should be Aristotelian in their methodology, for the simple reason that we think an Aristotelian approach to methodology is the one most likely to be *correct*. This should not be a scandalous claim. Wachbroit's terminology would seem to call biologists “imperialist” for believing that everyone's approach to biology should be Darwinian. It is not that I think this methodology correct because I am an Aristotelian; rather, I am an Aristotelian because I think this methodology correct.

The more serious accusation implied by the “imperialism” charge is a lack of humility, a refusal to listen. This is where the methodology's *fallibilism*, its refusal of certainty, is crucial. A number of observers (e.g. Larvor 1998; Peterman 2014) have noted the debt that MacIntyre and Lakatos both owe to Hegel – himself a

historicist who is also in important ways Aristotelian (see Ferrarin 2001). But Larvor (1998, 29) suggests that “Lakatos parted company with Hegel at just the point where Hegel turns against fallibilism”; MacIntyre and I explicitly part company with Hegel at just this point as well:

Implicit in the rationality of such enquiry there is indeed a conception of a final truth, that is to say, a relationship of the mind to its objects which would be wholly adequate in respect of the capacities of that mind. But any conception of that state as one in which the mind could by its own powers know itself as thus adequately informed is ruled out; the Absolute Knowledge of the Hegelian system is from this tradition-constituted standpoint a chimaera. No one at any stage can ever rule out the future possibility of their present beliefs and judgments being shown to be inadequate in a variety of ways. (MacIntyre 1988, 360-1)

So again, the claim this methodology makes, that is, is merely to be “the best theory so far” (MacIntyre 1984a, 270) – but indeed the best theory so far for everyone. We think that everyone should be an Aristotelian historicist in philosophical methodology for the same reason we think that everyone should be a Darwinian in biology: we think it is the best approach available. But that does not preclude its itself being superseded, as Newtonian physics was superseded by Einsteinian and quantum physics. Since there is a much wider variety of current paradigms in metaphysics and ethics than in biology or physics, the chance of our eventually being superseded is much higher.

One problem remains. The very idea of this methodology itself, at a meta-level, is Aristotelian, and there is a real extent to which such a methodology does depend on Aristotelian presuppositions. We saw above how Aristotle aims to preserve the established beliefs with which inquiry began, while Madhyamaka Buddhists aim to knock them all down. This is not the only example. Surely then not merely the substance of Aristotelian tradition, but the proposed method of reconciling Aristotle with Madhyamaka, is itself unacceptable from a Mādhyamika perspective?

Such examples could be multiplied; Madhyamaka is not the only tradition which could have such problems with Aristotelianism. The very idea of incommensurability suggests that they are likely. MacIntyre recognizes and anticipates such an objection in his discussion of Confucianism:

Against all this one complaint may finally be made. It is that not only did I begin by comparing the Confucian theory of the virtues with the Aristotelian in terms which are themselves already Aristotelian and which presuppose the truth of an Aristotelian standpoint, but that more generally the argument of this essay is framed in terms of and presupposed just that conception of rational order which Hall and Ames judge to be characteristic of Western metaphysics and to exclude just that conception of aesthetic order which they take to be fundamental to Confucianism. (MacIntyre 1991a, 122)

MacIntyre feels the force of the objection, as do I, and I think his response is entirely appropriate:

Yet if the argument of this essay is correct, how could I, as an Aristotelian, have done otherwise? What I have presented is indeed an Aristotelian account (albeit one which perhaps many Aristotelians would reject) of what is at issue between a Confucian theory of the virtues and an Aristotelian. To elicit from some Confucian a no doubt very different account of what is at issue is one of the principal aims of this essay. We have to begin by disagreeing even on how to characterize that about which we disagree, if we are to make any movement, even a stumbling and halting one, in the direction of rational agreement. (MacIntyre 1991a, 122-3)

This response takes the form of a sort of challenge: members of other traditions are invited to articulate their own methodological position that corresponds to this Aristotelian one.⁹ Develop a competing methodology of traditions so that a full-fledged dialogue can begin.

And what of those like myself, who are Aristotelian *and* something else? The next step for my own project is likely to identify the form that a competing Buddhist

9. So when Peter Seipel tries to object that “if Lott is correct [that MacIntyre’s methodology is tradition-based], MacIntyre’s opponents could have their own theories of rational competition between traditions” and so “their theories could even be vindicated in precisely the way Lott describes” (Seipel 2015, 263), the appropriate response is “Yes, exactly.”

theory of tradition would take. In this paper I have articulated a non-Buddhist Aristotelian meta-theory of traditions; what is the Buddhist non-Aristotelian meta-theory? An answer to *that* question would of course require at least another article, but doing so may be what makes a more meaningful synthesis possible.

Summary

I have intended here to establish an Aristotelian-historicist methodology as the best story so far for philosophical methodology that crosses the boundaries of traditions of inquiry. From Aristotle the methodology accepts the idea of dialectic, of starting from established beliefs and resolving apparent contradictions among them by showing that the contradictions were only apparent or showing why one side was wrong but appeared right. From historicism it adds the need for inquiry to be situated within traditions, because the vast panoply of contemporary opinion requires limiting the starting established beliefs to a more manageable set, and because the weak Duhem-Quine thesis points out that theories can rarely be refuted piecemeal. It also accepts that traditions may be incommensurable – that is, having no neutral or common standard by which their claims may be judged – but that they can *become* commensurable (and thereby supersede or be superseded) by learning the history of each other’s characteristic anomalies in its own terms and becoming able to explain another tradition’s anomalies better than they could themselves. This process can be a joint process of synthesis rather than one-sided supersession.

This whole methodology depends on Aristotelian and historicist presuppositions, and could not do otherwise. It is prepared to argue for those presuppositions, but acknowledges that competing approaches will have their own approaches to methodology. In MacIntyre’s (1991a, 121) words, “The key to comparative studies is the comparison of comparisons.”

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