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CORRECT ETHICAL TRADITIONS: TOWARDS A DEFENSE OF CHRISTIAN ETHICAL RELATIVISM

by

JASON HEAD

Under the Direction of Timothy Renick

ABSTRACT

This thesis provides one component of a greater defense of Christian ethical relativism, or the notion that what is a morally allowable action for one Christian may be wrong for another and both could be correct in their assertions. This essay does not develop such a Christian relativism, but merely defends the idea that a relativistic view could be developed in an academically rigorous manner and may be able to explain the diversity of Christian ethical traditions in a simpler manner than that offered by the ethical absolutist. As such, the thesis argues that a relativistic view ought to be developed.

INDEX WORDS: Ethical relativism, Christian ethical diversity, Ethical traditions, Religious traditions, Virtue ethics

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JASON HEAD

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Master of Arts

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

How is it that two equally mature practitioners of one religion, both having intellectual gifts in abundance and both having considered their moral stance before their God, can have such widely diverging ethical systems that allow contradictory moral judgments? To speak to those in the faith-tradition of Christianity more specifically, if the God of Christianity is the God who many Christians say He is and is morally good (among other things), why can't Christians agree as to what is meant by the description 'morally good'? Lest one hold that it is only Christianity that suffers from this challenge, even a cursory glance at the other major Western religions, Judaism and Islam, reveals that they both have their own struggles with these moral questions. Is this an irresolvable flaw inherent in (at least) the Western monotheistic faith-systems?

For an example of the contradictory moral claims in the Christian community, consider the contemporary debate concerning the moral status of abortion. One Christian group holds that abortion is simply a medical procedure on the same moral level as a tonsillectomy. Obviously, one does not want to have such a surgery in the first place, but when it is medically necessary, it should be done. For this faction, abortion is not a question of faith, but of medical feasibility. Another Christian group, however, takes the position that the fetus is a human life separate from the mother, and that to destroy the unborn human is to commit murder. This faction holds that the true Christian will oppose abortion as a principled person of faith. The challenge to the Christian is that either abortion is morally prohibited or it is not. There appears to be no other feasible option. [1]

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[1] I make reference to two formulations, one on each side. On the pro-choice side:

The problem with this debate is not that there are at least two sides. That is the nature of debates. The problem is not even that the debate is interminable and apparently irresolvable, for many ethical debates are criterial debates by nature. If everyone could agree on the language used, the debate would be resolvable in theory, but the debate is over the use of language. Even in the cases where both sides actually listen to each other, a rare enough occurrence, each side disagrees with the definition another side puts forth. And an appeal to a universal standard is futile, because that is what the debate is about.

The real difficulty is that two views which are contradictory often both claim to be logical consequences of "the Christian ethical tradition." However, the way that they approach moral problems is oftentimes different, and this difference impacts the conclusions they reach. Yet they often remain blind to the difference in their approach because of their mutual concern for the "moral law." For example, a mainline Protestant Christian, seeing the pain caused by unplanned pregnancy in the life of a mother, may see abortion as a viable option to end the pain in the girl's life. He then attempts to define abortion in a way that will avoid violation of the moral law. In the same manner, a conservative Roman Catholic, interpreting the Church's position in a consistent way, will be opposed to abortion except when the mother's life is in danger because of the concern for life. She may then try to define abortion in a way that will defend the life of the "unborn child." Each assumes that the discussion is about whether abortion is a morally

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Roy Bowen Ward, 'Is the Fetus a Person?' (*Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights rcrc.org* <http://www.rcrc.org/pdf/RCRC_EdSeries_Fetus.pdf> 29 September 2006).
Pro-life side:
Kerby Anderson, 'Arguments Against Abortion' (*Leaderu.com* <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/arg-abor.html> 29 September 2006).

allowable procedure without realizing that they may be asking the wrong question. They assume everyone is speaking about the same moral law.

I put forward the notion in this paper that, while there may or may not be a "moral law", there are certainly different ethical traditions (ways to approach moral questions) in the religious tradition of Christianity. I present a possible explanation that discards the notion of moral law and focuses on ethical traditions as yielding objective (but not universal) moral answers. Such a conception may be able to explain ethical diversity within Christianity better than the absolutist moral law conception. In this scheme, contradictory moral claims may be a result of the formulations of moral questions of rival ethical traditions and be irresolvable because both sides are correct in their reasoning. [2]

I present an argument in this essay against the conception that there is only one correct ethical tradition per religious tradition, based on the diversity of Christian ethical traditions and the possibility of ethical relativity. (Ethical relativity is the idea that one person can assert the moral proposition *X* and another person can assert the moral proposition ~*X* and both could be correct in their assertions.) I defend the possibility of ethical relativity by showing that the idea of a teleological approach to ethics as presented in the widely read and discussed (at least in ethical circles) book *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre can allow for ethical relativity by ascribing moral judgment only in narratives, not to actions in themselves. [3] Also, MacIntyre's idea of a 'tradition' can be analyzed further into (at least) the notions of ethical tradition and religious (or faith) tradition.

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[2] I do not attempt to prove the assertion that there are several different ethical traditions within the religious tradition on Christianity. I instead am assuming that there are rival traditions. Proving this assumption, while certainly possible, would detract from the more interesting question of the paper, which is "Is there only one correct Christian ethical tradition?"

[3] Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

This distinction is useful in the pursuit of the relation between religion and ethics, and allows us to ask the question of whether there is a single correct ethical tradition in the religious tradition of Christianity. I then question the idea that there is such a thing as 'the correct' Christian ethical tradition, citing the presence of rival ethical traditions within the religious tradition of Christianity. The argument of this paper then may serve as a component of a different argument that Christian ethical relativity (the idea that there is more than one correct Christian ethical tradition) is a feasible alternative, but this paper does not attempt to develop a form of Christian ethical relativity. I conclude that a version of Christian ethical relativity is logically possible and, depending on its development, may not be easily dismissed as false. Because it is possible, it ought to at least be considered given the difficulties the alternative conception of a single correct Christian ethical tradition has explaining ethical diversity.

Several points need to be made at the outset of the paper in anticipation of potential misunderstandings. First of all, this paper is not to be read as a rejection or a defense of MacIntyre's work. Instead, this paper should be seen as calling for a continuation of his project. His concepts of tradition and a teleological understanding of ethics are important, and may shed much light on both the study of ethics today and where it may have gone wrong. This essay moves beyond MacIntyre's work in ways that he may or may not agree with, and rejection of the notion put forth in this paper does not entail a rejection of MacIntyre's scheme.

Also, this paper is to be read as *presenting an argument* that the simplistic model of only one correct ethical tradition per religious tradition is unsatisfactory, not as

claiming that the simplistic model of only one correct ethical tradition per religious tradition is unsatisfactory in reality. One argument in isolation does not warrant the adoption of such a radically different position of ethical relativity, as useful as such a move may be in evaluating rival ethical traditions. There are other considerations, such as meta-ethical and epistemological, which may be responded to accurately in a relativistic ethical scheme but remain outside of the realm of the essay. My intent is only to present an argument in defense of Christian ethical relativity, not defend the greater conceptual scheme against all possible attacks.

CHAPTER 2: Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue

In this second chapter, I summarize Alasdair MacIntyre's book *After Virtue*. Obviously, this summary does not address all that the book covers, but it does glean three points necessary to my argument. The first is that MacIntyre declares the contemporary field of ethics is suffering from a system-wide mistake. Second, he claims that the only way to rectify this mistake is to look back to the past and reclaim a teleological (end-oriented) notion of ethics. Finally, he argues that looking back to a teleological ethical conception forces a re-examination and a different understanding of the terms "virtues" and "tradition."

MacIntyre begins his book by asking a question: What if a catastrophe occurred and people lost the tradition of science, only retaining some of the vocabulary and some (but not all) of the underlying conceptual schemes, and failing to understand science as the organization and classification of empirical phenomena? They would debate different theories, maybe even using some of the terms correctly, but it would be simply a debate of interpretation, and not science as we understand it. For instance, in astronomy there may be a debate between adherents of a Ptolemaic (earth-centered) conception of the solar system and adherents of a Copernican (sun-centered) model. The debate may be fierce, with each side taking the debate to talk shows and to the streets. The debate may extend to the relevance of certain scientific texts and/or remnants of scientific texts, and wars may be fought in defense of or attacking opposing interpretive schemes. However, no one would present observations or perform critical experiments to determine the appropriateness of one model over the other. The debate would be only over the

interpretation of texts, and not be based on empirical observation. What would ensue would appear to be science, and to a person not having any scientific training (in the sense of what we understand as science) there would be no way to distinguish between this pseudo-science and our present understanding of the scientific practice. Still, it would not be what we consider true science, nor would it produce true scientific findings except by accident.[4]

MacIntyre believes that this hypothetical predicament is similar to the situation in which contemporary ethics finds itself. Just as the practice of science involves and is dependant upon empirical observation, the practice of ethics involves and is dependant upon a notion of an end that everyone must strive to attain. What we think of as ethics is not really what our philosophical predecessors would have considered ethics, though it looks like it to the untrained observer. As he states, "We possess indeed the simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have…lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality."[5] In other words, we use the same words as ethicists of long ago, but we no longer have the appropriate underlying conceptual schemes necessary to the proper usage of moral language. We appeal to moral terms, but do not understand what is meant by those terms. We say things like "abortion is good" or "abortion is bad," "abortion is a moral act" or "abortion is an immoral act," but we do not really speak and understand the language and are only invoking a set of sounds like a magic incantation. The words 'good', 'bad', 'moral', 'immoral' are remnants of a greater ethical conceptual scheme that has been forgotten in

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[4]Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 2.
[5] MacIntyre 2.

the current debate, and the loss of that scheme leaves us using these words without understanding what they mean.

Historically, the place where MacIntyre believes ethical reasoning went wrong is the Enlightenment. He believes this is evidenced in the failure of works as diverse as those of Kierkegaard, Kant, Diderot, Hume, and Smith. This failure is due not to the lack of mental abilities of these thinkers, but due to their common philosophical structural background. According to MacIntyre, they all attempt to move from premises about universal human nature to conclusions about the authority of moral law.[6] Ultimately, such a structure of moral reasoning will lead to a Nietzchean nihilism.[7]

MacIntyre illustrates this interpretation by presenting the schemes of Kant and Kierkegaard, and argues that they differ not in the substance of the moral law, but in their conclusions about the authority of the moral law. For Kant, the moral law is to be obeyed by all people at all times, while Kierkegaard argues that ethical law is to be suspended in the case of the individual acting by true faith, the so-called "knight of faith." Despite their contrary conclusions on the authority of moral law, they share a common structure in that both assume the same structure of universal truths about human nature leading to conclusions concerning the authority of the moral law. Their differences lay in a disagreement concerning the universal truth of human nature.[8] Kant argues that all humans share a common rationality and that the moral law is based on that universal rationality. While it is not the case that every human has the same degree of developed

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[6] MacIntyre 52.
[7] MacIntyre 114.
[8] MacIntyre 47.

reason, all humans do have some reason. Kierkegaard, while not disputing the substance of the moral law, disagrees with the applicability of the moral law. For Kierkegaard, the universal truth about humans is not that all humans have reason, but that all humans are called to an individual relationship to God based on neither reason nor the passions but on faith (which all can attain, but few actually do). Their different conclusions concerning the authority of the moral law are based on a shared logical structure.[9]

For MacIntyre, this highlights the flaw of Enlightenment reasoning about ethics. Kant felt that all humans are essentially rational, Hume argued that humans are not motivated by reason but driven by emotions, while Kierkegaard held that what is essential to all humans is a call to faith, which is neither rational nor emotive.[10] Then comes Nietzsche, whom MacIntyre calls *the* moral philosopher of the present age, [11] who rejects both rational and non-rational attempts to establish the authority for the moral law, and holds that any authority for moral law is purely based in the individual subjective will. If there is no authority for moral law other than subjective will, than moral law is simply the expression of subjective will. If moral laws are simply expressions of subjective will, morality is purely the individual's creation, and a person with a strong

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[9] MacIntyre 49. I do not reference Kant and Kierkegaard here because I assume (as does MacIntyre) the reader to have some familiarity with these thinkers, and my purpose in presenting them is to present MacIntyre's interpretation of them, not to argue that they should be interpreted in this manner. If the reader is completely unfamiliar with these thinkers, I refer them to Frederic Copleston's summaries as a starting point.
Frederick Coplestone, A History of Philosophy:Volume VI (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 180-382.
Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy:Volume VII (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 335-331.
[10] MacIntyre 49. (see note 11)
Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy:Volume V (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 258-351.
[11] MacIntyre 114.

enough will can make her or his own morality, because there is no morality with authority outside of the individual.[12]

Obviously, MacIntyre's thesis that the Enlightenment approach to ethics will inevitably lead to nihilism is hard to prove with any level of confidence and, if warranted, needs historical support.[13] That is one of the tasks of his book, and whether MacIntyre accomplishes that goal is a debate to be saved for another time or place. Supposing that MacIntyre is correct, however, and that adoption of the Enlightenment project will inevitably lead to moral nihilism does not mean that one must adopt moral nihilism. There are other options besides Enlightenment thought, and MacIntyre advocates a return to an Aristotelian conception of ethical reasoning.[14]

The conception that MacIntyre advocates is a teleological (ends-oriented) understanding of ethics. Rather than regarding ethics as the knowledge of the movement from universal truths about man to the authority of moral law, the teleological approach necessitates a different path. It entails an awareness of both man-as-he-happens-to-be (point A) and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature (point B). Ethics, in this view, is the study or art of the transition from point A to point B.[15] Both man-as-he-is and man-as-he-could-be are beliefs in many ways determined by the tradition in which one is raised, and the judgment of an action as "good" or "bad" is a judgment about whether or not someone has taken a step toward attaining the ideal life.

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[12] MacIntyre 114. Again, this is MacIntyre's interpretation of Nietzsche, which I leave for MacIntyre to defend. For more background on Nietzsche, I recommend Coplestone's History of Philosophy: Volume VII.
[13] MacIntyre 3.
[14] MacIntyre 118.
[15] MacIntyre 52.

To return to the abortion example for illustration purposes: The story that the Enlightenment ethicist can tell about the moral status of abortion may be much simpler, but MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment story leads to nihilism. For the Enlightenment thinker who is not a nihilist, there is a moral law in existence somewhere that is universally applicable to all humans. The act of abortion is either allowed or prohibited by this moral law, and ethical debate consists in determining the status of the act in relation to this moral law. The specific particular ruling concerning the specific act in space and time is but an instantiation of a universal ruling. The act of abortion is morally good or not morally good in isolation from its setting.

MacIntyre's conception of teleological ethical reasoning is much different. For MacIntyre, before one can answer the question about the "goodness" or "badness" of the act, one must first define the goal aimed at by action (point B) and also define the position a person is at currently (point A). Roughly speaking, an act is good if it moves one closer to point B, and not good if it moves one further away from point B. If an abortion will move a pregnant Christian young woman closer to "Christ-likeness," then the act is good. If it moves her away from the end of "Christ-likeness," it is bad. Thus, while abortion may or may not be bad or good as a rule (more on this later), to inquire as to the universal status of abortion apart from a particular circumstance is nonsensical.[16]

At this point, many modern ethicists balk, for two major philosophical reasons that are closely related. The first is the analytical tradition of assigning moral goodness

[16] This is not utilitarianism, for utilitarianism as I understand it assumes that an act is right or wrong independent of the test of whether greater happiness is a result, and the test of happiness is an accurate indicator. A teleological ethicist says that movement to point B (be it happiness, or whatever) is the only criterion for the goodness of an act, not merely a test.

or moral badness to actions in isolation from their setting, while the second is the existentialist and sociological tendency to make a distinction between the self and the roles one plays in society.[17] These are different mistakes for MacIntyre, and MacIntyre deals with each in turn. Understanding both the objections and MacIntyre's responses shed light on MacIntyre's overall system.

The first objection is that, in MacIntyre's scheme, moral goodness is not applicable to individual actions. If ethics cannot take place without a tradition that determines the good for humans, one cannot say that an action is good or evil without a setting. But many people feel that the torture and murder of innocents is wrong, no matter the context. Some actions are just morally wrong, and the virtue ethicist fails to recognize this.

MacIntyre acknowledges that actions are neither good nor evil separate from a setting, but this is far less of a problem than it appears. The analytical mistake is a too narrow conception of morality, for it is not the case that one can assign moral value to unintelligible actions. They may shock one, but until a narrative is assigned to an action, there can be no moral value assigned.[18] A truly unintelligible action, one for which there is no corresponding narrative, is neither good nor evil. If someone is waiting for the elevator, and while waiting for the elevator, turns to you and declares with obvious passion that he is wearing new socks, you will most likely be confused. You would not judge that action as good or bad, because outside of a narrative, this particular action is meaningless.

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[17] MacIntyre 204.
[18] MacIntyre 210.

It is only by assigning a narrative that moral judgment is possible. For instance, if the narrative assigned to the act of that declaration is that the individual telling you that he has new socks is a previously homeless person who bought new socks for a job interview and his declaration is an overflow of emotional well-being, that declaration is what we consider a good act. However, if the narrative assigned is that the person is a terrorist intent on killing as many people as possible, and his declaration to you is a code phrase declaring that the dirty nuclear bomb is in place, then we would declare that act a bad act. The declaration is neither good nor bad in itself, but is good or bad only in respect of the particular narrative assigned to it.[19]

In MacIntyre's scheme, to question whether an act is right or wrong apart from a setting simply does not make sense. Moral correctness or wrongness is dependant upon a context in which the action takes place, not upon the action itself. This does not mean that some acts are not wrong in every context, just that those acts always participate in a narrative such that the end of the acts is always contrary to the end at which human life is striving for. The torture and murder of innocents may be wrong in every setting, not because of an intrinsic property of the action, but because the end which such an action has on one's character is acting against the end for humans in general. To state it another way: Torture may as a rule always be wrong. However, it is wrong not because torture violates a moral law; rather the moral law prohibiting torture exists because the action of torture moves one away from the end toward which human life is aimed.

[19] This does not mean that people do not assign narratives rather quickly, and sometimes erroneously. However, it is not the action we judge, but only insomuch as we are able to assign a story to it. Murdering small children we consider evil, but if someone is deemed mentally incompetent, the punishment is lessened or discarded completely. Why? Possibly because we recognize that some actions have no legitimate narrative assigned for the killer.

The second objection is that an individual's self is greater than any of the roles one may play in society. The existentialist Sartreian model and many sociological models deriving from modern thought separate the self from the roles it plays in society.[20] For instance take Bob, a hypothetical philosophy graduate student. Bob, in his self, is not simply a graduate student in philosophy. Bob may play the role of a graduate student in society, going to classes, teaching classes, and whining about his current lack of money and future lack of prospects for employment. Bob may play the role of a philosophy graduate student very well, such that he attains the ideal of a philosophy graduate student. However Bob's self is separate and greater than any role he may play. Other roles Bob may play include religious, such as being a Christian, and gender, of a single heterosexual male with a tremendous fear of commitment. Bob's self, which makes Bob a person, is not any one of these, though. To identify Bob's self as simply one of these roles to the exclusion of the others is to mistakenly associate the self too strongly to a role the self plays.

The idea of narrative is essential to answering this second objection. MacIntyre rejects this fragmented view of the self by asking the question what makes the self a unity?[21] In MacIntyre's understanding, the different roles that one may play all have a different corresponding narrative and end toward which the narrative is aimed. This end is necessary to make the role intelligible. For instance, to call Bob a good philosophy graduate student presupposes an ideal of what philosophy graduate students are to be like. A good philosophy graduate student may be someone who not only has a virtuous

[20] MacIntyre 204.
[21] MacIntyre 218.

character (more on this later), but who also writes clearly, is aware of current philosophical debates, researches thoroughly, and enjoys philosophical discussion and the process of philosophy. In so far as one fulfills these ideals, within the setting of philosophy student, one may be referred to as a good philosophy graduate student.

This leads right into the concept of a tradition, for often people refer to another person as "good" without mentioning the setting in which the claim is being made. They are not just babbling. Rather, most people assume that everyone else is subscribing to the same overarching narrative. It is obvious, or at least it should be, that not everyone ought to be a philosophy graduate student, just as not everyone ought to be a carpenter or a farmer. Thus, when speaking of someone who is on the way to the ideal of one of these sub narratives, it is made explicit. "He is a good farmer" or "She is a good carpenter" does not entail a moral judgment. A person can be a good person yet be a bad farmer and vice versa. The ideal life that is assumed when one declares a person good without making the context explicit is based on a tradition which they either inherited or to which they converted. It is often assumed that all people are aiming at that same ideal, and thus it needs no articulation.[22]

Thus, to call someone a good person presupposes a notion of what an ideal person is. It does not simply refer to a moral sphere or role, but is evidence of an overarching narrative. This overarching narrative in which the other narratives participate determines the ideal self, and a person is judged "good" or "bad" insomuch as they attain the ideal. MacIntyre does not deny that different roles and contexts are necessary for explanation,

[22] Not everyone is in fact aiming at the same ideal, but people may mistakenly assume that everyone is aiming at the same ideal life.

and that different settings entail different judgments.[23] However, MacIntyre does hold that one of the roles played by the self must be primary. In order for the self to be a unity it must participate in a narrative. Every different narrative implies a different role being played at the same time, and different judgments. To judge someone as "good" is to say that they played the overarching narrative role well. The overarching narrative is based, in every particular instance, on a tradition that gives the ethicist not only the end which man should seek to attain, but also the understanding of where a human is now.

Ethical reasoning is the art of knowing where a human is, knowing what the ideal is, and knowing how to get to the ideal from where one is. These understandings are based in a tradition, and to speak of "good" and "bad" outside of a tradition simply does not make sense. However, there is something to the notion that morality is applicable to every situation. What is applicable to every situation are not moral rules, however, but virtues as character traits necessary for the attainment of any ideal. [24] MacIntyre's definition, focused within a setting or practice, is "A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from attaining any such goods."[25] To state it differently, a virtue is an attribute that can be trained and is required to attain and maintain possession of the ideal in every setting. It is not limited to a single role (such as the role of a carpenter), but is a trait that must be used to attain any end that is sought after.

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[23] Consider MacIntyre's discussion of the gardener, MacIntyre 206-208.
[24] MacIntyre 209.
[25] MacIntyre 191.

To illustrate, let's revisit our good philosophy graduate student Bob. Bob lived a rich, full life, has died, and been judged "good". Bob lived the ideal life in the tradition of a philosopher. He published several books, influenced hundreds of students in a positive way, and truly enjoyed his life. When we claim Bob was good, we are essentially saying that the tradition of philosophy understands what the end for humans ought to be, that it correctly diagnoses where humans are, and that Bob fulfilled the ideal. Bob was a good philosopher.

In order for Bob to have been a good philosopher, Bob must have had a virtuous character. Bob must have acquired certain human qualities that enabled him to be a good philosopher. One virtue that Bob must have evidenced is courage as a mean between the vices of foolhardiness and cowardice. Bob did not back down from all intellectual debates (if he did, that would be cowardice), but Bob did not try to pick or get involved in intellectual fights that he could not win (which would be foolhardy). This virtue of courage is necessary for Bob's attaining the ideal of a good philosopher.

However, let us further say that Bob also had the talent such that he never made mistakes and always asked very good questions. It was not something he learned or acquired, he was just born with the ability of always asking the right question. Bob was simply extremely lucky and very intelligent. This talent would be useful in being a good philosopher, but it is not necessary. There have been lots of good philosophers who have asked really dumb questions. This talent of never making mistakes was not acquired, because Bob had it since birth. As such, while it may be useful, it is not a virtue as MacIntyre presents virtue.

Another important feature of the virtues is that they are essential for fulfilling any role. A person can be judged "good" in one role, such as a farmer, but to be good one must have a virtuous character. A good farmer must have courage to plant crops at the right time. If she does it too early, and is foolhardy, she risks frost. On the other hand, if she plants too late, she risks not giving enough growing time to the plants. To be good, a farmer must be courageous.

But simply having a virtuous character is not enough to be judged good in any role. Bob may have been a good philosopher and, as such, must have been virtuous. That does not mean that Bob was also a good farmer. Virtue does not entail that the possessor of a virtuous character must succeed in attaining the ideal in every setting or practice in which he or she participates. Bob may have been an incredibly virtuous philosopher, and applied those virtues to his farming activities as well, but he just had very bad luck, or he lacked the necessary skills. There were late frosts, tornadoes in his fields, torrential downpours that ruined his crops. Bob may have been virtuous, but his life as a farmer was far from the ideal life of a farmer. Therefore, Bob could not be judged a good farmer. There are other factors involved in being judged good, such as luck and ability.

The nature of virtues could be fleshed out much more than it has been, but it would distract from the main goal of the paper. It is more important that MacIntyre's overall scheme of a teleological approach to ethics is understood. Ethics for MacIntyre is dependent on a common tradition that accurately assesses the location of humans and the ideal at which humans must aim. This dependency on a tradition emphasizes the

development of the virtues as acquired human traits. The conception of virtue ethics is more concerned with developing people of good character than with developing people who follow moral rules, and the terms “good” and “bad” do not make sense outside of a setting.

CHAPTER 3: Christianity as One Correct Ethical Tradition or Not

This next section is a response to the first. Properly understood, this section is neither a critique nor a defense of MacIntyre's teleological conception of ethics, but an argument that the implications of MacIntyre's project are far from completed. I defend the notion of ethical relativism by showing that in a teleological conception of ethics, ethical relativism is a possibility. Alternatively, if one does say that each religion has only one correct ethical tradition, then one faces a serious problem. Different adherents of the major western religions often make contradictory moral claims, and an explanation of how this could be forces one to make very questionable assertions in order to maintain the single correct ethical tradition position. This does not mean that one cannot hold the position that there is a single Christian ethical tradition, merely that the alternative position (that there may be more than one correct Christian ethical tradition) ought to be considered.

I begin this section by examining the teleological conception of ethics as the art of transitioning from point A (humans as they are) to point B (humans as they could be). The beliefs concerning the substance of point A and point B are inherited from ones' tradition. I then further analyze the idea of "tradition." I first present the notion that an ethical tradition refers to a different notion than a faith-tradition. I define a religious tradition as sharing a common *telos* for man, and an ethical tradition as sharing both common assumptions about man-as-he-is and a common goal for man. I do not argue for this division, but simply present the possibility and some useful attributes of such a division. I then defend the possibility of ethical relativism (the idea that contradictory

moral assertions can both be correct) in a teleological approach to ethics. I examine three objections that the relativist must answer, and conclude that relativism is possible. The possibility of relativism, coupled with the division of ethical and religious traditions, allows us to phrase the central question of the section into a logical contradictory form: Is there a single correct ethical tradition for each religious tradition or not? I use for my primary example the Christian religion, thus the question I examine is: Is there a single correct Christian ethical tradition or not? The denial of one answer is the affirmation of the other.

Then examining the question I argue that the claim that there is only one correct Christian tradition fails to account for the diversity of moral assertions among those individuals claiming to be members of the Christian church. I consider five possible responses in defense of the notion that there is a singular correct Christian ethical tradition. These responses upon further analysis raise serious questions which, while answerable, require a complexity of thought which negates the apparent simplicity of the single correct Christian ethical position.

I conclude that a Christian ethical relativistic position is possible and ought to be seriously considered by Christian scholars because of the difficulties the absolutist position (the view that there is only one correct ethical tradition) has explaining the diversity of moral assertions. I do not defend a relativistic view in this paper, but merely argue for the possibility of such a view.

The Term 'Tradition' Examined and the Possibility of Ethical Relativism Defended

I wish to re-examine the notion of tradition in a teleological understanding of ethics. The teleological approach to ethics, as presented earlier, views ethical reasoning as the transition from point A (the human as she is) to point B (the human as she could be if she fulfilled the ideal). A good ethicist is one who is able to make decisions that ultimately aid in the transition from point A to point B, and the substance of point A and point B is conveyed by tradition. This is different than the current Enlightenment approach to ethics, which posits a universal moral law based in universal truths about humanity and this moral law is then applied to specific situations. The role of the ethicist is discovery, defense, and interpretation of the moral law.

MacIntyre's *After Virtue* is an argument in favor of the adoption of a teleological approach to ethics as opposed to an Enlightenment approach. I do not wish to get involved in this debate, but I do wish to pursue a teleological conception of ethics and present a notion that MacIntyre may or may not disagree with. Assuming a teleological approach (as I do for the rest of the paper), I think it possible to break down the concept of tradition into the differing concepts of religious tradition and ethical tradition. The members of a religious tradition, to explain it in the teleological terms presented earlier, share a common end point (or point B, man-as-he-ought-to-be). Their goal is the same. Members of an ethical tradition share not only the common end point (point B), but also common starting assumptions (point A, man-as-he-is).

There are several benefits to such a maneuver. It would allow the religious philosopher to maintain that very large and diverse religions, such as Christianity and

Islam, do have something in common despite their incredible differences. It would help to explain ethical diversity within religious traditions. For example, a Christian has a goal to be like Christ (whatever that means) despite the differences in starting assumptions given by Gnostics, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Protestants.

Yet there are drawbacks to the adoption of this teleological understanding. In this conception, members of different religious traditions by necessity are members of different ethical traditions, for they have different goals towards which they are aiming (or at least they state they have different goals). Even if they agree that the proper end of humans is *eudaimon*, or human flourishing, they disagree as to the substance of what that means. For instance, a Muslim and a Christian, qua Muslim and qua Christian, cannot speak to each other as members of a common ethical tradition. The Muslim has the end of being a true servant of Allah as his goal, while the Christian has the end of being like Christ as his goal. I cannot think of a way to resolve this dispute without making the highly questionable (though possibly true) claim that they mean the same thing despite their stated disparity. Because it seems that each view is internally consistent, and an argument establishing the superiority of any religious system over all others may never be discovered, and because I do not wish to enter a debate over the universal harmony of all religions, I put forth the possibility (undefended in this paper) that every internally consistent religious tradition is correct. Therefore, if I wish to claim it possible that religious traditions which often make contradictory metaphysical assertions may both be correct, and that different religious traditions by necessity indicate different ethical

traditions, I must establish the possibility of ethical relativism (a different task than arguing that ethical relativism is, in fact, the case).[26]

Let me be perfectly clear on this: I am defending the possibility that an act such as abortion may be correctly judged as morally allowable by some people and yet that very same abortion correctly judged as not morally allowable by others. The notion of ethical relativity I am defending declares that even acts which I find abhorrent and distasteful, such as the Nazi Holocaust, may be morally allowable in some ethical traditions, even though it is not morally permissible in my own ethical tradition. This does not mean that I do not feel morally compelled to resist and fight such acts, just that I cannot appeal to a universal morality to justify my moral feelings. If the ethical relativity I am defending as possible is in fact the case, my declaration that such acts as genocide are morally bad has no universal bearing, because it is possible that someone determines the ideal of humans to involve genocide. There is no standard for evaluating universal moral claims.

Defending the possibility of ethical relativism does not appear a legitimate option if one approaches morality from an Enlightenment approach because of the Enlightenment scheme of moving from a universal moral law to a specific instantiation. Thus, if abortion is against the moral law, it cannot also be not against the moral law. People may disagree as to the substance of the moral law, but the moral law cannot be contradictory, for such a moral law would violate any attempt for humans to understand

[26] I am not saying that proving superiority is futile, just that it may be. I personally have not encountered an argument that convincingly proves one religious tradition as superior to all others, but such an argument may exist.

it. A contradictory moral law is incoherent. However, ethical relativism is possible if one adopts a teleological perspective. Three charges must be addressed to defend the possibility of ethical relativism: there is a large amount of intuitional resistance to the notion of ethical relativity; ethical relativism seems to collapse into ethical nihilism, which many declare is a self-refuting position; and ethical relativism is thought to be internally inconsistent and to violate the Law of Non-Contradiction (LNC). However, these attempts to deny the possibility of ethical relativism fail.

The first response one may give is that ethical relativism must be rejected based solely on intuitions. Many people strongly feel that ethical relativity cannot be the case. Abortion must be wrong or right universally, the Nazis were morally evil and bankrupt, the Rwandan genocide was purely evil. Intuitively, everyone knows that there is a universal standard for humans to act, and to deny that these standards exist is simply a result of over-complication. To deny that there is a standard that applies to all people is contrary to humanity.

I could construct a long story to explain why people feel that standards must be universal, but that is not necessary. It is far more simply demonstrated that intuitions are often wrong. Most philosophers, if not all, can point to a case in their philosophical training where their intuitions were (often spectacularly) wrong. And not just philosophers have been misled by what they "knew" to be the case. History is full of examples of great thinkers whose intuitions were wrong, from the ancient notion of a flat earth to (if ethical relativism is the case) the contemporary confidence in absolute moral rules. Intuitions are great things, but can be wrong. I need not argue that intuitions in

this case are wrong, but merely argue that they could be wrong. Rejecting the possibility of ethical relativism simply because one feels it to be wrong is not a proper response for anyone, least of all the academic philosopher.

But intuitions often serve as indicators and while intuitions alone are not enough to warrant a denial or acceptance of a theory, they can indicate a strong argument that has not been made explicit. Many people feel that the idea of ethical relativism eventually collapses into ethical nihilism. Ethical nihilism is supposedly an untenable position. Therefore, if ethical relativism entails the indefensible position of ethical nihilism, then ethical relativism cannot be held and the only alternative is to assert that there is only one correct ethical tradition.

One response the ethical relativist may give is simply to acknowledge the necessity of nihilism, but to deny that nihilism is untenable. One may not want nihilism to be true, but simply desiring a thing to be true or false does not make it so. I may really desire to fly without reliance on anything else, but it's not going to happen. If there is no objective universally correct ethical tradition, then nihilism must be tenable as a simple fact of life, and ethicists are simply trying to find an impossible solution to an imaginary problem.

Still, many would balk at accepting nihilism, and while one may hold that such a position could be held and argued for, it would require much more defense than this paper could provide. In the interest of defending ethical relativism, one can simply concede that nihilism is untenable for the sake of argument. Yet ethical relativism does not entail nihilism. The two positions may be similar, but they are different.

Ethical relativism declares that there is not one single correct ethical tradition because there is more than one correct ethical tradition, but there may be a finite number of correct traditions that exist and it makes sense to speak about ethical matters within a tradition. Ethical nihilism holds that there is not one single correct ethical tradition because there are no correct ethical traditions, and that any talk about ethics is nonsensical. Both views hold that there is no universal moral standard, but ethical relativism claims that there are objectively correct moral answers, just not universally correct moral answers. Ethical nihilism denies that ethical answers can be neither universal nor objective.

Finally, ethical relativism may be held to be inconsistent because it violates the Law of Non-Contradiction (LNC). The LNC holds that a thing cannot be both p and not p at the same time, yet ethical relativism holds that an action can be both good and not good at the same time. As such, it is in clear violation of the laws of logic, which are inviolable. Therefore, the position must be discarded as incoherent.

This response betrays the belief that there must be a moral law, which is exactly the assumption which is being challenged. If ethical relativism is the case, then there are more than one correct ethical traditions which indicate different moral laws. Obviously, both ethical absolutism (the belief that there is only one moral law) and ethical relativism (the belief that there is more than one moral law) cannot both be true at the same time. But to discard the possibility of ethical relativism merely because ethical relativism cannot work in the ethical absolutist position assumed by the Enlightenment approach to ethics commits the fallacy of begging the question.

A teleological ethical approach can tell a different story than the Enlightenment ethical approach. In a teleological approach actions imply no intrinsic moral judgment. Apart from a narrative, actions are unintelligible. Thus, it is not the actions that are good or bad in themselves, but the narratives that actions take part in that determine their moral worth. If an action aids in the transition from point A (humans as they are, whatever that is assumed to be) to point B (Humans as they ideally should be, whatever that is), that action is good. If it does not aid in the transition or prevents it, that action is bad. Given that each of us takes part in many different narratives at one time, the same action may be good in one narrative yet bad in another without violating the LNC.

For example, consider the case of an unmarried pregnant girl getting an abortion. In one narrative, which views the ideal of humans to involve humans breeding as much as possible, the action of destroying a human life (or even potential human life) is bad. The girl's act clearly leads her away from attaining the ideal. Yet the same act of abortion, when viewed as a participant in a different narrative which assumes the ideal end of humans to be the accumulation of wealth, would be seen as a good act. Unmarried mothers earn less money than unmarried women with no attachments, and therefore such an act serves the end of the accumulation of wealth. If we imply no judgment on narratives, then the same act can be both good and bad at the same time without violating the LNC by evaluation by different narratives.

I thus conclude that ethical relativism is possible, and thus that dividing the notions of ethical tradition and religious tradition without judgment concerning other traditions is possible. As I make my case, it is important to note that the focus of this

paper is on the sub-category of ethical traditions, and that different religious traditions by necessity indicate different ethical traditions. I argue further that there may be many correct ethical traditions within the greater commonality of a religious tradition because the notion of one correct ethical tradition per religious tradition runs into serious problems when seeking to address the fact of contradictory moral assertions. [27]

Christian Ethical Diversity and a Single Correct Ethical Tradition

But to move on to the main question of the paper: Is there a single correct Christian ethical tradition or not? The important thing to note in the formulation of the question is that it is stated in as logically simple form as possible. (I am assuming that there is at least one correct Christian ethical tradition.) To say that there is a single correct Christian ethical tradition is to say that it is not the case that there is more than one correct Christian ethical tradition. In the same manner, to say that there is more than one correct Christian ethical tradition is to deny that there is only one.

As far as simplicity of theories, the idea that there is more than one correct Christian ethical tradition offers a much easier explanation of the sociological fact of diversity of moral assertions within Christianity than does the notion that there is only one correct Christian ethical tradition. In the beginning of the paper, I introduced the current Christian debate concerning the moral status of abortion. A relativist can simply claim that abortion may be morally permissible for some Christian narratives yet not in

[27] The urge I must resist is to try to defend the idea that the concept of tradition ought to be further analyzed into religious tradition and ethical tradition. However, it is only necessary for me to show in this paper that it is possible in a teleological conception of ethics to show that it is possible to maintain a position with academic rigor, which it could. To argue that such a division ought to take place, however, would distract from the main goal of the paper, which is to show it possible to defend a form of Christian ethical relativity.

others. An absolutist (a person who claims there is only one correct ethical tradition) is forced to argue that the moral status of abortions must be the same for everyone.[28]

When faced with the fact of rival traditions, the person who holds that there is only one correct Christian ethical tradition has several options. However, I argue that these options can each be questioned and the answers forced to an exceeding amount of complexity and/or dismissed. The first, and most common, tactic is frank admission of the necessity of the maneuver of philosophical suicide, or ceasing to question by an act of the will. In response to the sociological fact of rival ethical traditions within a religion, an absolutist may refuse to entertain the question of why their tradition is the correct one. Statements such as "only God can tell why" or "I'll let God judge," while possibly appropriate responses for non-academics, nonetheless advocate a defeatist attitude toward the question. Philosophical suicide must be committed in order to continue on with more important tasks. Many Christians who do not have intellectual training use this tactic when faced with the question of contradictory moral assertions within Christianity. Yet many intellectuals with great training recognize the difficulty of understanding other perspectives and rest content in their own reasoning. They just give up on hope of solution and no longer try. One can be entirely consistent and make this move, yet it is still a form of philosophical suicide.

There are many reasons for religious scholars to avoid philosophical suicide, and many ways to approach the issue, but they can get very confusing. The best brief argument I can give against the maneuver is that it abandons the academic project of

[28] There may be extenuating circumstances that may or may not change the appropriateness of the act, but the moral status remains the same.

seeking grounded, justified truth claims, and this is an essay that seeks to do just that. If one wishes to commit philosophical suicide, go ahead. If an individual thinks philosophical suicide is necessary to understanding contradictory moral assertions, he should not be reading this essay. However, there are good reasons for not committing philosophical suicide, and I suspect the reader has already chosen, at least subconsciously, not to engage in this maneuver. This essay addresses those who will not surrender intellectual pursuits so easily, and does not claim to speak to everyone. Thus such a maneuver can be dismissed.[29]

The next two approaches lead to questionable assertions by denying the opposing voice in an *ad hominem* manner. In a debate between two or more Christian intellectuals holding positions that cannot all be true at the same time, the tendency is to deny either an opponent's claim to intellectual ability or to deny the opponent's claim to a common faith. The first approach would be to affirm that there is a common basis for reasoning but to deny the intellectual abilities of the opposing side. Both sides do in fact share a common faith, it's just that the holders of the opposing view lack the training and raw talent needed to correctly reason. Perhaps there is an argument or fact which is known to one side in a debate but not to the other, or possibly an opposing view may not interpret the appropriate texts correctly and the correct interpretive scheme would clear up any mistakes. The holders of the opposing view are not necessarily evil, they are simply mistaken because of a lack of information or training.

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[29] Philosophical suicide is a term developed by Albert Camus in the Myth of Sissyphus, and for further arguments against philosophical suicide, I would point the reader there.
Albert Camus, The Myth of Sissyphus Trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991).

This view is very questionable when we examine an issue such as the Christian use of violence. As concerns arguments and facts, there have been intelligent, intellectually aware, well-trained thinkers on both sides of the issue of Christian involvement in war throughout the ages. On the pacifist side stand great Christian intellectuals ranging from many of the Pre-Constantinian thinkers to contemporary examples such as Martin Luther King and John Howard Yoder.[30] On the non-pacifist side of the issue there are many medieval thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, as well as contemporary examples such as C.S. Lewis and Reinhold Niebhur, all of whom assert that Christians are morally required to got to war at times.[31] The lack of unity on this issue is not due to a lack of excellent thinkers on either side.

For example, I as a well-trained Masters' candidate in philosophy with an average amount of talent, can argue either side of the issue. On the pacifist side, I can argue that if Christians truly followed and tried to imitate Christ, they would plainly see his pacifistic nature. The kingdom of God is not of this world, and even if it is, it betrays a

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[30] The best case for Christian pacifism, as I consider it, is put forth by John Howard Yoder in his book of essays The Priestly Kingdom. However, there are many other pro-pacifistic arguments by many other theologians, and I only refer to these notables as a starting point if one is unfamiliar with the discussion. I only cite the contemporary authors because I am simply concerned with showing that there is an educated debate, and the contemporary authors make reference to the Pre-Constantinians in their works.
Martin Luther King Jr., The Trumpet of Conscience (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).
John Howard Yoder, The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[31] Again, I am just citing several authors who have contributed to the debate on pacifism. There are many more who have contributed whom I have neglected to mention. My goal is not to choose sides, but to illustrate that a debate exists, and that there are Christians of great intellectual ability on either side. I assume the reader to be slightly aware of Augustine and Aquinas, but reference Coplestone again for those completely unfamiliar with their thought.
Frederick Coplestone, A History of Philosophy: Volume II (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 81-91, 398-422.
Reinhold Niebur, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1944).
C.S. Lewis, "Why I am not a Pacifist" The Weight of Glory (and other addresses) (New York: Macmillan Press, 1962), 33-53.

lack of trust in God to engage in violence contrary to our prime example. It takes far more courage to turn the other cheek having the ability to strike back than to have a tooth for tooth mentality.

The non-pacifist could retort that the pacifist has wrongly seen Christ and the nature of violence. It is true that Christ did not act in his own defense, but he did engage in violence on behalf of others in the case of the moneychangers in the temple courtyard, and promises greater violence toward the wicked when he returns. One shows more courage by fighting for God if one feels that the cause is just than by not engaging in any action and allowing evil to triumph.

Obviously, this debate is much more nuanced and involved than I have presented. My point is not to show that one view is right and the other wrong, but to illustrate that both sides can plausibly be argued for, and consistently so. Because of this far from unique phenomenon, one can easily hold that this disagreement is not due to ignorance or lack of intellect on either side. Yes, an individual can make a personal decision on personal involvement in war yet refuse to extend that decision to all Christians, acknowledging only that some arguments seem stronger to her or him than they do to another Christian. There may or may not be a proper Christian position on pacifism and war, and certainly some people are ignorant of facts or arguments, but to claim that all opponents must be uninformed is an *ad hominem* fallacy, even if it was to prove to be true. In any case, to hold the position that disagreement exists due to bad reasoning on one side or the other involves a very questionable assertion concerning the abilities of any opponent.

Another form of denying the intellectual abilities of one's opponent is to deny their interpretation of Scripture. It is not that the opponent lacks ability or knowledge, but that he or she is interpreting the tradition incorrectly. There is a proper way to understand the issue, and the opponent is wrong insomuch as he or she fails to adhere to the proper Christian approach to Scripture.

The assertion to be questioned here is that there is a singular proper Christian interpretation of Scripture. To deny that there are wrong ways to read Scripture may be fallacious, yet to assert as a result that there is a single right way to interpret is definitely questionable. There may be many correct interpretations, just as there are many wrong interpretations. This point delves into philosophy of language, and is not easily resolved. Any argument against the possibility of more than one interpretation of anything reflects a view of language and its relationship to the world that is itself subject to dispute. This does not mean that this position cannot be held. All I am seeking to show is that Christian ethical relativism can explain contradictory moral assertions far easier than the notion of one correct Christian ethical tradition can.

The second approach is to deny the opponents' faith, to declare that the opposing party is not in reality Christian. The opposition exists, not because of any lack of intellectual ability, but rather because they are not real believers. There is a common Christian ethical tradition, and while questioning may occur within the tradition, the questions will be resolved by true believers. Ultimately, the arguments offered by an opposing side may be good arguments, and possibly intellectually compelling, but they

are only put forth as a test of faith. The opposition's claim to share a common religion is a lie, or more charitably, a mistake on their part.

This view raises the question of language usage and its governance. Simply assuming that the intellectuals on opposing sides of a moral issue genuinely believe they are speaking as Christians forces one to deal with the question of what is Christianity? The problem is, different sects of Christianity have different answers to the question, often as wide-ranging as the ethical views themselves. Some hold that Christianity is the only way to heaven, others say that it is a tradition or a lifestyle, while others say that Christianity is a belief in the Truth (whatever that means). These answers are not necessarily in opposition to each other, but they reflect different understandings of the end of Christianity.

The intellectually questionable maneuver is the privileging of one understanding of Christianity over another and declaring that the privileged conception is 'the' Christianity. How does one establish the supremacy of one understanding of Christianity over another? Does one hold a democratic vote? Does one go to war, and let God choose the winner to survive, while the unfaithful loser is annihilated?

This is not to say this position cannot be held consistently. One can be entirely consistent and hold this view, and I do not wish to demean in any way those who feel that there is only one proper understanding of Christianity and its relation to an ethical tradition. All I am seeking to establish is that this answer to the problem of Christian ethical diversity is based on an assumption that leads to many very difficult questions.

The final response the ethical absolutist may give to the existence of contradictory moral assertions is to declare that there may be more than one ethically correct answer within one tradition of ethical reasoning whenever the tradition is changing. Thus, abortion may have been bad at one time, but because the tradition has changed, abortion may now be good. The changing of a tradition happens when a narrative is replaced in a revolution of paradigms along the nature of a Kuhnian scientific revolution. Thomas Kuhn argued that scientific advancement took place by revolutionary paradigm shifts where one paradigm, or way of thinking, replaces another way of thinking over one or more generations. Such revolutions are slow, even though reading scientific textbooks can make them appear instantaneous. More importantly, these revolutions may not make science more accurate, but they simply reflect different ways of thinking. It may not be that science is "advancing", just that scientists keep explaining things differently.[32]

Christianity could be experiencing ethical revolutions like science experiences scientific revolutions. The difference is that Christian ethical revolutions, by the nature of ethical assertions, are more apparent. The shifting Christian ethical tradition may not reflect any deeper "true" ethics, but simply be useful amid a new context. The usefulness of some assertions may fade and be replaced over time, and it is not that Christian ethics is advancing or declining. It is simply changing, and different judgments on actions merely reflect different periods in a single ethical tradition, not different ethical traditions as one may at first suppose.

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[32] For more on scientific revolutions, See Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Initially, this may seem a plausible concept if one agrees with Kuhn and his conception of science. If traditions are living, then they must be changing, and this may apply to ethical traditions as well as scientific traditions. Sometimes in the midst of a change, the same action can be placed into two different rival narratives, thus leading to paradoxical conclusions concerning the moral value of the same action. The seeming contradiction can be explained away by a proper understanding of the nature of the relationship between narrative and tradition.

But this attempt to rescue the unity of a Christian ethical tradition fails when one considers a long-standing ethical dispute such as the pacifist/activist division. If pacifism had existed in Christianity only until the time of Constantine, and then the non-pacifist position had been universally adopted by the vast majority of Christians, then possibly that explanation could work. But disagreement and debate continues today, some 1600 years after Constantine, and no solution appears in sight. Furthermore, such an explanation is very complex, and relies on notions that are extremely abstract. This does not mean it is wrong, but once again, a notion of Christian ethical relativity could explain the apparent contradictions much easier

Despite these analyses, it may be possible to defend the notion that there is only one correct Christian ethical tradition despite the diversity of moral claims in a simple manner without eventual reliance on questionable claims. However, I cannot think of a way that does not eventually collapse into one of the five questionable tactics mentioned above when questioned hard enough. It may be lack of imagination on my part, and I wish to leave the door open for a possible convincing retort. I also do not want to think

that any of the responses given irrefutably disprove any of the possible answers examined above. My intention was only to demonstrate that, if it is possible to hold a Christian ethically relative position, such a position explains the fact of contradictory moral assertions in a much simpler manner than does the notion of a single correct ethical tradition.

CHAPTER 4: Conclusion

The goal of this paper was not to attack MacIntyre's position, but to defend a possible development of his teleological approach. There are serious problems with the idea that there is one correct ethical tradition per religion, and a focus on the Christian religion and the diversity of moral assertions by those claiming to be members of that religion highlighted the issue. A view of Christian ethical relativity may be developed which could answer questions raised by the diversity of moral assertions made by those claiming to be Christians better than the standard belief in moral absolutes.

In Chapter 2, I presented MacIntyre's ethical position of Virtue Ethics as expressed in his landmark book After Virtue. Virtue ethics involves a complete re-orienting of ethical questions and entails much more complexity than modern Enlightenment ethics. This complexity is necessary because the Enlightenment conception of ethical reasoning is flawed and will fail, if it has not already done so. To rectify the situation, MacIntyre advocates a return to an Aristotelian teleological conception of ethics. Rather than focusing on specific actions and analyzing them to discover some hidden 'moral property,' the teleological understanding holds that ethics is the science of moving a specific human-as-she-currently-is to a specific ideal of a human-as-she-is-meant-to-be. The notion of human-as-he-is-meant-to-be can only be understood within a tradition and everyone is a member of a tradition. In this view, a virtue is a character trait necessary but not sufficient for the attainment of the essential-nature-of-humans.

Then, in Chapter 3, I examined the notion of tradition, and made a distinction between ethical tradition and religious tradition. Because in this conception, a different religious tradition necessitates a different ethical tradition, and I do not see a way possible to establish the superiority of any religious tradition in an academic manner, I then defend the possibility of ethical relativism. I conclude that such a view is possible. Therefore, if ethical relativism is possible, it may also be possible to divide the notion of tradition into ethical tradition and religious tradition.

Based on that distinction, I examine the idea that there is only one correct Christian ethical tradition. I do not reject that position outright but point out that, when one attempts to explain the diversity of Christian moral claims, serious questions are raised. The simplicity of a possible Christian ethical relativist position may be a benefit of a development of such a system.

I do not conclude that the notion of a single correct ethical Christian tradition ought to be abolished. If my overall argument is successful, all that I have shown is that the notion of a single correct Christian tradition faces difficulties explaining Christian ethical diversity, and that Christian ethical relativity is a very real logical possibility. There may very well be other reasons to maintain the position that there is only one correct ethical tradition per religious tradition, such as textual and metaphysical considerations. And it may well be that MacIntyre's scheme is structurally flawed. I neither defend nor attack MacIntyre's overarching thesis, but simply accept it as necessary background. If MacIntyre is correct, however, and if the differentiation of religious tradition and ethical tradition is appropriate, I have weakened the view that there

is only one correct ethical tradition per religious tradition and strengthened the call for a development of Christian ethical relativism.

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