



4-15-1992

**[Book Review] Alasdair Macintyre. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.**

John Inglis  
*University of Kentucky*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.01.07>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



### Recommended Citation

Inglis, John (1992) "[Book Review] Alasdair Macintyre. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 1, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.01.07>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol1/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to [disclosurejournal@gmail.com](mailto:disclosurejournal@gmail.com)





A. DISALVO

Alasdair MacIntyre. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.

There is something amiss in the title of Alasdair MacIntyre's latest book. It implies that he will focus on morality, when in fact, his topic is nothing less than the tension between a plurality of rationalities to which the contemporary university is blind. But, in commenting on three over-arching models of reason, MacIntyre sketches three distinct types of activity, each of which is rational, none of which is commensurable to the other. The "versions" turn out to be "rivals:" they compete. Thus their current manyness is merely provisional, unstable and at best a stage along the way to triumph for one over the others. A question stalking the title of this book is twofold: how is this rivalry possible and how long can it last. Which version can and must vanquish its rivals is the explicit question to which MacIntyre invites the reader. Yet it is also foreclosed, preemptively decided by his implicit selection of criteria from one of the alternate versions with which to judge the other two. Thus the one wins whose terms are used to name the rivalry. In being successfully described, the rivalry is decisively concluded.

Which of the rival modes of inquiry does MacIntyre favor? His money is not on the version of rationality that in his view currently predominates in American universities. He characterizes that predominant brand of inquiry as projecting an unattainable ideal of pure objectivity. Its exemplar and sweetest fruit was the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1875-1889), traditionally known as the "scholar's encyclopedia." MacIntyre writes that the ninth edition *Britannica* presents a single method and canon for each academic discipline, thus propagating the Enlightenment ideal of the ability of human reason to attain universal and disinterested knowledge. This ideal of pure objectivity he points out, is formally supported by the genre of the encyclopedia article, a genre within which a single voice speaks authoritatively, immune from objections. MacIntyre argues that instructional practices within the contemporary universities mimic textual practices in the encyclopedia: a single authoritative voice monopolizes the floor, as the pedagogical form of the lecture mirrors the literary form of the article.

However, the rationale for this sort of organization is largely eroded, MacIntyre writes. Generally we no longer claim to offer accounts that are neutral and objective. The ambition to make rationality coincide with pure objectivity is therefore doomed to frustration. Objectivity is a myth, an idol that no longer need claim our allegiance. Scholars acknowledge the constitutive relation between methodology and what it is that one may claim to know. At the forefront of virtually all disciplines, one acknowledges that judgments are imbued with both theory and value.



MacIntyre characterizes this abandonment of the quest for pure objectivity as a second model of rationality, what he calls a Nietzschean denial of the neutrality of knowledge. This Nietzschean view equates what is claimed as knowledge with the interests of an individual, yielding a view of rationality relative to individuals. This extreme relativism removes the ground for any commonality of method, purpose, or vision among the scholars of the university. Faced with these two unappetizing alternatives, MacIntyre refuses the choice. Instead he reconstructs from history a tradition of a plurality of rationalities. This is the perspective from which MacIntyre has been writing for a decade, and from which he has identified both the Brittanic and the Nietzschean program.

From this third perspective, MacIntyre argues that William Bennett and Allan Bloom's case for the study of great books is fallacious. Their proposal of a great books panacea for American higher education presumes the Brittanic rationality of universal knowledge and pure objectivity. Yet if readers, as MacIntyre argues subscribe to different rationalities, they share no principle for generating any list of books that all readers would classify as great.

This argument accords with the view that MacIntyre expressed in *After Virtue* (1981) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), that Western culture is not one cohesive whole but actually inheres in different intellectual communities. Western culture includes Nietzscheans as well as people like Bennett and Bloom who continue the Brittanic quest for pure objectivity. It includes different reading practices. Therefore, Bennett's list of highly touted works will not in itself provide cohesiveness to education. The cohesiveness of western culture is itself a fiction that is no longer useful. The proposal that great books will restore American education is an unhelpful utilization of the idol of pure objectivity. It inappropriately attempts to reimpose the all embracing objectivity of the ninth edition *Britannica* in an age where pure objectivity itself is at issue.

MacIntyre argues rightly, I think, that contemporary universities are not structured to accommodate competing rationalities. Academics continue to write and lecture within institutional forms that presume the possibility of universal disinterested knowledge. MacIntyre cites Foucault as an example of the dissonance between what a person says and his or her academic forms of expression. He argues that the form of Foucault's inaugural lecture of 1970 contradicts its anti-institutional content, that the strength of Foucault's critique of institutional structures is itself severely weakened by the impartial and authoritarian form in which he speaks.

As an alternative to the intellectual restrictiveness of the contemporary university, MacIntyre's third version of rationality is presented as having a respectable pedigree. MacIntyre adduces the work of Joseph Kleutgen, a

largely overlooked German thinker of the nineteenth century, who in his *Die Philosophie der Vorzeit* (1860-1863) characterized Western culture as consisting of opposing philosophical traditions. MacIntyre purports to avoid the dismal modern alternatives of pure objectivity versus relativity, by reconstruing rationality as a craft.

Unlike rationality as relativity, rationality as a craft does not survive through criticism of pure objectivity. Unlike rationality as pure objectivity, rationality as a craft does not aspire to conclusions that are universally right or wrong. The essence of MacIntyre's proposal is the recovery of a tradition-centered objectivity. He argues that rationality as a craft does yield conclusions that are justified—not universally justified, but rather justified within the community that practices this craft.

Rationality in this third version coincides with community judgments as to how things should be thought or done. The result is a qualified objectivity, an objectivity within a community with interests. MacIntyre's fusion of objectivity with interest provides an account of objectivity that is very different from the Brittanic version. While this view appears similar to Paul Feyerabend's account of the relativity of traditions (*Farewell to Reason*, 1987) MacIntyre asserts that his view is in fact very different. He argues that by positioning objectivity as occurring within a community, he avoids relativity. It seems though that any objectivity is still relative to other community bound objectivities—Feyerabend's point.

According to MacIntyre if the university is fairly to represent multifarious western culture, then it should renounce the idolatry of pure objectivity. He suggests academic forms be modeled after dialogue rather than after the sort of universal objectivity attempted by the ninth edition. Like Kleutgen, MacIntyre suggests that we take a lesson from the middle ages, and displace lectures with dialogue and disputation in order to bring rival versions of rationality into the university. His argument for disputation is that if we widen the population of rationalities then there would be a greater chance for people to sharpen their critical skills. A greater number of opposing rationalities would multiply views providing a wider framework within which to distinguish options and to state why we hold the view we do.

Whence, then, are these variant rationalities to come. The "rivals" considered so far all are western types of rationality. Thus the western impulse now must open itself to dialogue with what is not western. What about Japanese literature and philosophy or the native thought of our own land? If universities would benefit from representing opposed western types of rationality then they should benefit even more by including eastern as well as western rationalities. Not only would bringing in eastern and aboriginal rationalities provide an even greater number of options from which to compare and criticize our own views, but study of east, west and indigenous



## BOOK REVIEWS

rationalities would prepare people better to interact internationally. MacIntyre's argument for the inclusion of western rationalities would seem to imply that we should also construct universities that are open to non-western rationalities. Yet the western concept of rationality as craft might be inappropriate to judge eastern or native rationalities.

What would it mean to bring rival western and non western rationalities into our universities? Feyerabend has suggested that medical schools should study traditional medicine as well as western medicine. If instructors in eastern, traditional North American, and homeopathic medicine join medical faculties, then future doctors would have a greater selection of remedies from which to choose. Relegating native medicine to anthropology puts its healing power beyond our reach.

Are there any options that one should exclude from a university of dialogue and disputation? This is a hard question. I prefer the politically correct exclusion of creationism since I don't see creationism as good science; yet it might be studied in other departments. But a truly pluralistic university should include all rationalities, especially those practiced by many members of its own society. I am therefore in a dilemma over the breadth of a truly open university devoted to disputation and understanding. MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions Of Moral Enquiry* is a clever and wide ranging contribution to the debate over the purpose of contemporary universities. It successfully pushes us out of the institutions imprisoned by outmoded Victorian pedagogical structures into the debates that are emerging from actual conditions in contemporary social life.

*John Inglis, Lexington*

**Matthew H. Kramer. *Legal Theory, Political Theory, and Deconstruction: Against Rhadamanthus*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991.**

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception.

Jacques Derrida. *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 63.