"DUTY OR VIRTUE?" AS A METAETHICAL QUESTION

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Introduction

A long-standing debate in ethics has tried to determine the "content" of human goodness. Some support the Kantian position of the good consisting in a person's fulfilling obligations and obeying rules. Others maintain Aristotle's idea of goodness, namely, the person's development of various habits or traits. Two people supporting the Kantian view of ethics as a matter of duty are William Frankena and Iris Murdoch. In this article they are contrasted with the Aristotelian approach to ethics as a matter of virtue as taken up by Peter French and Alasdair MacIntyre.

At least two things result from considering whether ethics is a matter of *doing* good (rules, duty) or of *being* good (virtue). First, ethics does not *exclusively* either follow rules or develops habits but does BOTH these things. More importantly, if ethicists insist some acceptable, distinguishing moral characteristic as a standard of goodness needs to be established, this task must be considered at a metaethical level of investigation.

The positions of Harold Alderman and Michael Slote entail this second result in their recent articles. What they (with MacIntyre) explicitly argue can be seen implicitly in Frankena, Murdoch and French as well. As a result, whether ethics is a matter of virtue or of duty is less important than *how* ethics can be a matter of both duty and virtue.

Rules as the ethical reality

In his book *Ethics,* William K. Frankena places importance upon the role of rules in ethics. He asks whether rules are enough when reviewing Socrates' example in the *Apology* of conflicting principles. On the one hand, Socrates must attend to the principle of obedience to the state; on the other hand, such a principle conflicts with his duty to teach. Frankena is on the side of duty in the duty *vs.* virtue ethics debate; the resolution of this conflict lies both in the appeal to rules and to a further appeal of the priority of some

Diálogos, **55** (1990) pp. 139-150.

rules over others.[1] Iris Murdoch, in her collection of essays *The Sovereignty of Good,* agrees with Frankena about the authority of rules.

> Morality must be action since mental concepts can only be analysed genetically. ... Morality, with the full support of logic, abhors the private. Salvation by works is a conceptual necessity. *What* I am doing or being is not something private and personal, but is imposed upon me ... via public concepts and objective observes.[2]

Murdoch identifies morality as having relation to mental concepts and supported by logic. Does she see morality as an *exclusively* logical endeavor? Neither doing nor being is "a private, personal matter," but is "imposed" upon persons. This suggests a closure and exclusion of persons from moral authority. Persons are dominated by powers from without, not powers from within.

Frankena puts his case more weakly. "If not our particular actions, then at least our rules must have some bearing on the increase of good or decrease of evil." Frankena calls this prima facie obligation to do good and prevent harm the principle of benevolence. He insists all duties *"presuppose* the principle of benevolence, though they do not all *follow* from it." Frankena believes the reason many deontological systems fail to satisfy cames from "the failure to recognize the importance of [this] principle of benevolence."[3]

Peter French reviews the purpose and intent of rules in institutions in his work *The Scope of Morality*. He considers rules to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Institutional rules do not "regulate antecedently existing behavior patterns ... [but] identify the performance of certain actions as 'counting as' the performance of an institutional act."[4] Rules as *prescriptions* dominate Murdoch's perspective, for it is "difficult to learn goodness from another person." It is all well and good to say to imitate good people, "but what is the *form* which I am supposed to copy?"[5] Unless one discerns the form, the pattern, the rule, one cannot learn how to be good.

For Frankena, the answer to the question "which comes first, principles or virtue?" is also principles. Consider an example from one of his considerations of justice. He rejects any concept of justice dealing with persons ac-

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[1] William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 2.

[2] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1970), pp. 15-16.

[3] Frankena, p. 37.

[4] Peter A. French, *The Scope of Morality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. 93.

[5] Murdoch, p. 30 (underscore added for emphasis).

cording to their deserts or merits, because anything like a desert or merit first has to be decided to be such by some principle.

> [S]ince we have seen that the principle of justice must be part of this standard [i.e. what determines moral virtue], we cannot use contribution or merit as our basic criterion of justice, for to do so would be circular.[6]

Frankena finds this methodology circular because he wants to formulate justice as the principle foundation of the state of affairs called "virtue."

That an ethical reality exists

Murdoch and Frankena cannot adequately justify rules to constitute "*the*" ethical reality. Though principles fail to satisfy the need, the search continues for an ethical reality.

Rules are Doubted. While expressing a preference different from Murdoch and Frankena, Alasdair MacIntyre also attempts to uncover some ethical reality. The excellences in *After Virtue* are "truthfulness, justice and courage," and are to be sought "whatever our private moral standpoint or our society's particular codes may be."[7] MacIntyre illustrates his point by considering how society brings people up to use tact with "elderly great-aunts who invite us to admire their new hats." Even though this code is itself a careful "stepping around" of truth, it nonetheless "embodies an acknowledgment of the virtue of truthfulness."[8]

French does not think principles are the content of ethical reality. A contrast exists in speaking of someone as "being moral" as opposed to "being virtuous." Excellence is greater than morality. "[D]oing what morality demands, fulfilling one's moral obligations, is not sufficient to insure that one is a good person."[9] Murdoch, on the other hand, believes rules constitute the ethical reality, insisting "there is a moral reality, a real though infinitely distant standard." The preference for rules must be maintained, for "the difficulties of understanding and imitating remain"[10] — to drop rules for habits and traits is a less-than-satisfying move for any ethical project.

Frankena does not abandon rules altogether but suggests rules *and* traits be considered "not as rival kinds of morality between which we must

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[6] Frankena, p. 40.

[7] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 179.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 180.

[9] French, p. 115.

[10] Murdoch, p. 31.

choose, but as two complementary aspects of the same morality."[11] He sums up his suggestions (and honors Kant) by writing, "Principles without traits are impotent, traits without principles are blind."

Virtue is considered. In this article "By Virtue of a Virtue," Harold Alderman claims the central tenet of any ethical reality to be the primordiality of the good of character. Morality for Alderman is a matter of *learning* how to be moral, and "is strictly analogous to all other cases of *learning how to.* Rules, then, are secondary in the first place in the sense that they are not necessary to learn how to be moral."[12]

In considering the intrinsic value of virtues, MacIntyre points out another essential difference between virtues and rules: virtues are exercised "without regard to consequences."[13] MacIntyre identifies rules as directly related to the consequences of actions (rule theories as instances of consequentialism) and virtues as connected with the intentions of actions (virtue theories as instances of intentionalism).

French's conception of virtue as the core of the ethical reality has its relation to the happiness promoted by the practice of the virtues.

> Virtue ... has less to do with meeting obligations or requirements or with acting on moral principles than it does with the manner in which acts are performed and their result in terms of happiness promoted, it has to do with whether persons exhibit in their actions any of a number of specific qualities or attitudes gathered under the umbrella of the term "kindness."[14]

French describes the *incentives* or motivations involved in matters of virtue. Not only does French make a greater distinction between virtues and principles than does Frankena; he also agrees with MacIntyre by speaking of virtue as speaking of the intentions of virtuous agents.

Murdoch hesitates to relinquish the authority of principles for morality, for "the idea of goodness ... has been largely superseded ... by the idea of rightness." Yet she provides the germ of an explanation for this situation more than ten years before MacIntyre more explicitly makes the point: "This [condition, viz., the 'fall of virtue'] is to some extent a natural outcome of the disappearance of a *permanent background* to human activity."[15] Though the importance of considering morality against a background comes

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[11] Frankena, p. 53.

[12] Harold Alderman, "By Virtue of a Virtue," in *The Review of Metaphysics* **36**: 127-153 (1982), p. 143.

[13] MacIntyre, p. 185.

[14] French, p. 117.

[15] Murdoch, p. 53 (underscore added for emphasis).

forth, Murdoch still insists upon some fixed, immovable context, "whether provided by Good, by Reason, by History, or by the self."[16]

That *some* ethical reality exists is an open question. Frankena cannot decide if virtue is a matter of following principles or of cultivating habits. Rules alone cannot cultivate habits.

> [All morality can insist] is that we develop and manifest fixed dispositions to find out what the right thing is and to do it if possible. In this sense a person must "be this" and need not "do this". But it must be remembered the "being" involves at least *trying* to "do."[17]

Virtues cannot constitute the sole totality of morality, Frankena argues, any more than can rules or principles. "Being good" is a fine ideal, but virtues in and of themselves are insufficient to constitute the ethical reality.

From ethics to metaethics

What is the difference between ethics and metaethics? Ethics conceives of various possible solutions and responses to the question "what is the good?" Metaethics, however, concerns itself with the presuppositions and conditions entailed by the question "what is the good?" For example, ethics might come up with a theory claiming rules are the substance of moral reality. When asked, "what is the good?," it presents some theory in answer to the question. Ethics also takes up the various terms (e.g., "rules" and "moral reality") it employs and defines what the theory means by those terms. But metaethics, quite literally, goes beyond ethical concerns. It must decide whether a question like "what is the good?" *can* be dealt with in a satisfying manner. Metaethics considers "what is the good?" by asking further questions: *Is* there some good at all? If so, can it be *known*? *Need* there be some actual reality, or is it enough to believe *that* some good exists?

The ethics of virtue/ethics of duty debate must address this distinction. At the ethical level, two responses were made to the question, "In what does the good consist?" On the one hand are rules; the other, virtues. From these initial responses flowed other alternatives: rules and virtues, with rules as the dominant factor, constituting moral reality; or rules and virtues, with virtues as the dominant factor, constituting moral reality. Deciding at the ethical level which alternative is the more satisfying response is impossible, for each of them is founded upon equally substantive arguments, and no particular alternative can be shown to be superior to any other. At the ethical level, all re-

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[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Frankena, p. 54.

sponses are only partially satisfying. Metaethics, however, tries to determine whether something about the question being asked leaves the responses less than adequate.

Michael Slote works from a metaethical perspective in his article "Is Virtue Possible?" By criticizing Murdoch's conception of the moral reality, he forces the reader to consider whether a "moral reality" exists. The examples of slavery in fifth century Athens and the theocentric bias of medieval peasant parents toward a daughter beaten by her husband illustrate the wrongheadedness of trying to conceive of morality as a closed set of principles. Hence "defects" in morality can be cultural as well as individual.

> [P]easant parents may do the wrong thing for reasons having to do with social and cultural influences (as reflected of course in them) rather than through the sorts of personal, individually variable, vision-preventing defects [Murdoch] so exclusively focuses upon.[18]

This metaethical "lean" also crops up in the other authors. Alderman, though still pitching for the primordiality of the good of character, makes an appeal through a *reductio ad absurdum* of the conception of rules from a metaethical perspective. At times a good person's rule-breaking is perfectly reasonable and "does not affect any judgment [we] made about them." Therefore, "[i]t would be conceptually odd to make exceptions if rules were logically fundamental."[19] "Conceptually odd" and "logically fundamental" are metaethical recognitions of rules employed at the ethical level.

Metaethics is clearly at work in MacIntyre's central thesis:

> [M]an is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal ... We enter human society ... and we have to learn what [our rules] are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses are apt to be construed ... Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things.[20]

MacIntyre indirectly deals with the question "what is the good?" by asking if there *is* such a thing as "the good." If so, how should it be construed? For MacIntyre, the indeterminability of whether the good exists does not mitigate the possibility of ethics.

French's approach to the possibility of ethics also breaks out of the ethical realm toward the metaethical. For him, the previous responses of virtues versus duty is bound up in the "kindness" synthesis. "[W]hat constitutes an

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[18] Michael Slote, "Is Virtue Possible?," in *Analysis* **42**: 70-76 (1982), p. 73.

[19] Alderman, p. 144.

[20] MacIntyre, p. 201.

act of kindness... avoids the counter-intuitive results of holding either [a consequentialist or intentionalist] thesis exclusively."[21]

Even Murdoch sees the import of metaethical considerations:

> If we reflect upon the nature of the virtues we are constantly led to consider their relation to each other. The idea of an "order" of virtues suggests itself ... [R]eflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and ... increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity.[22]

Though Murdoch is committed to resolving the conflict at the ethical level (a possible solution may lie in an "order" of virtues), she tends towards metaethics. "Reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world" differs from saying reflection discovers the unity inherent in the moral world.

The same is true of Frankena with respect to his consideration of the virtues. For him, the good of the virtues is *not* intrinsic, but rather "the *experience* of them that is good in itself ... [The virtues] are not themselves intrinsically valuable; what is intrinsically good is the contemplation or experiencing of them."[23] Does one live virtuously only in order to experience "morally good emotions"? No; Frankena merely points out virtues cannot be what they are without some contextual reference. The idea virtues might be conceived only as "virtues" themselves, as things to do instead of watching TV or smoking a cigar, renders the concept of virtue as having no intrinsic content. Frankena's wording is misleading, because it is difficult to imagine what it means for a virtue to be a "virtue," to imagine what a virtue is in abstraction from its contextual references.

Is there an ethical reality?

Inability of Reason to Answer the Question. Metaethically speaking, the existence of an ethical reality upon which an ethics can be founded is indeterminable. Slote says as much by criticizing Murdoch's postion: "there is reason to believe that moral virtue as traditionally understood is not accessible even today..."; but the modern ethical project can be undertaken "only at the historical limit of human cultural endeavor, in a long run that no individual may ever encompass."[24]

The structure and content of history, especially as it is conceived in some narrative form, is the kind of context Alderman believes necessary for ethical considerations.

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[21] French, p. 125.

[22] Murdoch, p. 57.

[23] Frankena, p. 73.

[24] Slote, p. 75.

> The sorts of connections that hold between rules (deductive) are not those that hold between virtues or states of character ... [A]lthough any virtue theory must be deductively incomplete, the canon of deductive completeness is simply inappropriate ... [T]he appropriate structure of any possible substantively adequate moral philosophy must be more like the structure of a story than like the structure of a formal system.[25]

Any system of rules or principles is only as good as the authority accorded to it. Deductive completeness as a requisite to be met by ethical systematic attempts is an instance of authority accorded to deduction. This is legitimate, for in and of itself logic suffers from no defect. Considered on its own merits, logic is as legitimate as any other science.

But it is an entirely different matter when one questions the reasons why authority is accorded to certain principles. Science and technology hold today a tremendous sense of what constitutes reality. For the fifth century Greeks, the "disciplines" of art and mythology also provided a tremendous sense of what constituted the real. Ethics, Alderman suggests, is better suited to inductive approaches of knowledge. To insist systems be deductively complete is a wrongheaded insistence, for deduction cannot deal with ethics as it can deal with logic. MacIntyre also lays out inductive attempts by showing how the concept of personal identity becomes intertwined with the idea of a narrative context. Definite relations between the concepts of personal identity, narrative, intelligibility and accountability exist, for all four presuppose one another's applicability.[26]

Though French uses a different term, something like narrative context is at work in his scheme about "kindness." Concepts like "kindness, compassion, pity and love cannot be solely explained as the progeny of rational self-interest,"[27] but instead follow from human nature being a

> certain set of primary *social* needs or motives that give rise within the community to the invention of euergetical concepts; these concepts embody our beliefs about the need to be kind, compassionate, benevolent, charitable, the need to act in a certain manner.[28]

The idea of *social* primary needs or motives supports a narrative ethical context. French's insistence upon the role of the community in the formation of those needs or motives gives the context a slightly different bent than what MacIntyre asserts. For MacIntyre, the role of the community is a subor-

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[25] Alderman, p. 146.

[26] MacIntyre, p. 203.

[27] French, pp. 128-29.

[28] *Ibid.* (underscore added for emphasis).

dinate facet of the narrative context. For French, an individual narrative submits to the communal context.

A Reformulation of the Ethical Project. The existence of an ethical reality need not be proven in order to do ethics. At the same time, the question concerning its existence need not be discarded either, for dealing with it can lead to the discovery of valuable, helpful insights for the decision of other ethical matters.

Murdoch develops a way to handle the question of what constitutes the good life. Though preferring the ability of precepts to deal with the ethical life, she acknowledges "human beings are far more complicated and enigmatic and ambiguous than languages or mathematical concepts." For her, virtue is "good habit and dutiful action ... [Any] philosophy which leaves duty without a context ... ignores [virtue's] task and obscures the relation between virtue and reality."[29] Murdoch's recognition of virtue within a context, even if the context she has in mind is one of a rational justification of ethics, is a step in a more satisfying direction for ethics.

Slote points to Murdoch's resistance by pointing out her preoccupation with ontogenetic considerations of virtue. Ontogenetic considerations show a preference for systematic, ordered, categorial thought. Slote feels Murdoch's ontogenetic focus limits her ability to deal with the question "what is good?" Slote contends the ontogenetic impediments of individuals Murdoch focuses upon can themselves be overcome "by means of the phylogenesis of moral knowledge," the sort of moral evolution shown by "admitting the sort of analogy between progressing science and moral philosophy that seems repugnant to Murdoch."[30]

It is strange to say the moral philosopher's task parallels what the scientist does, especially since every context of appeal, whether a narrative context, scientific, logico/deductive, sociological, or mythological, can deal with particular realities only insofar as some authority is accorded to it. If science's dealing in reality is only a preference among other possible ways of dealing in reality, why choose it rather than some other way?

By *paralleling* progressing science, Slote does NOT mean *substituting* science as the context best suited for ethics. Alderman claims the forceful appeal of a narrative context "derives from the fact that telling a story is a more adequate way of getting through a moral crisis (or of expressing a moral point) than is citing a rule or specifying a good."[31] For him, the narrative context deals best with ethical considerations. Imagine, for example,

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[29] Murdoch, pp. 91-2.

[30] Slote, p. 75.

[31] Alderman, pp. 147-8.

whether the law of gravity is better explained by art than by science. Some people, those who prefer art to science, would argue for this claim. But taking into account the manifold diverse aspects of what it is to be human brought to bear upon it, the law of gravity has been addressed by a scientific context with success. No other context, in light of the human story, is better suited to deal with gravity.

Within a narrative context MacIntyre suggests the following conclusion be employed in a provisional way in the study of ethical theory: "[T]he good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is."[32] For MacIntyre, the history of humankind testifies to the power and ability of the virtues as twofold: to aid in dealing with life as it arises (if incompletely, at least in some initial, partial way) and, from dealing with life, to help man understand a bit more what the question "what is good?" entails.

MacIntyre's approach to the virtues parallels French's appreciation (see n. 28). After abandoning the ability of reason to ground the ethical project, French points to an order within the ethical life, where "being good" is the minimum requirement, and "being kind" is the maximum fulfillment of ethical man. "Being moral is the limiting case on being good; ... Human excellence of character is the achievement of a synergistic unity of morality and kindness, of doing right and of being kind."[33]

Virtues and principles find their place in context

Slote's preference for paralleling moral philosophy with progressive science need not bring on the horror of scientism. Moral philosophy is not identical with science, for "there seems to be something historically *developmental* about moral philosophy, even if this does not amount to progress as science understands (and achieves) it."[34] Alderman believes both virtues and rules submit to the authority of some other overarching context. Even his preference for the paradigmatic individual is shaped by a socio-historical context. "Virtue theories, like axiological, deontological, and rights theories are in need of good reasons"; by referring to the paradigmatic individual, "things [do not] become philosophically easier, but ... they become morally and philosophically adequate."[35]

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[32] MacIntyre, p. 204.

[33] French, p. 129.

[34] Slote, p. 75.

[35] Alderman, p. 149.

The extent of MacIntyre's emphasis upon the primordiality of context is unclear. How is this narrative context to be understood? Because a number of descriptions share equally in the constitution of the narrative context (see n. 26 above), MacIntyre remains truest to the metaethical task. Context is *qua* context, and virtue submits to it: "The virtues find their point and purpose... in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context."[36]

Still approaching the problem of ethics metaethically, Slote encourages whatever "new" moral ideals might be conceived in trying to deal with the problem at the ethical level. Attempts to deal with the problem are similar to the trial-and-error method of a persistent person faced with a difficult task. The value of "new" moral ideals, such as the principle of utility or Rawls' principle of difference, does not depend upon whether they are actually true, but upon whether "they are ideas worth taking seriously, real contributions to the attempt to know what is right (think how much has been learned by attempts to *refute* Utilitarianism and Rawls)."[37]

Murdoch's and Frankena's initial intuitions for order in the cosmos are like a set of Chinese boxes, of one order within a larger order within a still larger order. For Alderman, the smallest "box" in the ethical order is rules, fitting into the next larger "box" of virtues, fitting into the still larger "box" of the paradigmatic individual. "[V]irtue ... is the primary moral category and ... it is neither reducible to nor dependent upon either some rule or some other notion of the good."[38]

Slote's conclusion differs. Instead of rules deriving from and submitting to virtue, both rules and virtue share an equal importance and status in ethical considerations. "[T]here is a place for an independent 'principles' approach to moral philosophy alongside efforts to conceive morality from the standpoint of the virtuous individual."[39] He differs greatly from Frankena by stipulating the approach be carried out within a socio-historical context.

Emotivism's Mistake

Is the duty *vs.* virtue debate secondary to ethics? To conclude it is supports emotivism's claim that "all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions

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[36] MacIntyre, p. 207.

[37] Slote, p. 76.

[38] Alderman, p. 152.

[39] Slote, p. 76.

of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character."[40] But the emotivist thesis is unfounded—the conflict between duty and virtue is a central driving power of ethics.

Using the Chinese boxes again for a moment, it may be clear how emotivism commits an error rendering it an unsatisfactory ethical thesis. Alderman and Slote are able to conceive of how rules and virtue can be placed within a larger ethical context (though they vary on how rules and virtue find their place). The emotivist, however, conceives of rules and virtues and any other response to the question "what is the good?" as a number of boxes standing around in some place, where each response is and must be considered in and of itself without reference to the way such a response comes about.

Emotivism cannot deal with the metaethical import of context. If it tries to account for context, it either (wrongly) considers context to be only another box among the other boxes, or it regards context as the set of the relations between the boxes. This second outcome terminates emotivism's own thesis of moral judgments being matters or arbitrary preference. For if context is a matter of the coherence of various ethical theories for the emotivist, no single theory can be preferred *in and of itself* any longer, for its relations to the other theories are as much a part of the theory as its "own" content. Similarly, if the emotivist is to maintain his thesis, he must reject the idea of metaethical considerations of context as the coherence of ethical theories. If one does this, one cannot account for context.

Emotivism is initially appealing as an ethical thesis because it looks at the various theories put forth in ethics and "uses" metaethics to conclude ethics is impossible. Its use of metaethics is an abuse, for it refuses to understand how the many theories are responses to the *possibility* of the good, and retreats to the immediate realm of ethics to make its *own* response. Merely to raise the question, "*Is* there such a thing as 'the good'?," even without further investigation, is well within emotivism's rights. But it jumps to the unwarranted conclusion no such thing as "the good" exists when it has not been determined whether such a thing as "the good" exists. It gives an *ethical* response illegitimately gained by *metaethical* means. Emotivism cannot have its cake and eat it too.

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[40] MacIntyre, p. 11.