

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S *AFTER VIRTUE* AFTER AUSCHWITZ

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the concept of moral breakdown in Auschwitz to consider what happens to the virtues under extreme circumstances. The method of exploration applies Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue theory to the moral experience of Auschwitz inmates. The application of his theory to the moral landscape of Auschwitz sheds light on the ability of MacIntyre's virtue ethical approach to make sense of extreme circumstances in terms of his account of the minimal conditions required for the moral life. I argue that MacIntyre's account of narrative moral agency as fundamental to the intelligibility of moral life passes the limit test of Auschwitz experience by showing that the intelligibility of moral life is called into question when the narrative nature of moral agency is seriously interrupted and fragmented. As such, he offers good conceptual resources for understanding the demoralization Auschwitz inmates faced. This is so because he emphasizes the manner in which any moral theory must be capable of social embodiment, and he takes seriously the notion that every social situation reflects a set of moral standards that can be articulated theoretically. This allows MacIntyre to spell out the moral theory embodied in the moral landscape of Auschwitz and to judge it deficient in terms of his conceptual framework of a core conception of the virtues.

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For E.S.S. (1932-1994)

I know that you would have been proud of me for finishing this thesis and, in the best of Jewish tradition, found much here to argue about.

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Epigraph

You who live secure
In your warm houses,
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labors in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

10 January 1946

(Primo Levi, "Shemá," in *Collected Poems*, 9)

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis explores the concept of demoralization as it arises in Auschwitz; the specific aim is to determine what happens to the virtues under extreme circumstances. The method of exploration applies Alasdair MacIntyre's version of virtue ethical theory to the experience of Auschwitz inmates in order to test his theory as a viable account of moral agency and the exercise of the virtues. Critical evaluation of MacIntyre's theory—indeed of any moral theory—can proceed along two very different lines: (a) an analysis of the cogency of his arguments that is internal to the account as he has presented it, and (b) a test of his theory taken as a whole instigated by an empirical example or situation external to his theory. In this thesis I opt to evaluate MacIntyre's virtue theory by the latter method. Thus, in chapter two I present a charitable, straightforward account of MacIntyre's theory, reserving analysis for chapter four in the wake of the empirical phenomenon of breakdown at Auschwitz presented in chapter three. There are two reasons for this decision.

First, I am largely sympathetic to MacIntyre's approach and therefore wish to evaluate it in light of its ability to cope with a real-world phenomenon. Second, and more importantly, I think that the viability of any moral theory is ultimately decided on the ground, as it were, in terms of its practical implications and descriptive powers. Indeed, MacIntyre himself invites this kind of approach in his criticism of the disconnection of theoretical ethics from lived experience. He argues that moral philosophy cannot be pursued in complete isolation from empirical history and sociology (11).¹ Moreover, he claims that any moral philosophy “characteristically presupposes a sociology” (23). Accordingly, he states, “it would be a decisive refutation of a moral philosophy to show that moral agency on its own account of the matter could never be

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all references to MacIntyre's work are from *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

socially embodied; and it also follows that we have not yet fully understood the claims of any moral philosophy until we have spelled out what its social embodiment would be” (23). Thus, in this thesis I take MacIntyre at his word and evaluate his moral theory in light of a limit-case historical example, namely, Auschwitz.

Berel Lang notes that the use of the Holocaust as a “stress-test” of moral theories—akin to stress-tests in medicine and engineering—relies on the notion that “whatever warrant may be found for practice or theory in the context of such an event would, everything else being equal, apply *a fortiori* in less extreme conditions” (6). However, as Lang admits, it might be the case that the extreme circumstances of Auschwitz were so unique that they are no help whatsoever in evaluating the adequacy of moral theories in more typical conditions. As Lang notes, one might claim that Auschwitz cannot make or break a theory precisely because of its “uniqueness” and extremity; at the very least, this raises the question of “what relevance extreme situations ever have for ethical enquiry into everyday practice and decision” (Lang, 6).

However, since MacIntyre’s aim in *After Virtue* is to articulate the conceptual framework required of *any* functional society and tradition—where the virtues are to play a central role in maintaining and extending the good of both the community and its individual members—it makes sense to test the adequacy of his theory against an example of an extremely dysfunctional social situation. Auschwitz is a good, albeit extreme, model of social dysfunction and the uprooting of a tradition. We can imagine lesser cases of dysfunction. However, if MacIntyre can account for the moral breakdown in Auschwitz *in terms of* the stress that the Auschwitz conditions placed upon moral agency and the exercise of the virtues, then this shows that his theory passes a significant test case accurately describing the nature of moral agency and the virtues. If MacIntyre can show that the widespread failure of moral agents to exercise the virtues can be accounted for in terms of the lack of the minimal conditions that he identifies for the exercise of

the virtues, then he can claim that the dysfunction identified in Auschwitz points to the intelligibility of his theory. My argument is that if MacIntyre's theory can pass the test of accounting for the moral landscape of Auschwitz, including the well-documented breakdown of agents and normativity, then his theory has passed a significant test and shows genuine insight.

MacIntyre provides a distinctive version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics where the concept of the virtues is conceptually linked to a human end, namely, happiness or flourishing (258). Naturally, since agents possess the virtues, and virtues are settled states of mind and character that move agents to act in particular ways, this thesis necessarily involves some investigation of the kind of strain that moral agents face in extreme circumstances where they are forced to act in ways that contravene their settled states of character. Thus in chapter three I use historical accounts of Auschwitz and first-person testimonials by Holocaust survivors to explore inmate experience in the moral landscape of Auschwitz. I argue that such circumstances lead to demoralization of both individual moral agents and the greater social milieu in which they exist, namely Auschwitz.²

In the fourth chapter, I put MacIntyre's account of the virtues to the test in light of the demoralization described in chapter three. I argue that MacIntyre's theory provides the conceptual resources to describe the breakdown found in Auschwitz and that he correctly articulates the minimal conditions required of a functioning morality.

² My concern in this thesis is with moral breakdown as it concerns those under duress rather than the moral breakdown of those who placed others under duress, i.e., Auschwitz inmates rather than the Nazis who perpetrated the Holocaust. Questions concerning the perpetrators' behaviour and its effect on the stability of their moral character are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Chapter 2: MacIntyre's Theory of the Virtues

2.1 Why MacIntyre's Virtue Theory?

A key development in ethical theory in the latter half of the twentieth-century has been a resurgence of interest in the virtues.³ My investigation of MacIntyre's theory focuses on his landmark *After Virtue*, a book that did a great deal to combat the predominantly ahistorical approach that characterizes much of 20th century Anglo-American ethical theory.

There are several reasons in favour of concentrating on MacIntyre's work. First, *After Virtue* has been widely read and discussed since its publication in 1981 and thus situates this thesis in the midst of lively contemporary debates in moral philosophy. Second, MacIntyre's emphasis on the historical nature of ethical theorizing makes his theory a prime candidate for evaluation in terms of its application to historical events. His approach is partly historicist as he argues for a "socially teleological" account of the virtues (197). He traces the changes and developments in both the theories of the virtues and the accounts of the human good that accompany the changes in human society from Homeric times to the present.⁴ MacIntyre's approach embodies the view that "each particular theory or set of moral or scientific beliefs is intelligible and justifiable—insofar as it is justifiable—only as a member of an historical series"

³ The rise of metaethical analyses of moral judgements in subjectivist terms has prompted suspicion from philosophers who argue for a return to the notion of character as a means of describing ethical judgements in rational rather than emotive terms. Indeed, MacIntyre offers his theory of the virtues in direct opposition to all forms of non-cognitivist analyses of moral judgements. He spends the first nine chapters of *After Virtue*, and especially the first three, rejecting what he terms the "emotivist" nature of modern, liberal individualism. In so doing, he traces the history of the conceptual changes in our ethical theory and practice to argue for a return to the virtues as the means of escaping what he sees as the quagmire of subjectivism and "pluralism which threatens to submerge us all" (226).

⁴ For reasons that will become clear in my ensuing discussion of MacIntyre, he must not be read as a straightforward historicist who denies any objectivity to our understanding of the virtues. Indeed, he distills and argues for a "core conception of the virtues" from his analysis of different accounts of the virtues ranging from Homer to Benjamin Franklin and Jane Austen.

(146). This constitutes at least partial motivation for this project of examining the moral life of Auschwitz inmates in terms of explicit philosophical theorizing.

The third reason for concentrating on MacIntyre concerns his emphasis on the notion that any moral philosophy “presupposes a sociology”:

[E]very moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be in the real social world (23).

MacIntyre’s theory of the virtues takes into account sociological and historical facts and attempts to demonstrate how these factors shape earlier accounts of the virtues and moral theory. Thus, since this thesis attempts to confront a concrete historical episode, it makes sense to do so by means of a moral theory that maintains (a) that every moral theory must have a corresponding social embodiment, and (b) that the history of events and the history of moral theory are complementary sides of the same coin.

MacIntyre’s account of the virtues is the focus of the discussion in this thesis. The chief aim is to consider how his theory is capable of coping with the demoralizing experience of Auschwitz inmates. Chapter four investigates what happens to the virtues in the absence of the circumstances necessary for their exercise in light of the social circumstances described in chapter three. In the present chapter, my primary concerns are the nature of the virtues and the circumstantial requirements for the exercise of the virtues (background or minimal conditions). Let us now turn to MacIntyre’s account of the virtues in order to explore this connection.

2.2 MacIntyre’s Diagnosis of Modern Moral Philosophy

The opening chapter of *After Virtue* begins with “a disquieting suggestion” (1). MacIntyre argues that contemporary moral utterances make appeals to standards that might have made sense in a different setting but no longer do so due to fragmentation of our moral

conceptual framework. He claims that due to a series of historical changes we now possess fragments of earlier unities of moral theory and practice and that we are largely unaware that what we now possess are “simulacra of morality” (2). Thus, because we employ fragments of an earlier conceptual scheme, “we have—very largely, if not entirely, lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality” (2). MacIntyre claims that contemporary moral debate consists of an arbitrary clash of wills where opponents appeal to conflicting principles chosen from amongst the fragments of an earlier conceptual scheme—a scheme that now lacks the context that supplied its unity (6-11). As a result, he claims that contemporary moral debate is interminable and is not susceptible of rational resolution. The disputants seemingly make appeals to objective, impartial criteria; however, according to MacIntyre, this merely masks what are in fact expressions of personal preference (11). He argues that the descriptive resources of contemporary linguistic philosophy serve only to analyse the inconsistencies in particular arguments but cannot reveal the incoherence of our moral framework as a whole (2-5). This task of revealing the incoherence of our moral framework requires tracing the history of moral concepts to illuminate the changes, both practical and theoretical, that led to this contemporary fragmentation (22).

The main culprit, according to MacIntyre, is the individualism of modernity. He sees the emotivist claim that moral judgements are merely expressions of personal preference or “pro-attitudes” as the logical outcome of the failure of the Enlightenment project to provide a universal, ahistorical justification of morality (39, 50). The chief culprits in this history are David Hume, whose subjectivist account of moral motivation is the precursor for twentieth-century non-cognitivists,⁵ and Immanuel Kant, the failure of whose transcendental project of providing a

⁵ In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume argues that the passions, not reason, constitute the “influencing motives of the will.” He also adds a normative claim to this descriptive one, namely, that “Reason is, and

rational foundation for morality further opened the door to subjectivist accounts of morality—whether existentialist or analytical.⁶ Another key figure in MacIntyre’s narrative of decline is Kierkegaard for he recognized that Hume’s attempt to base morality on the passions and Kant’s attempt to base it on reason both failed and so offered a theory of radical choice as a pseudo-justification for the ethical life (MacIntyre, 43). A further response to the apparent failure of Kant’s transcendental project was Nietzsche’s radical individualism. Indeed, MacIntyre describes Nietzsche’s view of the individual as creator of his own values as the culmination of the individualism that is the product of the Enlightenment (118). Nor does MacIntyre find it surprising that the doctrine of emotivism arose in early twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy as a response to earlier intuitionist analyses of moral judgement (e.g. Moore’s) and the failed attempt to provide a transcendental grounding of morality (18).

MacIntyre takes emotivism to be the doctrine that “all evaluative judgements and more specifically all moral judgements are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character” (11-12). He does not restrict this analysis to the emotivism of C.L. Stevenson and A.J. Ayer; in fact, MacIntyre takes this formulation of emotivism as the hallmark of nearly all contemporary ethical theory (34-5)

The key step that leads to this emotivism in MacIntyre’s lengthy and complex historical argument is the rejection of Aristotelian teleology that heralds the onset of modernity (52-5). As

ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (Treatise, Book II, Section III, p. 415).

⁶ Whether the Kantian project of providing rational, transcendental, ahistorical foundations for morality has indeed failed is of course a highly contentious issue. MacIntyre claims that the contemporary Kantians who are presently occupied in further refining Kant’s original formulation are unable to see that they are involved in a Sisyphean task because they lack the historical consciousness that he seeks to provide in After Virtue. This is not an issue that can be settled here. (See O’Neill for criticisms of MacIntyre’s reading of Kant.) The key issue for this thesis concerns MacIntyre’s positive account of the virtues irrespective of whether it is better than the Enlightenment individualism that he so scathingly criticizes.

MacIntyre rightly points out, the rejection of Aristotelian science and biology was necessary for the rise of the new science and the understanding of the world in mechanistic terms. During the rise of the new science, the notion of final causes—a *telos* inherent in each natural entity—came to be seen as superstition unnecessary for the successful prediction and control of nature.⁷ Instead, scientific explanation became mechanistic and focused at the level of efficient causes. However, MacIntyre’s complaint is that the rejection of final causes in favour of an explanation of the natural world in terms of efficient causes spilled over into the realm of ethics. It is this rejection of the notion of a goal or *telos* for human beings that MacIntyre claims contributes to the current state of disorder in our moral framework.

By contrast, what MacIntyre calls “classical morality” is characterized by a three-fold schema that provides the conceptual unity for morality. This teleological structure is Aristotelian in its account of how man moves from potentiality to actuality akin to how an acorn becomes a full-grown oak. Jack Weinstein notes that in Aristotle’s view the realization of human potential must be understood in relation to a goal or *telos* towards which humans develop, rather than merely as the realization of favourable consequences (44). This is in keeping with Aristotle’s claim in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that every human activity aims at some good (1094a). The key features of the classical teleological structure are: (i) man-as-he-happens-to-be, (ii) man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature, and (iii) ethics as the science of moving man from (i) to (ii) (MacIntyre, 52). According to MacIntyre, in this original schema the role of ethics was to shape the desires and passions according to the norms dictated by (ii); that is, to move untutored human beings towards their goal of becoming good human beings according to standards derived

⁷ For a clear and concise discussion of the rejection of teleology in modern cosmology see, R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960, 93ff.

from essential human nature. Since (ii) is normative it gives an account of how (i) must be shaped and so rationally *justifies* the ethical norms governing human behaviour (iii).

MacIntyre's rather bold claim that the Enlightenment project of justifying morality *had* to fail is based upon the fact that the moderns rejected part (ii) of the teleological framework inherited from Ancient and Medieval thought (52). Thus, MacIntyre claims that Hume, Kant and their philosophical inheritors were left with differing accounts of human nature (i above) and the problem of deriving an ethical theory that could keep untutored human nature in check without the benefit of a goal or *telos* to move towards (55). In the classical scheme, premise (ii) concerning man's essential nature if he realizes his *telos* involves a statement of fact about human nature as such. Because Aristotelian ethics derives (iii) from (ii) as the necessary means of moving from (i) to (ii) it does not face what has come to be identified as the "fact/value dichotomy." This is so because (ii) is normative and so gives an account of how (i) must be shaped, thereby justifying the application of the appropriate normative rules (iii). The aforementioned rejection by the Moderns of the Ancient teleological view as superstitious means that premise (ii) above is dispensed with. So, for Modern philosophers, the task of deriving (iii) from (i) becomes impossible (MacIntyre, 55). This, for MacIntyre, explains how it became possible for Hume to remark that you cannot derive an "ought" from an "is."⁸

⁸ It is worth quoting at length from Hume's Treatise in order to get the full sense of his non-cognitivism and its expression in the fact/value dichotomy. He claims that morality "consists not in any *matter of fact*, which can be discover'd by the understanding." For example, vice can only be identified when you "turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind..." In the following paragraph Hume makes his famous complaint that he finds in all previous moral philosophy an illicit move from "is" to "ought": "when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or *ought not*, expresses some

MacIntyre's criticism of Hume in particular and modern moral philosophy in general focuses on the need to rehabilitate the notion of functional concepts. MacIntyre objects to Hume by noting that we *can* indeed derive an "ought" from an "is" as in the case of a watch (57-58). MacIntyre remarks that a watch is a functional concept: "This is a watch" *does* entail "This ought to keep accurate time" because the *function* of a watch is to keep accurate time (58). MacIntyre's main objection to modern moral philosophy is that the moderns stopped thinking of "human being" as a functional concept (with either a function or a goal) and therefore ended up with the fact/value problem that Hume describes. If the substance of MacIntyre's historical argument is correct, we have lost a normative conception of human nature—a conception of how human beings are meant to be—and so we are left trying to construct morality out of an individual's desires and/or rational capacities (e.g. Hume and Kant, respectively). The details of this stage of MacIntyre's complex and contentious argument are beyond the scope of this thesis.

The key point to note at this juncture is that MacIntyre's positive project in the latter half of *After Virtue* involves articulating a "core conception of the virtues," distilled from earlier traditions of the virtues, in order to restore the teleological framework rejected by modern moral philosophy (186). He does so in three stages by giving an account of the virtues in terms of their role concerning practices, narrative selves, and tradition. These three fundamental aspects of MacIntyre's project operate as follows: step one situates the virtues within practices, step two relates the virtues to human lives as a whole by means of the narrative unity of a human life, and step three locates the virtues in broader context in terms of their role in sustaining traditions. Indeed, MacIntyre argues that this process of embedding characterizes both the logical development of the concept of the virtues from which he wants to distill his core conception and

new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others which are entirely different from it" (Book III, Part I, Section I, pp. 468-9).

the historical movement from the Homeric account of the virtues onwards (186). It is to this account of the virtues that we now turn.

2.3 MacIntyre's Account of the Virtues

2.3.1 Virtues: Means and Ends

Following Aristotle, MacIntyre takes human beings to be essentially social beings who depend upon each other to live well and realize characteristic human goods. In this sense, MacIntyre views human life as practice-based in the sense that we characteristically engage in shared activities in pursuit of common goods. We shall consider MacIntyre's account of practices in more detail in the next section. First, however, note that he takes "practices" that seek to realize human goods cooperatively to be the basic arena for the application of the virtues. Moreover, the virtues receive their primary definition in terms of their role in sustaining practices where practices are characteristic human activities that require the virtues for their pursuit and survival (191). Practices are also goal-oriented in the sense that they have goals that are internal to the activity. For example, a doctor practices medicine for the internal good of promoting health but also receives the external good of money. Thus, practices form the first step in MacIntyre's account of the role of the virtues in human life. MacIntyre notes that for Aristotle the virtues are "means" to an end (the good for man—his *telos*) but they are not externally related to it; that is, the exercise of the virtues is not merely instrumental, it is in fact a constitutive part of the good life (184). MacIntyre's account of practices takes a similar view of the virtues that we shall consider shortly.

MacIntyre claims that the *telos* of a moral theory is logically prior to its concept of the virtues. Thus, the notion of a social role is prior to the virtues in the Homeric conception, and "the good life for man" is logically prior to the concept of a virtue in the Aristotelian and Thomist

accounts of the virtues such that the virtues are defined in terms of their role in promoting the good life and as a part of it (184). Therefore, how the concept of the good life for man is applied in each moral tradition determines how the virtues are to be applied. For example, if, in the Homeric moral tradition, the good life involves success as a warrior, then the virtue of courage will be applied in a very different way than if one lives the life of a medieval monk. In his effort to distill a “core conception of the virtues” from a variety of historical accounts, MacIntyre says the following concerning the theories of the virtues whose history he traces. For Homer “a virtue is a quality which enables an individual to discharge his or her social role.” According to Aristotle, the New Testament and Aquinas “a virtue is a quality which enables an individual to move towards the achievement of the specifically human *telos*, whether natural or supernatural.” For Ben Franklin: “a virtue is a quality which has utility in achieving earthly and heavenly success.” MacIntyre’s aim is to find out whether these are different descriptions of the same thing—the virtues—or whether each view describes a different thing altogether (185). He is looking for the “conceptual unity” of the various theories of the virtues that he surveys in chapters ten through thirteen.

In seeking this conceptual unity, MacIntyre remarks that the concept of a virtue is always secondary to some features of social and moral life (186). What does this mean? He means here that it makes no sense to speak of a virtue—a settled disposition of mind and of character to act in particular ways—unless one has a framework in which the application of this concept can be intelligible. This is just to say that a virtue is only a virtue if its exercise takes place within a particular social context—a social context with established (even if not fixed) views about what makes for a good life. So, for Homeric heroes, courage is made sense of in terms of its role in the life of a warrior. The judgement “Achilles is a good warrior because he is courageous” (because he possesses the virtue of courage) only makes sense against the background of a social life

where warriors inhabit a key social role. On MacIntyre's view, the virtues are means/ends, that is, they function in service of some prior end that is intelligible in terms of its place in the social and moral life of a community. For example, in the Homeric tradition, courage is an important virtue as a means to being a good warrior, but it is also an end because the social role of warrior entails that a warrior must be courageous for its own sake (186).

According to MacIntyre, the virtues are not means/ends in the way that modern instrumental rationality is (194-5). Here he compares his account of the virtues to the instrumental rationality of a major modern character of which he is highly critical—the bureaucratic manager. MacIntyre is critical of this character because he claims that he or she is rational only insofar as he or she maximizes efficiency by whatever means available (25). On this view, if a particular means is ineffective it is ruled out because it does not contribute to the goal of efficiency (26). Thus, for example, if honesty gets in the way of maximizing efficiency, it is, in this view, irrational to be honest. MacIntyre sees modernity as solely instrumental in this way and thus as corrosive to the tradition of the virtues; indeed, he thinks that modern instrumental rationality not only erodes the virtues but in fact militates against them altogether (82-4).

For MacIntyre, by contrast, the virtues are not so easily discarded in the service of some other predetermined goal. The virtues may be secondary to the concept of a good life (i.e., they are means to it), but they are not externally related to it. MacIntyre is not saying that honesty is just a means to being happy and that if honesty does not lead to happiness we should jettison it from our list of the virtues. Rather, he is arguing that exercising the virtue of honesty is necessary for the good life and it is internally related to a good life. Thus honesty is an element of happiness such that dispensing with honesty is happiness' deterioration. To further understand this notion of internal relation we have to consider MacIntyre's notion of a "practice."

2.3.2 Practices

MacIntyre offers a rather unwieldy definition of “practice:”

By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (187).

Practices are socially cooperative activities that include: “arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, [and] the making and sustaining of family life” (188).

Let us consider one of MacIntyre’s examples, painting, in order to elucidate his concept of a practice. Learning to paint involves entry into a social activity with socially established, historical standards of excellence. Thus it is not an activity that one can pursue in the absence of social ties and the elaboration of socially established standards. Of course, one can paint all alone in a room, but, in so doing, one is engaging in a practice that is social because it has standards that extend beyond the individual practitioner. In other words, one does not *learn* to paint in complete isolation from others and the painter does not start out by making up her own rules. Even if one purports to choose one’s own standards, one does so against a background in which standards are already in place. What counts as good painting is not determined merely by the painter’s subjective preferences but rather is determined by the ongoing socially established historical standards of excellence in painting, i.e., she has a goal to aim at, namely, excellent painting. In this sense, a practice such as painting is an ongoing “socially established cooperative human activity.” However, it is important to note that the standards of painting are not fixed. Indeed, it is in the pursuit of excellence and the creative response to practical problems that the standards may progress, but nonetheless, this takes place against a shared background of socially established standards (190).

MacIntyre makes the same point analogically about morality. *Contra* the emotivism that MacIntyre thinks characterizes modern moral philosophy, the moral practitioner does not determine her own values as a result of subjective preference. She enters a world of antecedently established practices and rules in which she must participate in order to have any moral identity whatsoever. We shall return to this point in the following section. First, however, we must expand our understanding of the notion of a “virtue.”

Here it is helpful to think of the virtues as “excellences,” broadly construed, rather than as restricted to what we might call the “moral virtues” that concern only our behaviour with regard to others. Thus, a good brushstroke is one of the virtues of a good painter and it is necessary to achieve excellence in painting according to the aforementioned standards. This helps to explain the second point under consideration from MacIntyre’s definition of a practice, namely, the notion of “goods internal to an activity.” According to MacIntyre, it is through her engagement in a practice that our painter achieves the goods internal to an activity, both a good product—a painting—and the necessary skills, in her pursuit of excellence in that activity. Accordingly, neither the end result—an excellent painting—nor the skills required to produce it, can be acquired without the practitioner pursuing excellence in painting where this is to be explained because the ends sought help regulate what counts as skillful in achieving these ends. So, although the excellence at issue here (a good brushstroke) is a means to the internal good of a good painting, neither can be achieved—except perhaps by accident—without the other. Thus the relevant excellence and the product are internally related to the practice as well as to each other.

A third point to note concerning MacIntyre’s definition of a practice is that, in our example, it is only in the pursuit of painting that our painter’s powers to achieve excellence are furthered. In other words, painting has a history and this history involves the extension of the

powers of individual painters over the course of their lives as well as the extension of the possibilities for achieving excellence in the discipline. Thus, our capabilities to produce excellent work and foster excellent skills are furthered in the pursuit of excellence, and what counts as excellent work and excellent skills are also furthered in the history of a practice. So understood, MacIntyre makes room for progress, both in the painter and the practice. However, he is willing to allow, in fact his argument about the decline of moral practices in modern life demands that he allow, that practices can decline and decay.⁹ We will explore this issue of how practices—indeed traditions as a whole—can decline and decay in chapter four.

So far we have seen that internal goods are realized in aiming at the internal standards of excellence of a practice, that practices can extend human excellence (both individual and collective), and that practices can also extend our conception of our aims and goods, and enable us to achieve the goods internal to a practice. Further, by engaging in a practice we extend our aims and the goods achievable within that practice. For example, MacIntyre cites Rembrandt's synthesis of iconography and naturalism in the painting of faces as an instance in the history of painting that extended the possibilities for individual and collective excellence (189). Such instances in the history of a practice extend the *possibilities* that practitioners can aim at as well as their notion of *what counts* as excellence, thereby extending the standards of said practice. At the same time, the practitioners extend their standards and excellences. Although we have not yet considered MacIntyre's move from the relative specificity of practices to the "moral virtues" as such, we should already notice that this is a claim about the revision and extension of *norms*.

⁹ MacIntyre points out that in the pursuit of excellence within any practice there will likely be "sequences of decline as well as of progress, and progress is rarely to be understood as straightforwardly linear" (189). Indeed, *After Virtue* is ultimately a deeply pessimistic book because MacIntyre argues that a "new dark ages" is upon us due to the decline of the tradition of the virtues in contemporary life (263).

The notion of “goods internal to a practice” is the fundamental means for MacIntyre to resist instrumentalizing the virtues in the way that he criticizes Franklin’s account as well as all of modern liberal theory (185). In the face of this instrumental account, MacIntyre offers an Aristotelian account of how we come to possess the virtues through his account of the child learning to play chess, that is, of how a child comes to be inculcated into a practice (188).

Imagine that a grandfather wishes to teach his grandson to play chess and so offers him the chance to receive fifty cents worth of candy every time that he beats his grandfather at chess. At first the child plays for the fifty cents worth of candy rather than for the love of the game. At this stage, the child has “motivating reasons” to play chess, namely, his desire for a chance at fifty cents worth of candy each time he wins. But the child as of yet has no reason not to cheat because he is participating in the practice solely for the payoff from his grandfather, that is, the “external good” of candy. At this stage, the child does not yet fully accept the internal standards of the practice of chess and so has no reason to abide them.

However, what happens if the child plays chess often and becomes a relatively skilled player? MacIntyre claims, rightly I think, that the child would characteristically come to appreciate the goods internal to chess such as analytical skill, strategy, and a good end-game. (And notice it does not matter about particular individuals just that the practice itself can so develop and that it is *feasible* that individuals can so develop.) Where this is so, the child now has no reason to cheat because this would be to contravene the standards of chess that he has come to accept and to see as constitutive of playing chess well. Moreover, to contravene the norms of chess by cheating would be to preclude the possibility of the child’s *excelling* at chess since cheating would hinder his development of legitimate excellences.¹⁰ It follows from this that

¹⁰ Recall that the Greek word *arete* or “virtue” is perhaps best translated as “excellence” (MacIntyre, 122) and virtue theory is concerned with what is involved in becoming an excellent person—a person who

the child would be barred from achieving the internal goods of chess if he were to cheat. Thus, to add to his original “motivating reasons,” the child now has “justifying reasons” to attempt to excel at chess according to the established standards where that *also* now comes to *motivate*. This point is thrown into relief through consideration of MacIntyre’s distinction between “internal” and “external” goods.

External goods such as money, fame, and candy can be achieved in a number of ways: you can get candy by trick-or-treating, shopping at the store, or stealing it from grandma’s candy-jar. However, internal goods can only be realized within a practice—the goods internal to chess cannot be had outside of chess (or a relevantly similar game); they are internal to the practice itself and they are specified in terms of the practice (188). For example, the excellence of executing the end-game is internal to chess and involves the mastery of the practice and full cognizance of the standards internal to chess. As such, a good end-game, or checkmate, is only intelligible in the realm of chess (or relevantly similar practices).

A second feature of internal goods, MacIntyre claims, is that they can only be recognized by competent judges who are skilled in the relevant practice (or very familiar with its standards) (189). Consider a competent art critic: they may not themselves be a good painter but they must be very well-studied in the standards of painting in order to make judgements. I can’t appreciate a good move in chess because I do not know how to play chess; but someone who is a skilled practitioner in chess can achieve the internal goods of chess because they have internalized the standards for the evaluation of what counts as a “good” chess move by being inculcated into a practice. This is a sound argument: for example, the Olympic committee does not ask philosophers to judge figure-skating (unless they are also skilled figure-skaters). Instead, they

possesses the excellences. According to virtue theory, there is an internal connection between excellence (virtue) and flourishing; one cannot become a good/flourishing person—one cannot be fulfilled and lead a good life—without possession and exercise of the excellences.

seek judges who are very knowledgeable about the sport, who know the difference between a triple-axle and a triple-salchow, to judge figure-skating. Similarly, we don't ask figure-skating judges to referee for philosophy journals (unless they are also philosophers) because they are not competent judges of the relevant excellences and they are not steeped in the ongoing standards and concerns of the practice.

Internal goods, then, can only be specified in terms of the relevant practice of which they are constitutive and can only be meaningfully evaluated by competent judges who care to appreciate the relevant practice. Earlier I noted that internal goods are of two kinds in terms of products. There is (a) the excellence of the products, e.g., the excellence of the painter's performance, such as the mastery of her brushstroke, and the excellence of the painting produced. Here again, note that both the skills internal to the practice and the products must be understood to have emerged historically because the standards are extended over time. There is also (b) the excellence of a certain kind of life—a life well-lived according to the standards internal to the practice.

This excellence of a certain kind of life, a life well-lived according to the standards internal to the practice, involves trying to extend the standards internal to a practice through “attempts to sustain progress and to respond creatively to problems” (MacIntyre, 190). For example, when a painter comes up with a new way of representing something she does so within the context of established standards, but she also extends those standards with her innovation. The artist finds the “good of a certain kind of life” in her dedication to her craft by pursuing excellence both in her own ability and in the quality of her products; in so doing, she lives a meaningful life in pursuit of excellence—the excellence specific to painting, in this case. MacIntyre's concern here is not with what we might call the artist's “personal life,” but with the excellence of the artist's life *as artist*. And this must be understood in terms of how excellently

or poorly the artist lives out an at least partially pre-scripted role—that of artist—that involves pre-existing standards of excellence to which the artist can conform or fail to conform. But at this stage of MacIntyre’s argument, a meaningful life only includes excellence in a specific realm of practice, not excellence as such or a meaningful life as such. Thus there is a further step needed in the argument. Indeed, MacIntyre makes a further claim about the excellences—it is not just that practices require the excellences specific to them, e.g., painting requires a good brushstroke; practices also require what we call the “moral virtues,” especially justice, courage and honesty (191). Before we consider this further step we must first make note of a crucial distinction between internal and external goods.

As we have seen, internal goods can only be achieved within practices, whereas external goods can be achieved in a number of ways. External goods are also characteristically “some individual’s property and possession” (190). This difference makes clear a further distinction: external goods are characteristically objects of competition (e.g., money, or candy for the chess-playing child); whereas internal goods characteristically contribute to the good of the community of practitioners as a whole (190-1). For example, painters may compete for limited grants or gallery exposure (external goods); because these external goods are scarce, competition for them may militate against the exercise of the moral virtues. As we shall see below, this is so because external goods can be attained by various means and so do not necessarily require the exercise of the virtues; whereas internal goods involve social relations with other practitioners and therefore require the virtues, particularly justice, courage and honesty (191). By contrast with the competition for external goods, although a new development in painting may be the result of competition to excel *within* the practice of painting, the resulting internal goods, construed as both the product (a new kind of painting) and the extension of the standards of painting, is available and contributes to the good of the whole community that participates in the practice of

painting (MacIntyre, 190-91). In order to support this distinction, MacIntyre needs to show that while vicious behaviour (e.g., lying) may help an individual secure external goods it in fact debars them from the achievement of internal goods.

It is in the move from the excellences specific to a particular practice to the need for the core virtues of justice, courage, and honesty in order to sustain practices that MacIntyre argues for the importance of the virtues in human life (191). Recall my earlier remark that MacIntyre views human life as essentially practice-based. Accordingly, the types of goods that we characteristically seek are generally achieved within the realm of specific practices. As we have seen, achieving the goods internal to a given practice requires specific skills or excellences. The next step in the argument is to show that the core virtues are also a kind of skill—a skill required for living well, where that now speaks to the person’s life rather than their accomplishment in this or that practice.

2.3.3 The relation of practices to virtues

MacIntyre argues that entering into a practice involves acceptance of the authority of standards of excellence and obedience to rules (190-1). To extend our painting example, learning to be an excellent painter involves accepting the authority of your teacher and following the rules of composition, proportion, and so on. Rembrandt could not have extended the possibilities for the representation of the human face without first having been inculcated into the practice of painting by practice and mastery of the relevant skills. And he could only get the goods of a certain kind of life—a life spent in dedication to the mastery of painting—if he initially accepted the authority of the best standards achieved so far in painting. This is to say that a potential practitioner must accept an honest appraisal of his own abilities by recognized authorities in order to be inculcated into a practice (190). So the thrust of MacIntyre’s argument here is that the achievement of the goods internal to practices makes human life accomplished and worthwhile to

the agent *and* that the pursuit of these goods is only possible once we have come to be inculcated into a practice. The next step in the argument is to establish what this inculcation into a practice requires.

MacIntyre's claim is that the fulfillment sought in the pursuit of the internal goods of a specific practice requires the virtues. Thus, he formulates an initial definition of a virtue: "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 achieving such goods" (191). The argument here is that we simply cannot succeed without the virtues—we cannot successfully participate in communal life, nor sustain practices, without the virtues.¹¹ MacIntyre claims that we have to be able to cooperate with other practitioners in order to achieve internal goods, and this requires justice, courage and honesty (191). Thus we need to consider how it is that he argues for the core virtues of justice, courage, and honesty as necessary conditions for sustaining practices.

MacIntyre's conception of practices rules out the kind of radical individualism that he associates with liberal modernity for a number of reasons:

It belongs to the concept of a practice ... that its goods can only be achieved by subordinating ourselves within the practice in our relationship to other practitioners. We have to learn to recognize what is due to whom; we have to be prepared to take whatever self-endangering risks are demanded along the way; and we have to listen carefully to what we are told about our own inadequacies and to reply with the same carefulness for the facts. In other words we have to accept as necessary components of any practice with internal goods and standards of excellence the virtues of justice, courage and honesty. For not to accept these, to be willing to cheat as our imagined child was willing to cheat in his or her early days at chess, so far bars us from achieving the standards of excellence

¹¹ Anyone who does so without possessing the relevant virtues is a kind of free-rider or lone wolf—if we all did so, there could be no social life.

or the goods internal to the practice that it renders the practice pointless except as a device for achieving external goods (191).

Again, while the pursuit of external goods is characteristically competitive, practices, and hence the pursuit of internal goods, are primarily cooperative and involve practitioners in certain kinds of relationships in pursuit of shared goods. Thus, MacIntyre continues: “the virtues are those goods by reference to which, whether we like it or not, we define our relationships to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices” (191).

The thrust of MacIntyre’s argument in this section is as follows: (1) practices are socially cooperative pursuits of shared goods, i.e., they involve practitioners in relationships with each other, (2) practices cannot be sustained without the virtues necessary to sustain these relationships, namely honesty, justice and courage, thus (3) these virtues are genuine excellences without which practices cannot be sustained (192). In effect, because MacIntyre conceives of human life as practice-based and argues that practices require the virtues, he is saying that a human being who lacked the virtues would be a defective human being. They would be unable to achieve the internal goods of practices and unable to participate in shared pursuit of common goods—and therefore unable to live a fulfilling, good human life. However, even if MacIntyre has claimed the exercise and cultivation of the virtues as a necessary condition for achieving the goods internal to practices, we still need a further step in the argument to support the claim about the role of the virtues in a good human life. MacIntyre must still demonstrate that practices have full ethical significance in a complete human life and that the virtues are necessary in ordering such a life rather than merely skills needed to achieve internal goods. Accordingly, he allows that his account of the virtues in terms of particular practices is “a partial and first account” and provides three reasons why his account of the virtues so far needs to be supplemented with an argument for the role of the virtues in whole human lives (201).

MacIntyre contrasts his primary definition of the virtues in terms of particular practices with Aristotle's primary definition of the virtues in terms of their place in life "*viewed as a whole*" (201). Thus MacIntyre acknowledges that his account must provide a fuller answer to the question "What would a human being lack who lacked the virtues?" (201). His answer cannot be simply that they would lack the goods internal to practices because he has admitted that the role of the virtues in sustaining practices is a preliminary and incomplete account of the importance of the virtues in a well-lived human life:

For such an individual would not merely fail *in a variety of particular ways* in respect of the kind of excellence which can be achieved through participation in practices and in respect of the kind of human relationship required to sustain such excellence. His own life *viewed as a whole* would perhaps be defective; it would not be the kind of life which someone would describe in trying to answer the question 'What is the best kind of life for this kind of man or woman to live?' And that question cannot be answered without at least raising Aristotle's own question, 'What is the good life for man?' (201).

MacIntyre gives three reasons in support of the move from considering not simply the importance of the virtues for particular practices but also to the place of the virtues in a human life considered as a whole.

First, if seen only from the point of view of particular practices, there would be too much arbitrariness and conflict between goods in an agent's life (201). In other words, there would be no means for determining the choice between dedicating oneself to one particular practice over another. This could allow for the notion of arbitrary choice in choosing between projects lauded by the emotivism that MacIntyre decries and seeks to overcome through his return to the notion of the virtues as primary features of human life (202).

Second, MacIntyre notes that we need the concept of a full human life as goal-oriented in order to make sense of the place of particular virtues (202). For example, consider justice. According to MacIntyre, an Aristotelian conception of justice "is defined in terms of giving each

person his or her due or desert” (202). But this relates to human life as such, not simply to particular practices; it is not enough simply to be just to other painters—one needs to be just in general, and this can only be understood in terms of how one orders his or her life as a whole (202). Thus, for all of the virtues, “the unity of a virtue in someone’s life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole” (205). In terms of this the role of particular practices, if any, can find their appropriate level.

The third argument concerns the intelligibility of an important virtue—integrity—in the unity of a whole human life. MacIntyre claims that integrity only makes sense in terms of a full human life. The “singleness of purpose” in a life well-lived cannot be made sense of unless we consider the “good of a human life conceived as a unity” (203). We don’t just engage in practices, but live more or less ordered lives in which practices come to have a place. What place they can really have has itself to be determined in terms of the excellences of a functioning human life. And in particular this requires justice, integrity, and courage. In order to make sense of an individual living his life with consistency and purpose, we need to view that life as a whole—not as a series of disconnected actions within different practices (203).

Although we began this section by noting that practices form the backbone of MacIntyre’s account of the virtues, it is the narrative unity of individual lives embedded in the history of practices that makes sense of his argument as a whole. Earlier I suggested that the logic of MacIntyre’s argument involves relating (1) practices to (2) narrative selves in terms of their connection to (3) tradition. We must now investigate the notion of the narrative self and determine how it is related to MacIntyre’s account of the role of the virtues in sustaining practices.

2.3.4 The Narrative Self

The best way to investigate MacIntyre's notion of the narrative self is to set up a contrast by briefly considering the notion of the "emotivist" self that he rejects:

The specifically modern self, the self that I have called emotivist, finds no limits set to that on which it may pass judgment for such limits could only derive from rational criteria for evaluation and ... the emotivist self lacks any such criteria. Everything may be criticized from whatever standpoint the self has adopted, including the self's choice of standpoint to adopt. ... To be a moral agent is, on this view, precisely to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgment on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity. Anyone and everyone can thus be a moral agent, since it is in the self and not in social roles or practices that moral agency has to be located (31-2).

MacIntyre is critical of the notion of the "liberal" or "emotivist self" as prior to its ends or goals. Like other so-called "communitarian" philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel, MacIntyre is critical of the liberal idea that the specification of "right" action is prior to the determination of a "good" life.¹² According to this liberal view, an agent is never defined by her goals and values because she can always stand back and criticize them (even all of them at once) for the reason that she is fundamentally a free chooser of her values. Thus, in the liberal conception of social relations, since we are all free choosers, we need rights to protect our ability to determine our own choices (autonomy) and we need rules to regulate the liberty and equality of choice for all (insofar as everyone has this purported right to freely choose their own goods). Thus we get a morality of rights and rules, not of aims and character development, primarily

¹² See Michael Sandel's Introduction to [Liberalism and its Critics](#) for a brief discussion of this point (9). See MacIntyre's "A Partial Response to my Critics" in [After MacIntyre](#), John Horton and Susan Mendus, eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994) for his reasons for differentiating himself from "contemporary communitarians" (302).

concerned with doing the right thing (duty) rather than with being a good person, i.e., possessing the virtues (MacIntyre, 119).

By contrast, on MacIntyre's view, the "good" is prior to the "right:" we must first have a common aim, purpose or end in order to make sense of how we ought to live. Recall that, for Aristotle, human action is to be evaluated in terms of whether it aims at the good of a human being, thus prioritizing the good over the right (MacIntyre, 229). Similarly, for MacIntyre, the idea of the "right thing to do" quite apart from a conception of what is good—what is worth pursuing—makes no sense. Thus, he claims that the preoccupation of modern morality with "rules for right action" is mistaken, not because there is anything wrong with rules, but because the notion that the rules of conduct come first and the specification of the good comes second is mistaken (119). The kind of rules I have in mind here are rules that are premised upon a fundamentally individualistic conception of persons of the sort that MacIntyre rejects in the passage quoted above. This conception of moral agency sees individuals as self-interest maximizers who seek to fulfill their chosen ends and thus requires rules of conduct to restrict them from impinging upon the rights of others to pursue their own freely chosen ends (228-9).

MacIntyre, by contrast, thinks that we have to have a conception of the good life—individually and communally—in order to make sense of how we ought to act. As a result, he rejects the Humean view of practical rationality whereby reason is a slave of the passions, as well as the modern form of instrumental bureaucratic rationality that he sees as the logical outgrowth of Hume's view (161-3, 229-37). MacIntyre maintains that the notion of the free chooser makes no sense because it relies on a notion of moral agency that is an abstraction, and indeed, an invention (61). In fact, MacIntyre claims that you always make moral choices against a background of aims and values that you already have, i.e., that are socially given, thus ruling out the possibility of the emotivist self as free chooser of her own values. Hence, he remarks that

even in rejecting aspects of one's socially given identity an agent is acting against background norms that she does not choose: "Notice that rebellion against my identity is always one possible mode of expressing it" (221). Thus MacIntyre's view does not entail hard cultural determinism; he does allow that you can revise the particular values that you happen to have in the course of your life; but, in his view, you cannot stand back from all of them at once and freely choose like the "liberal" or "emotivist self" does (221).

It follows from MacIntyre's view of the self that if we are partly defined by the communities and social relationships that we inhabit, then understanding of our lives must be embedded within the story of these larger communities (220). And it is within the context of these stories that we make our moral choices. However, recall that MacIntyre thinks that with the loss of the notion of a *telos*—a goal for human beings to aim at—moral life becomes unintelligible. As we have seen in our discussion of practices, he also thinks that the virtues are functional concepts that help us to aim at characteristic human goods within the realm of practices. Accordingly, unless we can make sense of some kind of connection between virtue (the moral life) and happiness (man's *telos*) we will be unable to render the moral life intelligible. We will be unable to make sense of our lives and hence ourselves.

MacIntyre thinks that the modern self is a fragmented self, provided with no good reasons, that is, no rational criteria, for the choice of one kind of life, or even any given action, over another. He thinks that contemporary society has fragmented everyone by making us free autonomous agents who choose in abstraction from who we are (who we happen to be because of the socially given background within which our identities are constituted)—our values, commitments, history, and community. There is no unity to these fragmented lives, and given MacIntyre's account of intelligible action, which we shall discuss shortly, we must restore this unity in order to make our lives, decisions, and actions intelligible to others and to ourselves.

The chief means of understanding ourselves, according to MacIntyre, involves seeing ourselves as narrative selves on a quest for the good life (fulfillment of our *telos*), a quest for which the exercise of the virtues is essential (219). This is how MacIntyre hopes to reconnect the notion of happiness (the good life) to the moral life (virtues). This is his way of avoiding the radical discrepancy between untutored-human-nature-as-it-happens-to be and moral rules designed to shape and habituate it that he claims plagues the Enlightenment project of justifying morality.

We have already seen how the virtues are necessary for sustaining practices in MacIntyre's practice-based account of human life. In order to consider the move from practices to human life as a whole, it will be helpful to briefly survey the remainder of MacIntyre's argument in support of the crucial place of the virtues in human life before explaining the notion of the narrative self in more detail.

The chief means of integrating the virtues into MacIntyre's account of human life concerns his notion of the narrative self. The basic idea here, which MacIntyre claims characterizes pre-modern cultures such as the Ancient Greek and Medieval Christian traditions, is that human beings live their lives as stories or narratives (208-16). This insight, MacIntyre argues, has the implication that human action must be understood in a "causal and temporal" sequence of actions rather than as a single event (208). Moreover, the relationship between actions, understood contextually, and human lives as a whole is reciprocal. Actions must be placed within the context of a lived narrative to be intelligible, and that narrative comprises a series of actions insofar as they contribute to the lived story of an agent's life.

MacIntyre rounds out the ethical implications of his account by adding a further complication to his narrative account of human agency: he claims that agents live their lives as a kind of quest for the good (219-20). This is the first step in MacIntyre's move to avoid the

arbitrariness that we noticed would pervade an account of the place of the virtues in human life understood wholly in terms of practices. On this understanding, an agent would be unable to decide which kind of life to live and which virtues to cultivate because they would, by means of the internal goods of practices alone, not yet be provided with good reasons for living one way rather than another.

Thus, in order to know their overall good, an agent must discover (amongst other things) it by learning to rank the internal goods of practices in their life as a whole. This involves asking and answering in word and in deed the question, “What is the good life for me?” (218). Here it is important to note that MacIntyre is not reintroducing the emotivism and egoism that he seeks to overturn. He acknowledges that construed in this seemingly individualistic way, the question of what good one ought to seek might still lead to some arbitrariness. However, he deals with this objection by noting that this quest for the good involves further reflection on the best answers articulated so far in systematic attempts to answer Aristotle’s question “What is the good life for man?” (219). Thus, the initial goal for an agent is to order the internal goods of their particular life in order to live a good human life; however, if MacIntyre’s rejection of the emotivist self in favour of the narrative self is correct, this takes the shape of searching for the good life as such (218-19). And in so doing, according to MacIntyre, I form myself in accordance with this conception of a good life that transcends me, thus ruling out any simply subjectivist account of values.

It now becomes clearer that MacIntyre’s notion of the narrative self is deliberately opposed to the atomism of liberal modernity that he sees as the source of the emotivist analyses of moral judgement which he seeks to supplant. He claims that the modern self is a fragmented self because our lives are split up into different areas with different criteria of evaluation, e.g., student, worker, family member, etc (204). The modern workplace in particular re-enforces this

split because an agent may pursue their social role and possess the relevant characteristics required of an efficient worker which are seriously at odds with the rest of her life. Recall our earlier example concerning how being an efficient manager in a modern corporation may militate against the exercise of the virtues that an agent may otherwise possess in other realms of her life. By contrast, MacIntyre is arguing that we should view our lives as a unity, specifically a narrative unity, and thus as a story. Moreover, he is arguing that we can only understand the place of the virtues in human life if we understand human life as a narrative unity. For example, honesty is not just a technical skill to get you what you want within a particular practice or institution; rather, through habituation, honesty comes to be a settled disposition of mind and of character to behave in particular ways. And this can only be understood by reference to your life as a whole. In answer to the question “Is he honest?” we do not say, “Well, he was honest that one time in 1985 when he admitted to stealing the candy from grandma’s candy jar.” In asking about the attribution of a virtue, we are asking a question about a person as a whole, a question that can only be answered with reference to his life as a whole.

As we have noted, MacIntyre is offering a perspective on the moral life that is at odds with modern liberal individualism. He is critical of the notion of the “moral point of view,” as articulated in Kant, Mill, and others, where the ethical life is about following rules on particular occasions. His criticism includes that these views ultimately offer no decision-procedure to determine how you ought to live a good life, or even how you ought to act in a given situation, and so they relapse into subjectivity—the emotivism that we discussed earlier. Against this notion of criterionless, arbitrary choice, MacIntyre is arguing that there is a moral point of view such that there are better and worse lives and there are criteria for deciding this. If we understand all of our activities as goal-oriented (as teleological) and that in life our goals are not subjectively

and freely chosen, we will make our moral choices against a background that renders them intelligible and justifiable. He makes this point through an example in the philosophy of action.

MacIntyre asks us to consider a man working in the garden and suggests that different descriptions of his intentions situate his action in different narratives and his action can only be properly understood if we place it in the right narrative. We can only understand the man's intentions by placing them in a goal-directed narrative that includes his long-term intentions. For example, in answer to the question "What is he doing?" the man might be said to be "Digging", Gardening', 'Taking exercise', 'Preparing for winter', or 'Pleasing his wife'" (206). Thus MacIntyre claims that in order to place the man's action in the correct narrative we must identify his "primary intentions" and his place in his social surroundings (206). And this is to be done in a way that is not merely determined by the will of the person in question by answering a number of counterfactual questions in order to determine what would have to be the case in order for the man *not* to pursue the particular action in question. "That is to say, we need to know both what certain beliefs are and which of them are causally effective; and, that is to say we need to know whether certain contrary-to-fact hypothetical statements are true or false. And until we know this, we shall not know how to characterize correctly what the agent is doing" (MacIntyre, 207).

MacIntyre adds two constraints: first, we must note that individual intentions can only be made sense of as having a history and as taking place within larger settings; second, those larger settings have histories of their own. Accordingly, our understanding of an action is a complicated affair:

For if someone's primary intention is to put the garden in order before the winter and it is only incidentally the case that in so doing he is taking exercise and pleasing his wife, we have one type of behaviour to be explained; but if the agent's primary intention is to please his wife by taking exercise, we have quite another type of behaviour to be

explained and we will have to look in a different direction for understanding and explanation (206).

In either case, MacIntyre claims, explaining the man's action involves the telling of a historical narrative. In the first case, the narrative that explains the man's intentions concerns "an annual cycle of domestic activity" where the setting of this activity has a narrative history. In the second case, the man's intentions are to be explained in terms of their role in the narrative history of a marriage which presupposes its own kind of setting. Thus MacIntyre argues, "We cannot ... characterize behaviour independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others" (206). The upshot of this argument is that we cannot understand goal-oriented activity without the notion of intelligibility and intelligibility is a narrative concept that is not subjective.

Actions characterized in terms of intentions and setting must be situated in the ongoing histories of a life and of a larger social setting in order to make them intelligible. In the example at hand, we can only understand the man's intentions by placing them in a goal-directed narrative that includes his long-term intentions. And we cannot understand goal-oriented activity without making it intelligible by reference to a setting and its history.

Accordingly, intelligibility is not subjective because it relies on shared public background (a setting), especially language which is necessarily public and social and only makes sense in terms of shared standards of correctness. Moreover, MacIntyre argues against the analytical emphasis on a "basic" human action; an individual action construed as an "unintelligible action" is a secondary concept, parasitic on the primary notion of an intelligible action understood in terms of its narrative character. Thus, MacIntyre presents "human actions in general as enacted narratives" (211).

We can understand this notion of “enacted narratives” as follows. Think of life as like a game—as practice-based. Being excellent at a game requires certain virtues (some of which are practice-specific, like the painter’s brushstroke, and some of which are core virtues—justice, courage, honesty). If life is practice-based and practices require the virtues, then life requires the virtues—living well necessarily involves living virtuously. Moreover, we are in some sense always involved in the moral enterprise, and MacIntyre’s argument is that this is basic in human life: we do not start life unscripted with no moral values and then select them by some criterionless choice (*contra* Kierkegaard). Instead, we are already within the moral enterprise and we try to live our lives in accordance with conceptions of our good that are necessarily within the narrative-limiting scripts available (conceptions of the good) elaborated within our tradition. Thus, we are not only agent but author of our lives. However, we are never more than co-authors as we seek to form ourselves in terms of the standards embodied in the settings that are constitutive of our social life (MacIntyre, 213).

To see the force of this view for moral agency, consider children whose lives are badly scripted because they are deprived of stories, of the narrative of a tradition and its values, and so they are unable to make their actions intelligible to themselves or others—they are searching for meaning. If they are brought up badly, they receive little training or habituation in living well (virtuously), they do not have the chance to become successful human beings, they do not possess the virtues requisite to live well, and they search for meaning and belonging in gangs, cults, through crime, and so on. In this example, an agent lacks the moral resources of a tradition required to make sense of their lives and to exercise the virtues in the pursuit of living well. In chapter four we shall consider whether the loss of a moral tradition, interruption of the narrative of an agent’s life, and the loss of a realm of application for the virtues can lead to the moral breakdown of an agent who has been previously well-habituated and scripted.

Nonetheless, in response to my example of the badly scripted children, MacIntyre is saying that you have to start somewhere—you start against a background of moral practices and beliefs that are given (220). Accordingly, he thinks his account more basic than any of the Enlightenment justificatory accounts of the moral point of view that he criticizes. He is arguing that life is teleological: you live your life towards a goal—actualizing your potential, being the best person that you can be—by ranking the place of various practices in your life in an effort to achieve a rational ordering of your life.

However, living a good life is not just like being a good chess player because the full specification of what counts as a good life for *that* sort of person is not specified in advance. Since the good life cannot be entirely specified, it involves a search for the good life, that is, a quest. But we live out our lives towards certain possibilities and away from others (215):

We live our lives, both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us, some seem already foreclosed and others perhaps inevitable. There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a *telos*—or of a variety of ends or goals—towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present. Unpredictability and teleology therefore coexist as part of our lives; like characters in a fictional narrative we do not know what will happen next, but nonetheless our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future. Thus the narratives which we live out both have an unpredictable and a partially teleological character. If the narrative of our individual and social lives is to continue intelligibly—and either type of narrative may lapse into unintelligibility—it is always both the case that there are constraints on how the story can continue *and* that within those constraints there are indefinitely many ways that it can continue (215-16).

Determining how to actualize my potential and successfully doing so requires the virtues, so the quest for the good life requires the virtues. But my quest does not take place in isolation from others because I necessarily take part in communal life and practices. Since my life is not

unscriptable, the process of understanding who I am and what kind of person I am becoming involves understanding the tradition of which I am a part. Thus, I live my life against a shared background of understanding of the good life and I draw on the resources of this tradition to understand my own quest—the teachings of my parents, relatives, religious tradition, culture at large, etc. In this sense, a tradition is concerned with the good as such because it is an amalgam of ongoing debate and activity about the good life for man, so my own search takes place against this background, i.e., within this tradition. I will complete my account of MacIntyre by examining the role tradition plays in his theory of the virtues.

2.3.5 Tradition and the Quest for the Good Life

MacIntyre's narrative account of man as a story-telling and living animal enjoins us to actualize our potential, and this potential is best actualized by pursuing the goods internal to practices, for which the virtues are necessary. This makes his account of the moral life distinct from those of Kant and Mill, whereby "good" is private and only "right" is public yet procedural (to protect the individual's ability to pursue private goods). MacIntyre thinks human potential is best, and perhaps only, actualized in communal life with a shared conception of the good (he follows Aristotle on this point). But he does not think that the conception of the good is fixed (eternal), hence his point about the extension of the standards of excellence (and the logical contrary about their possible decline). If the good must be shared and pursued in common, then how we arrange ourselves socially is of great consequence.

For MacIntyre, standards of excellence are shared and public and articulable; that is, they are rational. They are grounded in the rationality of a community with shared concerns and values—a conception of the good—where the aim is a life that achieves the good by cultivating the excellences. Rationality, on MacIntyre's view, is immanent in traditions and practices which is another way of saying that norms or standards are public, shared and embodied in the ongoing

narrative of a tradition: “A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition” (222). These goods include the “goods internal to practices” and “the goods of a single life” where both of these are embedded in the ongoing narrative of a tradition (222).

Accordingly, man as a story-living animal is also an historical animal. The stories we live are situated in, and build upon the resources of, the greater social, political, and cultural fabric of society. This larger tradition embodies standards of rationality which are constitutive and expressive of an account of the human good: both of what human nature *is* and of what it *can be* when actualized by the cultivation of the excellences. Here is the connection with the narrative self: you do not come into the world unscripted; you are raised within a tradition and according to certain standards which include an account of the human good that has been accumulated and modified over time. This is the social given that makes sense of the notion of identity. Without this grounding in tradition you would not have an identity, according to MacIntyre—you would lack the basic tools to forge one (216-17).

Again, MacIntyre thinks that the notion of the unscripted free chooser makes no sense, and even if it did, such an individual could not live the good life because he or she would lack the moral resources of a tradition. Such a radical individual would be unscripted and so would lack the narrative background that MacIntyre claims is necessary for the forging of an identity, the shared pursuit of the goods internal to practices that make up an accomplished life and the participation in common life that makes human life meaningful and fulfilling. Built right into our identities—constitutive of us as persons—is a shared public conception of the good and of the standards of excellence for each given practice or social role (e.g., parent) and mode of life (e.g., fisherman). As we are inculcated into a practice we come to grasp these standards—first as subordinate to the authority of the tradition (teacher, master painter, etc.) and later as competent

practitioners in our own right. As we come to develop the relevant excellences in each arena we advance towards our *telos* of becoming “excellent” persons by becoming accomplished in particular practices according to shared, historical standards. Moreover, because practices are necessarily social and the achievement of goods internal to practices requires the core virtues of justice, courage and honesty, this advancement of our *telos* extends beyond the realm of particular practices towards realizing the good life as such.

In this unfolding of the narrative of our individual lives we are not unscripted, but we are at best co-authors of our lives (213). We enter the stage, as it were, in mid-stream—*in medias res*—and we act out our parts excellently or poorly according to the standards available within the tradition (215). One becomes an excellent fisherman or architect (or not) according to the best standards of fishing or architecture available thus far. And one becomes an excellent person according to how one orders the goods of various practices and the relevant excellences in the ongoing story of one’s life lived within a given social reality. And as we saw earlier (section 2.3.3), such ordering requires the core virtues of honesty, justice and courage: it requires that we be honest with ourselves and others both in entering practices and in relating to other practitioners, that we give each his or her due and order our lives so as to value our commitments appropriately (e.g., balancing family and work commitments), and that we be willing to face self-endangering risks in order to protect others who we value and to advance our conception of the good.

MacIntyre claims that because we understand all of our activities as goal-oriented (as teleological), and because these goals are not subjectively chosen, we live and act against a background that makes our choices intelligible. This background is the larger tradition within which the virtues developed and are played out.

However, because the *telos* for man is not fixed, consisting instead of the best standards realized so far immanent in a given tradition, and because the individual *telos* is not fixed in a determinate way, the quest for the good life *is* the good life according to MacIntyre (219). We pursue the good in accordance with established standards of excellence but we are also able to extend those standards in our reflective practices. Following Aristotle, MacIntyre's account of the good life is active, social, realized in a community in shared pursuit of the good, and rationally articulable, that is, the norms or standards can be rationally articulated and so agents can be said to act on *reasons* in their pursuit of the good.

Thus, on this account we *can* make rational evaluations in ethics; value judgements here, *contra* emotivism, are not matters of mere subjective preference. The standards are also, importantly, open to rational revision precisely because they are objective and impartial (public and shared) rather than being based on subjective preference or choice. This is why—against the emotivist strain that MacIntyre thinks is characteristic of modern life—he thinks the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues offers the best conceptual resources for reflection on the good life and for justifying the moral enterprise.

MacIntyre's account can be summarized by the following points:

- (1) The tradition of the virtues, as against liberal modernity, requires that we see our lives as socially embodied narratives (in word and deed) within the larger ongoing narrative of a tradition and a community.

- (2) The good life begins with the notion of the self as determined, at least in part, by its social roles and the self learns standards of excellence by entering into a variety of social practices. Human life is essentially social and practice-based and human beings are only able to achieve the goods internal to practices through possession of the virtues, especially honesty, courage, and justice.

(3) MacIntyre's account of morality involves the notion of the "narrative self." We must understand human lives as enacted narratives in order to make sense of an agent's actions, long-term goals, and character traits (i.e., virtues).

(4) The narrative self can only be furnished with the background conditions that make its actions and long-term choices intelligible by being embedded in a tradition which is itself an enacted narrative spanning generations.

(5) Thus, MacIntyre rejects conceptions of moral agency that see the self as an atomistic individual capable of determining its choices and values in abstraction from social life and the moral resources of a tradition.

According to MacIntyre, failure to achieve the virtues precludes flourishing, which in turn results in failure as a person because of his narrative account of agency and the constitutive role of the tradition of the virtues in shaping agency. In chapter three I present Auschwitz as an example of just such widespread failure which therefore provides an important test for MacIntyre's theory. I have identified three fundamental aspects of his account of the virtues: (1) their relation to practices, (2) their role in human lives conceived as narratives, and (3) their situation in the broader context of tradition. I will examine, on the basis of my account of Auschwitz, the ways in which the virtues fail us at all three levels of MacIntyre's account before considering how, or if, he can respond to this test. First, let us consider the world of Auschwitz.

Chapter 3: The Moral Landscape of Auschwitz

The chief concern of the following chapter is to depict an instance of social reality that rules out MacIntyre's notion of the quest for the good life, *as well as* the notion of shared standards of the good life, in order to determine what happens to the virtues in such circumstances. In this chapter, I proceed first by offering a general portrait of the objective conditions that Auschwitz inmates¹³ faced followed by a brief account of the state of particular practices in Auschwitz. Thus, chapter three proceeds in the reverse order of MacIntyre's account presented in chapter two. My portrayal of Auschwitz moves from the depiction of a social world (the "tradition" of the camp) to the role of that world in shaping practices. In the opening section of chapter four I conceptualize the concrete details of camp conditions in terms of the demoralization of agents and their social circumstances. Let us now depict that landscape before we put MacIntyre's theory to the test in chapter four.

3.1 The Context of Inmate Life in Auschwitz

Auschwitz was the largest and most all encompassing of Nazi concentration camps; it was also a laboratory for the physical, spiritual, and moral degradation of inmates. The Holocaust was an unprecedented event in human history due to its "perfection" of mechanized mass murder.¹⁴ It represents the first time in history that a modern, industrialized, bureaucratic state marshaled its resources and energy in order to systematically eradicate an entire people.

¹³ Here I am referring to all individuals who suffered at the hands of the Nazi state. In the forthcoming discussion of the varieties of behaviour in Auschwitz I employ the term 'inmate.' One reason for this is that concentration camp inmates are not reducible to their status as victims. Moreover, the variety of types of prisoners ("politicals," "criminals," "Jews") and differences in their treatment by the SS make it problematic to equate all inmates as equally victimized. For example, German criminals and political prisoners generally were treated much better than Jews who were imprisoned because of the latter's purportedly "inferior" race. Thus, the value-neutral term "inmates" is employed consistently throughout this study unless there is a specific reason for describing a victim of violence or other form of assault.

¹⁴ The best and most thorough account of the Holocaust as an historical process remains Raul Hilberg's seminal three volume work [The Destruction of the European Jews](#). New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985. His

Any attempt to understand Auschwitz inmate behaviour must first come to grips with the alien atmosphere and horrible conditions of camp life. This section provides a portrait of the conditions in Auschwitz with reference to survivor testimonials and the work of professional historians. Descriptions of Auschwitz inmate behaviour must necessarily be incomplete because a high percentage of inmates died in the camp. As Michael Marrus notes, the Nazis also destroyed many of the camp records, making the historical leap of imagination more difficult (129). Nonetheless, historical work provides us with a great deal of evidence concerning the objective conditions of the camps, and survivor testimony provides us with many accounts of the subjective effects of Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was the largest of the concentration camps, and was unique in its function as both a large labour-camp and the largest and most “productive” of the death camps. The other death camps, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka were death camps only; the prisoners who were not killed immediately upon arrival were employed in the extermination process for a few days or even several months before they were also murdered (Arad, vii). The latter three “Operation Reinhard” death camps—named for SS *Obergruppenfuhrer* Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA)—employed an average of 700-1,000 Jewish prisoners to carry out the extermination of new arrivals, strip the bodies, and dispose of the corpses. Operation Reinhard was the largest single massacre of the Holocaust in spite of the relatively short operation of the camps from March 1942 to November 1943 (Arad, 377).

By contrast, Auschwitz was a much larger camp and was in operation for almost the duration of the war. It was established in 1940 as a concentration camp for Polish political prisoners, with Soviet prisoners of war added in 1941. It became a death camp for Jews in 1942

account of the systematic Nazi steps toward the eradication of the Jews documents the Nazis tactics from definition, expropriation, concentration, and deportation to murder in the death camps.

following the Wannsee Conference Protocol of January 20, 1942 to implement the “final solution.” In October of 1942, Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, ordered the concentration of the Jews from all of the Nazi camps at Auschwitz. From 1942 on, Auschwitz was divided into three separate camps: Auschwitz I, the main camp that included the commander’s headquarters, administration buildings, and Gestapo offices; Auschwitz II—Birkenau, the death camp with four gas chambers; and Auschwitz III—Monowitz, the slave labour camp that included armaments factories and the IG Farben Buna-Werke rubber factory (Bauer, 234). There were also a number of smaller satellite labour camps and industrial installations; the total radius of the whole complex was approximately 40 kilometers (Kulka, 201).¹⁵

Estimates of the number of Jews killed by gas at Auschwitz range from 900,000 to 1.25 million (Bauer, 235). After May 1942 the Nazis needed more war materials in response to the increased Allied bombing of Germany. As a result, Himmler issued an order to reduce the Auschwitz death rate in order to increase the supply of slave labour (Bauer, 239). Nonetheless, approximately eighty percent of the Jews transported to Auschwitz were sent straight to the gas chambers without even being registered as prisoners (Feig, 365).

The population of Auschwitz fluctuated from 18,000 at the end of 1941 to 66,000 in January 1945 with a peak of 79,000 in August 1943.¹⁶ On average, after 1942 seventy to eighty percent of inmates were Jews, and ninety percent of those killed were Jews (Bauer, 241; Piper, 62). Since the Jewish prisoners included religious and secular Jews from Western, Eastern, and Southern Europe and spoke many different languages, it is difficult to establish commonalities between the traditions and backgrounds of the inmates.

¹⁵ The satellite camps were of three types: external camps, extension or subcamps, and labour camps closer to mines or factories. The conditions were often even worse in these camps than in the main camp. See, Yisrael Gutman, “Auschwitz – An Overview,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, eds. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, 17.

¹⁶ According to Yehuda Bauer (241); Yisrael Gutman puts the peak population at 80, 839 in January 1944

The first female prisoners, many of whom were Czech inmates from Ravensbruck, arrived in August 1942, (Czech, 365). The population of Auschwitz could be doubled or halved within a matter of weeks depending on transport arrivals or mass “selections” of victims from among the camp population (Hilberg, 908). Auschwitz became the principal killing center of the Holocaust in 1943 (Marrus, 28).

Raul Hilberg identifies three reasons for the large population at Auschwitz: (i) temporary congestion of the killing installations (gas chambers and crematoria); (ii) camp construction and maintenance; (iii) labour for industrial purposes. The inmates slated for the gas chambers were not even registered and were not given prisoner numbers. Those prisoners awaiting “processing” of the backlog in the crematoria were not even given clothes or food; they simply waited for death (907).

Because Auschwitz was an extermination camp *and* a slave-labour camp, inmate behaviour was conditioned by the constant threat of death in the gas chamber or by other violent means. In spite of living in the shadow of death, there was at least the slight hope that if he or she could avoid death by starvation, overwork, or disease, an inmate might survive long enough to outlast the war. This hope persisted in the face of the realization that, as Yehuda Bauer notes, “The camp system was designed to kill Jews, either immediately upon arrival or after utilizing their labor” (242).

The Nazi “final solution” included an explicit policy of “destruction through work” for those deported to concentration camps (Krakowski, 50-51). Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels stated the “destruction through work” criteria clearly:

Jews and Gypsies unconditionally, Poles who have to serve three to four years of penal servitude, and Czechs and Germans who are sentenced to death or penal servitude for

(“Auschwitz,” 17).

life, or to security custody ... for life. The idea of exterminating them by labor is the best; for the rest, however, except in the aforementioned cases, every case has to be dealt with individually. In this case, of course, Czechs and Germans have to be judged differently (quoted in Krakowski, 51).

In addition to the two chief Auschwitz aims of murder and labour exploitation until death, a concomitant result was the dehumanization of the inmates, especially the Jews (Bettelheim, 108-10; Levi, *Drowned*, 112, 125-26). From the Nazi point of view, this dehumanization made Nazi racist ideology true by turning the Jews into *untermenschen* (literally: “sub-humans”) who would kill each other for food, eat scraps, and live in filth (Wistrich, 232; Glover, 342). It also served to foreclose the possibility of inmate revolt or resistance (Levi, *Drowned*, 38-39). The dehumanization process was successful in many cases; for example, some people did fight for food scraps, but many inmates also resisted dehumanization to the extent that this was possible (Bauer, 242).

The conditions in Auschwitz were so deplorable and “unspeakable” that a recurring theme in virtually every survivor testimony is the fear that non-inmates cannot possibly understand what life inside was like (Gilbert, 816). Indeed, the Auschwitz life-world was totally unlike any other setting known in human history. It was unreal, “morally separate from the rest of the world,” “extraterritorial,” or, in the words of Auschwitz Commander Rudolf Hoss, “another planet” (Glover, 352-53).

3.2 The Conditions of Inmate Life in Auschwitz

The conditions and rules in Auschwitz were often incomprehensible even to seasoned inmates. According to Nazi plan, the bewilderment of new arrivals was total (Gutman, 6). They arrived in Auschwitz disoriented and exhausted after a long train journey and their first instinct was to co-operate to save their families and themselves. The SS guards preyed upon this co-operation by yelling “silence” and threatening beatings. There were aggressive dogs, and

incomprehensible commands to the many Jews who did not understand German. The elaborate series of Nazi ruses began on the loading platform: there was an ambulance with a red cross to put the new arrivals at ease.¹⁷ The ambulances were actually used to transport Zyklon B—the gas used to kill Jews—to the gas chambers (Suhl, “Underground,” 195). The SS doctors selected the prisoners who were to live or die upon arrival: a gesture to the left meant death in the gas chambers; to the right a slow and painful death through hard labour, disease, and starvation (Eisenberg, 215).

Those prisoners selected for slave labour had a number tattooed on their left forearm which began their transformation from a human being into a number on a Nazi prisoner-list (Levi, *Survival*, 27-28). The new inmates were stripped, shaved with dirty blunt razors, disinfected with corrosive chemicals on their newly shaved skin, sometimes given hot baths followed by cold showers, and then given lice-infested clothing (Eisenberg, 215). Non-Jews did not face selections upon arrival; among Jews, only “men and women fit to work, 16-50” were allowed to live (Gutman, 31).

Leo Eitinger describes the initial “shock phase” as a well-orchestrated process designed to disorient recent arrivals and decrease the likelihood of resistance (469-71). After the “shock phase,” the “reaction phase” began (Eitinger, 472). New inmates had undergone the above described treatment, had lost all of their personal belongings, their dignity (both men and women had their heads, underarms, and private parts shaved by male inmate barbers in front of SS guards), and likely several family members since the Nazis had no regard for family ties in deportations or selections. The new inmates faced immediate anxiety and insecurity in an unpredictable world that they did not and could not understand.

¹⁷ See Bauer (238) for discussion of Nazi deception of inmates about to be gassed.

The dehumanization and degradation that they faced added to the inmates' feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and confusion. The camp was always overcrowded, with limited washing and toilet facilities; bunks intended for five people were used for fifteen (Hilberg, 909). The inmates had to eat, sleep, and defecate in filth, yet mocking signs proclaimed, "Your health depends on cleanliness" and "Don't forget your soap and towel" (Eisenberg, 216). Sickness and epidemics of dysentery and typhus were rampant because there were no sanitation measures. Auschwitz had fill-in latrines, unpurified water (the camp was built on drained swampland), rats, and lice. The blocks were occasionally deloused with Zyklon B, which was also the chemical used to kill inmates in the gas chambers (Hilberg, 911).

New arrivals were deprived of all belongings including clothes. Until early 1943 they wore striped prisoner clothes; later, shortages of material meant that the prisoners sometimes wore rag-like regular clothes—the best of the confiscated clothes were sent to the Reich for needy German families. In 1944 thousands of inmates had no clothes at all due to shortages. Nonetheless, outside work parties continued to wear stripes in order to prevent escape. Inmates were not allowed toilet articles, handkerchiefs, paper, or toilet paper (Hilberg, 910). The only items of personal property inmates could have were a bowl and spoon, which they had to carry with them at all times (Gutman, 24).

Inmates were further dehumanized by being made to live in filth and subjected to what Eugen Kogon termed "excremental assault." This involved denying the inmates permission to use the filthy, primitive lavatories—often while on work detail—thus forcing them to soil themselves. This was particularly cruel punishment given that many of the inmates suffered from dysentery and other gastrointestinal diseases. Terence Des Pres reports that the defilement of inmates often took vicious and even fatal forms:

The favorite pastime of one *Kapo* was to stop prisoners just before they reached the latrine. He would force an inmate to stand at attention for questioning; then make him “squat in deep knee-bends until the poor man could no longer control his sphincter and ‘exploded’”; then beat him; ... In another instance prisoners were forced to lie in rows on the ground, and each man when he was finally allowed to get up, “had to urinate across the heads of the others”; and there was “one night when they refined their treatment by making each man urinate into another’s mouth” (57-58).

Des Pres also reports that inmates’ soup bowls were sometimes confiscated and thrown in the latrines and prisoners forced to retrieve them. Inmates also “got around camp rules and kept from befouling themselves by using their own eating utensils” since they were not allowed out at night and would be shot by the SS if they tried to go to the latrines (58). Inmates did not have access to adequate washing supplies and were not able to maintain much of a semblance of personal hygiene in the terrible conditions of the camps (Des Pres, 62)

Chronic starvation was a fact of life in Auschwitz. The food distribution was discriminatory for Jews because the *Kapos* and SS guards often stole their rations (Hilberg, 910). Prisoners were entitled to 350g of bread, and 1 litre of soup daily; 150g margarine, 50g sausage, 40 g marmalade, and 30 g cheese weekly. However, in reality they received half this ration and the bread was mixed with parsnips, sawdust and bacteria; the soup consisted of watery turnips, grass, and occasionally potatoes (Hilberg, 910). Every morning the inmates received a half liter of bitter ersatz coffee in lieu of breakfast. Israel Gutman notes the effects of the inequality that pervaded the food system:

The official daily value of food for prisoners employed in light work stood at 1,700 calories and for prisoners doing strenuous work, 2,150 calories. An analysis done after the war of the actual food content ranged from 1,300 calories for light-work prisoners to 1,700 calories for prisoners performing hard labour. The difference was caused by plunder of food by SS personnel and functionary-prisoners.... The kapo, or the prisoner entrusted with ladling out the soup, made sure that the thicker more nourishing contents

from the bottom would reach "proper" prisoners, whereas the others had to content themselves with a watery substance from the top of the pot (24).

According to a post-war report from the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, the ration was below a subsistence level even for people not engaged in camp labour:

Whereas according to the standards of the Physiological Committee of the Section of Hygiene of the League of Nations a hardworking man ought to receive in 24 hours about 4,800 calories and an average working man more than 3,600 calories, the prisoners at Auschwitz were getting at most from 1302 up to 1744 calories for 24 hours! 1744 calories daily represent a little less than the basic conversion of food into energy of a grown man, or in other words a little less than the amount needed by a man resting in a lying position, covered and motionless. A man who works, nourished in such a way is burning up his own tissues in order to cover the amount of energy expended. This inevitably results in the wasting away of his organism in a manner dangerous to life. The diet of the prisoners working very hard outside the camp possessed such a calorific value. The prisoners who were working in the camp and whose work was also undoubtedly hard were getting at most 1302 calories for 24 hours, which was much below the amount necessary for the preservation of life when lying in bed (69).

As Gutman notes, "supplementary food was tantamount to survival" (24). After 1942, some prisoners were allowed to receive food parcels from outside sources; Jewish and Soviet inmates were not.

Hunger also decreases motivation and resistance to infection, notes Leo Eitinger:

"Research on hunger disease has shown that over extended periods, starvation can cause impaired memory, reduced initiative, fatigue, drowsiness, and irritability. These symptoms are usually followed by indifference, dullness and apathy" (473). The combination of starvation and poor sanitation took its toll; few prisoners lived more than two or three months (Eisenberg, 217).

There was an atmosphere of constant danger, violence, and cruelty in Auschwitz.

"Selection" for the gas chamber was possible at any time and for any reason. The most likely

reasons to be sent to the gas chambers were chronic illness, or incapacity for work. Thus, inmates did anything they could to hide illness and infirmity from the SS doctors and guards (Gutman, 26). The frequent roll calls were the most important event of the day from the SS perspective: they had to account for the right number of inmates; otherwise, they forced all of the inmates to stand at attention for hours until they found the missing persons. This strategy of accounting for every inmate by number on a roll call sheet—the SS never referred to inmates by name—furthered the dehumanization process by reducing inmates to a tattooed number rather than a name (Levi, *Drowned*, 115).

The main form of inmate control was the system of inmate functionaries who enforced the rules under the supervision of the SS. The inmate bureaucracy was fairly extensive. The highest inmate authority was the *Lageraltester*¹⁸ (“Camp Elder”), followed by the *Blockaltester* (“Block Elder”) and *Stubendienst* (“Barracks Leader”); the work leaders were the *Oberkapo*, *Kapo*, and *Vorarbeiter* (Hilberg, 912). All of these positions were highly stratified and responsive to Nazi camp command. The inmate functionaries wore special armbands and had special privileges, including sleeping apart from the regular inmates. The SS knowingly played the inmates against each other in order to increase Nazi control, as noted by SS Chief Heinrich Himmler’s description of the *Kapo*’s job:

His job is to see that the work gets done ... thus he has to push his men. As soon as we are no longer satisfied with him, he is no longer a *Kapo*, and returns to the other inmates. He knows that they will beat him to death his first night back.... Since we don’t have enough Germans here, we use others—of course a French *Kapo* for Poles, a Polish *Kapo* for Russians; we play one nation against another. (Quoted in Czech, 364)

¹⁸ *Lager* is the German word for “camp.” Adding the German word for work, *arbeitslager* means “work camp.”

The functionaries tended to be German criminals or political prisoners, some Poles and Russians. Once the camp became overwhelmingly Jewish, some Jews became higher functionaries as well (Czech, 366).

Every inmate was classified using coloured stars to denote his or her status: red for political prisoners, green for criminals, and a yellow and red Star of David for Jews (Gutman, 22). Jews were at the bottom of the racial hierarchy and thus had the worst time in camp (Gutman, 25). They had the worst jobs, suffered the most degradation, had the least chance of a good job, and therefore the lowest chance of survival. Indeed, the Jewish inmates succumbed to exhaustion, sickness, and starvation at higher rates than non-Jews (Gutman, 27). Jews were also more likely to face harsh forced labour and beatings from *Kapos*.

There was also a linguistic hierarchy: all orders were in German. Inability to instantly understand orders in German led to beatings, and prisoners who did not understand German had no chance to advance in the prisoner hierarchy and thus a severely reduced chance of survival (Czech, 364).

Inmate control was further enhanced by the Nazi policy of “collective punishments.” Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish survivor of Auschwitz and celebrated author, describes how “apocalypse was unleashed” in the event of an escape or miscount at roll call:

The co-nationals or known friends or pallet neighbours of the fugitive were interrogated under torture and then killed.... His hut companions, or at times all the prisoners in the camp, were made to stand in the roll call clearing without any time limit, even for days, under snow, rain, or the hot sun, until the fugitive was found, alive or dead (*Drowned*, 155).

In one example, three Poles escaped and twelve of their countrymen were hung and their bodies left hanging in camp as a deterrent to others. Collective punishment was not limited to regular inmates: If an inmate escaped from a labour group, the *Kapo* would be punished; thus *Kapos*

were vigilant with the roll call before returning to camp (Czech, 377). The net effect of these punishments was to decrease resistance and pit inmates against each other. This focused their anger on fellow inmates rather than their SS oppressors. It also dissuaded escape or rebellion because every prisoner knew that his comrades would be severely punished if he were to attempt either (Czech, 375).

3.3 Inmate Responses to Auschwitz

Inmate responses to the conditions in Auschwitz varied. One way to deal with the concentration camp universe was to simply “roll with it.” Thus, an older inmate counseled a young man who was crying upon arrival at Auschwitz, “don’t cry ... just figure you dropped out of the sky into this awful place” (Feig, 439). A more likely and much-documented reaction was to become totally demoralized and dehumanized.¹⁹ Individuals who underwent this process to its extreme were labeled a *musulman*²⁰ by their fellow inmates.

At the *musulman* stage inmates succumbed to “terminal, irreversible depression, apathy and withdrawal,” according to psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor Henry Krystal (34). These inmates no longer conserved energy, sought food, avoided blows, or related to fellow prisoners. Thus they were feared and shunned because they were a threat to the morale of other prisoners. They were dangerous because they could incite “collective punishment” through their inability to work or absence at roll-call, and they also provoked disgust among other inmates who feared reaching a similar state of exhaustion and despair (Levi, *Survival*, 88-89; Czech, 370). Being a *musulman* was partly a psychic condition caused by giving up hope, but it was also a result of starvation. Consider, for example, that one adult male inmate was five feet and sixty-

¹⁹ For example, see the section entitled “The Drowned and the Saved” in Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* (especially, 87-90) for a succinct description of this phenomenon.

²⁰ The origin of the nickname is unknown; it may derive either from the belief that Muslims are fatalists (Marrus, 130) or from the resemblance of broken inmates unable to stand to Muslims kneeling in prayer

two pounds; another was five foot five and seventy-six pounds. At such an advanced stage of starvation inmates would talk incessantly of food, and eat almost anything, including spilled soup and dirt, and potato peelings (Czech, 370). This is dehumanizing enough, but, moreover, led to a cycle of decline: survivor Tadeusz Borowski tells a story of a *musulman* eating brains from a prisoner who has just been shot (156).

Suicide was another possible response to camp life. Unknown numbers of inmates committed suicide by several methods: they would attempt to escape and be shot; run into the electric fence; or submit themselves to a medical exam knowing that they would be selected for the gas chamber or killed by phenol injection if they were sick or no longer fit to work (Eitinger, 476).

However, psychological accounts disagree on the nature of the typical prisoner responses in Auschwitz (Marrus, 130-32). Bruno Bettelheim argues that the inmates came to accept the SS values as their own and were psychologically crippled by having no sense of control over their own destiny. He suggests that this led to regression to childlike behaviour (Bettelheim, 110). Terence Des Pres argues that inmates did not regress but rather adjusted to the necessity of camp conditions. Thus, he claims that kindness and caring continued in the camps and were instrumental in helping the prisoners maintain the workable social structures required to keep themselves alive (116 ff). Leo Eitinger concurs with Des Pres, claiming that one of the most successful coping mechanisms for resisting demoralization was not to become a SS tool or spy. Eitinger also claims that interviews show that mutual help and pairing to help survive was the most successful survival strategy, especially in the general absence of family ties (475).

However, survivors constitute an artificially limited number of inmates; no doubt many more inmates used caring as a coping mechanism and died nonetheless, or perhaps even because

(Gutman, 20).

of their caring, as Eitinger notes (475). Some examples illustrate both sides of this issue. One survivor describes her rejuvenation when she began a relationship with a young man in the men's barracks. She describes how the feeling of being cared for by another restored her hope and will to live, and rekindled her sense of humanity through caring about another person (Rubinstein, 171-75). By contrast, Elie Wiesel describes how he lost hope and descended to the *musulman* stage after the death of his father *because* of love:

My father was dead and the pain was gone. I no longer felt anything. Someone had died inside me, and that someone was me.

I couldn't cry. My heart was broken, but I had no more tears. I had taken leave of myself: the dead do not weep. Hardly anyone wept in the camp, as though fearing that if you started, you could never stop. Freedom, for us, would mean being able to weep again.... For all practical purposes, I had become one of the "Mussulmen" [*sic*] drifting beyond life, into death as into water, no longer hungry, thirsty, or sleepy, fearing neither death nor beatings (*Memoirs*, 94-95).

Indeed, sometimes love and loyalty could lead directly to death. Leo Eitinger describes the plight of two brothers in Auschwitz. One brother didn't understand a command and was beaten by the *Kapo*; the other brother tried to help, which led two more camp elders to join in and beat both brothers to death (474).

Prisoners removed from the general labour pool because of a special skill tended to fare better. Doctors and nurses that worked in the HKB (hospital) had a special role that helped them preserve their sense of identity and connection to their occupation in the outside world. They also had better living conditions, food and access to limited medical care (Eitinger, 475). Other skilled workers also increased their chances for survival by avoiding the hard labour and low-calorie diet of the general inmate population. For example, office clerks would intentionally complicate the bureaucracy so that they could not all be liquidated or transferred at once, lest the camp bureaucracy collapse (Czech, 365). Such attempts to secure one's own position were

extremely common in Auschwitz. Another tactic employed by the clerks involved slowing down the registration of inmate deaths in order to exacerbate the backlog of paperwork. As a result, the clerks would collect and split the extra food allotted to the dead prisoners until the files were updated (Czech, 367).

An Auschwitz orchestra started in 1941 in order to play for the inmates' forced marches as they went to and from camp for work. The musicians received a lighter workload, working in the kitchen, in order to be nearby in the main camp for SS concerts. They were better fed and lived in better conditions than the average inmate. They also received clean clothes because they had to play in front of the SS (Czech, 367-68). Music not only improved the lives of the musicians; it also could improve the lives of the general camp population. Hermann Langbein, quotes Polish survivor Jerzy Brandhuber's thoughts about hearing the orchestra: "That was the only moment that made me forget the camp around me" because music fostered "the feeling of not having been expelled completely from humanity" (317-18).

The Gestapo (Political Department) used Jewish women as secretaries because they could speak German and other languages and they could be killed afterwards so that there was no concern about the women learning secrets about the camp. However, some of these women survived the liberation of Auschwitz; perhaps they were not killed by the Germans because they had come to know the women from working with them. These women also had better conditions and lived apart from the other prisoners. They were also able to practice better hygiene because they had to interact with the SS daily (Czech, 366).

Most inmates participated in the underground economy of the camp as a means of survival. The practice of stealing, buying, and exchanging food and other necessities was known as "to organize," and was vital as a means of survival:

Food had to be organized, because no one could subsist on the camp rations. Things like shoes, blankets and warm clothing had to be organized, as did jobs. Spoons and bowls—without which one could not even get soup—had to be organized, because in many cases these essential items were not provided (Des Pres, 105).

“Organizing” was illegal, and thus risky, but whenever possible prisoners sought jobs with better access to contraband as a means of survival.

One group of prisoners who had as much as they could eat were the members of the *Sonderkommando* (SK). Being a member of the SK involved the highest degree of complicity in Nazi crimes as well as certain death after a number of months (Wistrich, 232). The SK were responsible for unloading the transport trains, herding the new arrivals into the gas chambers, searching the bodies for valuables including gold teeth, and removing the corpses from the gas chambers to the crematoria. In the ultimate Faustian bargain, the SK could take food and liquor from the new arrivals in exchange for their role in furthering the machinery of destruction of European Jewry.

Nonetheless, some of the SK also tried to help in several ways. They had access to information because of their special location in the “Canada” section of the camp where all of the plundered valuables were kept in large warehouses. Many of the SK passed on the information that they had about the death camps to the new arrivals. Speaking to the arrivals was forbidden, but many testimonies tell us that the SK did risk their lives in order to try to save new arrivals by giving them hints about how to describe their physical condition, age, twin-status, and lack of children in order to avoid selection for the gas chambers. The Nazis automatically gassed the sick and infirm, children, and mothers with children in order to keep the children quiet in the “showers”—which were actually sealed gas chambers—to which they were sent. The Nazis also took twins to the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele, so any warning to avoid being identified as twins

could save new arrivals from potentially very painful, and ultimately deadly, medical experimentation (Berlin, 33).

Some in the SK worked within the Nazi rules in order to select some people to save as best they could. Due to Nazi age and health restrictions for slave labour, the SK had to leave the sick, the very old, and the very young to their fate; they helped those closest to the age limits to pass the selections, but were hindered by the haste of the unloading, and the nature of the information they were passing on. Many new arrivals simply did not believe that they were about to be gassed. In camp, old prisoners helped family, friends, fellow villagers and countrymen; some SK members helped new arrivals on the platform by speaking Yiddish to them and trying to coach them through the selection process (Berlin, 34-35).

There was certainly resistance in the concentration camps.²¹ But definitions of concentration camp resistance have become a political issue: should we only count armed resistance? Or does the will to stay alive in the face of the Nazi onslaught also count as resistance? (Berlin, 35). In any case, there were countless acts of symbolic resistance such as lighting Hanukkah candles even though any religious practice was expressly forbidden by the Nazis. Indeed, some inmates pursued religious observance, knowing that prayers were punishable by death (Bauer, 243). Herman Langbein recounts a particularly moving tale of a man saying *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer of mourning, for his father in a satellite camp of Auschwitz; he tried to keep his voice down but the other inmates heard him and soon the whole block of several hundred people started crying (326). Inmates also managed to celebrate Passover—the story of the Exodus of the Jews from slavery in Egypt—in Auschwitz. S.B. Undorfer quotes a survivor’s recollection of the power of clandestine religious observance in Auschwitz:

²¹ See the selections in “The Problem of Jewish Resistance” in Donald Niewyk, The Holocaust (139-76) for differing perspectives on this issue.

Nothing as soothing and as satisfying as the knowledge that even in this Godforsaken death camp—in this dirty little backyard of humanity, where the value of a cigarette was greater than that of a life—that even here, three little matzos had been baked in preparation for the forthcoming Passover Festival (245).

Such moments of solidarity and traditional religious expression helped to combat the dehumanization of camp life. Other forms of religious observance included women blessing light-bulbs or candles made out of potato peelings and margarine for Sabbath, and some clandestine prayer services held with other inmates standing guard (US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 39).

Some inmates lost their religious faith as they came to believe that God could not allow such atrocities to happen. Elie Wiesel recounts his personal struggle with this issue in the dilemma between fasting to observe Yom Kippur and starving to death:

Yom Kippur. The Day of Atonement.

Should we fast? The question was hotly debated. To fast would mean a surer, swifter death. We fasted here the whole year round. The whole year was Yom Kippur. But others said that we should fast simply because it was dangerous to do so. We should show God that even here, in this enclosed hell, we were capable of singing His praises. I did not fast, mainly to please my father who had forbidden me to do so. But further, there was no longer any reason why I should fast. I no longer accepted God's silence. As I swallowed my bowl of soup, I saw in the gesture an act of rebellion and protest against Him.

And I nibbled my crust of bread.

In the depths of my heart, I felt a great void. (76)

Wiesel's admission is striking since Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) is a significant Jewish festival marking the end of the Ten Days of Penitence. Penitence is the theme of Yom Kippur and an important concept in Judaism, as Norman Solomon explains:

It is a 'return' (the literal translation of the word) to God, and consists of the recognition of sin, regret and confession, and renewed commitment to the right path. No sacrifice or

intermediary is required to complete the process, which depends on God's grace alone (63).

At the closing of Yom Kippur, "worshippers are stirred to make the most of this final hour when the gates of heaven remain wide open" and the congregation declares the unity of God (Solomon, 64). Thus Wiesel's refusal to fast is indeed a "rebellion and protest against Him" and is replete with symbolic significance.

Bearing witness before man motivated many survivors more than bearing witness before God. Filip Muller, who spent three years working in an SK commando, recalls how he attempted suicide by following a selection into the gas chamber. However, one of the women inside insisted that he stay alive to bear witness to all that he saw in the gas chambers. She pushed him out and he survived. However, in a perfect illustration of the twisted logic of the Nazis, the guards beat him and then one of them said, "You bloody shit, get it into your stupid head: *we* decide how long you stay alive and when you die, and not you. Now piss off, to the ovens!" (Muller, 114). Other members of the SK who did not survive also felt an intense need to bear witness to the unique hell that they witnessed in the gas chambers. Several men wrote diaries and concealed them in jars in the earth around the crematoria. These diaries demonstrate a deep desire to bear witness even in the face of guaranteed death (Cohen, 532).

Another form of bearing witness was the desire to escape and warn other Jews about their coming fate and tell the world about the atrocities in Auschwitz in an effort to have the camp bombed or liberated. Escapes were very difficult, and unsuccessful attempts were a guaranteed death sentence: the Nazis brought back dead escapees and propped their corpses up on chairs with a sign that said "I am here again" in order to discourage others from attempting to escape (Hilberg, 915). Anyone wishing to escape had to get past barbed wire, ditches, watchtowers, dogs and a forty kilometer radius of "company territory" (camps and industrial installations with no civilians within). There were approximately two-hundred and thirty Auschwitz escape

attempts, of which eighty were successful (Kulka, 201). The most famous escape from Auschwitz was carried out by Walter Rosenberg (who later changed his name to Rudolf Vrba) and Alfred Wetzler, both clerks in Auschwitz. They hid in a bunker for three days until the “all-clear” alert allowed them to proceed to Slovakia. They had plans drawn up of the Auschwitz installations and passed on a message known as the “Vrba-Wetzler Report” to the rest of the world concerning the situation in Auschwitz (Kulka, 205-06).

The SK executed the only armed rebellion in Auschwitz. On October 7, 1944 the *Sonderkommando* rebellion was carried out with homemade weapons and smuggled gunpowder from girls working in a munitions factory. The SK managed to kill several SS men and blow up crematorium III, which never opened again. There were very harsh reprisals after the uprising was quashed by the SS’ superior fire-power (Kulka, 216). The Auschwitz underground was well-organized and the attack was the result of months of work. One of the girls, Rosa Robotka, shared barracks with some munitions girls. She managed to get twenty of them smuggling dynamite in secret pockets and in their bosoms, which they handed over to a Russian bomb expert who used sardine cans as casings (Suhl, “Rosa,” 220). When the Polish underground leaders found out that the Nazis had captured their courier and found out about the plan they decided to pull out (Cohen, 528-29). The SK feared that they would be liquidated soon anyway so they went ahead and blew up crematorium III without the support of the Polish underground leaders. After the explosion they cut the barbed wire and six hundred men escaped. All of them were killed by the Nazis and no general uprising ensued. It was the only armed uprising in Auschwitz. The girls were arrested by the SS, tortured and hung, but they did not give up the names of any of their co-conspirators. All four of the girls who were arrested were hung on January 6, 1945, three weeks before the liberation of Auschwitz (US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 28). Rosa’s last words just before she was hung were “Be strong and brave” (Suhl, “Rosa,” 222).

Auschwitz was understaffed at the end of the war because of the demand for troops on the front lines, so the SK bombing probably saved many lives. The Nazis had to evacuate rather than exterminate the last inmates between October 7, 1944 and the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945. Himmler ordered the end of selection and gassing on November 2, 1944, and on November 26 the crematoria and gas chambers were destroyed by the Nazis in order to get rid of the evidence of mass murder. The last transport arrived in Auschwitz on January 5, 1945. On January 18, 58,000 inmates began the death march to camps in Germany ahead of the advancing Soviet army (Feig, 364). As well as those inmates who died in Auschwitz,²² many others died from disease and malnutrition after the liberation by the Soviets in January, 1945.

3.4 General Conclusions about Inmate Life in Auschwitz

Inmate behaviour in the Nazi “*univers concentrationnaire*”²³ is difficult to describe because the reactions of Jews, Gypsies, Poles, and others to persecution and state-sponsored terror and murder were so varied. However, concentration camps by their “nature, structure, and duration” can be potentially traumatic for any person exposed to them regardless of previous experience and psychological strength (Krystal, 23). Nonetheless, transferred prisoners and ghetto residents tended to be better prepared for camp life than, for example, Western European integrated Jews who were taken directly to Auschwitz without earlier experience of Nazi methods (Gutman, 20).

In any case, inmates arrived in Auschwitz in crowded box-cars, often after long journeys and internment in other camps or Jewish ghettos. As noted earlier, new arrivals were met with violence from the SS guards, dislocation from their remaining family and friends, the loss of their possessions, and humiliating and degrading assaults on their privacy and dignity. For those who

²² As many as 1.25 million inmates died in Auschwitz, according to the earlier reference to Bauer.

²³ This phrase was coined by David Rousset, quoted in Michael R. Marrus, The Holocaust in History.

did not understand German, the initial “shock phase” was even more difficult; for all new arrivals, their first days in Auschwitz were disorienting in the extreme.

Those who survived the initial selection and were chosen for slave labour in the adjacent sections of the camp faced a life-world unlike any they had previously known. The physical circumstances of life in Auschwitz were horrible. Camp conditions were deplorable for the majority of inmates: they were surrounded by the constant smell of death from the crematoria and filth from human excrement and corpses. Inmates suffered from starvation, disease and heavy work. They slept in crowded quarters and were exhausted, malnourished and irritable. Inmates were typically separated from their families and were pitted against each other by the SS on the basis of language and nationality. They also faced the constant threat of selection for the gas chambers, violence at the hands of guards or fellow prisoners, and death by starvation, disease or violence.

The psychological facts were equally terrible: inmates suffered from any combination of bewilderment, loneliness, fear, despair, indifference to their fate and loss of hope. Inmates had no sense of when or if their ordeal would end and no intelligible sense of why it was happening. They also felt powerless in the face of Nazi cruelty and arbitrary rules which threatened their survival and dignity, for example, the “excremental assault” described earlier. This sense of having no agency—even concerning basic decisions such as when to sleep, eat, urinate, defecate or seek shelter—was debilitating and dehumanizing.

In the face of such conditions, there were a variety of types of inmate behaviours in Auschwitz. Some inmates struggled to keep their sanity and dignity; others were simply overcome by the unprecedented inhumanity of the camp conditions and their Nazi overseers. All accounts of inmate behaviour in Auschwitz seem to agree that powerlessness was one of the most

difficult obstacles to overcome. Survivor interviews show that having even some decision-making powers helped many inmates survive. As Leo Eitinger notes, this sense of control over one's own fate could take several forms including, "systematically saving one's strength, never giving up, helping others and receiving help, and dealing correctly with the daily ration of bread" (475). Dealing "correctly" with food could mean eating it all at once to avoid being beaten to death for hoarding, or it could entail rationing the bread over the course of the day in order to conserve strength (475). Some inmates sustained themselves through the Auschwitz experience by drawing on their religious faith and practice; others lost their faith in an omnipotent, loving God as a result of the horror they faced.

Many inmates survived by leveraging their skills to secure better jobs, living conditions, food and sanitation. Some prisoners stole food from each other. Most "organized" from any other available source and traded on the camp's black market for better rations, clothing and shoes. Some prisoners tried to escape or to bear witness however possible. Others committed suicide and many reached the dreaded *musulman* stage through a combination of starvation and despair.

The clearest general conclusion about inmate experience in Auschwitz is that the inmates' life-world was much narrower than their outside life experience. Life was boiled down to concern for daily survival against long odds. As Jan Kott puts it, "When life is cheap, food and clothing are worth their weight in gold" (23). Inmates had little hope for the future—particularly since they had little access to outside information about the progress of the war. They faced not only the daily struggle to survive and questions about the chance of liberation, but also unpredictable violence from the SS guards and fellow prisoners and the chance of "selection" for the gas chambers should they prove too weak or sick to work or simply unlucky. This concludes the description of the conditions that inmates faced in Auschwitz. In the following chapter, we

shall consider the demoralizing implications of life in Auschwitz before considering how MacIntyre's moral theory can cope with this phenomenon of moral breakdown.

Chapter 4: MacIntyre's Theory and the Moral Landscape of Auschwitz

The chief concern of the following chapter is to discuss the implications of the demoralization produced by the Auschwitz conditions depicted in chapter three for MacIntyre's theory of the virtues. Here there are two senses of "demoralization." First, the world itself may be "demoralized" in the sense that the usual moral concepts such as "honesty" no longer apply in characteristic ways to the world the inmate inhabits. For example, as we shall see later in this chapter, "honesty" amongst prisoners no longer had its usual application for to be honest about one's physical condition made it likely that one would be killed. Second, inmates may be "demoralized" when they are stripped of moral agency and reduced to immoral or—more accurately—amoral behaviour as a result of camp conditions. They may find little or a very different realm for the application of their moral character—their virtues—and this may cause the breakdown of their identity as moral agents.

In relating this to MacIntyre's theory, I argue that the moral world of Auschwitz rules out the achievement of MacIntyre's notion of the quest for the good life, *as well as* the embodiment of shared standards of the good life, and thus seriously damages the realistic possibilities for being a virtuous person. These facts point to the intelligibility of MacIntyre's theory since he can make sense of this limit-case of extreme moral breakdown *in terms of* his moral theory. For if we understood morality in the terms that MacIntyre is set against, namely, the atomistic terms of Kantian rationality or Humean emotivism, we should expect that the inmates, as rational beings, or agents with desires, would continue to function as moral agents just as they did in their pre-camp lives. Instead, I argue that there was a general moral breakdown in the actions and lives of the inmates, and that this breakdown can best be accounted for on MacIntyre's view. This breakdown, specifically that being a virtuous person is not possible under the Auschwitz

circumstances, shows that MacIntyre's specifications of the minimal conditions of a functional morality are indeed necessary conditions. According to these minimal conditions, the virtues play a necessary role in constituting and sustaining practices, and hence social life; and this must be done in the context of an overall pattern for the forging of an agent's moral identity through a quest for the good which is itself embedded in the moral resources of a tradition embodying conceptions of "the good life for man." This amounts to saying that the virtues must play a role at all three levels of MacIntyre's explanation of morality—practices, the narrative self and tradition—in order for there to be a functional morality. In the absence of these minimal conditions of a functional morality, we see the widespread demoralization that characterized life in Auschwitz.

In relating the moral breakdown at Auschwitz to MacIntyre's framework described in chapter two, I argue as follows: (i) Auschwitz largely obliterated the inmates' moral traditions, and to the extent that it provided new standards of "excellence" it was a negative "tradition" that reduced inmates' lives to pure survival (ii) inmates' lives were radically interrupted, which characteristically lead to the breakdown of the narrative self; (iii) there were some surviving practices in Auschwitz. However, without the stability provided by MacIntyre's account of the narrative self (ii) and tradition (i), the surviving practices (iii) are like the emotivist conception of moral judgement—they are arbitrary, do not cohere, and cannot build up to a good life. Thus the fact that the virtues largely failed to get a grip in the moral landscape of Auschwitz can be explained in terms of MacIntyre's theory of the minimal conditions required for the application of the virtues. Let us now consider the demoralization inmates faced in Auschwitz.

4.1 Demoralization in Auschwitz: The "Gray Zone"

Auschwitz was a demoralized and demoralizing place, as the concrete details presented in the previous chapter show, and this is a fact that any moral theory has to account for. In this

section, I wish to speak to these and ensuing issues in ordinary terms. In the following section (4.2), I return to the same casting it now in MacIntyrean terms. The point of doing this is to allow us to see the phenomena (types of demoralization) for itself, then how it is captured in MacIntyre's terms. The two types of demoralization here concern the ways in which (i) the circumstances do not provide the usual realm of application and outcomes for moral concepts and (ii) the effect that this has on the moral identities and agency of individuals. There is a reciprocal and mutually-reinforcing relation between these two aspects of demoralization.

In Auschwitz, moral concepts no longer applied in characteristic ways and the application of the virtues no longer had their characteristic outcomes, plus inmates' identities as moral agents were fragile and mutable by virtue of the appalling conditions and practices of the camp. Inmates were witness to continuous death; they breathed an all-pervasive stench of death and filth; and Jews, in particular, received the least in human obligations and rationality. Inmates' sense of self was under constant threat of collapse or obliteration: inmates had no past that was relevant to their present; their present was hell; and their future was bleak in the face of the constant threat of death and its likely arrival within a few months (Feig, 439). Auschwitz presented inmates with wholly alien modes of existence for which their moral traditions had not prepared them, and many of them succumbed to their circumstances both physically and morally.²⁴ The actions of individual agents in Auschwitz raise important questions concerning the minimal conditions necessary for the exercise of the virtues, particularly since agents had so little control over leading their lives and were thus largely prevented from exercising the virtues. Auschwitz also raises

²⁴ This is not to say that there were other people who *were* prepared for the circumstances in Auschwitz. Indeed, part of my point is to argue that the circumstances precluded any functional morality, and thus *whatever* moral resources an agent brought with them to Auschwitz would not stand up to the circumstances.

questions about the ability of individuals to withstand the demoralizing aspects of the Holocaust, that is, the stability of moral character in the face of extreme circumstances.

As the previous chapter has made clear, entry into Auschwitz was entry into a new world order, where all the previous ways of ordering or regulating oneself and others did not apply. This first sense of demoralization was so either because persons could no longer control what they had previously, for example, even the simplest choices about when to eat, sleep or defecate, or because to the extent that they tried to operate in their previous ways, the results were entirely different, for example, honesty about one's health became characteristically self-endangering rather than a means of seeking help and comfort. Furthermore, inmates often found themselves in circumstances in which they had to break down their settled states of character—their inclinations to act in particular ways, for example, honestly—if they were to survive. This sense of the limiting conditions of inmates' moral agency—and its being compromised—is described by Primo Levi as a “gray zone” where traditional values did not apply and inmate behaviour cannot be fully understood or judged by outsiders:

It remains true that in the Lager, and outside, there exist gray, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise. The extreme pressure of the Lager tends to increase their ranks; they are the rightful owners of a quota of guilt (which grows apace with their freedom of choice), and besides this they are the vectors and instruments of the system's guilt.... [T]he prisoners of the Lagers, hundreds of thousands of persons of all social classes, from almost all of the countries of Europe, represented an average, unselected sample of humanity. Even if one did not want to take into account the infernal environment into which they had been abruptly flung, it is illogical to demand—and rhetorical and false to maintain—that they all and always followed the behaviour expected of saints and stoic philosophers. In reality, in the vast majority of cases, their behaviour was rigidly preordained. In the space of a few weeks or months the deprivations to which they were subjected led them to a condition of pure survival, a daily struggle against hunger, cold,

fatigue, and blows in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero (*Drowned*, 49-50).

On the emotivist conception, in order to make moral judgements inmates would have been free to stand back from their social circumstances and *choose* their moral commitments and dispositions. But in the compromising “gray zone,” emoting and choosing in the limited ways that inmates could does not amount to moral agency. If morality is primarily a matter of an agent correctly applying his or her moral judgements—whether founded on the emotions or reasons, i.e., on either the Humean or Kantian view—to the circumstances, then moral life, on the emotivist view, should have kept rolling along in Auschwitz. But this was clearly not so in the limited life-world of the camps. Inmates had limited space for the application of their moral judgments, and once shorn from the social circumstances and traditions that gave sense to their pre-camp moral lives, they were adrift in the demoralizing and demoralized world of Auschwitz. This puts in context the behaviours described in the previous chapter, such as the *Kapos* who doled out beatings, the inmates who took revenge on former *Kapos* and the inmate who was so hungry that he ate brains. In the new circumstances of the camp, inmates behaved in ways that were contrary to their pre-camp virtues and moral identities and a realistic self-understanding.

However, camp life was disorienting for inmates not simply because they found themselves in new, hellish circumstances, but also because they left behind their ordinary, full lives and had to find ways to go forward in the new reality of the camp. Levi describes the effects of an inmate’s early days in Auschwitz as follows:

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgement of utility. It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the

term “extermination camp,” and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: “to lie on the bottom” (*Survival*, 27).

The degradation of the *Lager* reduced inmates to “pure survival” so that they often became complicit in the workings of the camp in order to eke out their existence in the “gray zone” between the normal moral categories of “good” and “bad” behaviour. As Levi saw, even those who survived were effectively “exterminated” as moral agents by the conditions of the camps and the treatment by the Nazis.

One of the chief ways in which many inmates were compromised by camp circumstances was that they became inured towards—or even complicit in—the violence around them. Here we see the relationship between the demoralization of the gray zone and its effect on individuals in terms of their amoral behaviour. Tadeusz Borowski, a student and poet in Warsaw before he was deported to Auschwitz, describes his disgust at the circumstances leading to his own moral transformation in his first days on the train ramps as a member of a “Canada Kommando” charged with unloading new arrivals:

I don’t know why, but I am furious, simply furious with these people—furious because I must be here because of them. I feel no pity, I am not sorry they’re going to the gas chamber. Damn them all! I could throw myself at them, beat them with my fists. It must be pathological, I just can’t understand... (40).

His friend Henri replies:

[I]t is natural, predictable, calculated. The ramp exhausts you, you rebel—and the easiest way to relieve your hate is to turn against someone weaker. Why, I’d even call it healthy.... Look at the Greeks [newly arrived Greek Jews who did not speak German and were less familiar with Nazi methods than their European counterparts], they know how to make the best of it! They stuff their bellies with anything they find. One of them has just devoured a full jar of marmalade (40-41).

Many of Borowski’s anecdotes display the juxtaposition of his comrades’ keen interest in consuming food and liquor plundered from recent arrivals with casualness to the violence meted

out on the newcomers in order to keep the machinery of destruction rolling. In another conversation, he asks an acquaintance “what’s new with you?”:

“Not much. Just gassed up a Czech transport.”

“That I know. I mean personally.”

“Personally? What sort of ‘personally’ is there for me? The oven, the barracks, back to the oven ... Have I got anybody around here? Well, if you really want to know what ‘personally’—we’ve figured out a new way to burn people. Want to hear about it?”

I indicated polite interest.

“Well, then you take four little kids with plenty of hair on their heads together and light the hair. The rest burns by itself and in no time at all the whole business is *gemacht*.”

“Congratulations,” I said drily and with very little enthusiasm.

He burst out laughing and with a strange expression looked right into my eyes.

“Listen, doctor, here in Auschwitz we must entertain ourselves in every way we can.

Otherwise, who could stand it” (Borowski, 142).

Survivor testimonies are replete with accounts of how inmates became so inhuman that they viewed the deaths of others nonchalantly because inevitable. This was not a place where people acted like moral agents in spite of terrible conditions but where people stopped acting like anything that resembles human beings. This reinforces the inter-relatedness of the two senses of demoralization noted above: camp life was demoralized in that moral concepts such as justice and compassion no longer had their usual application or outcomes, nor was their absence remarkable, and agents were demoralized by being reduced to amorality.

The world of the *Lager* was a struggle for survival in which any attempt to live by old codes and procedures would result in a quick death. Here we see the first sense of demoralization in terms of the ways in which moral concepts no longer applied or no longer had their characteristic outcomes. For example, if in Borowski’s examples, had he refused to mete out violence in order to speed up the unloading of the new arrivals, he would himself have been subject to SS violence. Similarly, most inmates were made complicit in the machinery of

destruction—and hence caught in the “gray zone”—either through their work in the camp administration, the SK, or their general inability to resist the outcomes of the camp system.

Terence Des Pres notes that this complicity was connected to the inmates’ restricted free will:

Under normal circumstances, assistance in crime is condemned, if only because (and this amounts to a definition of the civilized state) there is always a margin of choice, always another way to live. But in extremity there may be *no other way to live*. In the concentration camps, to choose life means to come to terms with, but also to resist, the forces of destruction. And although this imperative opens the door to every manner of hypocrisy and lie, and therefore becomes a permanent occasion for corruption, it cannot be avoided. The luxury of sacrifice—by which I mean the strategic choice of death to resolve irreconcilable moral conflicts—is meaningless in a world where any person’s death only contributes to the success of evil (100) [emphasis added].

Here again, the demoralization is twofold: inmates’ reasons for action are reduced in a world of near certain death, thus the moral constraints of the civilian code do not apply. The reduced reasons for action were either to live or not live: If you live, there is but one way to do so, a way that one cannot recognize as itself moral. Choosing a path and acting on it was no longer a possibility. In this, the agency of persons was lost and former moral categories became unrealistic.

Levi connects this powerlessness and resultant loss of moral identity to a deep sense of shame experienced and described by many survivors. He generalizes his point about the effects of the camp system on the inmates’ moral identity in an anecdote about the hanging of one of the SK who participated in the 1944 uprising. Right before his death, the man cries, “*Kamaraden, ich bin der Letz!* (Comrades, I am the last one!).” Levi’s response is telling:

I wish I could say that from the midst of us, an abject flock, a voice rose, a murmur, a sign of assent. But nothing happened. We remained standing, bent and grey, our heads dropped, and we did not uncover our heads until the German ordered us to do

so. The trapdoor opened, the body wriggled horribly: the band began playing again and we were once more lined up and filed past the quivering body of the dying man.

At the foot of the gallows, the SS watch us pass with indifferent eyes: their work is finished, and well finished.... [T]here are no longer any strong men among us, the last one is now hanging above our heads.... The Russians can come now: they will find only us, the slaves, the worn-out, worthy of the unarmed death which awaits us.

To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it has not been easy, nor quick, but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under your gaze; from our side you have nothing to fear; no acts of violence, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgement.

Alberto and I went back to the hut, and we could not look each other in the face. That man must have been tough, he must have been made of another metal than us if this condition of ours, which has broken us, could not bend him.

Because we are all broken, conquered: even if we know how to adapt ourselves, even if we have finally learnt how to find our food and to resist fatigue and the cold, even if we return home (*Survival*, 149-50).

The outcome of open defiance of the Nazis was certain death. Quite sensibly, most inmates tried to survive the camp system through adaptation—including moral adaptation—to the extreme conditions, but they characteristically felt shame at their own impotence and complicity. This sense of moral adaptation, combined with Des Pres' remark that there may be "*no other way to live*" in extremity, supports the claim that the notion of being a moral agent doing voluntary action was lost in the camps, and with it, the basis of a moral system. For if agents cannot be said to act on reasons through voluntary actions, then it makes no sense to apply moral evaluations to their behaviour nor to understand them as living within the usual moral realm.

Forty years after describing his and the other inmates' apathy in the face of the hanging of the resistor, Levi confirms the judgement that ordinary moral evaluations did not apply in Auschwitz. He notes that the post-liberation realization that "you too could have, you certainly should have" resisted is a judgement that does not take into account the extremity of the

circumstances in Auschwitz (*Drowned*, 77). Levi locates a more common form of survivor's guilt at an even simpler level than that of heroic resistance:

More realistic is ... the accusation of having failed in terms of human solidarity. Few survivors feel guilty about having deliberately damaged, robbed or beaten a companion. Those who did so (the *Kapos*, but not only they) block out the memory. By contrast, however, almost everybody feels guilty of having omitted to offer help. The presence at your side of a weaker—or less cunning, or older, or too young—companion, hounding you with his demands for help or with his simple presence, in itself an entreaty, is a constant in the life of the Lager. The demand for solidarity, for a human word, advice, even just a listening ear, was permanent and universal but rarely satisfied. There was no time, space, privacy, patience, strength; most often, the person to whom the request was addressed found himself in his turn in a state of need, entitled to comfort (*Drowned*, 78).

Here again we see that ordinary notions of “moral agency” fail to account for inmates' behaviour. Inmates were too pre-occupied with survival to act on their pre-camp moral inclinations to help and comfort their comrades and to protect them from harm.

Camp life served to largely obliterate the social relations that characterize moral life insofar as it is concerned with other-regarding behaviour. Indeed, camp conditions made conflict and divisions amongst inmates inevitable, as Gutman and Berenbaum note:

In a world with all moral norms and restraints lifted and no holds barred, where congestion, severe deprivation, and nervous tension were ubiquitous, the prisoners easily succumbed to violence and rudeness. Conditions of life in the camp managed to undermine any solidarity that might be expected to arise among human beings who find themselves in identical situations. The assumption that common suffering bridges distances separating people was not borne out by camp reality (27).

Similarly, Levi insists that the “civilian” moral code cannot be sensibly applied to Auschwitz, since the inmates' moral space was so severely restricted by the circumstances and their physical and psychological condition. Moreover, the possibility of individuals living a good life was precluded by the reduction of life to pure survival. This narrowing of moral agency and its

disconnection from a conception of how to live a fulfilling life had a profound impact on inmates' moral identities.

In a chapter entitled "Shame," Levi captures the multiple ways in which inmates had become demoralized and the pain and shame it caused them upon liberation:

Coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished. Not by our will, cowardice, or fault, yet nevertheless we had lived for months and years at an animal level: our days had been encumbered from dawn to dusk by hunger, fatigue, cold, and fear, and any space for reflection, reasoning, experiencing emotions was wiped out. We endured filth, promiscuity, and destitution, suffering much less than we would have suffered from such things in normal life, because our moral yardstick had changed. Furthermore, all of us had stolen: in the kitchen, the factory, the camp, in short, "from the others," from the opposing side, but it was theft nevertheless. Some (few) had fallen so low as to steal bread from their own companions. We had not only forgotten our country and our culture, but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves, because, like animals, we were confined to the present moment. Only at rare intervals did we come out of this condition of leveling, during the very few Sundays of rest, the fleeting minutes before falling asleep, or the fury of the air raids, but these were painful moments precisely because they gave us the opportunity to measure our diminishment from the outside (*Drowned*, 75).

Once more we see demoralization in terms of inmates being conscious of their own diminished moral agency and the interruption of the narrative unity of their lives, yet powerless to overcome this in the camp circumstances. Inmates' awareness of the incongruence between their pre-camp moral identities and the fact that they had to live otherwise in the camp was extremely demoralizing. Levi attributes the high number of post-liberation suicides by survivors to this resurfacing from "perilous waters," and notes that suicide was, all things considered, rare during imprisonment precisely because the inmates' choices—even to kill themselves—were so restricted and they were so quickly reduced to survival mode upon arrival in Auschwitz (*Drowned*, 76).

The combination of restricted moral choice and either complicity in the camp system or meaningless self-sacrifice through suicide or fatalism had serious impact on an inmate's moral identity. The most common manifestation of this tension was a deep sense of shame at one's own condition and behaviour. Inmates felt themselves morally impotent and broken down by the extremity of camp life, yet still retained enough of their former self to feel deeply ashamed at their impotence and complicity in the camp system, however limited or inevitable the latter may have been.

By systematically alienating inmates from control over their own actions, and disrupting their sense of logic and rationality, "The camps were designed to create a debilitating sense of impotence in their victims, to literally reduce them to *Untermenschen* ["sub-humans"] and thereby remake them in the image of Nazi propaganda," notes Robert Wistrich (233). The extreme circumstances of camp life demoralized inmates in a number of ways: they offered little resistance to the Nazis; they did not commit acts of kindness or justice that would have been customary in civilian life when they were reduced to survival mode because they learned quickly that such behaviour was self-endangering; many of them participated in the machinery of destruction thereby compromising their pre-existing moral identities and values; and they felt shame at their impotence, physical and psychological condition. The demoralization which inmates underwent does not simply apply to a case or two, but occurs systematically and on many levels. However, the world of the *Lager* was not merely a struggle for survival which superseded moral categories; it was also in many ways beyond the space of reasons. Inmates had to submit to the punishments and indignities of camp life even when there was no good reason for such treatment. Nazi orders and punishments were arbitrary and cruel, for example, in the use of "excremental assault," and inmates had no sense of why they were being treated as they were and subjected to the extremity of camp life. Moreover, they had little sense of what the outside world

knew or cared of their circumstances, which compounded the feeling that life in Auschwitz was disconnected from ordinary reasons and explanations. Inmates inhabited a “gray zone” where their pre-camp moral concepts did not have their usual application and their moral identities were compromised by the reduction of life to pure survival. Let us now return to MacIntyre’s theory of the virtues in response to the extreme circumstances of Auschwitz.

4.2 MacIntyre’s Theory at Auschwitz

MacIntyre’s virtue theory sets out minimal conditions for the development and application of the virtues and for coherent explanation of moral life. The extreme circumstances described in chapter three and the resulting kinds of demoralization discussed in the previous section offer an example of a world where the virtues could not get a grip and where agents had great difficulty maintaining the stability of their moral character. In the remainder of this chapter, we shall consider how MacIntyre can account for these issues in his terms and how this demonstrates the applicability of his theory. Not only can MacIntyre’s theory explain the total moral failure just described, but the example of Auschwitz provides a stress-test that shows what a functioning morality minimally requires.

In chapter two, we saw how MacIntyre links virtues to practices and the narrative self and how he grounds his moral theory by connecting these elements to the notion of a moral tradition as an extended exploration, in theory and in practice, of the “good life for man.” In the following section, I argue that the destruction of any coherent moral tradition for inmates to rely on introduced the arbitrariness that MacIntyre argues characterizes emotivist conceptions of moral judgement. MacIntyre’s account, by contrast with the emotivist conception, can make sense of the inmates’ limited and compromised morality by showing the failures at all three levels of his minimal conditions of morality: the social realm for the application of the virtues (in practices), the unity of the narrative self, and the moral resources of the inmates’ traditions. Thus in the final

two sections, I trace the implications of Auschwitz demoralization for MacIntyre's conception of the narrative self and the relation of virtues to practices, all of which points to the intelligibility of his theory.

At the first level of MacIntyre's minimal conditions of morality, camp life served largely to obliterate the social relations that characterize MacIntyre's account of practices as the primary realm for the application of the virtues. There was no opportunity for inmates to enter into the social realm of pre-camp practices because all of their actions were subsumed by the goal of survival. As I shall soon show, this fits with MacIntyre's emphasis on the importance to moral intelligibility of the narrative unity of an agent's life and its embeddedness in a moral tradition. Let us now consider MacIntyre's emphasis on the importance of a moral tradition in light of the circumstances in Auschwitz.

4.2.1 The Destruction of Tradition and the Interruption of the Quest for the Good

MacIntyre argues that morality can only function within a larger tradition that is an extended answer to the question "What is the good life for man?" Auschwitz obliterated traditions and made impossible a good life for a man. Millions of European Jews, among others, were violently uprooted from their communities of origin before, during, and after the Second World War. The extreme circumstances of the Holocaust led to severe reversals of fortune, including six million deaths, and the total uprooting, dispersal, and near destruction of an entire people and their ways of life. Auschwitz remains the paradigm example of the Nazi attempt to eradicate European Jewry during the Second World War (Feig, 333). Camp conditions foreclosed the possibility of a search for the good and co-authorship of a narrative displaying constancy of moral identity. Life was stripped down to "concrete forms of existence ... actual life and actual death, actual pain and actual defilement" where these now constitute "the medium of moral and spiritual being" (Des Pres, 69). It is no exaggeration to say that a "flourishing" life,

on any meaningful understanding of the concept, was impossible in the inmates' life-world of Auschwitz.

The unique conditions in Auschwitz provide a glimpse into a world that bears little resemblance to the everyday world in any functional society. In terms of its relation to tradition, Auschwitz was not only an alien environment, it also represented the complete antithesis of the close-knit Jewish communities that it sought to destroy. Inmates were pitted against each other in a struggle for survival in what Levi has described as the “Hobbesian” world of Auschwitz. This was a massive upheaval for Jews from small, isolated communities, particularly those located in Eastern Europe (*Drowned*, 134).²⁵ When normal social circumstances are drastically altered, and the usual rewards and penalties for good and bad behaviour—indeed even the reasons for *any* behaviour—have been upended, the appropriateness of the usual modes of explanation and justification are called into question.²⁶ *Contra* MacIntyre's account of moral life as essentially social and practice-based, Auschwitz presented inmates with a world that was essentially atomistic, hostile, and in which there was no opportunity for entry into—or creation of new—practices in shared pursuit of common goods. Moreover, inmate life was extremely restricted by Nazi rules and violence, thus further reducing the opportunities for the extension of communal moral life as MacIntyre envisions it. This new “tradition” of Auschwitz was wholly negative: it

²⁵ For a selection of texts illustrating the lost world of European Jewish life, see ch.2 “The World that Was Annihilated” in Rita S. Botwinick, ed, *A Holocaust Reader: From Ideology to Annihilation*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998, 24-44.

²⁶ Thus, although the Holocaust was largely ignored by post-World War Two Anglo-American moral philosophers, it is now receiving more attention in Anglo-American philosophy. It has long been a subject of investigation for Continental philosophers such as Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jurgen Habermas. For some recent examples that deal with the Holocaust from within the Anglo-American tradition, see: Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice* (London: Routledge, 2002); Eve Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre, eds., *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2003); and Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). For a sociological account of morality in Auschwitz, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

was about the obliteration of individuals and whole communities, not their flourishing in either material or moral terms.

The logic of the camp “tradition” is neatly summed up in Levi’s story about reaching for an icicle to quench his thirst shortly after his arrival in Auschwitz. A SS guard snatches it away from him and Levi asks “*Warum?*”, to which the guard replies, “*Hier ist kein warum* (there is no why here).” Levi goes on to explain, “The explanation is repugnant but simple: in this place everything is forbidden, not for hidden reasons, but because the camp has been created for that purpose” (*Survival*, 29). Eve Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre interpret this event as emblematic of the Holocaust:

The man’s reply to Levi was not a reasonable answer to a reasonable question. It was not, in a sense, even an unreasonable answer to a reasonable question. It was, more frighteningly and profoundly, a denial that, in the world of the extermination camp, ordinary notions of reasons, of evidence, of justifications for action had any place. For Levi, the fundamental non-rationality of the Holocaust made comprehending it impossible. To understand human actions is to map them within the space of reasons, yet the happenings at Auschwitz are for ever beyond that space. (ix)

Terence Des Pres also notes that “camp regulations were designed to make life impossible,” if not unintelligible (104). However irrational it was, the social reality of the camp was nevertheless seamless and in this sense terrifyingly rational in its reduction of life to mere survival in the face of overwhelming odds. In this sense, the “culture” or “tradition” of Auschwitz had its own standards of excellence, its own practices, and those who arrived and wanted to survive had to quickly learn them.

To put this in MacIntyre’s terms, the world of Auschwitz was not an extended exploration, in word and deed, of “the good life for man.” To the extent that Auschwitz had a “moral philosophy” which expressed its sociology—as MacIntyre maintains must be true of all social settings—it was the antithesis of the conditions MacIntyre requires for virtue and a good

human life. The world of Auschwitz was an exploration of questions such as, “What is the worst possible life for man, up to and including the worst possible death?”, “What depths will a human being sink to in order to survive in extreme conditions?” and “What kinds of assaults on their dignity and moral identity can individuals endure before they succumb physically and morally to the pressures of the *Lager*?” In this sense, the “tradition” of the camp functioned to obliterate the lives and traditional moral resources of the inmates. It offered them no opportunities for exploration of a good life, no social roles that were connected to the preservation and extension of the goods of communal life, and indeed no chance at the determination of their own lives and moral identities within an extended tradition in the way that MacIntyre claims is a necessary condition for the intelligibility of moral life.

At its simplest, the orienting question of camp life was “What do I need to do to survive these horrible conditions?” This offered only one narrative script: that of “inmate” in the negative “tradition” of Auschwitz. Even the difference between inmate as “victim” or as “survivor” was not under inmates’ control, as the previous chapter showed that death could come at any time and for any reason. To the extent that Auschwitz formed a new “tradition,” it was amoral and inconsistent, and it didn’t have any aspiration toward a good life. Whether inmates were transferred from secular, integrated life in Western Europe or the small Jewish *shtetls* (villages) of Eastern Europe, no unified, coherent tradition of their former lives carried over into Auschwitz. As noted in chapter three, camp life was alien and horrible for all new arrivals, and barely tolerable even for “old numbers” who managed to adapt to the new “traditions” of Auschwitz. (We shall discuss particular practices and virtues in section 4.2.3.)

Life in Auschwitz was reduced to survival: Inmates had to fulfill their basic needs and avoid unnecessary life- and health-endangering risks. Inmates learned quickly that they had to secure food, clothing, shoes, and workplace advantages to ensure their survival, and that they

couldn't rely on others for help in this regard. This emphasized the atomism that is at odds with MacIntyre's account of social and moral life. They also quickly learned that helping others, resisting violence and irrational Nazi orders, asking for help or explanation of their new circumstances or attempting to continue their old modes of living through, for example, religious practice was characteristically self-endangering in Auschwitz. This ruled out the pursuit of common endeavours aimed at promoting and extending the good of the community and hence dislocated inmates from MacIntyre's notion of tradition. Starvation, overwork, exhaustion, "collective punishments," language rules (all orders in German), and the ban on religious practice all served to destroy the traditions that inmates brought with them and prevented them from forging a new tradition tied to any non-instrumental end beyond survival. The new "tradition" of Auschwitz was harnessed to one simple goal: survival. To survive, an inmate characteristically had to abandon his or her traditions as, for example, when Elie Wiesel noted that fasting for Yom Kippur seemed not only pointless in Auschwitz, but also suicidal given the inmates' starvation diet.

This is not to say that aspects of the inmates' traditions did not continue to find expression in the narrowed camp life. There were ways in which inmates made attempts, largely futile but admirable nonetheless, to preserve their pre-camp traditions. This is to be expected, given MacIntyre's emphasis on how traditions are deeply constitutive of persons' moral identities. The expectation that inmates would suddenly adapt to the new "tradition" of Auschwitz and abandon their old traditions is unreasonable. Instead, they found themselves trying to continue with their pre-camp traditions in a world where those traditions and corresponding practices no longer held sway. For example, the clandestine religious practice noted in chapter three was one significant way in which inmates continued to draw on their moral traditions, in spite of the fact that such practices were expressly forbidden by the Nazis.

However, it is obvious that although such limited remnants of tradition continued for some inmates as holdovers from their past, there was no chance for them to establish and continue the deeper roots and fuller expression of their past lives in their new circumstances. For example, there was no way for inmates to systematically extend the teachings of their moral tradition through study and inculcation of young inmates into the ways of life of their (former) community. Even if there had been large numbers of young people to be so initiated into religious and moral tradition, there were no motivating reasons in the camp “tradition” of survival-at-all-costs for inmates to pursue this path, since clandestine religious practice was extremely dangerous in the camps. Indeed, given that the express aim of the Nazi “final solution” was to kill all of Europe’s Jews, it follows that Jewish traditions were also under attack and offered no chance at a good life in Auschwitz. This is, of course, not to say that there were *any* chances at a good life in Auschwitz, since I am arguing precisely that there were not. The point is that an inmate’s former moral tradition did not offer the tools that were necessary for survival in the new “tradition” and, indeed, could impede survival, for example, if an inmate were caught practicing their religion by the Nazis.

The story of a given tradition, e.g., that of religious Polish Jews or secular, integrated German Jews, and the scripts that it offered individuals as possible means of enacting their moral identities was shattered by the new story of deportation and life in Auschwitz. Living as they had was no longer a possibility, only life in the camp was. In this sense, MacIntyre’s narrative approach applies to traditions as a whole. Traditions are enacted narratives spanning generations, and just like individuals, traditions can lose their way and fail to embody their former moral concepts if they are subjected to sufficient strain (MacIntyre, 277).

However, the traditions of the Jewish communities of pre-war Europe did not lose their way and fall into decline because of internal inconsistencies in the moral philosophy which they

embodied, or disinterest, or the loss of allegiance of their members, but rather because of the all-out assault of the Nazis. MacIntyre emphasizes that the virtues are embedded at all three levels of his account of morality: practices, narrative selves and tradition. He argues that traditions are weakened by the failure to exercise the relevant virtues in “sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical character” (223). Here we see the force of the Nazi assault on Jewish tradition: not only did camp life destroy practices and interrupt the narratives of individuals’ lives, it also destroyed the traditions which supplied these two levels of moral life with their context. MacIntyre argues that there is a “virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one” (223). But this was no longer possible for Auschwitz inmates because they could no longer draw on or apply the resources of their former traditions in their new circumstances, and they could see the disappearance of those very traditions in the extermination of European Jewry taking place around them.

Thus, the diabolical reversals and corruptions of practices and language perpetrated by the SS help to make sense of the breakdown of the inmates’ pre-internment traditions. The Nazis intentionally transformed concepts in order to serve their ends. Nazi linguistic subterfuge involved prescribed code words to hide their murderous deeds: Killing became “final solution,” “evacuation,” or “special treatment;” deportation was called “resettlement,” or “labor in the East” (Arendt, 85). These “language rules” concealed Nazi deeds which further isolated their victims so that they were unprepared for what they found upon arrival in Auschwitz. Inmates suffered the loss of their traditions and the social contexts that gave them their sense when they were deported to Auschwitz, yet they were largely unprepared for this precisely because the Nazis were so effective at hiding their deeds from the outside world. The Nazis sought to reconfigure German and conquered European society by controlling thought and language (Todorov, 254-55),

and this involved the destruction of Jewish traditions and ways of life. The concentration camp universe was all-encompassing, alien, and left inmates with few means to deploy their traditional resources in making sense of their actions or moral identities.

Recall the older prisoner who told a new arrival to just imagine that he had “dropped out of the sky into this awful place.” In effect, this was the situation facing new arrivals. They brought with them all of their traditional understanding of how to make sense of their moral actions and identities and were then faced with a wholly alien environment in which their tradition no longer served as an anchor or useful reference point in orienting their new life. In the “space beyond reasons” it was impossible for agents to have an idea of the good life, and thus impossible for them to be co-authors of their lives within an established tradition in pursuit of the good. Thus, it is no surprise that we should see widespread demoralization at the level of the narrative self which MacIntyre claims is crucial to the intelligibility of moral life. We have seen that the breakdown of tradition in Auschwitz and its replacement with a wholly negative “tradition” destroyed one level for the embedding of the virtues in Auschwitz; now let us consider how this had similar effect on the narrative self.

4.2.2 The Breakdown of the Narrative Self

It is clear that the interruption of an agent’s life, the disruption and thwarting of their goals and projects—especially in the hellish circumstances of Auschwitz—can mar an agent’s life. Inmates had no new, intelligible narrative of a tradition and its accompanying values and scripts upon arrival in Auschwitz. All there was left was to survive, but to survive is not to have a cohesive narrative with goals, projects, social commitments and connections in the way that MacIntyre argues is vital to forming an identity with constancy as one lives towards certain (scripted) possibilities and away from others in a fulfilling life.

If inmates came from the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Europe, they tended to be more familiar with Nazi methods yet were still unprepared for the extremity of what they faced in Auschwitz. In this sense, inmates were like the badly-scripted children who lacked the moral resources and stories of a tradition to make their lives meaningful and offer them possibilities in living out their quest for the good. Indeed, inmates were even worse off than our fictional children since there is no meaningful way in which one could pursue a “good life” in Auschwitz, although one could be better or worse to the extent that they managed to resist or succumb to Des Pres’ “permanent occasion for corruption” noted above. But such circumstances do not fulfill MacIntyre’s stipulation that a tradition and its roles provide opportunities for an agent to live their life in pursuit of goods that are at least partly defined by the tradition to which they belong. In this sense, inmates were adrift with no orienting tradition (their holdovers were no guide in Auschwitz) and no sense of how to accommodate themselves to the scripts available in their new circumstances.

However, in one important sense, the inmates were very much unlike the badly-scripted children: Inmates had a tradition, its values and scripts to draw on, but their problem was that their moral resources could not be applied in their new surroundings. And this problem of having a moral identity drawn from past life, but no occasion for its embodiment in the present was disorienting for inmates. MacIntyre claims that an agent’s moral identity can only be made sense of in terms of how it fits into a larger tradition of a quest for the good life (even when this involves rejecting one’s identity), but there was no such possibility for inmates. This radical break in the narrative of an agent’s life took place on many levels: they were taken from their homes and communities; separated from their families and friends—often violently so; they had often already endured the expropriation of their homes and property and herding into the deprivations of ghetto-life; they had lost their occupations and other social roles; they were

forbidden to practice their religion; they endured the initial Auschwitz “shock-phase”; and, finally, they often found themselves alone in the alien environment of the camp where they had to learn a new social role when reduced to a numbered inmate subjected to all of the horrible conditions described in chapter three. In all of these ways, inmates were unable to further their quests for the good and maintain the stability of their narrative self-understanding as inhabitants of *this* village, practitioners of *this* religion and occupation, relatives of *those* others, and so on. Inmates were deprived of all of the contextual narrative-forming factors that MacIntyre maintains are crucial to making sense of moral life and identity.

MacIntyre claims that describing an individual’s actions involves placing them in a narrative sequence, and this is indeed possible *after* the Holocaust as we have a narrative and role of “survivor.” However, at the time of the inmates’ deportation and imprisonment, there was no such public narrative for making sense of an agent’s actions, and indeed, there seemed to be no possibility of a future, which precludes any forward-looking narrative or role at all. The fact that inmates were closed off from the rest of the world reinforces this point. In MacIntyre’s terms, inmates did not live out their lives as a quest “in light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future” (215). Instead, survivors lived a fragmented, day-to-day life subject to irrational orders such as the SS response to Levi that there is no “why” in Auschwitz. This is to say that inmates had almost no control over their circumstances and no decision-procedures for determining their actions, to the extent that this was possible. Their lives were fragmented into a series of survival reactions where there were few opportunities and no good reasons to act on their former moral values. In this sense, the inmates were like the emotivist conception of moral judgement: they were not provided with contextual reasons for grounding their moral actions and identities—other

than survival.²⁷ This picture of the fragmentation of inmates' lives corresponds with much of the psychological literature that describes the stages of decline from the "shock-phase" to the "reaction-phase" to survival mode that inmates experienced. However, this does not point to a flaw in MacIntyre's theory, but rather to its intelligibility: he can make sense of this in terms of the interruption of the narrative unity of a life, the loss of practices and thus internal goods, and the breakdown of the socially cooperative arena(s) for the application of the virtues. Given that practices were largely obliterated by camp life and that even surviving practices could not be fashioned together to form a coherent narrative unity in an inmates' life, this supports MacIntyre's specification of narrative unity as a minimal condition of the moral life.

What Garrard and Scarre call the "fundamental non-rationality of the Holocaust" captures what inmates experienced as the disconnection of the reasons for acting virtuously from the stories that provide the background conditions for moral action. MacIntyre claims that this way of understanding actions results in the notion of a separate sphere of "morality" divorced from the rest of our lives and focused on the correctness or rightness of discrete acts, and he thinks that this is an unintelligible notion (232-36). In this sense, moral life in Auschwitz was like the free choice of the emotivist conception of moral judgement: There were no longer good reasons for doing any action except what was required for survival, that is to say, that moral reasons were overridden by prudential and other self-regarding reasons.

But, in an important respect, camp life did not support the emotivist conception of morality because the widespread demoralization the camp engendered should not have happened if the moral life is simply a matter of applying the correct judgements (based on either reason or the emotions) to the circumstances in which an agent finds himself. The fact that there were no

²⁷ This is not to say that survival was not a good reason for action. Indeed, it was, but where this came to conflict with what we normally think of as *moral* considerations—for example concern for others or for one's own integrity—the effect of the camp was to override traditional moral reasons for action.

moral constraints—obviously, there were severe non-moral constraints from the Nazis and *Kapos*—on inmates’ behaviour, and that widespread demoralization still resulted, supports MacIntyre’s claim that the moral resources of a tradition and the intelligibility of the narrative of an agent’s life are necessary requirements to make sense of their moral actions and identity. For, if the foregoing is correct, here we have people stripped of traditions, a narrative and a good life, in which its survivors are demoralized thereby.

MacIntyre is right to say that the only way to understand any action or utterance is to place it in a context. This involves placing it both within the context of the unity, i.e., the ongoing narrative, of a human life, and the narrative of a tradition. We have already seen how the narratives of a tradition and of individuals can break down; let us now consider what remained at MacIntyre’s first level of description of the moral life in practices.

4.2.3 Surviving Practices and Limited Virtues in Auschwitz

Auschwitz was not a community that fostered pursuit of the good and the excellence of its members in shared pursuit of communal activities. It did not offer opportunities for inmates to enter into socially-established practices in pursuit of common goods. To the extent that there were opportunities for inmates to apply their (pre-camp) excellences within a practice, these were now tied primarily to the external good of survival rather than the shared pursuit of the continuance and extension of standards of excellence. For example, the musicians in the camp orchestra played primarily for the external good of increasing their chances of survival rather than extending the standards of excellence in music. Similarly, there was no time or inclination for the dedication to other social, practical, intellectual and creative pursuits in a world reduced to survival concerns. Yet, there were still instances of virtuous behaviour in Auschwitz, as we saw in some of the stories of inmate co-operation and resistance to the Nazis.

An immediate objection to my account of the ability of MacIntyre's theory to cope with the circumstances of Auschwitz is to ask how he can explain the fact that there were some stories of courage, compassion, kindness, even heroism that point to the continued functioning of morality there. If the virtues did persist in Auschwitz, then isn't MacIntyre's account of the minimal conditions necessary for the exercise of the virtues mistaken? This objection misses the mark for three reasons.

First, we needn't deny that fragments of previous lives survived for some inmates, including virtues such as the courage evidenced in Rosa Robota's resistance. But inmates did not have whole lives, there was little solidarity amongst them, no particular rational planning of their lives through ordering their goals and commitments, and all of this supports MacIntyre's account of the minimal conditions of morality. Recall that he gives a three-fold account of the nature of the virtues and their place in moral life: first at the level of practices, then in providing unity to the narrative self, and finally in maintaining and extending the moral life of a tradition. We have already seen how there was failure at the latter two levels of MacIntyre's account. He argues that the virtues may fail us at all three levels, while the virtues must be embedded at all three levels to provide constancy and intelligibility to the moral life: "no human quality is to be accounted a virtue unless it satisfies the conditions specified *at each of the three stages*" (275, original emphasis). Thus, he does not deny that quasi-virtues may persist at the first level of practices to varying degrees. His deeper claim is that if the virtues are not embedded at all three levels, then we cannot have a functional morality. And this is exactly what we see in the life-world of Auschwitz: systematic failure at all three levels, which does not preclude the endurance of some particular instances of virtuous behaviour as holdovers from the inmates' pre-camp lives.

Second, and relatedly, the exercise of the virtues—especially courage and honesty—in Auschwitz was characteristically self-endangering and tended to be abandoned fairly quickly by

inmates seeking to survive the extreme conditions of the camp. Here the inmates would have brought with them their predispositions to courage (to the extent that they had them still—this varies amongst any group of people), but they would often learn too late that acting courageously in Auschwitz was likely to be more self-endangering than in civilian life and with less chance of achieving a positive result such as the protection of loved ones or the preservation of other goods worthy of endangering oneself. For example, Levi recounts a story of a man who, on his first day in camp, “answered the first punch he had received with punches and was massacred by three *Kapos* in coalition” (*Drowned*, 83). Or, recall the brother who courageously came to his sibling’s aid with the result that they were both beaten to death.

Moreover, in its most self-endangering forms, such as escape attempts or armed resistance, courage was a liability in Auschwitz because of the collective punishments detailed in chapter three. Heroic acts of self-sacrifice were also arguably counter-productive for the reason that Des Pres notes: such behaviour added one’s own death to the evil tally. Once inmates realized that outright resistance was both futile and counter-productive, they found this to be deeply demoralizing, as Levi’s anecdote about the hanging shows. Of course, some inmates, such as Rosa Robota and the members of the SK uprising, did show extraordinary courage in the face of the demoralizing conditions of the camp but these remain exceptions that didn’t in a meaningful way lead to a good life or the furtherance of a tradition.

The third response to the objection that the leftover virtues in Auschwitz point to a flaw in MacIntyre’s theory is that the virtues in fact became changed or transvalued in the extreme conditions of the camp. This is precisely the kind of decline that MacIntyre predicts will occur in the absence of all three of his minimal conditions of the moral life. MacIntyre admits that traditions can fall into decline and that qualities that would be virtues if they satisfied all three conditions may persist at the first level of practices or even the second level of the narrative self

(275). The virtues at Auschwitz were holdovers from a past unity of moral theory and practice, but in the new circumstances, the virtues lost their grounding. Let us consider the transvaluation of honesty to illustrate this point.

For most inmates—especially those in the general population—the most successful means of survival was to adapt as quickly as possible to the camp conditions. Prisoners had to find ways to cope in Auschwitz as soon as possible or they risked death by starvation, overwork, or violence at the hands of SS guards or fellow prisoners, as well as the ever-present danger of “selection” for the gas chambers. “Selections” provided an early initiation into Auschwitz’ new transvalued form of the core virtue of honesty. Against their likely settled disposition to answer questions honestly, new inmates learned that honesty about illness or injury could lead to selection for the gas chambers (Levi, *Survival*, 124-129). “Old numbers”—inmates who had lasted a long time in Auschwitz—counseled newer inmates to lie to the Block Elders and SS about their age and health in order to avoid the gas chamber. Thus, contrary to an inmate’s settled disposition to tell the truth, especially to those in authority, survival in Auschwitz demanded the opposite, and for purely self-regarding reasons.

Indeed, information was not always shared willingly amongst inmates: Levi describes how when some prisoners knew of a selection in advance, they deliberately withheld this information so that they would have a better chance of preparing themselves to pass the inspection and stave off death for another day—at their comrades’ expense (*Survival*, 124). This supports Levi’s claim that Auschwitz was a Hobbesian world, and shows that Auschwitz did not meet any of MacIntyre’s conditions for important moral conceptions: Since practices as social, co-operative and aimed at internal goods are the first realm for the application of the virtues, such a Hobbesian world does not even satisfy MacIntyre’s first condition for the specification of the moral life. Moreover, honesty is one of the cardinal virtues for MacIntyre, so a morality that

rules out honesty for instrumental reasons also does not meet his minimal conditions. Indeed, in the camps, dishonesty was often a necessary survival tactic: inmates learned that they should lie to the SS and camp functionaries and that they should even sometimes lie to their comrades to secure a survival advantage. Here MacIntyre can respond to the objection about the persistence of some virtues by noting that without the grounding of his entire account of the moral life, the virtues remained (occasionally) functional means-ends concepts, but were divorced from any end except for survival and thus from the usual moral constraints.

A transvaluation of honesty—whereby the appropriate terms of its application become redefined by circumstances such that it no longer applies in the old ways—also factored into one of the chief means of augmenting one’s chances for survival, which was to “organize” extra rations of food through theft and barter. As noted earlier, inmates availed themselves of every opportunity to steal food, clothing, shoes and other necessities. This involved “dishonesty” because it was stealing and thus required inmates to contravene their settled disposition to be honest (to the extent that they were honest upon arrival in camp). There were external restrictions on “organizing”: the camp rules forbade such behaviour and so it exposed inmates to the risk of serious punishment—the SS searched all prisoners returning from work details and meted out 25 lashes for theft, which often lead to death (Des Pres, 106). But one cannot sensibly say that in the circumstances inmates were unjustified in carrying out such “theft.” This would be to illegitimately apply the “civilian” moral code to Auschwitz, where it did not fit the circumstances (*Drowned*, 81). The point is that when life was reduced to the pursuit of a single end—survival—the inmates reconfigured their conception of honesty so that “organizing” became an accepted and necessary activity.

Indeed, although “organizing” was dishonest in the shallow sense, it also required cooperation and hence honesty *amongst* prisoners in order to outwit the SS:

[A]lthough on occasion the individual prisoner had a chance to grab something for himself, most of the time the items of daily need could only be acquired through collective action; hence the social significance of the word *organize*, used to cover all forms of illegal, life-sustaining activity (Des Pres, 105).

“Organizing” also required countless small acts of courage—much less demonstrative than Rosa and the SK’s self-sacrifice, but arguably more essential—to outwit the Nazis at the risk of severe punishment. In this regard, Auschwitz did have “surviving practices” in terms of co-operative activities that were helpful to survival and required the virtues of courage and restricted honesty amongst inmates. Thus the virtues played a role in camp life, but they functioned only as vestiges of an earlier moral order since they became disconnected from the context and tradition that connected them to the quest for the good life. Here the virtues of courage and honesty were linked to survival as an end and focused on procuring external goods. Thus, MacIntyre can explain the persistence of these types of courage and honesty at the level of his partial and first account of the virtues where the child has motivating reasons to act virtuously to get the fifty cents from his grandfather. Similarly, inmates had reasons to act courageously and co-operate honestly with each other to obtain external goods such as food and clothing necessary for their survival. But we cannot call those reasons *moral* in the normal sense of the word.

To the extent that it required co-operation and partial forms of honesty and courage, “organizing” was a “practice” that was indigenous to camp life. But the virtues here could not be fitted into a tradition or the constancy of a narrative self. And the practice of “organizing” does not meet MacIntyre’s standard for the specification of a practice because it was chiefly a “device for achieving external goods,” albeit goods vital for survival. Recall that MacIntyre argues that external goods are objects of competition, and so the pursuit of external goods cannot sustain the virtuous co-operation required for shared pursuit of the good through the development and extension of practices. This is not to say that there were not some instances of inmate co-

operation that were not primarily focused on external goods. Possible exceptions include the “organizing” done to further camp resistance and to help save inmates’ lives through various means of co-operation in the camp system. For example, prisoners smuggled inmates slated for the gas chambers and hid them in the typhus wards since the SS were afraid to enter those blocks for fear of contracting disease. (Des Pres, 107). Similarly, inmate medical staff helped women who gave birth in camp to dispose of their newborns as stillborn—even when they were not—since the automatic SS response to mothers with children was to throw both in the gas chambers (Des Pres, 129). Both of these co-operative activities required a form of honesty—the ability to keep secrets, a subspecies of honesty, since to betray one’s comrades’ trust would be dishonest—and the courage to risk severe punishment from the SS.

Thus, demoralization was not complete in Auschwitz, but even where there was virtuous behaviour left, such acts of courage or compassion were divorced from the circumstances that a functioning society and tradition would provide. For example, deliberately sacrificing a healthy newborn in order to save the mother’s life points to the resolution of a dilemma that reinforces the supremacy of survival—rather than a quest for the good—as a motivating reason for action. This underscores the attenuated morality produced by the extreme circumstances even where demoralization was not complete in every and all respects.

A certain kind of justice also found its expression in Auschwitz in response to the particularity of the circumstances, but also in the limited ways that MacIntyre’s account of the minimal conditions of the moral life would predict. Inmates administered swift and brutal justice to those who violated the camp’s informal rules of survival, which was again the chief end that ordered their moral conduct. The most crucial aspect of the frail and limited ethics of the camp was “the bread law” which was the “foundation and focal point of moral order in the concentration camps” (Des Pres, 140). “Organizing” was seen as legitimate activity, theft from

fellow inmates was not. Survivor Rudolph Vrba explains what happened to bread thieves in Auschwitz:

“So what happened? Did the others beat him up?”

“They killed him of course. What’s the use of beating up a bastard like that?”

That was the law in Block 18. If a man stole your food, you killed him. If you were not strong enough to carry out the sentence yourself, there were other executioners; it was rough justice, but it was fair because to deprive a man of food was to murder (quoted in Des Pres, 141).

Des Pres argues that “the bread law” was necessary “not just to protect the individual, but to preserve the basis of trust and community on which everyone’s life and humanness depended” (141). Accordingly, there was some sense of justice in relations amongst prisoners. This included the direct eye-for-an-eye punishment noted earlier that inmates doled out to former *Kapos* when they got the chance. Levi notes another tactic for punishing fellow inmates who violated the camp’s informal rules: prisoners in the “Work Office” would switch the registration numbers on the “Selection” list to get rid of particularly violent and abusive *Kapos*, thus using the SS machinery to lessen the brutality meted out by inmate functionaries (*Drowned*, 74).

Although there was a sense of justice amongst prisoners, it cannot be said that the world of Auschwitz was “just” in MacIntyre’s sense of each “getting what he deserved,” since no human being deserves the treatment which inmates received. Even where there was a sense of rough justice, this did not connect to an ongoing tradition with an articulated conception of justice (for example, a tradition of secular or religious law), nor did it connect up to the narrative self in evaluations made in terms of an inmates’ character as a whole. Moreover, justice was not only rough in Auschwitz, but there was no possibility for anything more. (It may be that the wild west could be equally rough, but if so, there were other possibilities one could work towards.) In this sense, Auschwitz was a terribly “demoralized” place because the Nazis made it so. Thus,

although inmates enforced some justice amongst themselves, they were nonetheless made to feel powerless in the face of the injustice of Nazi behaviour and the very structure of the camp.

In Auschwitz, inmates were made to feel powerless by being systematically disconnected from their actions. Inmates were repeatedly presented with situations where their (deeply-held) values and inclinations did not apply, or could no longer bring about the expected or desired result and might even bring about the opposite result, thus bringing their stability of character under attack. For example, as noted, an inmate who told the truth to a guard about an illness that made him unable to work, in an effort to get a reprieve from crushing slave labour—and so to increase his chances for survival—would in fact be sent to the gas chambers at the next available “selection.” Here the virtue of honesty did not have its usual application or its characteristic or desired effect. Rather than increasing trust and solidarity amongst humans, honesty was likely to be a death sentence for inmates who told the truth to the SS. Honesty became transvalued and tied to survival as its chief motivation and justification.²⁸ The new rule for its application was: “Be honest with your comrades when it will help you to secure some external goods, such as through ‘organizing,’ but be dishonest with the Nazis and inmate functionaries, since to be honest will likely lead to punishment or death.” Thus, inmates had constantly to compromise their past moral virtues in order to survive in the camps.

Prolonged existence in such a world systematically chips away at an agent’s character by forcing them to abandon or suspend their former values, dispositions and reasons for action. And this is Levi’s point in the anecdote about witnessing the hanging of the resistor: the inmates were too demoralized to offer solidarity and resistance, yet they retained enough of their moral sense to feel deeply ashamed at their inability to act. To the extent that there was a morality in Auschwitz,

²⁸ I do not mean to suggest that morality’s possibility requires that being virtuous might not on occasion be at the cost of one’s life, but where being virtuous is always at the cost of one’s life, then one cannot have a life with a stable narrative self, a tradition, and so on.

it was, on MacIntyre's terms, a primitive morality focused on survival rather than a full moral tradition complete with practices and an orienting conception of the good. Auschwitz inmates were stuck at the first level of the classical teleological structure—man-as-he-happens-to-be, and at his worst possible due to the demoralizing circumstances. They had no opportunity to realize their “essential natures” nor did they have the moral resources of a tradition applicable in Auschwitz to so move them.

4.3 General Conclusions

It is a presupposition of this study that virtue ethics, specifically MacIntyre's iteration, provide a fruitful avenue of exploration of the demoralization found in Auschwitz. MacIntyre's virtue ethics offers the conceptual resources to evaluate an agent's character *and* its relation to the world in which they act. Consideration of the minimal requirements for moral agency in terms of character and social circumstances is a helpful way to make sense of what happens to moral agents in extreme circumstances. MacIntyre's concept of virtue, because it must be made sense of in terms of the long-term stability of an agent's character, can be usefully employed to describe the demoralization of an agent. One such explanation involves making sense of what happens to agents in extreme circumstances by showing how the virtues may fail us in such circumstances. Furthermore, MacIntyre's emphasis upon the importance of placing moral evaluation within the context of a full, meaningful human life also helps to clarify ways in which agents became demoralized in Auschwitz. I have argued that reflection upon extreme circumstances and reversals of fortune, particularly where these systematically destroy a community's life (rather than victimizing a prisoner or two), can shed light upon the moral experience of a specifically modern phenomenon: Auschwitz. Moreover, such reflection points to the plausibility of MacIntyre's minimal conditions of a functional morality by explaining the demoralization of Auschwitz and its inmates in terms of his theory.

The thrust of MacIntyre's whole argument is that the tradition of the virtues requires that we see our lives as socially embodied narratives (in word and deed) within the larger ongoing narrative of a tradition and a community (220-23). His account of the good life begins with the notion of the self as determined, at least in part, by its social roles and that agents learn standards of excellence by entering into a variety of social practices (186-7). Human life is essentially social and practice-based and human beings are only able to achieve the goods internal to practices through possession of the virtues, especially honesty, courage and justice (191).

A second element of MacIntyre's account of morality involves the notion of the "narrative self." He argues that we must understand human lives as enacted narratives in order to make sense of an agent's actions, long-term goals, and character traits (i.e., virtues) (206-12). And, of course, one important feature of narratives is that they can be interrupted. Thus, I have argued that MacIntyre's account of moral agency can adequately describe the demoralization of agents at Auschwitz in terms of the interruption of the narratives of their lives.

The third element, which unites the first two, is the view that the narrative self can only be furnished with the background conditions that make its actions and long-term choices intelligible by its being embedded in a tradition which is itself an enacted narrative spanning generations (222). Thus, MacIntyre rejects the emotivist conception of moral agency that sees the self as an atomistic individual capable of determining its values in abstraction from social life and the moral resources of a tradition (220). MacIntyre's moral philosophy can account for the consequences of the social dysfunction of Auschwitz by describing the ways in which camp life systematically denied agents access to the resources of their communities and moral traditions and thus more closely resembled what he calls the "emotivist" conception of moral judgement.

Three main points can be used to summarize MacIntyre's account of the virtues in the face of Auschwitz:

(1) Auschwitz sought to destroy Jewish traditions, including traditions of the virtues; Auschwitz was so successful in this that it militates against the survival and exercise of the virtues by disconnecting them from the history and tradition of pursuit of the “good life for man” according to rich traditions of theory and practice.

(2) Auschwitz interrupted and fragmented the narrative unity of agent’s lives. Inmates were torn out of their community’s ways of life, thereby removing them from socially-established pursuit of common goods. These factors combined to destroy practices and thus remove the main arena for the application of the virtues.

(3) In a Hobbesian struggle for survival there is hardly any realm for the application of the virtues. In the demoralized world of Auschwitz the exercise of the virtues is at best inconsistent, and at worst, characteristically self-endangering. Thus, both practices and virtues were severely limited in Auschwitz.

MacIntyre argues that contemporary moral utterances make appeals to standards that might have made sense in a different setting but no longer do so due to fragmentation of our moral conceptual framework. Thus he claims that what we now have are “simulacra of morality.” In this sense, Auschwitz presents an extreme example of MacIntyre’s diagnosis of the problem when there is no longer a unity between moral theory and practice. The concentration camp universe was all-encompassing and disrupted inmates’ ability to employ their traditional resources for making sense of their actions or moral identities. Inmates brought with them a way of life which no longer had real application in their new circumstances, yet the power of the appeal of the old ways would hardly evaporate. Thus, the problem is not that inmates had lost the virtues as they had conceived of them, but that they had them as holdovers from their past, where now the application of the virtues (if any) is not effective in ways that contributed to their traditions, sense of self or reasonably working towards a goal in life. Instead, virtue’s only reward was punishment and likely death. This was disorienting in the extreme to have deep

commitments which were no longer functional in the ways they once were. Thus inmates faced a combination of the familiar and the unimaginably horrible, and in this sense, camp life was different from beginning anew with new rules and no commitments. The problem was that the old commitments could not be actualized in the new environment, with its new rules, without life-endangering consequences. This supports MacIntyre's claim that the virtues must play out at all three levels of practices, narrative self-understanding, and ongoing tradition for the moral life to make sense.

The link between inmate life in Auschwitz and philosophical ethics has been established in this thesis by considering the ability of Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue theory to account for the stability (or lack thereof) of character in the face of extreme circumstances. In this thesis I argue that MacIntyre's account of narrative moral agency as fundamental to the intelligibility of moral life passes the limit test of Auschwitz experience by showing that the intelligibility of moral life is called into question when the narrative nature of moral agency is seriously interrupted and fragmented. As such, he offers good conceptual resources for understanding the challenges that inmates faced in the application of the virtues in Auschwitz. This is so because he emphasizes the manner in which any moral theory must be capable of social embodiment, and he takes seriously the notion that every social situation reflects a set of moral standards that can be articulated theoretically. This allows MacIntyre to spell out the moral theory embodied in the moral landscape of Auschwitz *and* to judge it deficient in terms of his conceptual framework of a core conception of the virtues. He can do so in terms of the breakdown of a tradition at large and the forging of a new Nazi "tradition" of demoralization, the breakdown of narrative selves, and some examples of the surviving practices in Auschwitz and the limited realm for the application of the virtues which model the first level of MacIntyre's moral theory but do not cohere due to the systematic failures at the levels of tradition and the narrative self.

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