Retorting Arguments, Overcoming Limitations, Aiming at Truth:
A Comparison of MacIntyre and Transcendental NeoThomism

Tamás Paár*
Graduate Student
Doctoral School of Political Theory
Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Abstract. In this paper I will summarize the criticism of transcendental NeoThomism in Alasdair MacIntyre's works; offer points of agreement where MacIntyre's Thomistic-Aristotelian arguments and ideas get very close to some of the transcendental NeoThomists'; look for the possible roots of these commonalities in Aquinas's works; and show more at length what we could gain theory-wise from contrasting some of their views by initiating an argument on the question of fallibility and infallibility.

In the present paper I would like to suggest an armistice between two strands of Thomism: transcendental NeoThomism and MacIntyrean Thomistic Aristotelianism. A dialogue should be initiated between these two schools to overcome some past criticism that was the result of superficial understanding. In fact, some of my points below tackle the issue of how rational dialogue is central to both schools—to evade such a dialogue between them would, therefore, not only be a great missed opportunity but would also go against their own principles. Beyond merely comparing these schools, I also wish to show that their points are worth considering, and that attempts at reconciling them may bring us important insights in general.

    After offering a short summary of MacIntyre's and Rahner's views on what does not pass as true Thomism, I will introduce the method that is used both by MacIntyre and the transcendental Thomists. I will show how they use this method with regard to various topics, and at the end of this paper, I will endeavour to resolve an important issue about this method by offering a solution to a problem raised by MacIntyre's ideas.

---

*Graduate Student, Doctoral School of Political Theory, Pázmány Péter Catholic University.

I. Whose Thomism? Which Aquinas?

Most of the time, Alasdair MacIntyre's attitude towards transcendental
NeoThomism seems to be sheer hostility. In his book, *Three Rival
Versions of Moral Enquiry*, there is a chapter that tackles the problem
of what he calls 'too many Thomisms'.[1] Here, he argues that after *Aeterni
Patris,* many philosophers and theologians became self-styled Thomists
without a proper knowledge of Aquinas. When decent scholarship on
Aquinas started, he suggests, it was already too late. Thomism had
become quite a diverse movement, with many rather deeply incompatible
theories held by its various representatives. These representatives engaged
the problems of contemporary philosophers and tried to solve them from
the angle of Thomism. By so doing, MacIntyre argues, they invoked
standards alien to Aquinas. Thus their enterprise was doomed to fail. As
the author tells us, these Thomists did not convince contemporary
philosophers, and they only generated more disagreements.

   In the chapter where MacIntyre recounts these intellectual incidents,
transcendental NeoThomists are rarely mentioned. Joseph Maréchal is
mentioned once, as just another figure multiplying controversies.[2] Karl
Rahner is mentioned only in passing, as MacIntyre notes that some
philosophers compared him to Antonio Rosmini.[3] It seems to be the case
that throughout MacIntyre's narrative about the history of 19th and 20th
century Thomism, Rosmini himself symbolizes the transcendental school
of Rahner as well. Yet Rosmini is only a character here who embodies a
dilemma of modern-day Thomism: either becoming acceptable to many
contemporary philosophers but ceasing to be Catholic, or to remain
Catholic but to lose the sympathies of the non-Catholic contemporaries.[4]

   Some years after *Three Rival Versions,* MacIntyre has published a
short, obscure 'advice for Thomists' in the newsletter of The Maritain

---

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry. Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and
Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 58-81.
[2] *Ibid.,* 74. Compare John Haldane's take on *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* where he
agrees with MacIntyre that transcendental Thomists were unfaithful to Aquinas's philosophy.
(Given the fact that MacIntyre notes the influence of Heidegger on Rahner, Haldane's remarks
on the relationship between Aquinas and Heidegger are also relevant.) See John Haldane,
'MacIntyre's Thomistic Revival: What Next?', in *After MacIntyre. Critical Perspectives on the
Work of Alasdair MacIntyre,* ed. Susan Mendus and John Horton (Cambridge: Polity Press,
1994), 100-102.
[3] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 71.
[4] *Ibid.,* MacIntyre goes on to say that 'in this respect Rosmini was the forerunner of much of the
Catholic modernism of the early twentieth century and of most of fashionable Catholic thought
since Vatican II'. This is the reason why Rosmini seems to stand here for Rahner, amongst others.

Society.[5] It is here that we find his most explicit judgement on transcendental NeoThomism so far. In his 1990 Aquinas Lecture he already emphasized that Aquinas did not engage in epistemology,[6] and here he accuses some Thomists of accepting the epistemological starting point of Kant—this is how, he says, 'that unfortunate hybrid, transcendental Thomism' was born.[7]

The least hostile treatment of transcendental Thomists is featured in his *Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*, titled *God, Philosophy, Universities*. Though Maréchal is the only transcendental Thomist mentioned here, his project is at least briefly introduced without any criticism. However, the final note by MacIntyre is still that Maréchal only added to the disagreement of Thomists when he approached and answered Kantian problems from a Thomist's point of view. 'Kantians, however, remained unconvinced and so too did many Thomists'—as MacIntyre summarizes the result of Maréchal's endeavour.[8]

Romanus Cessario, who has written *A Short History of Thomism* on MacIntyrean premises,[9] repeats word for word some thoughts of MacIntyre regarding the transcendental branch of Thomism from *The Maritain Notebooks* in the beginning of his work.[10] At the end, when he returns to these issues he claims that Thomism is made unstable if some self-proclaimed Thomists forget that 'some starting points in philosophy and theology are incompatible with those of Aquinas', and goes as far as to lament – perhaps regretfully – that 'no official body enjoys the authority to excommunicate someone from the company of Thomists'.[11] It seems that in the eyes of MacIntyreans, transcendental NeoThomists are partly responsible for the problem of 'too many Thomisms'.

Just like MacInyre, transcendental Thomists also sometimes codify the standards of being a 'real' Thomist. Rahner does this in his piece 'On Recognizing the Importance of Thomas Aquinas'. The main *sine qua non* that he identifies here is the thesis that theology (or philosophy) can never

---

[5] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Thomism and Philosophical Debate', *The Maritain Notebook* 3:2 (1995), 1-2. The paper was published in the column titled *Advice for Thomists*.

[6] 'For if the Thomist is faithful to the intentions of Aristotle and Aquinas, he or she will not be engaged, except perhaps incidentally, in an epistemological enterprise'. Alasdair MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 175.

[7] MacIntyre, 'Thomism and Philosophical Debate', 2.

[8] Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities. A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 154.

[9] See Romanus Cessario, *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005 1-2.

[10] *Ibid.*, 18.

[11] *Ibid.*, 96.

fully uncover the mystery that is God, the ineffable reality, since – measured against these – theology is in fact 'all straw'. According to Rahner, the label for the thought of those who do not bring this lesson home from Aquinas 'may be Thomism' from 'an historical point of view', but theirs will never be the kind of theology that is 'Thomas-inspired'.[12]

Apart from this, he only mentions 'certain simple lessons' that theologians could learn from Aquinas: e.g. 'to listen to, and to take seriously, the views of others, … to recognize … that one can only exercise self-criticism, and so be truly modern and avoid merely following the fashions of yesterday with the rest, by bearing in mind the ideas of earlier ages'.[13]

On most of these points Rahner and MacIntyre could agree, as it were (with the exception of course regarding the term 'modern' in the passage quoted above). Rahner praises Aquinas among other things for not succumbing to intellectual fashions and for always being open to what thinkers of fashion ignore and in general for paying attention to those things that seem irrelevant at the moment.[14] MacIntyre also commands Thomists to always look for all of the strongest arguments made so far – to be capable of entering dialogue and debate with these arguments – and to be open to criticism. In *The Maritain Notebooks,* when he criticizes the transcendental Thomists, he adds that 'if … Thomists … refuse to open themselves up to attentive points of view, they will find that they have become the victims of an ossified and dogmatic Thomism. Thomists should of course be dogmatic about dogma, but not about anything else'.[15] In his eyes, the proponents of the transcendental school were too quick to open up to modern philosophies; nevertheless, the ideal of an open mind is in fact shared by both him and transcendental Thomists like Rahner.

As this openness to dialogue and to self-criticism is cherished by both, it would be an error on the side of the latter to continue to ignore the strongest points of transcendental NeoThomism. Especially since there seem to be instructive points of agreement between them, which are invisible if we rely on superficial accounts of these Thomisms. In what follows, I set out to uncover further commonalities between transcendental Thomism and MacIntyrean thought. Sometimes the

---

[12] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (London – New York: Darton, Longman & Todd-Seabury, 1975), XIII: *Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, 10.
[13] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, XIII: 8.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] MacIntyre, 'Thomism and Philosophical Debate', 2.

common points appear to be more than similarities, other times the differences between the two schools seem to be such that a fruitful dialogue could result from comparing them. In this paper, my main example for the latter is a question of epistemology (faillibility and apodicticity) which I will tackle in the last section. Throughout my discussion, I will treat Rahner as the paradigmatic transcendental Thomist,[16] as he seems to be both the most well-known member of this school and its central figure, and I will mention others (such as Maréchal, Coreth, Donceel and Weissmahr) only in passing.[17]

II. The retorsive method

As noted above, MacIntyre advises philosophers to look for all the 'strongest arguments that have been advanced' for or against particular theses.[18] What would be the strongest arguments of transcendental Thomists? In their eyes, the answer would point to the so-called transcendental arguments they use. Indeed, this type of argument is so central for the movement that this constitutes the main reason for the name of their movement.[19]

---

[16] Sources that point to similarities between Rahner and MacIntyre are almost non-existent. An interesting exception is Hauerwas's *War and the American Difference*. Nevertheless, he does not compare the two in epistemological or metaphysical respects. Rather, he uses them to provide answers to the challenges that globalization constitutes for the Church. However, even he notes that 'Rahner and MacIntyre are strange bedfellows'. Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 137.

[17] One could, as is often done, reasonably treat Bernard Lonergan as a transcendental Thomist. However, dialogue between Lonerganian and MacIntyrean thought has already been initiated by quite a few others. Also, Lonergan is not mentioned at the places where MacIntyre criticizes Neo-Thomists. It seems more reasonable to base my comparison on someone whose philosophical inadequacy is at least hinted at by MacIntyre, and Rahner is both mentioned by MacIntyre and is actually a closer follower of Maréchal – whom MacIntyre talks about mainly as a transcendental Thomist – than Lonergan. For these reasons, I restrict myself to comparing mainly Rahner and MacIntryean Thomism. For comparisons of MacIntyre and Lonergan that are relevant to the questions tackled in the present paper, see, among orhers, Michael P. Maxwell, Jr., 'A Dialectical Encounter Between MacIntyre and Lonergan on the Thomistic Understanding of Rationality', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 33:4 (1993), 385-399; David Burrell, 'Autonomous Reason versus Tradition-Directed Inquiry: Mulla Sadra, Lonergan, MacIntyre, and Taylor', *Lonergan Workshop* Volume 21 (2008), 33-41.

[18] MacIntyre, 'Thomism and Philosophical Debate', 1. See Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism', in *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, ed. Klaus Brinkmann (Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), I: 4.

[19] Of course, transcendental argumentation is not the only method NeoThomists employ, and those who use these points or similar ones do not belong, just because of this, to the school of transcendental Thomism. Therefore, as it should be clear, I am not saying that MacIntyre is a

There are various ways these Thomists use this kind of argument and they offer somewhat different interpretations of their method. Nevertheless, what could be stated in general is that these arguments are designed so that they bring forward our implicitly accepted presuppositions, which are often characterized as undeniable. One way to characterize transcendental arguments is to break them down to two premises.[20] The first of their premises calls our attention to something *(x)* that we observe, that we experience, and claims that this phenomenon happens or that it exists. The second premise then is a conditional. It claims that in order for this phenomenon to be observed, something else *(y)* has to take place or exist as well. So the argument concludes that *y* takes place as well. A more general account of these arguments would be to say that they focus on the necessary conditions that enable something to take place.[21] One type of this argument focuses on our utterances, typically noting some feature of our claims. For instance, it may state in its first premise that someone claims *p*, and in its second premise that in order for that claim to make sense or to be true, it has to imply or presuppose *non-p*. So the argument concludes that stating *p* is self-undermining as it also implies *non-p*; therefore, as *p* cannot be stated in a meaningful and consistent way, *non-p* must be true.

This kind of transcendental argument is often dialectical in nature; that is, many instances of it are directed against some sceptical claim. Béla Weissmahr, who was called one of the masters of speculative argumentation by Emerich Coreth, characterizes this type of transcendental method – which he most often calls the retorsive argument

---

transcendental philosopher. However, using transcendental arguments is a key feature of this school. Donceel, in characterizing transcendental NeoThomism, lists as one of their five central tenets, and the main methodological one, the view that transcendental argumentation ('retorsion') is a valid way of reasoning. See Joseph Donceel, 'Transcendental Thomism', *The Monist* 58:1 (1974), 81-83.

[20] *Cf.* Ralph Walker, 'Transcendental Arguments Against Physicalism', in *Objections to Physicalism*, ed. Howard Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 61-62.

[21] In a paper on rights, MacIntyre defined this kind of argument the following way: 'By a transcendental argument I mean an argument which provides cogent grounds for some particular answer to a question of the form: "What has to be the case for it to be possible for us to judge that *p*?", where *p* is some statement that we do indeed judge to be true'. He suggests about such arguments that 'what always follows from a valid transcendental argument is a disjunctive conclusion of the form: Either such-and-such is the case or our judgements that *p* are not after all well-founded'. However, he seems to be disregarding the possibility that he later considers in his arguments for natural law: that some judgements of *p* are inescapably made. After all, in the paper just cited he only talks about 'judgements highly characteristic of the United States and similar legal systems and particularly of opinions in constitutional cases in such systems'—which are, of course, highly contingent. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Are There Any Natural Rights?* (Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1983), 18-19.

– in the following way. In using the retorsive method, he says, 'we turn the argument [or thesis] of our interlocutor against her' or against the argument itself.[22] This way, the retorsive method can show that 'the person making a claim, regardless of her will, *approves* of what she would like to deny—*by the very act of making her claim*'.[23]

Can MacIntyre disregard arguments of this kind? One could say that he shouldn't disregard them either because they are de facto of the strongest kind, or, at least they think so. But the main reason why MacIntyre should not disregard their arguments is that he too uses them. While transcendental Thomists employ them most often to establish speculative metaphysical theses,[24] MacIntyre turns to them typically in moral matters. But transcendental Thomists also use retorsive arguments sometimes to arrive at moral theses and MacIntyre also uses them on occasion in the domain of metaphysics.[25] I will give examples below for both kind of transcendental arguments. More specifically, my examples will be limited to retorsive arguments, as MacIntyre seems to use mainly this kind of transcendental argumentation. But first, let me note shortly that the reliance on these arguments on the part of MacIntyre seems to signify a new phase in his intellectual journey.

In an earlier stage of his project, MacIntyre criticized Kantian or transcendental arguments at various places. For example, in the postscript of *After Virtue*, he stated that to refute relativism completely would 'involve the successful resuscitation of the Kantian transcendental project', for which he has no interest.[26] As I will show below, he later actually used arguments that are akin to the Kantian transcendental type. He sometimes connects these later arguments to natural law as understood by Aquinas. It might be the case that in this regard, i.e., in turning to transcendental or retorsive arguments, Aquinas's influence on him increased since the beginning of the 1990's.[27]

---

[22] Béla Weissmahr, *A szellem valósága* (Budapest: Kairosz, 2009), 51. *Cf.* Béla Weissmahr, *Die Wirklichkeit des Geistes* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006), 41.

[23] Weissmahr, *A szellem valósága,* 52, emphasis added. Cf. Weissmahr, *Die Wirklichkeit,* 42.

[24] The transcendental school's characteristic metaphysical stance is one reason why not everyone who uses transcendental arguments should count as a transcendental NeoThomist at the same time.

[25] *E.g.* MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 46.

[26] MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory,* 3rd edn. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 277.

[27] I conceive this as a strand in MacIntyre's ouvre, which is not necessarily present in all of his works even since 1990. Most notably, it is not present in his latest book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity.* Some views expressed in that book seem to be either congruent or at least consistent with arguments that belong to this strand, while others are more or less incompatible with it. Given that there are both similitudes and differences, reviewing these might be useful to see how

Nevertheless, as far as I know, Aquinas himself doesn't use retorsive arguments in his ethics, not even to establish his account of natural law as MacIntyre does. Though Aquinas uses this kind of argument in metaphysical and what we may call – despite MacIntyre's and others' criticism of the concept – epistemological contexts. Weissmahr, while enumerating notable examples where the most important philosophers employed transcendental arguments, points to two different places where he spotted such arguments in Aquinas. The first one is from *Summa contra Gentiles*:

> Many propositions … are of such nature that he who denies them must posit them; for example, whoever denies that truth exists posits the existence of truth, for the denial which he puts forward he posits as true. The same is true of one who denies the principle that contradictories are not simultaneous; for, by denying this, he asserts that the negation which he posits is true and that the opposite affirmation is false, and thus that both are not true of the same thing.[28]

The other one is from *Summa Theologiae:*

> the existence of truth is self-evident. For whoever denies the existence of truth grants that truth does not exist: and, if truth does not exist, then the proposition 'Truth does not exist' is true: and if there is anything true, there must be truth.[29]

---

arguments of this more transcendental strand could reinforce certain ideas of that book, and also to see in which aspects MacIntyre has diverted from lines of arguments that he initiated earlier. In what follows, I will note a few (dis)similarities in footnotes below; however, a full comparison would deserve its own paper.

[28] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles,* II. 33.

[29] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I. 2 a 1 obi 3. This argument is explained by Maréchal the following way: 'The relation of truth is inherent to objective thought, for, if denied, it surges again from the very negation. When you say there is no truth, you affirm implicitly that to your present negative statement there corresponds a certain objective disharmony which you admit between thought in general and outside reality. In other words, you admit the existence of a relation of truth in the very act by means of which you claim to deny any relation of this kind… . Even when we try to deny as thoroughly, nay as wildly as possible … , negation is shored by affirmation.' Joseph Maréchal, *A Maréchal Reader*, ed. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 90-91.

Though Weissmahr does not quote the paragraph before the one above, it is also relevant. It reads:

> those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known, which the Philosopher (I Poster. iii) says is true of the first principles of demonstration.[30]

Now these paragraphs are quite peculiar because they come from the 'Objections', that is, the arguments of which Aquinas disproves. But while he rejects the *conclusions* of the arguments in which these parts are embedded, he does not deny the truth of what these parts of the objections have to say. That is, he leaves the *premise*s quoted above intact. Indeed, when he answers the objections, he seems to acknowledge the truth of the parts quoted by Weissmahr. As for the objections in *Summa Theologiae* he says 'in contrary' that nobody 'can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident; as the Philosopher ... states concerning the first principles of demonstration' and he adds that the terms of 'the first principles of demonstration ... are common things that no one is ignorant of'.[31]

However, the most notable use of retorsive argumentation by Aquinas is to be found in his *Commentary on Metaphysics* where he comments on Aristotle's way of introducing the principle of non-contradiction. Regarding this principle, he says that (a) 'no one can make a mistake or be in error regarding it'; (b) that it is 'self-evident' *(per se nota)*; and (c) that it 'is naturally known and not acquired'. Since he holds that only the single principle that is the firmest and the best-known satisfies all of these requirements, he might imply that there is no other thing about which (a), (b) and (c) are all true. Nevertheless, he surely thinks that all other first principles satisfy (b) and (c)—and perhaps one could argue that all 'prima principia' satisfy these three conditions.[32] Let us now turn to principles and theses that Thomists set out to establish in the same way as Aristotle and Aquinas establish the principle of non-contradiction.

---

[30] Aquinas, *ST* I, 2, a 1, obi 2.

[31] *Ibid.*, I, 2, a 1, co.

[32] He explicitly says this regarding condition (c): 'first principles become known through the natural light of the agent intellect'. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. by John P. Rowan (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1995), 599.

III. Objective truth as a good

As we have seen above, there are places in Aquinas where he uses transcendental arguments regarding the existence of truth. In fact both MacIntyre and Weissmahr used the same method to argue against relativism, for objective truth and for truth as a good.

In one of his reflections on *Fides et Ratio*, MacIntyre uses two arguments against Stephen Stich that seem to be transcendental. Here, I am going to summarize briefly only one of them. Stich suggests that abolishing any talk about truth would be more useful than to keep resorting to our 'truth-talk'. MacIntyre in his objection says that by stating this 'Stich himself presupposes a commitment to' truth and therefore cannot escape relying on truth. His own suggestion expresses a commitment against itself.[33] Quite obviously, MacIntyre's argument fits the definition of the retorsive method given by Weissmahr.

And why does Stich's suggestion imply a commitment to truth? Elsewhere, MacIntyre directs us to the papers of Peter Geach on assertion and he explains that 'we are entitled to ascribe claims to truth to the protagonists of rival moral standpoints … just because their assertions of their various and incompatible points of view are assertions'.[34] Instead of invoking here Geach's argument, let me summarize Weissmahr's reasoning that leads to the same conclusion. Every judgement, he notes, implies its truth by its act itself. If it is stated seriously and honestly, by its very act of asserting it tells us about it being true and its claim to truth indirectly and in a non-propositional way. If we do not make this claim to truth, we do not assert anything.

Similarly, MacIntyre holds that just like 'we cannot but presuppose – even when we fail to recognize that we presuppose – a realistic account of truth of the kind classically formulated by Aquinas',[35] 'we cannot but take truth to be a good'. [36] He basically explains that by claiming

---

[33] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 204.

[34] MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, 212. Here, he argues that 'Geach's thesis remains the best account of assertion that we possess' and defends his position against Blackburn and Dummett. This thesis, as he notes, implies that emotivism is misguided and he derives a realistic conception of truth from this. Though he admits even here that his points need development, in his most recent writings, including *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, he suggests that the disagreement between versions of emotivism and his Aristotelianism cannot be resolved by philosophical argument. Thus, he has departed from his earlier claims, which seems to be a major change in his position. Compare Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1-69.

[35] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics,* 214.

[36] *Ibid.,* 198.

something to be objectively true, which is inescapable when we communicate, we offer points for the consideration of our interlocutors, in light of which they could revise or strengthen those points that they (implicitly or explicitly) acknowledge as true (or false). As making this invitation is inescapable, it necessarily presupposes that truth is something that the other naturally seeks. As MacIntyre himself puts it, 'this invitation presupposes that truth is a good, independently of one's own particular moral standpoint, not a good the acknowledgement of which can be independent of all or any standpoints, but a good that is already implicitly acknowledged within... any standpoint'.[37]

Essentially the same concept of truth as a good leads Weissmahr to the refutation of relativism about values. He tells us that what a relativist of this kind says amounts to the following: 'all judgements are subjective, that is, they are arbitrary'. Now, he argues, this 'statement leads to contradiction insofar as someone who says it expresses at the same time that her statement is *better* than its opposite'.[38] This idea is quite rough, and is actually better stated by MacIntyre who acknowledges – of course, independently of Weissmahr – that the concept of truth as a good can be employed against moral relativism: the 'relativists, if they are to give good reason for taking the claim that relativism is true seriously, must also recognize truth as a good, whatever one's standpoint, and to the extent that they do so they abandon relativism'.[39]

Of course, the concept of truth as a good comes from Aquinas. In *Summa Theologiae* he writes that 'the true is a kind of good'.[40] He adds that this kind of good is 'of the intellect'. Again, this quote is from the objections he answers, but he allows in his reply at least that 'the true is a kind of good'.[41] As far as I know, Aquinas does not use this notion for any further purpose, let alone the purpose of refuting views linked to relativism. Unlike him, MacIntyre explicitly uses the concept of truth to establish several moral norms, Weissmahr goes as far as to claim an ultimate identity of truth and good, and Rahner, who also acknowledges the 'value of truth',[42] goes perhaps the furthest by saying that 'every true

---

[37] MacIntyre, 'Moral Pluralism', 4.
[38] Weissmahr Béla, *Az emberi lét értelme* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 2012), 104. Weissmahr articulates the same argument better against nihilism in Weissmahr, *Az emberi lét értelme,* 26.
[39] MacIntyre, 'Moral Pluralism', 6.
[40] Aquinas, *ST* I, 16, a 4, obi 1.
[41] *Ibid.*, I, 16, a 4, ad.1.
[42] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (London – New York: Darton, Longman & Todd-Seabury, 1971), VII: *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 1,* 231.

item of knowledge is … always and *ipso facto* an existential factor in the life of man'.[43]

It would be interesting to compare Rahner's and MacIntyre's account of the goodness of truth. Both of them seem to assign value to all truths, but MacIntyre may at least say that the value of some truths to us can be much smaller or even insignificant. This is so because he thinks that there is a difference between 'those true beliefs and judgements that constitute understanding' and those that do not.[44] This view is capable of accommodating the intuition that some truths, like the truth about – let's say – the number of leaves in Australia, are irrelevant for us. Rahner is much more radical in this question, as he holds that all truths add to our 'communication with reality'[45] and help us in opening ourselves up to the world.[46] Therefore, he believes that all truths require a high degree of respect. Among other things, this too can be a factor explaining their disagreement regarding the question of truthfulness. While according to MacIntyre (who in this question knowingly diverges from Aquinas) it is sometimes permissible or even a duty to lie, Rahner holds (in accordance with Aquinas) that lying is always and absolutely prohibited.[47]

However, in another question, MacIntyre seems to be closer to a common interpretation of Aquinas. For he understands truth as correspondence and takes Aquinas to be doing the same, while Rahner gives an apparently more controversial analysis both of truth and of Aquinas on truth. Truth, according to this less popular understanding, is more than mere correspondence; it is identity. And in the centre of all particular truths there is a single truth that is 'self-authenticating'.[48] Rahner is radical in this question as well, and this is the reason behind him denying the permissibility of lying. He seems to believe that holding truth to be mere correspondence is quite a grave mistake, because that cannot explain the value of truth as something that always deserves reverence—since the identity that is truth is ultimately rooted in God 'the unique truth of truths'.[49] Although MacIntyre also notes that, according to Aquinas, it 'is from God as truth, *veritas*, that all other "truths" and "trues" flow'.[50] However, MacIntyre does not take that as seriously or as

---

[43] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, XIII, 30.
[44] Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 205.
[45] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, VII, 232.
[46] *Ibid.*, VII: 234.
[47] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, ix.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*
[50] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 122.

central to his concept of truth as Rahner does, noting the importance of this only in a short passage that talks about Aquinas's view, 'integral to which is a recognition of God as the truth and of all truth as from God, so that the progress through truths to the truth is itself one part of the ascent of mind and heart to God'.[51]

IV. Overcoming limitations

I have already noted that the main reason for the name of the transcendental Thomist movement is their method. Another such reason could be that they reserve a central place for self-transcendence in their philosophy. And of course, they employ the transcendental method to show the significance of self-transcendence. Both Rahner and Weissmahr interpreted the history of the universe and evolution as a progress in self-transcendence. As I have shown above, Rahner holds truth to be a good because it opens us up and helps us to go beyond our boundaries. Where he talks about why dialogue should be respectful he also quotes Pascal, according to whom 'man … infinitely transcends man'.[52]

The transcendental Thomists' understanding of this self-transcendence is characteristically metaphysical most of the time, meaning that humans ought to transcend that which is objectified in them and aim at becoming more than their actual selves. But not only that, as this self-transcendence has an epistemological aspect as well since not only ourselves, but a certain belief of ours may be a 'conviction objectified in propositions'. By this, Rahner most probably means that we are liable to hold on to the phrasing of our views, instead of their essence. As this shall become clearer below, the phrasing always has its limits.

At one point, Rahner shows that even if our means to express ourselves is limited and relative, our knowledge transcends our frames of reference; he writes that

> someone who says that every language is related to a finite system of reference and is valid only within this system, communicates with [the] other person by this statement, especially if it is heard by the other and is accepted by him (and this is the intention of this statement); he communicates with the other in the permanent openness of

---

[51] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, 212.
[52] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, VI, 43.

what is unspeakable and hence present, in whose presence he achieves the knowledge of the invincible finiteness of his system of reference and of his language and by which – without destroying this finiteness – he has nevertheless already crossed over it.[53]

The gist of this thought is characteristic of transcendental Thomism: that we can reach something infinite, unconditional and ultimate. This seems to be so, according to these Thomists, even if we only have finite, conditioned and contingent expressions – which are, as we shall see, historically shaped – as the former grounds the latter.

It is lesser known, that MacIntyre, too, thinks that going beyond our limitations is essential. He does not, however, understand this in the sense of metaphysical self-transcendence. Since he is often taken to be a traditionalist, it is not very widely recognized that he encourages his readers to recognize the limitations of their traditions. He too takes it that our aim of truth is such that it should open us up so that we become attentive towards criticism, recognizing the limitations of our standpoints or traditions, and trying to overcome them. In his paper 'Moral Relativism, Truth, and Justification', he notes that in order for a tradition to be successful, just like the natural law tradition, it has to meet 'the challenge of transcending the limitations hitherto imposed upon it by its own standards of rational justification'.[54]

He even suggests here that 'where there is no possibility of thus transcending such limitations, there is no application for the notion of truth.'[55] That is, the idea of truth is intimately connected to the transcendence of limitations hitherto present in our thinking, including the limitations of our conception of justification. While what we rightly take to be justified is constrained by this conception, there is an ideal that our ways of justification are supposed to aspire. Or, at least this is what MacIntyre seems to express when he says that 'the claim to truth universally or almost universally advanced – implicitly or explicitly – by the protagonists of … standpoints, … involves appeal to rational justification *as such*, that is, to some mode of justification which transcends the limitations of particular standpoints'.[56]

---

[53] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, VI, 83.

[54] MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, 217.

[55] *Ibid.*, 207.

[56] MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, 205. MacIntyre also explicitly says that a 'non-relativist conception of rational justification' is implied by this. However, the idea of 'justification *as such*' seems to be contradicted by his definition that he recently provided: 'All justification is

At the same time he identifies three requirements for traditions of enquiry that need to be met in order to succeed in this, the third of which is the exercise of 'philosophical and moral imagination' to understand, on the one hand, our tradition from without and, on the other hand, others' traditions from within. This exercise might reveal what it was that so far limited our standpoint so that it was only a perspectival truth that it could reach. So by seeing this we have already left behind our past standpoint and come over to the one of the contending tradition. Just as Hegel once said: recognizing the 'very fact that something is determined as a limitation implies that the limitation is already transcended'. MacIntyre does not refer to Hegel here, but his point is at least similar. This Hegelian observation is quite important to transcendental Thomists; they use it to devise retorsive arguments. For example, they believe that claiming that 'our knowledge is always relative and therefore limited by our initial starting point' is contradictory: it too aims at transcending its relativity.

Now how should we recognize our limitations in order to transcend our theoretical boundaries? How can we understand ourselves from the outside and others from the inside? Of course the eminent way to achieve this is through dialogue.

V. The centrality of dialogue

To the thought of John Paul II according to which the belief in universal truth is the precondition of honest dialogue, Weissmahr, in his reflection on *Fides et Ratio,* adds that in a pluralistic social situation the search for truth is not only a precondition, but also, 'must be the common commitment'.[57] This search is conducted by means of dialogue, which in

---

justification to some particular individual or set of individuals. To justify some claim … is to show to someone that their present beliefs, attitudes, and commitments are such and their capacity to recognize certain truths is such that on reflection they cannot, without … inconsistency, reject that claim. To which the response may be that there are surely some claims that are justified *as such*, no matter to whom they are addressed, claims, for example, that certain theorems in mathematics are provable. The standards of proof in mathematics do indeed hold for any and every rational agent. But with moral and political claims it is quite otherwise'. If all justification is justification to some particular individuals, then it seems to be relative. Perhaps only moral and political justification is like that, however, as he also talks about truth in those realms, according to the earlier paper, this would imply a reference to justification *as such* too. However, the definition of justification quoted here is rather vague, terms like 'showing', 'capacity to recognize certain truths' and 'on reflection' are left to interpretation. Examining this tension would deserve a longer discussion. See MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 204-205.

[57] Weissmahr, *Az emberi lét értelme*, 278.

turn requires tolerance—at least according to Rahner who holds that 'Dialogue and tolerance characterize a humane society'.[58] This might be self-explanatory, at least in a pluralistic setting, where dialogue 'becomes the only possible mode of co-existence'.[59] Rahner's own motivation of this claim is that worldviews are not such that we can withdraw them in a way that they have nothing to do with others. Our worldviews do concern other people, so the views confront each other, and thus the need to discuss them comes about.

However, apart from the contingent reason of living in a pluralistic society, there are two universal reasons why dialogue seems central to human life. One is that it is an excellent way to learn about our errors. The other one is that it is necessary insofar as thinking and aiming at truth is necessary for us.

'"In important matters we deliberate with others," wrote Aristotle, "not relying on ourselves for certitude" (*Nicomachean Ethics* III 1112b10-11).' This quote in MacIntyre speaks for the first point. He also says that practical reason demands us to deliberate in cases where we meet disagreement.[60] Rahner acknowledges as well that since we are 'liable to error',[61] and that 'it is just as possible for one's fellow to have hit upon the truth as for one's self',[62] we must pay attention to our critics.

The second reason behind the centrality of dialogue is that truth is always our aim and our claims presuppose this aim, so we also commit ourselves pragmatically to justifying that we indeed are not in error. This is believed by MacIntyre according to whom – as I am going to clarify below – any statement of ours implies that it is able to withstand the best counterarguments against it.[63]

Another way to argue for this point can be taken from Emerich Coreth. He says that some metaphysicians have used dialogue as their starting point, yet his starting point, namely questioning, is superior as even dialogue could be questioned—and so only the question remains as the firm ground of metaphysics. Even if we question questioning, we could not overcome it, it seems to be unavoidable. This argument can show that questioning is a necessary feature of our thinking and existence. However, in a way, this is true of dialogue as well since questions basically arise from dialogic contexts. Coreth himself admits that questioning is

---

[58] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, XXII, 16.

[59] *Ibid.*, XXII, 36.

[60] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, 76.

[61] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, VII, 245.

[62] *Ibid.*, VII, 9.

[63] MacIntyre, 'Moral Pluralism', 4-5.

rooted in dialogue and refers to Brunner who emphasized that 'question itself is a form of dialogue'.[64] In noting that we must go further than stopping at dialogue as the basis of our metaphysics, Coreth formulates his point the following way: 'we should inquire whether the dialogue is the correct starting point'. From this, it must be obvious that he identifies questioning with enquiry. Now it seems that enquiry indeed should include dialogue; it is one form of it. Coreth also says that to stop questioning is to stop thinking. But as that is impossible and since questioning is rooted in dialogue, there are no alternatives for us. To put Coreth's point concisely: dialogue is necessarily the only possible mode of existence in general.

VI. Natural law and the inescapable presuppositions of dialogue

MacIntyre interprets the first precepts of natural law as the rules of the ethics of enquiry and dialogue. These rules are the ones that we need to observe in order to continue successful enquiries and dialogues in our quest for truth. In other words, the primary precepts of natural law are inescapably presupposed in the way a rational conversation is conducted. In this respect, MacIntyre seems to develop Aquinas's concept of the natural law beyond the medieval account. Though not as thoroughly, Rahner has also tackled the implications of dialogues. Therefore, it should be worthwhile to look at both of these attempts at showing what an ethics of dialogue amounts to.

MacIntyre thinks that it can be shown that every representative of all possible standpoints is committed to these precepts, with an argument that we can call transcendental. This amounts to the claim that since we are necessarily committed to seeking truth, by that commitment we are necessarily committed to enquiry too—and in turn to everything that is generally needed for successful enquiry (which implies learning and dialogue as well). As MacIntyre puts it, 'the recognition of truth as a good involves according authority to the virtues and rules that constitute the ethics of enquiry'.[65]

It is here that his idioms come closest to that of the transcendental movement: he talks about 'inescapable presuppositions' and 'necessary commitments' that cannot be demonstrated inferentially. These considerations are present most eminently in his papers like 'How can we

---

[64] Emerich Coreth, *Metaphysics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 47.
[65] MacIntyre, 'Moral Pluralism', 6.

learn what *Veritatis Splendor* has to teach?', 'Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism', 'Natural law as subversive: The case of Aquinas' and 'Aquinas and the extent of moral disagreement'.[66] I do not want to enumerate here all the passages where expressions like the ones above or ideas denoted by them are invoked in MacIntyre's texts, so let me offer only one characteristic place where he argues the following way:

> Just because even in situations in which there is serious, even skeptical enquiry about the precepts of the natural law, willing conformity to those precepts is a precondition of rational and serious enquiry, it turns out that we cannot but presuppose allegiance to them in our activities. We know them, at least primarily, not as conclusions but as presuppositions of our activities, just insofar as those activities are or aspire to rationality. As Aquinas says, the generalizations apprehended by synderesis are known prior to any particular practical inferences.[67]

According to MacIntyre, the 'ethics of conversation',[68] for short, demand one to pay unqualified respect towards her interlocutor.[69] ('Goodwill' as Rahner says 'is the necessary presupposition of dialogue'.)[70] Now failure to show respect by following at least the minimal requirements of such virtues as truthfulness, courage, endurance, patience, considerateness and generosity[71] easily leads to the halt of rational enquiry by making our interlocutor frightened of victimization, punishment or ridicule, and thus not showing respect amounts to our 'self-expulsion from the discussion'.[72]

---

[66] Most notably, this kind of argument is almost absent from his latest book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. That said, he still presents a similar argument there: 'Without unconditional obedience to [certain] precepts there cannot be shared rational deliberation, and without shared rational deliberation there cannot be rational agents. So some of what Aquinas called the precepts of the natural law, that law whose authority we recognize in virtue of our nature as rational agents, are needed to structure the relationships of those who pursue their individual and common goods in the company of others'(pp. 56-57). This suggests that he still endorses the arguments that I am summarizing here.

[67] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, 48

[68] *Ibid.*, 205.

[69] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'How Can We Learn What *Veritatis Splendor* Has to Teach?', *The Thomist* 58:2 (1994), 173.

[70] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, XXII, 22.

[71] *Cf.* MacIntyre, 'How Can We Learn', 184.

[72] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, 216.

I would like to note here that the same notion of 'self-expulsion' is often employed by Weissmahr, who uses this about the necessary presupposition of objective truth, epistemic optimism, existence of the other person and so on—the denial of which theses amounts to abandonment of rational discussion.[73]

Rahner, in a similar manner to MacIntyre, talks about what is 'inescapable' according to him: reflection.[74] And he thinks that a 'common truth' is 'implied in the existence of language',[75] and not only language, as he thinks that an 'unadministered … capital of common convictions is invested in every dialogue'—one of which is the existence of this common truth.[76]

Moreover, just like MacIntyre, Rahner provides a list of what is needed from those who seek to converse with each other: 'in true dialogue one is patient, kind, never jealous, never boastful or overbearing, never deceitful, never seeking one's own', and so on.[77] Also, just as MacIntyre thinks that physical threat should be absent from rational dialogue, Rahner believes participants in a dialogue 'must from the very start renounce any use of force in its various explicit or anonymous forms in society'. By 'force', he means those attempts that try 'to influence a view and the internal or external attitudes of men without appealing in this to the individual insight and free consent of the other'.[78]

At this point, however, Rahner admits that intricate questions arise regarding the permissibility of using force in some cases. These cases include 'the safeguarding … of a necessary public order'—as some groups may appeal to tolerance even to make people accept their activities that disrupt society. These problems obviously extend to the domain of politics. So, let us tackle that as well, by comparing, if only very briefly, some political views of MacIntyre and Rahner.

---

[73] This move is present in Aristotle's argument for the principle of non-contradiction, and Aquinas also employs a similar one in a passage that may be said to employ a retorsive argument: Aquinas, *De unitate intellectus*, II. 79.

[74] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, VI, 83.

[75] *Ibid.*

[76] *Ibid.*, VI, 83.

[77] *Ibid.*, VI, 42.

[78] *Ibid.*, VI, 33-34.

VII. Politics and dialogue

According to MacIntyre's 'politics of ethics',[79] the political order, too, has to be arranged so that dialogues of a rational kind should be sustainable: the members of a flourishing community 'recognize that obedience to those standards that Aquinas identified as the precepts of the natural law is necessary, if they are to learn from and with each other what their individual and common goods are'.[80] This means that the search for truth as a good and the ethics of conversation and discourse should be realized on the level of society as well. That is, the transcendental arguments for these concepts are relevant even in the domain of politics.

It would be natural to think that as respect is demanded by these precepts towards our partners in discussions, tolerance is also demanded by them. And this is right. Nevertheless, MacIntyre argues that intolerance too is needed in order to sustain successful dialogue. His main reason for saying this is that rational dialogue is actually fragile and needs to be secured by intolerance towards certain views. Views that are harmful, threatening and make others frightened, that is, which clearly go against the ethics of dialogue as I have discussed it above.[81] But the views that should not be tolerated according to MacIntyre also include those that come from actors who probably want to manipulate the participants of a dialogue in order to further their own interests.[82] On the exact balance between tolerance and intolerance, however, MacIntyre consciously remains silent.[83]

Rahner seems to afford a bigger role to tolerance and believes that it 'has to do with the innermost nature of the human person as a free individual'[84] Tolerance is actually 'the respect we pay' towards such persons.[85] However, it is recognized by him too that 'there can be no tolerance without some intolerance'.[86] As we can suspect, on the exact balance he too remains silent, and consciously so.[87]

Surprisingly, their main example for a view that should not be tolerated is almost the same. Rahner says that 'the Nazi regime, for

---

[79] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, xi. *Cf. Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 57, 108.
[80] MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, 247.
[81] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, 216.
[82] *Ibid.*, 215.
[83] *Ibid.*, 222.
[84] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, XXII, 23.
[85] *Ibid.*, XXII, 22.
[86] *Ibid.*, XXII, 24.
[87] *Ibid.*, XXII, 25.

instance, did things and imposed burdens that are to be rejected out of hand, that are no fitting topic for tolerant dialogue among people who consider each other equally intelligent and humane'.[88] While MacIntyre holds 'the facts about the Holocaust to be a paradigm case of historical facts the denial of which … is an opinion that ought not to be tolerated in any local community, that to tolerate it is a form of vice'.[89]

In Rahner's and MacIntyre's accounts of tolerance the notion of common good has a role as well, a role that sometimes necessarily conflicts with tolerance. Though the picture of weighing is itself criticized by MacIntyre, we can safely interpret the main difference of these two authors in how they weigh tolerance against the common good. Rahner believes the former to be more important, while MacIntyre thinks that the latter should be held more significant.

VI. Historicity and tradition

MacIntyre is well known for being a historicist philosopher. In fact, he stresses the historicity of our concepts and ways of life so much that some even interpreted him as a relativist. Yet he does not go so far as to become relativistically historicist, and I need nothing else here to prove this than to refer to all the different quotes by him above, where he expressed his commitment to the possibility of finding objective truth. Nevertheless, insofar as he can be identified as a historicist, this could amount to a serious difference between his thought and NeoThomists of the transcendentalist kind. This received picture is the reason why I turn now to the question of historicity briefly, to point out similarities with regard to this topic as well. In my view, while historicism is not something that is commonly associated with the transcendental school, these philosophers sometimes do express historicist concerns.

Rahner underlined in a separate paper that theology has to be aware of its own historicity,[90] and as we have seen above, maintains that throughout history, we can gain a better understanding of our concepts. He writes that 'outlooks and world-views are subject to the law of history'; that is, 'they have "a particular point of departure" and "a finite inherited vocabulary"'.[91] Weissmahr agreed with him on these matters.

---

[88]Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, XXII, 18.
[89] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, 220.
[90] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, IX, 64-82.
[91] *Ibid.*, VI, 37.

He, for example, says on occasion that everything in this world is a result of development—everything, therefore, has a history. They have expressed similar thoughts even about human nature, according to which it can change. What is more important is that Weissmahr emphasized many times that our concepts and our verbal grasp of what we know is context-dependent and historically conditioned; therefore, the truth of our explicit statements always depends on the linguistic and hermeneutic context that is never fully explicable.[92]

Karen Kilby, a scholar of Rahner, has even interpreted Rahner as a nonfoundational pluralist, who '*thinks* that there is an experience which underlies all historical conditioning and pluralism, but his *thinking* this is not itself something which escapes historical conditioning and pluralism, nor must he himself suppose that it does.'[93] While I suspect that her interpretation goes a bit too far in claiming that Rahner is a nonfoundationalist instead of a moderate foundationalist, it would indeed take further analysis to decisively evaluate her understanding of Rahner.[94] This fact in turn shows that a better understanding of him would indeed be in place—and for MacIntyreans in particular, since he cannot be that far from MacIntyre himself in the regard that Kilby points to in the passage quoted above. Historicity and a common ground that underlies all positions seem to be features that are central to the epistemology of both transcendental and MacIntyrean Thomistic thought.

VII. Epistemology

It is probably here that we should return to the question of 'epistemology'. As I've noted, MacIntyre criticized transcendental Thomism for becoming an epistemological project, under the influence of Kant. Now what is exactly the problem with their epistemology? In other texts, he suggests several features of what he calls 'epistemology' to be erroneous, but those are not present in all those whom he thinks to be pursuing epistemology. However, at the places where he criticizes transcendental Thomists, he does not explain the main reason why he thinks their epistemology to be erroneous. We could naturally think of

---

[92] Weissmahr, A szellem valósága, 112. Cf. Weissmahr, *Die Wirklichkeit des Geistes*, 83.
[93] Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner. Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 105.
[94] For a start, see Rahner's thoughts on infallibility below.

two things.[95] First, it could be the problem that they make quite radical knowledge-claims; they claim that certain substantial philosophical truths are known basically by everyone. I try to show below that this either cannot be the real object of criticism, or that if indeed it is, then MacIntyre himself can be found guilty according to his own charge. Another aspect that MacIntyre could naturally criticize is the fact that transcendental Thomists, like Weissmahr, hold that these pieces of knowledge that everyone knows are infallible. The case of this latter question is complicated. I thus start with the first, more simple problem.

Transcendental NeoThomists do indeed make surprising knowledge-claims. Weissmahr, for one, believes that every person knows the existence of objective truth, moral responsibility, free will, the meaning of life, God, etc. Yet even if not for so many things or domains, MacIntyre too makes similar knowledge-claims. He thinks that every person knows the first precepts of natural law. Here is what he says about this: the 'knowledge that enables us to [say what the natural law is] is possessed by any person capable of adequate reasoning and, so far as the common principles of the natural law are concerned, by every rational being'.[96] Agreeing with Suarez whom he holds to be a reliable interpreter of Aquinas in this matter, he also holds that a class of first principles is 'recognized by the greater number of persons—those, we may suppose, with any capacity for inference at all', and this class includes 'the precepts prohibiting adultery, theft, and like acts'.[97] That is, 'knowledge of the natural law' belongs to anyone 'in virtue of their human nature'.[98] Based on these parts, it would be problematic for MacIntyre to criticize transcendental Thomists for the fact that they claim that some substantial pieces of knowledge are shared by all people alike.

The second point that MacIntyre could be criticizing is that transcendental philosophers reject the idea of fallibilism. MacIntyre, building on Peirce and Popper, emphasizes the importance of fallibilism at several places. In his reflection on *Fides et ratio* he claims the following: 'Only types of enquiry … which are organized so that they can be defeated by falsification of their key theses, can warrant judgements to which truth can be ascribed'.[99] According to this view, there should be no Archimedean, unassailable and invincible points in any philosophy. Most

---

[95] I provide a detailed analysis of MacIntyre's criticism of epistemology in my unpublished manuscript 'Universal Knowledge in Local Utopias'.
[96] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, 48.
[97] *Ibid.*, 58.
[98] *Ibid.*, 49.
[99] *Ibid.*, 163.

probably, MacIntyre would even say that the principle of fallibilism is itself fallible. He says about Aquinas the following:

> He was well aware that it is of the nature of philosophy that no conclusion is ever treated as unassailable. 'Human reason,' he wrote, 'is very defective in matters concerning God. A sign of this is that philosophers in their researches, by natural investigation, into human affairs, have fallen into many errors and have disagreed amongst themselves' (IIa-IIae 2, 4). Continuing disagreement is a permanent condition of philosophy.[100]

In fact, as I have already hinted, MacIntyre seems to believe that a central reason why we need to engage in dialogue is our fallibility.

In a sharp contrast to MacIntyre, Weissmahr strongly criticizes fallibilist philosophy. He thinks that it is self-contradictory, and uses several transcendental arguments against it. He even thinks that to claim that 'Fallibilism is fallible' is absurd. He takes that all the results of transcendental arguments are irrevisable. This, then, is a clear disagreement between him and MacIntyre.

As I noted above, at some points Rahner also calls our attention to our possible errors, and says that humans are generally liable to error. He also thinks that all worldviews should be open to 'the judgement of the future'.[101] Yet, at the same time he often talks about 'apodictic axioms'. He says that in the view of Aquinas, we have in first principles 'assured truths'[102] and

> something more than the mere principles of formal logic such as, for instance, the principle of non-contradiction. We are dealing, rather, with first principles of an ontological kind, with the ultimate and apodictic axioms of metaphysics, which claim to apply necessarily and absolutely to every existing thing.[103]

As I noted earlier, it seems to be open to interpretation whether Aquinas thought that more first principles or only the principle of non-

---

[100] MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics*, 72.
[101] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, XXII, 38.
[102] *Ibid.*, XIII, 22.
[103] *Ibid.*, XIII, 23.

contradiction enjoys the status of being unmistakable, of being so that 'no one can make a mistake or be in error regarding' them.

Putting on one side the question whether the principle of fallibility is itself fallible or not, perhaps there could be a middle ground to mitigate the position of MacIntyre and Weissmahr. This ground, in my eyes, is provided by Rahner, at least in the question of dialogue. For, Rahner seems to be able to show that even if we think that our main beliefs are infallible, we could and in fact should discuss them in a dialogue with dissenters. And this must be of interest to MacIntyre as well, since, as I quoted, even according to him, Thomists 'should of course be dogmatic about dogma'. This claim could be interpreted in more or less radical terms, but what this 'dogmatism' is actually contrasted to in MacIntyre's text, is to 'open … up to attentive points of view'.[104]

Let me explain more precisely why some people, probably even MacIntyre, see a tension between infallibility and the openness to dialogue by referring to Jason Hannan's account. He seems to express a common objection to infallibilism, or what he calls 'objectivism'. He describes as 'objectivists' those who 'insist that our primary goal is to identify universal standards of rationality and truth for formal inquiry and public life'. He goes on to object against this view that it 'thus shuts down the human conversation by unilaterally proclaiming the truth from the outset and precluding discussion over what the truth may be'.[105] He also attributes this objection to MacIntyre, stating that his 'turn to discourse is taken to be a necessary move to avoid the pitfalls of objectivism and relativism, and to preserve contingency, open-endedness, and the possibility of future revision'—and thus conversation as well.[106] In case Hannan is right about this attribution, Rahner has a case against MacIntyre's point.

As I said, Rahner thinks even those who believe some of their views to be infallible need to engage in dialogue. And this is explained by what I quoted from him already, as the *sine qua non* of real Thomism. That is, all theology (and philosophy) is nothing else but 'straw' as it cannot reach ultimate reality. All truths that we hold are similar in Rahner's eyes: they are only approximations to this ultimate reality. We can never come fully to terms regarding their content, and we need to (re)interpret them constantly. Now this could be the result of dialogue. So we should be

---

[104] MacIntyre, 'Thomism and Philosophical Debate', 1.

[105] Jason Hannan, 'Moral Discourse Without Foundations: Habermas and MacIntyre on Rational Choice', *Communication Theory* 26:1 (2015), 33.

[106] Hannan, 'Moral Discourse Without Foundations', 35.

open even if we think that we are infallible, since in light of the other's opinion we may learn more about our truths, about ourselves and we may be able finally to accommodate the gist of the other's truth as well. And here we may remind ourselves of what transcendental Thomists including Weissmahr said about historicity: all truths have a history, and even if they are essentially immutable, they can be clarified more and more with time. As Rahner writes:

> Even someone who professes an absolute viewpoint can realize that he is still 'on the way'; but he follows his path only if he enters into dialogue, opens himself out, allows himself to be attacked by others, is willing to learn even when he teaches and apparently is merely seeking to defend his own position and trying to make it 'come out on top'.[107]

And it is not only that our propositional knowledge can undergo development as a result of dialogue, but also, ourselves, our relationship to these truths may become better and more honest: 'even the truest conviction objectified in propositions and doctrines is not yet a guarantee of one's "being in the truth" of existence', as he puts it.[108] This means that dialogue, just like all truths in Rahner's opinion as we have seen above, has a strong existential significance—as it can help us in transcending our objectified selves and vocabularies.

So even those believing in infallibility can be friends of dialogue. Now what about the claim itself that there are such infallible doctrines? In fact, MacIntyre too implies, as I have shown, that there are inescapable presuppositions shared by all humans in virtue of our humanity. If this is so, it cannot be shown consistently and conclusively that they are wrong. In this light, they seem infallible. But these truths, too, need dialogue to be brought to the light. Our arguments that bring them forward may be erroneous, they need to be interpreted, concretized, developed, clarified. So this means that we may think that we have found infallible beliefs and at the same time may hold that our arguments that established their infallibility may be erroneous in one way or another. This is something that MacIntyre sees correctly.

---

[107] Rahner, *Theological Investigations,* XXII, 39-40. According to him, there are things that are both 'always known' and always 'unfathomed'.
[108] Rahner, *Theological Investigations,* XXII, 42.

By relying on an example, I will show below how we may be in error regarding the details of our beliefs about our inescapable commitments and how these errors may be corrected in a way that doesn't question the essence of these beliefs. As it will become clear, I attempt to do this by showing that MacIntyre makes a mistake because he tries to withdraw his radical claims concerning our inescapable commitments.

What seems to be problematic in MacIntyre with regard to final and unassailable truths is the following. He believes that to claim something as true is to imply that it is able to withstand all criticism. This makes him say sometimes, usually at the end of his papers, that he is not entitled to hold the main claims he made up to that point to be true, as he did not show that these claims are able to withstand the strongest arguments against them. One example is the following:

> I have not considered what reply to my argument an insightful relativist might make. So that what I have presented is perhaps a gesture towards an argument, rather than argument, not a conclusion to which I am as yet entitled, but a conclusion to which I might become entitled.[109]

Moreover, he refers here to his own retorsive arguments as well. That is, he thinks that (a) his arguments showing that we have inescapable presuppositions, and even (b) the argument according to which in claiming something we are committed to objective truth and so (c) the belief that these are able to withstand all strong criticisms—may not be able to withstand all strong criticisms. But this is clearly a 'performative contradiction', as Weissmahr would say; that is: this thought could be clearly an object of a retorsive argument. It basically expresses at the same time both that he holds that 'These theses *are* able to withstand all criticism' and that 'I am *not entitled to hold* that "These theses *are* able to withstand all criticism"'.

Let me explain why pointing out the problem with MacIntyre's statement is a retorsive move. MacIntyre expresses the following about our commitments: 'to assert of any judgement that it is true commits those who assert it to holding that it is , , , able' to 'withstand all attempts at refutation from any standpoint whatsoever'.[110] On his interpretation this means that we cannot assert of any statement that it is true if we have not *already* shown that it is able to withstand criticism. This is where a

---

[109] MacIntyre, 'Moral Pluralism', 8.
[110] *Ibid.*, 5.

tension seems to arise. The reason for that is the following. MacIntyre, by recognizing that he has not considered *already* all the relevant objections to the view he expressed about our commitments, realizes that he should withdraw the truth of what he expresses. But he does that in virtue of this very view about our commitments. This means that there is a paradox here: he withholds his judgement about a belief because of the same belief. This seems to be self-undermining. In pointing this out, we have turned his own argument against itself, and shown that its explicit content (that MacIntyre is not entitled to his view about commitments since he is in a T-type of situation) denies what it is implicitly committed to (exactly this view of MacIntyre about commitments that one is not entitled to her commitments if she is in a T-type of situation).

Two conclusions could be drawn from seeing this. One is that the thesis that 'claiming something implies that it is able to withstand all criticism' may be too strong an interpretation of our inescapable commitments. The other thing is that MacIntyre misunderstands himself. We may in fact be implying by claiming anything that it is able to withstand criticism, but it does not mean that we can only accept these things if and only if they are first shown to be immune to the strongest criticism. The commitment that MacIntyre has (or should have) in mind is for the future: if I believe that something is true, I imply that it would be possible in the future with effort to show that it can answer criticism.[111] If it was not so and we were all the time implying what MacIntyre writes, then we would have almost no permissible beliefs at all, no commitments, no truth—not even one about our commitments. This is so because showing conclusively that our beliefs can withstand the strongest counterarguments could be satisfied only in a lengthy process, and even then, new counterarguments could be devised. This way, our commitments would be destroying themselves. However, we can sidestep this danger by interpreting them better, in the light of each other.

The foregoing retorsive argument that I used against MacIntyre is then an example of how we can criticize claims about inescapable presuppositions, infallibility and objectivity, and how we can make progress in understanding our commitments and beliefs that might as well

---

[111] Something like this is expressed in an earlier paper by MacIntyre: 'if I assert that "*p*" is true, I am thereby committed to holding that, through the history of any set of enquiries concerned to discover whether it is "*p*" or "~*p*" that is true, either "~*p*" will never be supported by any scheme and mode of rational justification or, if it is so supported, that scheme and mode of rational justification which at some particular stage of enquiry appears to provide support for the conclusion that "~p" will in the longer run be rationally discredited'. MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader,* 213-214.

be infallible. I conclude that there is a middle ground: there can be infallible commitments, yet we may err in bringing them to light. No matter what we call this, fallibilism or not, it remains so that dialogue is needed either way. So it is not an obstacle for dialogues to think that some of our views contradicted by others belong to the category of infallible commitments, as long as we agree with Rahner that they can be clarified and better understood through conversation.

VIII. Conclusion

As I have tried to show in this paper, there are many affinities between MacIntyre's version of Thomistic philosophy and transcendental NeoThomism. The same method of argument is used by both and certain theses are shared by both. Some political and moral insights are assented to by MacIntyre and at least some representatives of transcendental Thomism as well. Does this mean complete agreement? Or would the observation that the same style of argumentation is relied on by the other amount to the acceptance of all their conclusions? Not at all. Both parties could use further arguments against the other in subsequent debates. Such a debate was started in my paper with regard, most eminently, to the topic of fallibilism and apodicticity. I believe that further argument should be in place between these two schools of Thomism, and more understanding of the transcendental movement should be demanded on the part of MacIntyreans. As was shown, both parties hold that the importance of dialogue cannot be overemphasized; and it was also suggested that each side could learn from the other in a discussion between them. It is high time for a respectful dialogue of Thomists that transcends misconstructions of rival positions within Thomistic philosophy, and aims at understanding the truth of the other.