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TWO REVIEWS: MACINTYRE'S *THE TASKS OF PHILOSOPHY* AND *ETHICS AND POLITICS*

F ew books have shaped the contemporary conversation in moral philosophy quite like Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (first edition, 1980). The book wonderfully captured the *angst* of moral philosophers, if not the broader population. It painted a picture of decline and fragmentation in moral thought and moral communities. It provided a powerful critique of liberal theory and the liberal state in a range of moral and political issues, and proposed a return to a vision of the moral community that derived from St. Thomas Aquinas' Aristotelian position. Subsequent work in the field may have borrowed from or condemned MacIntyre's work, but it had to address it. Even work outside the field of moral theory utilized MacIntyre's insights—take, for example, the work of theologian Stanley Hauerwas.

In 2006, Cambridge University Press published two volumes of selected essays by MacIntyre. These essays, dating from 1972 to 2002, shed light on *After Virtue* and MacIntyre's subsequent books. They also show the breadth of his philosophy, touching on other philosophical areas such as epistemology and even other disciplines such as theology and poetry.

In the preface to volume one, MacIntyre writes of the liberal theoretical framework that dominated his thinking in the 1950s and 1960s. This framework, he decided, was an obstacle to his thought. In the early 1970s he experienced a breakthrough, when he realized "the need first to identify and then to break free from that framework and to enquire whether the various problems on which I had made so little progress had baffled me not or not only because of their difficulty, but because they were bound to remain intractable so long as they were understood in the terms dictated by those larger assumptions which I shared with many of my contemporaries" (I.viii). It was at this time that he tore up a manuscript on moral philosophy and began looking at the problems of contemporary moral and political philosophy not from the perspective of "liberal modernity" but from that of Aristotelian moral and political practice—leading ultimately to the publication of *After Virtue* (I.viii). As he notes in the preface to the second volume, he ended up as a Thomistic Aristotelian—"something that had initially surprised me" (II.vii).

The Aristotelian vantage point, as explicated in St. Thomas Aquinas, provided a fresh framework in which MacIntyre could investigate contemporary moral and political problems and issues. In part it did this by providing an epistemological position that brought clarity to those problems and issues—even suggesting possible solutions. One of the key elements of MacIntyre's epistemology is the prominent role of tradition in the generation of knowledge. In "Epistemological crises and dramatic narrative" (vol. I), he argues that "it is traditions which are the bearers of reason, and traditions at certain periods actually require and need revolutions for their continuance" (I.12). Thus, Descartes (for example) was wrong to assume that everything could be put into doubt (including all of one's tradition). Such radical doubting is impossible, but also unproductive (I.17). It is through traditions or historical contexts that any theories ultimately make sense. But this does not lead to a naïve dogmatism in which the truth is nothing more than what our idiosyncratic tradition tells us. Rather, seeing knowledge as grounded in traditions or historical contexts helps us to avoid a dogmatism that believes with absolute certainty in the objective and universal validity of its truth. As MacIntyre concludes, "It is only when theories are located in history, when we view the demands for justification in highly particular context of a historical kind, that we are freed from either dogmatism or capitulation to skepticism" (I.23).

We see the role of tradition or historical context in epistemology in a wide variety of areas, from scientific theory to our perception of color (see "Colors, cultures, and practices" in vol. I) to moral and political issues. MacIntyre also believes that a recognition of the role of tradition or historical context would help make sense of and possibly resolve certain problems in the history of philosophy. "[T]he predicaments of contemporary philosophy, whether analytic or deconstructive," he writes, "are best understood as arising as a long-term consequence of the rejection of Aristotelian and Thomistic teleology at the threshold of the modern world" (I.173). In other words, contemporary philosophy works with the remains of concepts and principles that make less sense stripped from their contexts.

MacIntyre devotes a significant amount of attention to the question of truth. He argues that contemporary philosophy has failed to provide adequate accounts of truth. "To apprehend the truth about some subject matter," he writes, "is to judge truly what place the objects and properties and relations that constitute that subject matter have in the order of things" (I.209). In other words, truth is a matter of putting the subject matter into a broader, more comprehensible order of things (in other words, into what we would call a community's tradition). For MacIntyre, this is a fundamental characteristic of human beings. Thus, "every culture is an attempt to make the natural and social world habitable by making it intelligible and in such attempts there is always an appeal, characteristically implicit and unspelled out, to standards of truth and goodness, to standards by which this set of beliefs is judged more adequate than that and this way of life better than that" (I.193).

The question of truth comes up most significantly for MacIntyre in the investigation of moral life. Take, for example, the essay "Moral relativism; truth and justication" in volume one. He notes that the moral relativist is at odds with the person from the moral community who believes his or her moral claims to be true (I.54). The latter person is not only committed to his or her moral claims, but also to "a set of theses about rational justification" (I.55). In other words, a moral truth claim is justified in the contexts of a broad and comprehensible "order of things" (tradition)—that can be described by "a set of theses"—that makes sense of the moral truth claim. To this extent, it would seem like MacIntyre is arguing for relativism—at least some form of cultural relativism. And to some extent this *is* the case. Yet MacIntyre *does not* believe that people are trapped in their own epistemological and moral worlds. He *does* believe that people from different epistemological and moral worlds can engage in rational discourse in the pursuit of moral truth. To do so, they must be able to stand outside their own scheme of justification or tradition—drawing upon their innate imaginative ability.

> What this ability can on occasion achieve is a discovery that problems and difficulties, incoherences and resourcelessness, in dealing with which over some extended period one's own standpoint has proved sterile, can in fact be understood and explained from some other rival point of view as precisely the types of difficulty and problem which would be engendered by the particular local partialities and one-sidednesses of one's own tradition. (I.72)

Certainly there are those people who resist or refuse to take the external point of view (I.73). But for those who do, they can find the perspective from other epistemological and moral schemes or worlds to be beneficial at resolving problems or conundrums that arise because of their own "partial" and "one-sided" viewpoints.

MacIntyre extends the analysis in "Moral philosophy and contemporary social practice: what holds them apart?" (vol. 1). He notes that both Aristotle and Aquinas "argued that it was only within a particular type of political and social order that rationally adequate practical and moral concepts could be socially embodied" (I.111). In today's Western societies, however, we have disparate ethical communities. This is the case not only in terms of ethnic and religious differences, but even in the professions. Applied ethics, for example, has varying standards for physicians, lawyers, business people, and others (I.119). MacIntyre, in fact, sees a dangerous trend in applied ethics. He argues that it "is to some large degree not at all an application to actual social practice of the theories of academic moral philosophy, but is instead itself a substitute for those theories providing ideological disguises for some of the limitations of the social settings in which moral discourse is deployed" (I.120). In other words, applied ethics does not unify communities within a common moral viewpoint but instead is symptomatic of the very fragmentation of Western societies. Indeed, "we inhabit

an established social and cultural order which is in its central aspects resistant to, which has rendered itself largely immune to, critique from the standpoint of moral philosophy" (I.121).

So what is to be done? Surprisingly (coming from a philosopher), MacIntyre argues that philosophy is *not* the key to improving the current moral situation. While there certainly is a role for considered reflection, improvement will come from engaging in dialogical practices with others. He writes: "Only in the struggles, conflicts, and work of practice and in the attempt to find in and through dialogue with others who are engaged in such struggles, conflicts, and work [can we find] an adequate local and particular institutional expression of our shared directedness towards our common goods" (II.xi). It is in this way that we begin to forge a common narrative and even tradition (built upon our current traditions) within which moral virtues and vices make sense.

MacIntyre is optimistic about the resources at hand. He notes that we have many different moral educators available—not philosophers, but teachers, parents, uncles, aunts, and others. To the degree that they are successful in moral education, it is "by inculcating habits, eliciting desires, redirecting sentiments, punishing us for, among other things, acting only so as to avoid punishment, and providing examples and role-models ... But they *never* succeed in forming character or directing lives by presenting theoretical arguments and analyses" (II.21). Analogously, this is why the modern liberal state is not the answer. It rests upon an abstract position of political justice (worthwhile as far as it goes, for it does preserve civil and human rights) that speaks very little to the moral lives of individuals. That is why MacIntyre hopes for the "preservation and enhancement" of other communities besides the state, for it is only through such communities that "a less barren politics, one very different from the conventional politics of the contemporary state," will be possible (II.171).

In terms of intellectual biographical perspective, perhaps the most intriguing essay in the two volumes is "Three perspectives on Marxism: 1953, 1968, 1995" (vol. 2). I was introduced to MacIntyre's *After Virtue* in graduate school, soon after its publication in 1981. I came across his *Marxism and Christianity* (first published in 1953 under the title *Marxism: An Interpretation*) as I sought to learn more about his perspective. When I read the latter work it was hard to see its relationship to *After Virtue*. Indeed, it was difficult in some ways to see that it was even written by the same author. The essay "Three perspectives on Marxism" clarifies and resolves the disjunction that I experienced.

MacIntyre notes that the central thesis of his book on Marxism was "that Marxism does not stand to Christianity in any relationship of straightforward antagonism, but rather, just because it is a transformation of Hegel's secularized version of Christian theology, has many of the characteristics of a Christian heresy rather than of non-Christian unbelief" (II.145-6). Looking back to the book's publication from the standpoint of 1995, MacIntyre realizes that he had "aspired to an impossible condition, that of being genuinely and systematically a

Christian, who was also genuinely and systematically a Marxist" (II.150). He had sought to correct both standpoints in his work. But he failed to realize at the time (1953) that he was trapped into accepting the modern liberal state as a fundamental structure within which he had to work (and within which change would occur). He writes in 1995:

> Among my as yet unquestioned assumptions was a belief that the only possible politics that could effectively respond to the injustices of a capitalist economic and social order was a politics that took for granted the institutional forms of the modern state and that had as its goal the conquest of state power, whether by electoral or by other means, so that I could not as yet recognize that those who make the conquest of state power their aim are always in the end conquered by it and, in becoming the instruments of the state, themselves become in time the instruments of one of the several versions of modern capitalism. (II.150)

It was the rejection of the modern liberal state that became one of the most distinguishing characteristics of *After Virtue* and much of MacIntyre's subsequent writing.

The Marxism text was revised in 1968. While in 1953 MacIntyre had sought to be both a Marxist and Christian, correcting both, in 1968 he realized that he could be neither (II.152). He had concluded that an "adequate account of the relationship between Marxism and Christianity would have to embody and be justified in terms of some systematic standpoint on the major issues of moral and political philosophy and of related philosophical disciplines" (II.150). In other words, he needed a standpoint outside of simply Marxism and Christianity. He also came to realize that the way forward for him would be outside the purview of liberal political theory (II.153). For example, he noticed that trade unions working within the modern liberal state simply would become "domesticated" and that this would lead to their own destruction (what, in fact, has happened in many cases). He saw that liberalism was the politics of the elite, who predetermine the choices of the masses. Even more pernicious, he realized that "the moral individualism of liberalism is itself a solvent of participatory community" (II.153).

Various philosophical strands and self-critiques started to come together in the 1970s. MacIntyre realized that there was "a fragmentation of practical and evaluative discourse," and that what "needed to be recovered, in order both to understand this and to correct it, was some reconstructed version of Aristotle's view of social and moral theory and practice" (II.156). He concluded:

> The modes of social practice in some relatively small-scale and
> local communities . . . in which social relationships are informed
> by a shared allegiance to the goods internal to communal

> practices, so that the uses of power and wealth are subordinated to the achievement of those goods, make possible a form of life in which participants pursue their own goods rationally and critically, rather than having continually to struggle, with greater or lesser success, against being reduced to the status of instruments of this or that type of capital formation. (II.156)

Philosophically, then, MacIntyre was coming to formulate the kind of positions that would make *After Virtue* such a milestone in 20th century moral philosophy. More personally, he was "coming to acknowledge the truth of the biblical Christianity of the Catholic church" (II.157).

Of course, where MacIntyre ends up is subject to critique. The hope of creating homogeneous communities that share a vision of the common good may be naïve given the complexity and interdependence of today's societies. His vision also ignores the ways in which power can pervade even small moral communities, and how those who are different can be oppressed. But there nevertheless are lessons to be mined from MacIntyre's work (for example, those interested in community organizing would find much to consider), and his analysis certainly can be useful in thinking about why moral communities succeed or fail and how we can best understand individual virtues and vices.

What we see in "Three perspectives on Marxism" and throughout the essays in the two volumes is the development of thought of a compelling and influential thinker. MacIntyre seems to have followed his doubts and questions in a variety of fruitful directions, and avoided the all-too-easy path of simply defending one's original position against all critiques and critics. Certainly defending one's ground is worthwhile, but philosophy is about questioning and exploration too. It is about considered reflection and shaping one's work accordingly. Through these volumes we see how this was done, and why MacIntyre legitimately can be considered one of the leading philosophers of the 20th century.

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