

FIRST THINGS

The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre

Stanley Hauerwas

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Few dispute that Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most important philosophers of our time. That reputation, however, does him little good. It is as though, quite apart from the man, there exists a figure called *Alasdair MacIntyre* whose position you know whether or not you have read him—and whose name has become a specter that haunts all attempts to provide constructive moral and political responses to the challenge of modernity.

The curious result is that MacIntyre's work is often dismissed as too extreme to be taken seriously. In fact, MacIntyre's work *is* extreme, but we live in extreme times. And though he is certainly critical of some of the developments associated with modernity, Alasdair MacIntyre is also a constructive thinker who has sought to help us repair our lives by locating those forms of life that make possible moral excellence.

Born in Scotland in 1929, MacIntyre began teaching at Manchester University in 1951. He came to the United States in 1969 to teach at Brandeis University, and he has held in the years since a large number of academic appointments, including stints at Boston University, Wellesley, Vanderbilt, Yale, Duke, and Notre Dame. His books began with *Marxism: An Interpretation* in 1953 and have continued in a steady flow, including *The Unconscious: A Conceptual Analysis* in 1958, *A Short History of Ethics* in 1966, *Herbert Marcuse: An Exposition and a Polemic* in 1970, *After Virtue* in 1981, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* in 1988, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* in 1990, and *Edith Stein* in 2005.

After Virtue remains MacIntyre's most widely discussed book, and a third edition has just been published in celebration of its twenty-fifth anniversary. We are also fortunate to have two recent volumes of his selected articles published by Cambridge University Press: *The Tasks of Philosophy* and *Ethics and Politics*. These essays are crucial for any assessment of MacIntyre's position: Arguments and observations he makes in his books were often first developed in articles, and defended later in other articles, not widely available.

The constructive character of MacIntyre's work is apparent in his understanding of the philosophical task. A philosopher, he insists, should try to express the concepts embedded in the practices of our lives in order to help us live morally worthy lives. The professionalization of philosophy into a technical field—what might be called the academic captivity of philosophy—reflects (and serves to legitimate) the compartmentalization of the advanced capitalistic social orders that produce our culture of experts, those strange creatures of authority in modernity.

General dismissals of MacIntyre too often rest on a fundamental failure to understand the interconnected character of his work. His criticisms of modernity are often thought to reflect a nostalgic and unjustified preference for the Middle Ages. MacIntyre sometimes cannot resist wickedly confirming his critics' prejudices about his work, but those who refuse to take MacIntyre seriously because they think him antimodern fail to understand the fundamental philosophical arguments that shape his position. A focus on his accounts of action and practical reason reveals that his fundamental perspective has been remarkably consistent.

I am not a disinterested spectator when it comes to disputes surrounding Alasdair MacIntyre, for I have been deeply influenced by him. Most commentators point to MacIntyre's influence on my work concerning the recovery of the virtues and corresponding criticism of modern moral

philosophy, and it is true that I have learned much from MacIntyre's account of the virtues. But far more important for me is his work on the philosophy of action. I was fortunate to stumble on his early work on the philosophy of social science when I was writing my dissertation (subsequently published as *Character and the Christian Life*). As a result, I have always thought that the center of MacIntyre's work was his development of key arguments from Wittgenstein concerning the conditions necessary for our actions to be intelligible to others as well as ourselves.

To understand MacIntyre takes work. Indeed, he *intends* for it to be a daunting and challenging task to understand him. I suspect he assumes most of his readers, possessed as they must be by the reading habits of modernity, cannot help but refuse to do the work necessary to understand him. Which is but another way to say, as he makes explicit in the last chapter of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, that those who think they must think for themselves will need to undergo a transformation amounting to a conversion if they are to understand “that it is only by participation in a rational practice-based community that one becomes rational.” MacIntyre provides a rich account of such a conversion in *Edith Stein* by a close analysis not only of Stein's conversion but also Rosenzweig's and Lukacs' conversions.

Moreover, the sheer range of MacIntyre's work is a challenge to anyone who would understand him. He is able not only to write in a scholarly and intelligent manner about Aristotle, Abelard, and Aquinas, but he is equally adept when he treats Freud, Lukacs, Weber, and Wittgenstein. I sometimes have the impression he has never forgotten anything he has read. Few know what MacIntyre knows, but to understand MacIntyre it is often necessary to have read what he has read. He seldom discusses a figure for no reason, but each philosopher, artist, and historical figure he examines becomes integral to the argument he is making.

He is equally at home in the technical philosophy of brain and mind as he is in political and social theory. That he is so adept is not just an indication of his mental power but is integral to his understanding of philosophy, which he attributes to the influence of R.G. Collingwood. It was from Collingwood, as he indicates in the prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue*, that he came to recognize that “what historical enquiry discloses is the situatedness of all enquiry, the extent to which what are taken to be the standards of truth and of rational justification in the contexts of practice vary from one time to another.”

MacIntyre has always been driven by a desire to repair our lives morally. Nowhere is his moral project more apparent than in a short essay in *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, originally published in 1971. There he identifies two groups of questions requiring further investigation after his analysis of the inadequacies of Marxism. The first involves the nature of moral judgment and the meaning of such key evaluative words as *good*, *right*, *virtue*, *justice*, *duty*, and *happiness*. He notes that Marxists share with conservative philosophers a disdain for concerns about the meaning of language, but he observes that it is exactly at the level of language that the moral inadequacies and corruptions of our age are evident.

The second group of questions he raises in the essay concerns the explanation of human action: whether we can find reasons for actions in the modern world that would not only enable us to act effectively but also move us to act in a manner that who we are and what we do are of a piece. The pursuit of answers to these interrelated questions—answers, as he makes clear, that continue to be indebted to the Marxist analysis of the distorting effect of the economic, social, and cultural order of capitalism—is the animating heart of MacIntyre's subsequent work. (In the recent *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre*, Kelvin Knight provides the best account we have of the continuity between

MacIntyre's early Marxism and his later position.)

MacIntyre's work after *Against the Self-Images of the Age* forms the ongoing attempt to help us understand how it is that we now live lives we do not understand. He pursues that investigation by analysis of philosophical alternatives, because, as he says in *After Virtue*, key episodes in the history of philosophy were what fragmented and largely transformed morality. MacIntyre's respect for such philosophers as Kant and Mill reflects this understanding of the philosophical task. Their attempt to develop accounts of morality in the name of some impersonal standard was an understandable response to the loss of shared practices necessary for the discovery of goods in common. Such a project was doomed to failure, however, exactly because no such standards can be sustained when they are abstracted from the practices and descriptions that render our lives intelligible. Modern moral philosophy becomes part of the problem, for its stress on autonomy, like its corresponding attempt to free ethics from history, produces people incapable of living lives that have narrative coherence.

His 1966 book, *A Short History of Ethics*, was the first installment of MacIntyre's attempt to diagnose what had happened that makes our lives unintelligible to ourselves. But the 1981 *After Virtue* was the book in which his mature position received its most compelling presentation. In the preface to the second edition, MacIntyre said that he will be able to overcome the mistakes he made in *A Short History of Ethics* only when he writes something called *A Very Long History of Ethics*. Yet many of his friends and colleagues suggest that is exactly what the bulk of his work comprises: *A Short History* led him to write *After Virtue*, only to retell the story again in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, climaxing in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*.

Each of these books contains wonderful new material, of course. I do not

think, for example, the chapters on Plato and Aristotle in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* have been sufficiently appreciated. Yet there is some truth to the contention that the story the books tell remains similar. Like a great novelist, MacIntyre often goes over the same ground. But through the development of subplots and the introduction of new characters, the story he tells is thickened and made more complex.

If I am right about the trajectory of MacIntyre's work, the central contention in *After Virtue* is his remark that “the concept of an intelligible action is a more fundamental concept than that of an action.” This may seem a small philosophical point, but much revolves around it: his understandings of the centrality of practical reason, the significance of the body for agency, why the teleological character of our lives must be displayed through narrative, the character of rationality, the nature of the virtues, why training in a craft is paradigmatic of learning to think as well as live, his understanding of why the Enlightenment project had to fail, his particular way of being a historicist, and why the plain person is the necessary subject of philosophy.

The importance of MacIntyre's argument about intelligible action is suggested by the problems he must confront to sustain his case. For example, he has had to deal often and critically with issues surrounding the mind-body distinction, as well as those who assume that a strong distinction must be drawn between facts and values (the assumed impossibility to move logically from an is to an ought). Though clearly separable, these philosophical problems are interrelated to the extent that they each served to set modern philosophy and ethics on a mistaken path.

In an article first published in 1982, wonderfully titled “How Moral Agents Became Ghosts, or, Why the History of Ethics Diverged from That of the Philosophy of Mind,” MacIntyre writes, “At the beginning of modern moral philosophy—which I date in the 1780s—the moral agent as traditionally

understood almost, if not quite, disappeared from view. The moral agent's character, the structure of his desires and dispositions, became at best a peripheral rather than a central topic for moral philosophy, thus losing the place assigned to it by the vast majority of moral philosophers from Plato to Hume.” Choice—conceived by Kant and Reid as deciding between desire and the requirements of morality and later by Sartre as the condition of an individual's authenticity—replaced character as crucial for moral agency. And the rest, as the story goes, is history.

In a recent study, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, Thomas D. D'Andrea provides a helpful overview that rightly directs attention to MacIntyre's engagement with psychoanalysis and the philosophy of social science. It was, in D'Andrea's view, the preparatory work MacIntyre needed to do in order to write the crucial chapters in *After Virtue* on “Fact, Explanation, and Expertise” and the “Character of Generalization in the Social Sciences.” Those chapters reflect the arguments MacIntyre had been developing against behaviorist and deterministic accounts of action, as well as his development of Wittgenstein's distinction between description and explanation—all of which is crucial for the constructive account *After Virtue* gives of practical reason and the virtues.

MacIntyre's most concentrated statement of his understanding of action is in “The Intelligibility of Action,” an article written in 1986. Here he argues that essential to our learning to act is that we learn to behave in a way that others can construe our actions as intelligible. In other words, the intelligibility of an action depends on the narrative continuities in an agent's life. Yet the ability to narrate my life depends on having narratives available that make my peculiar life fit within narratives of a community that direct me toward an end that is not of my own making. The intelligibility of my life, therefore, depends on the stock of descriptions at a particular time, place, and culture. I am, at best, no more than a co-author

of my life.

It is MacIntyre's contention that, in modernity, particularly in that peculiar form of modernity called liberalism, the stock of descriptions has become inadequate for our ability to act in a manner that can be intelligible to others as well to ourselves. His critique of liberalism, as he puts it in *After Virtue*, “derives from a judgment that the best type of human life, that in which the tradition of the virtues is most adequately embodied, is lived by those engaged in constructing and sustaining forms of community directed towards the shared achievement of those common goods without which the ultimate human good cannot be achieved. Liberal political societies are characteristically committed to denying any place for a determinative conception of the human good in their public discourse, let alone allowing that their common life should be grounded in such a conception.”

MacIntyre's critique of modernity is hardly wholesale rejection. *Ethics and Politics* ends with a fascinating defense of the virtue of toleration and free speech. From MacIntyre's perspective, the presumption that one might be capable of standing somewhere to reject modernity is the kind of peculiarly modern attitude his work is meant to disabuse. MacIntyre, moreover, understands that there is no past to which we might return. He notes that we are all “inescapably inhabitants of advanced modernity, bearing its social and cultural marks.” Accordingly he acknowledges that his understanding of the tradition of the virtues and the consequences for modernity of the rejection of that tradition is one that is possible only on this side of modernity.

Yet MacIntyre thinks we can gain some understanding of the moral character of modernity only from the standpoint of a different tradition—in particular, the tradition of the virtues represented by Aristotle. Given his early Marxism as well as the influence of Collingwood and Wittgenstein, it should not be surprising that MacIntyre grew to find in Aristotle's account

of the virtues and practical reason an understanding of the conditions necessary for our actions to be intelligible. Aristotle provided MacIntyre with an account of why our actions require a conception of an end as well as the social and political conditions necessary to sustain a life formed by the virtues constitutive of that end that is simply lacking in modern moral practice and theory.

MacIntyre notes that when he wrote *After Virtue* he was already an Aristotelian but not yet a Thomist. His Thomism came when he became convinced that in some respects Aquinas was a better Aristotelian than Aristotle. Indeed, MacIntyre reports, he learned that his attempt to provide an account of the human good in social terms was inadequate without a metaphysical grounding. “It is only because human beings have an end toward which they are directed by reason of their specific nature,” he writes, “that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do.”

Some have wondered how MacIntyre's old emphasis on the historical character of all enquiry can be consistent with his new emphasis on the necessity of a metaphysical grounding to sustain our endeavor to know. MacIntyre responds to these worries in a chapter in *The Task of Philosophy*, where he argues that first principles are not simply given before our engagement in a mode of inquiry. Rather, as Aristotle argued, through the activity necessary to achieve a perfected science, thought “gives expression to the adequacy of the mind to its object.”

MacIntyre understands himself to be a metaphysical realist. Truth is the relation of an adequated mind to its object, but MacIntyre insists that the activity of enquiry is the necessary condition for the discovery of first principles. This is the metaphysical expression of his understanding of action—or, perhaps better put, his defense of first principles helps us see how his account of action has been metaphysical from the beginning. Thus

his agreement with Thomas Aquinas, against Aristotle, that the proper object of human knowledge is not essence qua essence. Because we know essences only through effects, for MacIntyre there is no place to begin but in the middle.

MacIntyre's position is, I think, similar to his characterization of Rosenzweig's in *Edith Stein*: “We do not begin with some adequate grasp of the concepts of knowledge and truth and in the light of these pass judgment on whether or not we know something of God or whether or not it is true God exists, but rather it is from our encounters with God—and with the world and with human beings—that we learn what it is to have knowledge of what truth is.”

Thus, with his realism comes an empiricism that shapes his account of how we learn the precepts of natural law. Just as metaphysical first principles are discovered in a mode of enquiry, so the precepts of natural law are those “presupposed in any situation in which learning and enquiry between rational individuals about their individual and common goods can be advanced and by any relationship in which individuals can conduct themselves with rational integrity.” This observation from *Ethics and Politics* makes clear his view that a natural morality is forged by people over time through trial and error. He calls attention to Thomas Aquinas' contention that play and delight taken in play are necessary for exchanges and interchanges of human life, and he concludes that “the common good requires, and hence the natural law requires, the making of jokes and the staging and enjoyment of entertainment.”

Such an account of natural law is subversive, because the way of life necessary for the discovery of natural law challenges “the persecutory activities of centralizing powers.” Those in power seldom display a sense of humor—the correlative to the humility derived from the recognition that we know what is required of us fundamentally by our failure to live

according to the precepts of the natural law. So, too, the virtues are equally subversive in capitalist social orders. For MacIntyre, the practices necessary for training in practical reason through which we acquire the ability to act intelligibly requires the systematic growth of human potential by acquired excellence that cannot help but challenge the character of modern moral practice and theory.

Conservatives who think they have found an ally in MacIntyre fail to attend to his understanding of the kind of politics necessary to sustain the virtues. He makes clear that his problem with most forms of contemporary conservatism is that conservatives mirror the fundamental characteristics of liberalism. The conservative commitment to a way of life structured by a free market results in an individualism, and in particular a moral psychology, that is as antithetical to the tradition of the virtues as is liberalism. Conservatives and liberals, moreover, both try to employ the power of the modern state to support their positions in a manner alien to MacIntyre's understanding of the social practices necessary for the common good.

Those who fear MacIntyre's position might commit him to some form of confessional theological position should be comforted by his adamant declaration that his metaphysical position, his account of natural law, as well as his understanding of practical reason and the virtues are secular. By *secular* I take him to mean that his argument that some overall good is necessary for our actions to be intelligible does not entail any theological convictions that are not available to anyone. In his important chapter called "Aquinas on Practical Rationality and Justice" in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre does acknowledge that Thomas Aquinas' account of practical reason does have a "theological dimension," because it requires knowledge of God. But he appeals to Thomas himself for evidence that such knowledge does not require revelation.

I find MacIntyre's implied distinction between nature and grace a serious problem, but it is understandable, given his commitment to maintain a strong distinction between philosophy and theology. That MacIntyre is intent on a division between philosophy and theology, a division I think unknown to Thomas Aquinas, confirms his claim that he works within the conditions of modernity.

These theological questions, however, seldom are raised by MacIntyre's critics. His critics, at least his conservative critics, are usually more concerned with whether his position does not entail some form of relativism. They think his view that standards of truth and of rational justification in the contexts of diverse practices and inquiries means he has little defense against relativism. So, too, his view that standards of truth will vary from one time and place to another, as well as his denial that there are available to any rational agent standards of truth sufficient to resolve fundamental moral, scientific, and metaphysical disputes in a definitive way.

He has on numerous occasions responded to the charge. MacIntyre certainly holds that it is undeniable that many culturally embodied systems of thought and action exist with their own standards of excellence. Moreover, adherents of these systems come to conclusions that are incompatible with other systems. Advocates of these alternative modes may from time to time judge the standpoint of the other party to be unsound. If this is what is meant by relativism, then MacIntyre is a relativist. But he distances himself from the kind of relativism that draws the further mistaken conclusion that, in the absence of modes of reasoning that can resolve conflicts in principle, the contending parties must alter their own modes of justification and reject all substantive conceptions of truth.

Crucial for MacIntyre is the historical fact that one tradition of inquiry can put another tradition into an epistemological crisis. (For his account of

such crises, see the chapter in *The Tasks of Philosophy* entitled “Epistemological Crisis and Dramatic Narrative.”) Advocates of one tradition learn how to think in terms of another tradition—and then they learn to identify the unresolved issues characteristic of the other tradition. Through such acts of the imagination, adherents of a tradition “may be able to conclude that it is only from the standpoint of their tradition that the difficulties of that rival tradition can be understood and overcome.”

In an extraordinary essay, “Colors, Cultures, and Practices” in *The Tasks of Philosophy*, MacIntyre draws explicitly on Wittgenstein's arguments against a private language, to argue that our judgments of color are socially established standards. Accordingly, it is a necessary condition for skillful use of the vocabulary of color to master a socially established language. He then provides a fascinating account of how painters such as Hals and Turner discovered through the practice of their painting color discriminations that established standards of excellence that make impossible relativistic judgments.

I do not expect that this account of MacIntyre's rejection of relativism will still the worries of those who think his historicism is simply incompatible with his Thomism. For those so disposed to think MacIntyre inconsistent, I commend “Truth as a Good: A Reflection on *Fides et Ratio*” in *The Tasks of Philosophy*. There he defends the encyclical's view that the task of philosophy is the articulation and pursuit of answers to questions posed by human beings, whatever their culture. It is the “characteristic of human beings,” MacIntyre writes, “that by our nature we desire to know and to understand, that we cannot but reflect upon the meaning of our lives, upon suffering, and upon death, and in so doing attempt to pursue our good, making our own the tasks of rational enquiry and the achievement of truth.”

When we begin by asking what makes an action intelligible, we cannot

avoid God—at least if MacIntyre is right. Like Thomas Aquinas, MacIntyre thinks every human being has a natural desire for happiness “which is achieved only in union with God, 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.” MacIntyre's critique of modernity, therefore, is but a footnote to his constructive attempt to help us recover the resources constitutive of our ability to act intelligibly.

Put differently, MacIntyre's fundamental problem with liberalism is the kind of people it produces. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from MacIntyre's worries about liberalism that he thinks any hope of recovering the tradition of the virtues is doomed. The subtitle of his 1999 book, *Dependent Rational Animals*, is *Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, which makes clear that MacIntyre thinks that we are necessarily teleological beings who must learn to trust one another.

The “plain person” is the character MacIntyre has identified to display the unavoidability of the virtues. Plain persons are those characterized by everyday practices such as sustaining families, schools, and local forms of political community. They engage in trades and professions that have required them to learn skills constitutive of a craft. Such people are the readers he hopes his books may reach. Grounded as they are in concrete practices necessary to sustain a common life, they acquire the virtues that make them capable of recognizing the principles of natural law and why those principles call into question the legitimating modes of modernity.

MacIntyre has sought, within the world we necessarily inhabit, to help us recover resources to enable us to act intelligibly. From beginning to end, he has attempted to help us locate those forms of life that can sustain lives well lived. In *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, Thomas D. D'Andrea quotes the preface MacIntyre wrote to the Polish edition of *After Virtue*:

The flourishing of the virtues requires and in turn sustains a certain kind of community, necessarily a small-scale community, within which the goods of various practices are ordered, so that, as far as possible, regard for each finds its due place with the lives of each individual, or each household, and in the life of the community at large. Because, implicitly or explicitly, it is always by reference to some conception of the overall and final human good that other goods are ordered, the life of every individual, household or community by its orderings gives expression, wittingly or unwittingly, to some conception of the human good. And it is when goods are ordered in terms of an adequate conception of human good that the virtues genuinely flourish. “Politics” is the Aristotelian name for the set of activities through which goods are ordered in the life of the community.

Where such communities exist—and they cannot help but exist—it may be possible for some to live lives they understand.

STANLEY HAUERWAS is Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke University.

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