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### **Alasdair MacIntyre's Critique of Contemporary Ethics: Can the Towering Figure of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ethics Have It Both Ways?**

Alasdair MacIntyre has been one of the most prolific and influential moral and political philosophers of the last 50 years. He has written on a wide variety of topics including Freud's notion of the unconscious, the enduring appeal of Marxism, relativism and the possibility of rational dialogue, first principles and contemporary philosophy, and the relationship between ethics and biology. The underlying thread giving coherence to MacIntyre's extraordinarily broad range of concerns has been his abiding search for an adequate moral stance on which to engage in large-scale social criticism (Murphy, 2).

MacIntyre is perhaps most famous for his insightful comments on reasons behind the striking interminability of moral debate today (MacIntyre, 1981, 6). He has persuasively argued that the root of the paralysis lies in part in the failure of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment moralists to appreciate that all moral systems (and the principles of practical reasoning on which these moral systems rest) are historically embodied in particular systems of social norms and practices. According to MacIntyre, "the Enlightenment's central project had been to identify a set of moral rules, equally compelling to all rational persons"

("Borradori," 255). But to abstract moral rules from the historical and social contexts that gave them meaning ends up emptying those rules not only of their intelligible content but also of any contextual ground that could be used to rationally justify them or evaluate their appropriateness as moral criteria.

### **The birth of MacIntyre's "After Virtue" ethical project**

MacIntyre came to this view only after many years of working out the tensions within his thoughts and among the rival traditions in which they find their origins. Let's look briefly at how his view developed slowly over the half-century of his scholarly enquiry. In a 1991 interview, MacIntyre divided his life as an academic philosopher into three parts.

The twenty-two years from 1949, when I became a graduate student of philosophy at Manchester University, until 1971 were a period, as it now appears retrospectively, of heterogeneous, badly organized, sometimes fragmented and often frustrating and messy inquiries, from which nonetheless in the end I learned a lot. From 1971, shortly after I emigrated to the United States, until 1977 was an interim period of sometimes painfully self-critical reflection.... From 1977 onwards I have been engaged in a single project to which *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* are central (*Cogito*, 268-269).

It is striking how much the themes of interminability, contending traditions, and the search for an adequate stance for large-scale social critique appear almost from the beginning of MacIntyre's work. "Long before I was old enough to study philosophy," MacIntyre told an interviewer, "I had the philosophical good fortune to be educated in two antagonistic systems of belief and attitude" ("Borradori," 255). His early imagination thrived on a "Gaelic oral culture of farmers and fishermen, poets and storytellers," a culture where what mattered

were particular loyalties to kin and land and to be just was to fulfill one's role in one's community. At the same time, through his studies of Latin and Greek literature, philosophy, and history, MacIntyre was educated in the perceptions and expectations of a literate world built more on abstractions and theories than concrete relationships and stories ("Borradori," 255-256). His first contact with formal philosophy instilled in him an aversion to the intellectual disaster of holding contradictory beliefs "partly by reading Plato and partly by coming across the proof, originally discovered by Thomas of Erfurt and then rediscovered by the pragmatist C.I. Lewis, that if you assert a contradiction, you are thereby committed to asserting anything whatsoever" ("Borradori," 256).

Three important intellectual traditions shaped MacIntyre in his early years as a scholar: Christianity, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. Christianity was the first influence and ultimately the most enduring – although for a long time, it was eclipsed by the other two which functioned for MacIntyre as more than systems of ideas. Rather, what captivated him was their status as ideologies – as secular religions – capable of offering a comprehensive explanation of reality. Raised a Protestant, MacIntyre became familiar with important beliefs, practices and thinkers in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions – thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth. But he found it increasingly difficult to reconcile faith with the modern liberal values he was also absorbing through his studies.

"Sometimes I would find myself thinking about justice in an Aristotelian or Thomistic way, sometimes in a modern liberal way, without recognizing the full

extent of my own incoherence" ("Borradori," 257). When a compartmental approach to faith and reason based on ideas taken from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Barth proved untenable, MacIntyre rejected his faith. But in the long struggle over his faith, he also learned that a "premature regimentation" of his thought in the interest of consistency could also lead one mistakenly to discard key data that later would prove valuable in the search for truth ("Borradori," 256).

The social sciences were exerting an increasingly dominant influence in the intellectual and cultural world following World War II. MacIntyre became interested in the rapid advances being made in the flourishing fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis. This interest would later give birth to one of the first books MacIntyre would publish, a study entitled "*The Unconscious: A Conceptual Analysis*" (MacIntyre, 1958). While a student in London, MacIntyre met the anthropologist Franz Steiner. MacIntyre credited Steiner with helping him to find a way of understanding moralities that would avoid two key problems: (1) the reductionism of "presenting morality as a mere secondary expression of something else" and (2) the sterile abstractionism "that detaches principles from social embodied practice." Steiner did this by leading MacIntyre to the insight of understanding a morality as constituted by the particular rules and practices of a particular society. This insight led to another, namely that rival forms of moral practice "are in contention which is neither only a rational debate between rival principles nor a clash of rival social structures, but always both" ("Borradori," 259).

Under the influence of George Thompson, a professor of Greek, he became a Marxist and briefly joined the British Communist party. What drew MacIntyre to Marxism was its insight that liberalism was ideological, “a deceiving and self-deceiving mask for certain social interests.” In the name of freedom, liberalism for MacIntyre “tends to dissolve traditional human ties and to impoverish social and cultural relationships” (“Borradori,” 256ff).

MacIntyre quickly came to see that the two forms of Marxism then prevalent also had their own inadequacies. Scientific Marxism – Marxism as a social science clarifying the laws of development that indicate the inevitable path to socialism – was for MacIntyre morally bankrupt, for it offered no way to critique the brutalities of Stalinism (Murphy, 3). Humanistic Marxism – Marxism as an ethics offering a critique showing the evil of capitalism and the superiority of socialism – was for MacIntyre morally impotent since it offered no philosophically adequate justification for the authority of its critique. MacIntyre confronted both forms of Marxism in his “Notes from the Moral Wilderness” where he located the deficiencies of both versions in a deeper commonality they shared with the Enlightenment project of humanism. He argued that the difficulties with the humanist stance stemmed from their effort to ground morality as comprised of universal truths shorn of the particularities of social, cultural, and historical facts. As intellectual descendants of humanism, Marxism and liberalism ironically both shared moral philosophical presuppositions that led directly to emotivism – “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more

specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character (MacIntyre, 1984, 11)

The insight that an adequate critical moral stance must be historically situated led to MacIntyre's effort to write a history of ethics (MacIntyre, 1966). He eventually saw, however, that history had to enter in not only at the level of changing patterns of social norms and practices that ground particular moral stances but also at the level at which different moral theories are justified. In other words, history grounds not only morality but also the underlying practical rationalities on which rival moral theories are justified. Thus the two tasks that would structure the great work of scholarship that would dominate the latter part of MacIntyre's output began to take shape: (1) finding the substance of what a morality adequate to critique the corrosive effects of humanism might look like and (2) identifying what norms of practical rationality would be adequate to justify a morality claiming to be adequate to the task of grounding one culturally embodied system of moral thought in such a way that one can critically evaluate a rival culturally embodied system of moral thought such that one system might in theory defeat other rival culturally embodied systems of moral thought.

MacIntyre also began to consider whether Aristotelianism in its account of the virtues, of goods as the ends of human practices, and justice as resting in a community of ordered practices themselves ordered to the human good might have the resources that would allow it to be revived in new forms in different

cultures (MacIntyre, 1966, 1997, xviii). The group of essays that make up *Against the Self-Images of the Age* reflected this effort to rethink the problem of ethics in a systematic way from an Aristotelian point of view (*Cogito*, 268).

### **MacIntyre's project and its critics**

Armed with a promising hypothesis that a reformed Aristotelianism situated within a grand narrative of rival and contending moral traditions might provide a stance from which he could embark on large-scale criticism of modernity, MacIntyre was ready to begin the great work of scholarship that would come to be known as the *After Virtue* Project. The striking metaphor that launched *After Virtue*, the 1981 book that marked the published beginning of this project, was “catastrophe” – the idea that the present state of moral fragmentation that characterizes modernity and post-modernity is the result of a two-stage process: (1) a cataclysmic historical and cultural disruption of a coherent and orderly moral tradition inherited from Classical Antiquity as modified by Christianity (2) followed by a disordered and ultimately incoherent appropriation of norms, concepts, and terminology from the disrupted tradition by a new tradition, that of the Enlightenment.

Central to *After Virtue's* complex argument was the claim that the culture of post-modernity can be adequately understood only from a standpoint outside of modern Enlightenment culture. Equally central was the claim that Aristotelianism as further developed beyond Aristotle provides that

standpoint – particularly in its account of the virtues, of goods as the ends of human practices, and justice as resting in a community of ordered practices themselves ordered to the human good – was still available as such an external critical standpoint. MacIntyre began the argument by defining a moral stance based on the virtues in terms of a confrontation with emotivism, which he took to be the inevitable consequence of modernity's moralizing effort to stand above history and situate morality in the rationality of the moral agent alone. He then situated the moral system in which the virtues took shape and evaluated its claims to objectivity and authority. Then he offered an extended historical account of the catastrophe that resulted in the loss of the earlier system of virtue and its gradual replacement by the modern system. Finally he used a critique of the modern system in order to pose the fundamental choice available to us at the present moment – the logical consequences of emotivism as articulated in the moral philosophy of Nietzsche or a revival and further development of Aristotelianism in a way that appropriates the many valuable insights of modernity (MacIntyre, 1984).

The responses to and criticisms of *After Virtue* led to three more books and numerous articles in which MacIntyre refined and extended his argument – essentially a long history of ethics – and attempted to flesh out the philosophical underpinnings of his position. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre developed a coherent understanding of how practical rationality was itself a historically situated phenomenon that nevertheless could provide resources

adequate to the task of grounding a historically embedded moral system and of explaining how someone situated within one historically embedded moral tradition might comparatively evaluate two different moral systems (thus justifying what in fact MacIntyre had done in *After Virtue* by critically evaluating the adequacy of the old moral system based on the virtues and the modern system based on the rational agent standing above history).

At the same time, MacIntyre also addressed the charge that his argument necessarily implicated him in moral relativism. His response was directed at two quite diverse audiences. The first audience was composed of Aristotelians disquieted by his moral particularism, seeing it as ultimately not distinguishable from moral relativism (Kent, 1996, 524). The second audience was composed of post-modern scholars troubled by his claim that from the standpoint of one culturally embodied system of moral thought one can critically evaluate a rival culturally embodied system of moral thought such that one system could in theory defeat the other and that Aristotelian Thomism is a particularly good candidate to accomplish this task with respect to modern liberalism (MacIntyre, 2006, xiii). Interestingly, MacIntyre located the strength of a moral system precisely in its openness to refutation ("Borradori," 264). For it is precisely in a moral theory's condition of being formulated so as to be maximally open to refutation that allows a particular moral tradition to develop a theory about what makes a moral theory superior to others.

It is in these terms that Aristotelianism failed with respect to key parts of its physics and biology, but succeeded in vindicating itself rationally as metaphysics, as politics and morals and as a theory of inquiry. If this is so, then Aristotelianism has been shown in at least these areas to be not only the best theory so far, but the best theory so far about what makes a particular theory the best one (“Borradori,” 264).

In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, MacIntyre attempted to clarify a key concept in his project’s argument – namely the central notion of “tradition.” For MacIntyre, the concepts distinctive of a particular historically embedded moral system are embodied in and draw meaning from particular forms of social practice. Practices in turn find their meanings and their developments in an ongoing narrative of stability and transformation within the history of a particular society. It is precisely the process of handing on these practices and narratives that constitutes a tradition. Traditions also help one understand the dynamic relationship between individuals as receivers of practices and narratives from their society and individuals as critical evaluators who sometimes alter or even reject moral resources available to them within their society and its constituting tradition. The passing on or breakdown of traditions also help explain the formation, maintenance, and development or decay of the particular norms of practical rationality that underpin moral enquiry and action within a society (*Cogito*, 269-270).

In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre gave an account of an important further development in the thinking underpinning his own project.

When I wrote *After Virtue*, I was already an Aristotelian, but not yet a Thomist, something made plain in my account of Aquinas at the end of chapter 13. I became a Thomist after writing *After Virtue* in part because I became convinced that Aquinas was in some respects a better Aristotelian than Aristotle, that not

only was he an excellent interpreter of Aristotle's texts, but that he had been able to extend and deepen both Aristotle's metaphysical and his moral enquiries (MacIntyre, 2006, x).

Later MacIntyre came to see that his effort to ground an account of the human good "in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives" apart from a philosophically-based biology was inadequate. *Dependent Rational Animals* was MacIntyre's attempt to describe how a historically-embedded notion of biology grounds his account of the human good in a way parallel to the way the notion of a stable human nature grounded Aristotle's ethical project of the virtues (MacIntyre, 2004, pg. xi).

With the incorporation of a historically-embedded notion of biology into his *After Virtue* project, it became increasingly clear that what MacIntyre was doing was formulating a Thomistic genealogy (a subversive history) of contemporary philosophy (Reames, 427). But MacIntyre's genealogy necessarily entailed reformulating Thomism as a tradition-constituted enquiry (despite the clear anti-relativism of Aquinas' thought). By "relativizing" Aquinas, had MacIntyre's project reached a point of incoherence?

### **Three questions for MacIntyre to address**

Not necessarily. But if MacIntyre is to show how reformulating Thomism as a tradition-constituted enquiry is both consistent and tenable, I would suggest three key areas that need further clarification. The first deals with explaining whether or not moral particularism necessarily entails moral relativism, and if

not, then why not. On one hand, MacIntyre has denied and continues to deny that he is a moral relativist. He has asserted and continues to assert that from the standpoint of one culturally embodied system of moral thought one can critically evaluate a rival culturally embodied system of moral thought such that one system can in theory defeat the other and that Aristotelian Thomism is a particularly good candidate to accomplish this task with respect to modern liberalism (MacIntyre, 2006, xiii). On the other hand, MacIntyre has consistently claimed both that all enquiry (including moral enquiry) is historically situated and that no rational agent has access to “standards of truth and of rational justification such that an appeal to them could be *sufficient* to resolve fundamental moral, scientific, or metaphysical disputes [between rival traditions of rationality] in a conclusive way” (MacIntyre, 2006, xii). MacIntyre laid the groundwork for a defense of the coherence of a historically-situated Thomism in his 1990 Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University, “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophy.” Here he offered a powerful argument as to how MacIntyrean historicism and Thomist metaphysics might be understood as not contradictory but complementary templates for engaging in a comparative critique of rival moral systems and of the rival notions of rationality in which they are grounded.

The second concept inviting clarification is the exact relationship between rationality and tradition in MacIntyre’s project. For MacIntyre, every understanding of rationality and every theoretical enquiry is tradition-

constituted, since the resources of an adequate rationality are made available to us only in and through particular traditions (MacIntyre, 1988, 350, 369). But traditions are not simply aggregates of intellectual beliefs and practices of reasoning but also include the social practices and institutions from which the intellectual beliefs and practices of rationality draw their life. (Hence, it makes no sense to talk about the tradition of a single individual but rather only of communities.)

But the question then emerges of precisely what this means. Is it sufficient to understand reasons as good reasons if one first understands the practices of reasoning employed within a particular social and historical setting in which they are put forward as reasons? If so, then it could be pointed out that this implies that a person in one tradition can directly evaluate the practices of reasoning in another tradition – which seems to undermine MacIntyre’s particularist claims about the nature of rationality. Alternatively, are we to understand reasons as good reasons only by first understanding how the social practices and institutions constitute and embody the defining characteristics and norms of coherence that ground rationality for a particular tradition? But this more perspectivist approach seems to render problematic MacIntyre’s claim that one rival tradition of rationality can be superior to another since, in order to understand the tradition-constituted nature of particular rationalities, one would need to embark on a hermeneutic investigation of nature and specificities of each tradition in question – an investigation that could easily result in a host of

incommensurably different interpretations depending on what one takes to be the key features of that particular tradition (Kuna, 259).

The third concept inviting clarification is MacIntyre's notion of first principles of rationality. Crucial to his argument for reconciling MacIntyrian historicism and Thomistic metaphysics is his argument for a particularist approach to first principles of rationality. But his argument for a particularist approach presupposes a distinction between two different types of first principles – (1) first principle accessible to everyone and (2) first principles that are accessible only to those who intellectually engage in enquiry within a theoretical framework (MacIntyre, 1990, 175). Here too, it appears that MacIntyre's effort to have it both ways entangles him in a contradiction. The second kind of first principle (first principles accessible only through theoretically-grounded enquiry) clearly presupposes a tradition. But the first kind of first principle – if it truly is to be accessible to everyone – appears necessarily to transcend any particular tradition. But MacIntyre has claimed elsewhere that all rationality is tradition-constituted, since the resources of an adequate rationality are made available to us only in and through particular traditions (MacIntyre, 1988, 350, 369).

Now MacIntyre might respond that even rival and incommensurable traditions of rationality need not necessarily be incommensurable in every respect. And one example of overlap is precisely the first type of first principle. But the post-modernist might in turn respond that (granted for the sake of argument that a principle could be first as such, which of course, epistemological

post-modernity would not and could not grant) an overlap of this type is not incidental to the notion of rival and incommensurable traditions of rationality. An overlap of first principles would seem to put into question the incommensurability of rival traditions of rationality. Even someone with an intellect as subtle and powerful as MacIntyre's may not be able in the end to have it both ways.

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