

Fran O'Rourke (ed.)

*What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century?:
Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre.*

University of Notre Dame Press 2013.

512 pages

\$70.00 (Hardback ISBN 9780268037376)

Alasdair MacIntyre is arguably the most influential Catholic or even theistic political philosopher alive today (with stiff competition for this title from Charles Taylor). A newly published volume of essays edited by Fran O'Rourke marks the most recent attempt to grapple with the complex ramifications of MacIntyre's thought. Like many collections that are conceived as encomiums to graying academic eminences, this volume is not entirely free of the intellectual scourges of flattery, eclecticism, and flab that plague this genre. Yet thankfully O'Rourke has also gathered a number of truly excellent and thought provoking pieces that move the discussion on MacIntyre and philosophical issues in political theory, ethics, and philosophy of social science further, thus meriting a diverse readership. I will survey the highlights.

The collection opens with MacIntyre's most detailed autobiographical piece to date, entitled 'On Having Survived the Academic Moral Philosophy of the Twentieth Century.' This essay alone makes the volume worth seeking out, clarifying the particulars of MacIntyre's various intellectual debts, while also launching a much more wide-ranging polemic against academia and modern moral philosophy. This being MacIntyre, the piece is philosophically lucid while also exhibiting rhetorical verve. The essay will be of interest to philosophers and also required reading for anyone concerned with MacIntyre's intellectual development. In the same vein, Kelvin Knight's essay adds further nuance and sophistication to the picture of MacIntyre's intellectual progress. Specifically, Knight continues the work that has established his reputation as a key voice in showing how MacIntyre's form of Aristotelianism is deeply politically radical and not quite like anything else that has come before it.

Probably the best essay of the collection is also the most irreverent (and not accidentally the one that draws the most extensive response from MacIntyre in the book's epilogue). Raymond Geuss advances a challenging critique of MacIntyre's Aristotelian assumption that there exists a hard distinction between intrinsic versus instrumental goods (a distinction absolutely key to MacIntyre's moral philosophy). Geuss then questions MacIntyre's arguments that individual human lives are ultimately rendered intelligible by some highest intrinsic good that gives them a narrative unity. By contrast, Geuss suggests that individual human lives cannot achieve any such narrative unity. Although Geuss clearly admires MacIntyre, he also thinks that the latter's famous alternative between Aristotle or Nietzsche is basically false. Geuss believes that MacIntyre is right that Nietzsche will only be overcome when the political and social conditions of late capitalism have been superseded, but the way forward is neither Aristotle nor Nietzsche, but rather a position that rehabilitates the insight that there is no strict divide between intrinsic and instrumental goods. Geuss's piece is of interest because it effectively shows how deeply tendentious the neo-Aristotelian assumptions of MacIntyre's philosophy are from the perspective of a rival school of thought. If MacIntyre turns out to be wrong, the problems highlighted by Geuss will likely be the culprits.

Two other standout essays are offered by John Haldane and Joseph Dunne. Dunne offers a sympathetic but highly challenging set of critiques to MacIntyre's political theory. Most importantly,

Dunne argues that despite MacIntyre's impressive contributions, his later thought as developed in *Dependent Rational Animals* remains defective in two ways. First, MacIntyre's defense of localist political solidarity requires forms of community that are either too small to be viable in an age of nation states, or else too large to retain the thick solidarity he envisions as key. Second, the virtue demands MacIntyre makes of the citizens of a properly ordered political community are too high. They are the stuff of lifelong religious conversions and of saints and cannot be expected to simply result from even the best moral education. Behind Dunne's objections looms the specter of utopia. Dunne seems to suggest that MacIntyre's ethical demands on both the individual and the community are utopian, and so if put into practice, might become pathological and self-defeating. Instead, Dunne wishes MacIntyre to recover his earlier Augustinianism, which serves to 'remind us how finitude and sinfulness issue in the fragility of all our projects' (77).

Haldane makes a forceful point which has largely gone unnoticed and has been a central concern of my own work. Specifically, he argues that one of MacIntyre's key contributions has been to stake out a humanistic position in philosophy and the human sciences. This humanistic position is critical of all efforts to reduce human life to an impersonal natural science—for example, as is seen in the encroachment of a reductive form of neurophysiology in the field of ethics. The attempt to reduce the human sciences and philosophy to another branch of the natural sciences is often referred to as 'naturalism' and MacIntyre provides a key resource of resistance against this pervasive movement.

Fran O'Rourke's essay can be viewed as putting Haldane's concern into practice. O'Rourke criticizes the radically reductive accounts of human ethical and moral life championed by evolutionary biologists like Edward O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins. He draws explicit inspiration from MacIntyre's appropriation of Aristotle. O'Rourke insists not only on the implausibility of reducing human ethical life to sociobiology, but also on the urgent need for a humanistic defense of philosophy.

Instead of naturalism, the future of the social sciences ought to follow MacIntyre's conceptualization of them as narrative and interpretive sciences. Because human actions embody meanings that are structured by narratives, social scientists should look to tell stories about political reality and not uncover the supposedly mechanistic law-like generalizations determining human behavior. Owen Flanagan's essay is notable for wrestling with how the narratives that are constitutive of human social and political life might become deeply misleading and illusory. Flanagan suggests that the libertarian narrative of ultra-individual autonomy is one such example of a distortive narrative. These distortive narratives, Flanagan believes, must be subjected to an analysis that is at once empirical and normative, social scientific and philosophical. Once they have taken the interpretive turn towards narratives, there is an ineliminable role for philosophy in the social sciences.

The volume ends with a brief epilogue by MacIntyre responding to his interlocutors and sounding general themes. Notable is MacIntyre's final insistence that the plurality of rival, incompatible views exhibited in the volume—views ranging from Marxist to Nietzschean to Thomist—are all absolutely necessary to continually establish the epistemic validity of his own preferred form of Aristotelianism. So he insists that 'a dialogue about issues in moral philosophy in which Marxists were not participating would be a defective and inadequate conversation' as would one 'from which contemporary Thomists were absent' (475). Indeed, MacIntyre even expresses pleasure in the fact that debates over his philosophy could create conversations that 'include

protagonists of standpoints whose adherents have largely ignored each other or felt able to be cursorily dismissive of each other's views' (474).

This opens a question that to my mind remains unresolved in MacIntyre's thought: namely, the role and desirability of pluralism and multiculturalism in his political philosophy. Whether wrong or right, MacIntyre is often read as a somewhat nostalgic defender of small-scale, local forms of self-rule. Yet at the same time his very understanding of philosophical inquiry requires and even applauds a deep diversity of modern outlooks (Marxist, Thomist, Nietzschean, etc.) engaged in charitable, free intellectual conflict and exchange. One looming question for MacIntyre's theory of modernity is: to what extent has he adequately responded to the liberal insistence on the need for forms of toleration and cohabitation within the conditions of deep diversity? In this specific sense, perhaps we have not yet 'survived' the twentieth century after all.

Jason Blakely
Pepperdine University