

Alasdair MacIntyre. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative.* Cambridge University Press 2016. 332 pp. \$49.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107176454).

Alasdair MacIntyre once quipped that his philosophical work, which began with *A Short History of Ethics*, had gradually morphed over the years into a very long history of ethics. His latest book, published at the age of 87, certainly adds another chapter to this ongoing project: revising the history of ethics by recuperating Aristotle and launching a scathing critique of modernity.

Although MacIntyre's general body of thought is quite remarkable (he is arguably one of today's most underappreciated philosophers), his latest book in some respects struggles to find a sense of identity. This is especially true when read in light of the path-breaking arguments of works like *After Virtue* (1981), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990). Indeed, the major claims of those books are largely reiterated here—the diagnosis of emotivism (updated as a more sophisticated 'expressivism'), the critique of the Enlightenment (here a critique of 'Morality'), and the need to recover Aristotle and Aquinas.

One possible response to the complaint that this book is largely reiterative would be to note that its stated purpose is not innovation, but an accessible introduction 'to the lay reader for whom it is written' (ix). Yet, if MacIntyre's goal was a book for a general readership, then he has probably missed his target. For one thing, the arguments presented here are written in dense, academic prose that few educated lay readers are likely to engage. In addition, the discussions are largely sustained through reference to the very specialized academic literatures that MacIntyre frequently decries (e.g., laypeople are not reading Alan Gibbard in any significant numbers). The choice of an academic press, with the attendant price tag, further ensures that this book will likely be limited to academic specialists, their students, and perhaps some of the wider circle of admirers of MacIntyre's earlier works.

To note that the book is largely a reiterative synthesis of past arguments is not to say there is nothing novel in it. To the contrary, those deeply interested in MacIntyre's philosophy will find a number of new engagements and updates to his position. The book is divided into five chapters, each with its own moments of insight.

Those interested in MacIntyre's critique of emotivism will find a deepening of that line of argument in chapter 1 where he substantively engages 'expressivists' like Simon Blackburn and Alan Gibbard (17-24, 39-42). Chapter 2 rehashes MacIntyre's Marxist-tinged sociology of modernity, but also adds some interesting critical discussions of contemporary economics (102-105), as well as reflections on Catholic social teaching and the Distributivist critique of communism and capitalism (106-110). Chapter 3 recasts MacIntyre's well-known critique of the Enlightenment as focused instead on the antagonist of 'Morality'. This tweaking of MacIntyre's earlier argument is highly indebted to the thought of Bernard Williams, who is both appreciatively and critically engaged throughout much of the rest of the book. Indeed, the quarrel with Williams's brand of Nietzscheanism is in some senses *After Virtue* revisited. The title to these sections could very much read 'Aristotle or Williams?'—along with some extended interpretations of Oscar Wilde and D. H. Lawrence as well.

Chapter 4 primarily consists of restatements of MacIntyre's basic Aristotelian and Thomist claims, though these are now interlaced with some thought-provoking criticisms of rational choice theory (184-188) and the modern conception of happiness (193-202). MacIntyre also supplements his position with empirical examples of his notion of how practices can be used to resist the corrupting effects of modernity. In this vein, one of the highlights of the book is a brief discussion

of W. Edwards Deming's influence on Japanese auto-making in the 1950s as an example of Aristotelian excellence resisting modern capitalism's tendency to instrumentalize labor and production for the sake of profit (170-172). MacIntyre similarly draws on case studies of contemporary Danish fishing cooperatives and Brazilian community associations as examples of local political communities that nurture and defend Aristotelian virtue against modern states and markets (176-183). The book ends with a chapter narrating four biographical vignettes of recent historical figures—Vasily Grossman, Sandra Day O'Connor, C. L. R. James, and Denis Faul—meant to serve as exemplars of Aristotelian virtue. This genre of philosophical biography will be familiar to those who have paid attention to MacIntyre's later work on figures like Edith Stein.

Likely one of the biggest points of debate with the reception of this book will be to what extent MacIntyre has managed to free himself from claims that his philosophy provides political justification for the so-called 'Benedict Option'. The latter term, coined by an American conservative activist and commentator Rod Dreher, refers to MacIntyre's dramatic claim in *After Virtue* that in the face of modern moral depravation we ought to reject the major institutions of our society and wait for a new Trotsky and Saint Benedict (the founder of Christian monasticism). Dreher and others have interpreted this to mean that modern markets and states are too corruptive to engage, and that Christian traditionalists should withdraw as much as possible into isolated local communities.

Although MacIntyre has denied this interpretation of his work, it nonetheless holds a certain plausibility. Nothing in the latest installment decisively resolves the debate. For although MacIntyre gives examples of practices flourishing within modern polities and economies (e.g., Japanese auto-making), there is still much of the massively condemnatory language of the contemporary modern world and the vaunting of local virtue-communities that inspired the Benedict Option. Indeed, MacIntyre continues to slide into denouncing both modern states and markets *tout court* as dominated by 'a set of interlocking elites, political, financial, cultural, and media elites' (127). MacIntyre's polemic against liberal elites in favor of 'plain' persons and the ordinary virtues of traditions (that once housed a better, past world), is bound to have some very unsavory resonances in the current political climate of reactionary, restorationist, anti-liberal, and populist politics sweeping the globe.

This is not at all to suggest that MacIntyre's argument is the same or even compatible with the ethno-nationalism and illiberalism recently shaking the world's oldest democracies (and certainly he has been a consistent critic of all xenophobia, racism, and nationalism). But as has been argued by Mark Lilla and others recently, there are nevertheless at least some family resemblances between MacIntyre's philosophy and these reactionary movements. Perhaps MacIntyre will yet issue an argument that definitively disentangles his work from contemporary calls for a revolutionary restoration of a past, long-lost order of greatness against the Babylon enforced on ordinary traditionalists by liberal 'elites'. But he will face at least one major philosophical hurdle if he ever tries to do so.

Namely, MacIntyre's conceptualization of modernity has long been too monolithic and reductive—and this problem persists in these pages. So MacIntyre reduces contemporary participation in markets and states to the ethics of what he calls 'Morality' (124-129), writing that 'individuals can only function as modernity requires them to function, if their desires are expressed, contained, and ordered in certain ways' (129). But why is this the case? Why can't modern institutions also be shaped by those coming from practices, traditions, and virtues outside of these moral schools instead? MacIntyre's arguments in these domains often rely on implying that one set of beliefs must somehow be logically tied to a particular set of institutions (e.g., all our political leaders are crypto-expressivists). Yet this seems to assume that humans cannot creatively engage in markets or modern states for their own purposes—for example, a virtue-based Muslim, Catholic, or Jew might embrace these very institutions with a completely different set of values and philosophical

outlooks. There is nothing that logically compels a young politician, activist, entrepreneur, or other citizen to be a utilitarian or Kantian instead of a traditionalist or a virtue ethicist. The necessity to believe certain things while occupying certain institutional positions might instead be argued as a case of sociological (and not philosophical) necessity—but this would be inconsistent with MacIntyre’s hugely important work justifying anti-naturalism and anti-positivism in the social sciences.

Thus a major problem in MacIntyre’s political philosophy remains unresolved. This book engages with many critics, but conspicuously absent are those like Charles Taylor—a fellow Catholic and Aristotelian—who sees no basic, inescapable conflict between traditions and modernity. Where is MacIntyre’s reply to Taylor’s rival philosophy and sociology of modernity? MacIntyre’s own examples in this book (like Japanese auto-making, Danish fishing co-ops, or the virtuous lives of U.S. Supreme Court Justices) only further confuse the issue. After all, if virtue and flourishing are possible within modern, capitalist automotive companies and in the lives of elite Supreme Court justices, then is liberal modernity really as irredeemably bad as MacIntyre often claims?

Perhaps MacIntyre’s most consistent antagonist in these pages is Bernard Williams. Yet MacIntyre never responds to one of Williams’s most pressing critiques of his work. Namely, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams implied that MacIntyre’s Aristotelian-inspired sociology of modernity is not so much a fair depiction of contemporary reality as a mythic, secular version of the biblical story of the fall. Does MacIntyre have resources to rebut this claim? Can he free his reductive condemnation of modernity from a political program of withdraw or reactionary restoration? Perhaps a future work will tell. Yet additional works may be too much to ask from someone who has already given himself so generously and intelligently to a life of thought.

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