

## **AFTER VIRTUE: A STUDY IN MORAL THEORY** (ALASDAIR MACINTYRE)

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The poor Enlightenment. Trapped by its inherent contradictions, we in the West find ourselves locked into playing out the game set by it, struggling to make the best of a bad hand until inevitably forced to fold, though the precise manner and consequences of that folding are yet to be determined. The Enlightenment's defenders, cut-rate Rolands all, including Steven Pinker and many other Pollyanas across the political spectrum, try their hardest, even though it is now pretty obvious that the Enlightenment only awaits a few good kicks to the head to put it down permanently. But the open and widespread realization of this looming denouement is quite new. When Alasdair MacIntyre first published *After Virtue*, in 1980, it was perhaps the first modern, sophisticated attack on the foundations of the Enlightenment. It has not lost its power in the past forty years, even though it has been joined by many others.

True, as with the major works of other modern politically relevant philosophers, such as John Rawls and Robert Nozick (both covered and rejected by MacIntyre), I am quite sure this is a book that a great many people talk about, and very few have read. I once read half of Nozick's libertarian manifesto, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. It defeated me, but perhaps I was not dedicated enough. At least the book was not obviously dumb. On the other hand, I have not, nor will I, read Rawls. The first I heard of him was twenty years ago, when one of my law school roommates, more educated than me (and now a prominent law school professor), returned home and announced excitedly he had gone to see the amazing John Rawls speak. (I, of course, was unaware that such a talk was even happening on campus, or that Rawls existed.) Curious, I asked about Rawls, and my roommate offered some summaries of his thought. To each summary, I posed a response, querying an item that seemed obviously defective in Rawls's ideas, to which, in each case, my roommate struggled to find an answer. Finally, he said "I'm not doing a good job of explaining his thought." After twenty years of much other similar second-hand exposure to Rawls, it's clear that my roommate was doing a great job. The problem is that Rawls's thought is glaringly stupid except to someone who has already bought into his

project, which is finding pseudo-philosophical justifications for leftist political positions first assumed as conclusive. He offers nothing but a giant exercise in question-begging, and he is therefore worthless. And why, more precisely, Rawls is worthless is, in many ways, the subject of this book, even if not framed so.

Such worship of obviously stupid philosophers is not new. MacIntyre spends a fair bit of time on the obscure G. E. Moore, who in the early 1900s was the John Rawls of his day, worshipped by everyone from John Maynard Keynes to Lytton Strachey. Moore wrote a famous book claiming to prove definitively that “personal affections and aesthetic judgments” were the only goods that mattered, as proven by “intuition,” even though he claimed to be a utilitarian. This was very attractive to people like the Bloomsbury Group and their ilk, obviously. After expertly dissecting Moore, and noting the slavish adoration he received from his acolytes, which today seems inexplicable, MacIntyre notes “This is great silliness of course; but it is the great silliness of highly intelligent and perceptive people.” Why did they “accept Moore’s naïve and complacent” ideas? They “had already accepted the values of Moore’s [book], but could not accept these merely as their own personal preferences. They felt the need to find objective and impersonal justification. . . .” So with Rawls.

Enough beating up on intellectual cripples, though as we’ll see, beating up on such cripples is the entire point of *After Virtue*. Why read this book at all? After all, while this book is famous, and especially famous among conservatives, analytical philosophy is not my usual reading. It hurts my head. Moreover, I am always more interested in doing than navel gazing (we can bracket for now that what I am doing visibly now is writing, which is not doing). Therefore, my purpose in reading this book, other than to be able to say I have done so to nods of knowing appreciation, is to aid in the construction of my own program for the remade future.

However, in the context of remaking the world, I do think books like *After Virtue* are of somewhat limited value. We, as a society, have long passed beyond the stage when discussion, much less discussion of high-level philosophy, has any use in deciding the existential questions (which, ironically, is part of the point of this book). Two wholly incompatible visions cannot coexist; one must give way permanently,

in the real world of zero-sum games that will ultimately be decided by force, not fought on the pages of books. That said, a revived and remade society has to be well-tutored, or more accurately its ruling classes have to be, and at that point the philosophers can become directly relevant again, so this book may yet prove valuable to a reborn society. I just suspect that'll be later, not sooner.

In any case, MacIntyre's basic point is that modern claims of what is moral, of which there are many systems, falling into several general groups, are not only all incompatible with each other, but contain within themselves no possible mechanism to resolve their competing claims. Viewed from outside, all are based on arbitrary premises that cannot be demonstrated. This is true for emotivism, MacIntyre's main target, the claim that "all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character." Emotivism is the characteristic philosophical mode of modernism, and it, in fact, embraces this irresolvability of moral claims. But it is just as true for utilitarianism, the characteristic mode of the major earlier Enlightenment thinkers, who invariably denied that claims are irresolvable. Ultimately, all these systems require the individual to make the choice without reference to anything outside himself, which is not surprising, given that autonomic individualism is the core belief at the heart of the Enlightenment.

Much of MacIntyre's writing is dense, though leavened with funny parts. We get "What I have described in terms of a loss of traditional structure and content was seen by the most articulate of their philosophical spokesmen as the achievement by the self of its proper autonomy. The self had been liberated from all those outmoded forms of social organization which had imprisoned it simultaneously within a belief in a theistic and teleological world order and within those hierarchical structures which attempted to legitimate themselves as part of such a world order." But we also get, "In the United Nations declaration on human rights of 1949 what has since become the normal UN practice of not giving good reasons for any assertions whatsoever is followed with great rigor." Yeah, pretty much.

MacIntyre examines and dismisses all attempts to justify Enlightenment conceptions of morality, from Hume to Kant to Kierkegaard. He demonstrates that either their belief that they have

found an objective basis for their conclusions on virtue is somewhere between incoherent and totally defective, or it is merely echoes of Christianity into which most of these thinkers were embedded so far they could not recognize it (a point I make regularly). MacIntyre thus comes to focus on Nietzsche, after dismissing the others as offering nothing but smoke and mirrors. In MacIntyre's analysis, Nietzsche correctly saw the insupportability of the Enlightenment project to justify morality by hanging it on a skyhook, so he stands apart, or appears to stand apart, from all other modern thinkers. But instead, he fell back into the Enlightenment's atomism by incorrectly thinking that another type of individualism, that of the pre-Christian supposed heroic age, was the solution.

MacIntyre's main point about Nietzsche is that contrary to the core of his claims, whatever the historicity of the heroic age, that of Homer, its morality had nothing to do with individualism. Rather, morality was dictated by compliance with assigned social roles, with the warrior-king at the apex of the pyramid of social roles. But the warrior-king was not free to choose; for him, and for all others, virtue consisted in completely and competently fulfilling the role he had been assigned. Had he picked actions inconsistent with that role, it would not have been heroic, or virtuous in the view of the time, but contemptible. His will was not at all sovereign; it was less sovereign by far than that of the modern believer in autonomic individualism. "Nietzsche replaces the fictions of the Enlightenment individualism, of which he is so contemptuous, with a set of individualist fictions of his own." Thus, Nietzsche is no less beholden to the prison of individualism than any Enlightenment thinker, and MacIntyre then declares a clean sweep of the Enlightenment field.

What does MacIntyre offer in opposition? A return to the teleological conception of man. I have often made a MacIntyre-type claim, that all modern and Left visions of morality are incoherent. I tend to phrase this in terms of the echoes of Christianity, that all not incoherent modern visions are merely the reverberations of Christian belief, and that is certainly true for certain elements that can only be found as central in Christianity, such as the Golden Rule. But MacIntyre is right, that the dividing line is not so much Christian/non-Christian, as teleological/non-teleological. Christianity is a subset, or the culmination, of such thought, not the exclusive provider. What is the end, the goal, the

purpose, of the life of each human? If the answer is “I don’t know” or “that is for him to decide,” the answers given by all thinkers of and since the Enlightenment, the inevitable consequence is moral incoherence, as MacIntyre demonstrates at great length. The remainder of the book mostly revolves around demonstrating that no teleology, no coherent morality or concept of virtue, with side departures into discussions of matters such as the emotivism of the Weberian concept of management.

MacIntyre does not say we can, even through agreement on teleology, come to agreement on what, in all cases, constitutes virtue. What he offers is common ground in opposition to the Enlightenment’s necessary inability to offer any. He does not offer an airtight box. Thus, MacIntyre repeatedly refers to the “table of virtues,” by which he means the list of virtues any given society holds as virtues. For moderns, he means this as a criticism. For pre-moderns, though, it is not a criticism, but a recognition that even a teleological view of humanity does not dictate a wholly identical set of virtues. For example, humility, the outstanding medieval and Christian virtue, did not even have a word for it in Greek (just as there were no words for “sin,” “repentance,” or “charity”), and humility was in no way thought of as a virtue by Aristotle. MacIntyre multiplies such examples, including as between pre-modern systems, most of all between Aristotelianism and medieval thinking (pointing out, among other things, that Aquinas was, in his great regard for Aristotle’s conception of the virtues, “a highly deviant medieval figure”). The author even brings in conceptions of virtue from some people not philosophers, examining how their “tables” differ— Benjamin Franklin, progenitor of the Prosperity Gospel, and Jane Austen, noting her reconciliation with Christianity of the ancient conception of virtue as tied to social roles.

Still, MacIntyre believes that despite these disagreements, a “unitary core concept of the virtues” can be distilled from these pre-Enlightenment lines of thought. After quite a bit of windup, including technically defining a “practice” to relate to the achievement of excellence that helps define an activity, thereby extending “human conceptions of the ends and goods involved,” he says “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.” Sounds reasonable, though I am far from competent to parse it, and obviously it requires a

non-emotivist and non-utilitarian, but rather teleological, conception of terms such as “excellence.” By this way of thinking, MacIntyre says, justice, courage, and honesty are always virtues; other virtues may be society-dependent based on practices (as technically defined).

“The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good.” Determining the good is a quest (shades of Jordan Peterson) and “It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood.” This quest can never be an individual quest; it is of man as embedded in society, and emancipation from multitudinous unchosen bonds is both not a goal and unthinkable.

The final paragraph of *After Virtue* is often cited, and its last sentences were taken by Rod Dreher as the basis for his famous Benedict Option. Predicting a turning point, parallel to late Rome (though disclaiming such analogies as generally appropriate), away from the “moral community” supporting the “*imperium*,” towards groping in the direction of “forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us,” MacIntyre says “We are waiting . . . for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.” What interests me in particular is that the last paragraph is the only paragraph like it in the book. Most of the book is dry and highly technical, and while there are embedded within it other conclusions to much the same import, they are cloaked in the language of philosophy. Only in this last paragraph does, quite unexpectedly, MacIntyre step out from behind the curtain to make an expansive claim of how what he has outlined earlier has fatally affected our society, and what must be done in response. This makes his conclusion much more effective; the book avoids polemic, or at least polemic obvious to the layman, until at the very last MacIntyre delivers his conclusive hammer blow to the Enlightenment.

So *After Virtue* is very well done, to the extent I can understand it. Still, as I say, what need of philosophical justification for a project that, to have practical impact, must first have visceral impact? Perhaps the main purpose of this book is to provide intellectual heft for the hypothetical Man of Destiny who may, at some point, remake the West. He does not have to understand it, quote it, or use it, but he can say—Look, MacIntyre agrees that there are virtues, and we know what they are. Since the utter remaking of the ruling classes is critical for any renewal, and this is the type of book that influences the influential among the ruling classes, perhaps it serves a more essential purpose than is obvious. “[Y]ou cannot hope to re-invent morality on the scale of a whole nation when the very idiom of the morality which you seek to re-invent is alien in one way to the vast mass of ordinary people and in another to the intellectual elite.” Helping to provide non-alien common ground on basic morality to all sectors of society is, perhaps, the fate of this book.

I think MacIntyre senses both the need for remaking and the role of his book. He explicitly rejects Burkean tradition, identifying it (somewhat unfairly, I think) with a refusal to acknowledge that any living tradition is a “continuous argument” and with accepting Enlightenment premises, and therefore being a doctrine “as liberal and as individualist as that of self-avowed liberals.” Like me, MacIntyre rejects “the conventional conservative role of *laudator temporis acti* [one who praises past times].” “It is rather the case that an adequate sense of tradition manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present. Living traditions, just because they continue a not-yet-completed narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past.” That is to say, or practically endorse, my repeated claim that what we need is a new thing informed by the wisdom of the past, not a return to the past. Not nostalgia, but a new thing for a new age. But MacIntyre does not say what will replace it, so that is the question that must be answered—not with an ideological program, but with a frame that escapes the Enlightenment prison and can be adopted to circumstances as they come into focus.