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From Voluntarist Nominalism to Rationalism to Chaos: Alasdair MacIntyre’s Critique of Modern Ethics

Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to connect the ‘Disquieting Suggestion’ at the beginning of *After Virtue* to a broader picture of Alasdair MacIntyre’s critique of modern moral philosophy. The essay begins with MacIntyre’s fictional scientific catastrophe, and uses four passages from the text of *After Virtue* to identify the analogous real philosophical catastrophe. The essay relates the resulting critique of modern moral philosophy to MacIntyre’s concern for recognizing the social practices of morality as human actions in “Notes from the Moral Wilderness”. The essay concludes by considering the implications of MacIntyre’s philosophy for the study of history, realism, and tradition.

0. Introduction

One question that can lead a person into the history of philosophy and ethics is, “How did we get here from there?” This question demands immediate attention to two other questions: what is ‘here’? and what was ‘there’? Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* offers answers to all three of these questions. According to *After Virtue*, ‘here’ is a culture in which discussions of morality—both academic and popular—tend to be incoherent, and strangely disconnected from discussions of practical wisdom; ‘there’ was a culture in which discussions of human action were at the same time both moral and practical; and the process that brings us ‘here from there’ centers around the cultural turn from teleological practical reasoning to voluntarist moral reasoning. This process is dramatically summarized in the opening chapter of *After Virtue* with its ‘Disquieting Suggestion’ that our moral culture bears the consequences of an unrecognized catastrophe that has led to the culture of emotivism. The precise meaning and reference of that story is not always clear to its readers; nevertheless, the attentive reader can recognize and reconstruct the events of the analogous philosophical catastrophe through a careful reading of the book, and the reader who realizes that the catastrophe is not just a broad metaphor holds a powerful tool for the interpretation of Alasdair MacIntyre’s critique of modernity.

1. The ‘Disquieting Suggestion’

After Virtue begins with ‘A Disquieting Suggestion’:

“Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on the scientists. Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists.” (MacIntyre 1985, 1)

MacIntyre tells us that after some passage of time, ‘enlightened people’ pick up the pieces, a collection of fragments of descriptions lacking any of the comprehensive theories that constitute the research programs of the sciences as we know them. These enlightened people would believe that they were doing science again but, in fact, they would not be, and they have no way of recognizing that they were not. Were they, like us, to have the rational resources of analytical philosophy, phenomenology, and existentialism, MacIntyre says they would remain incapable of recognizing their own condition, because none of these approaches would help them to recognize the differences between the pieces of scientific knowledge that they hold and memorize, and the practice of science as it had been before its destruction.

This is an interesting story, it is fascinating to imagine what might pass for science in such a culture, but the real ‘Disquieting Suggestion’ itself soon follows:

“The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived.” (2)

The point of MacIntyre’s story is that an event occurred in our past that suspended the rational investigation of morality, and that modern efforts in moral philosophy are nothing but faulty attempts using broken tools to resuscitate a study that had once been dead.

This is an amazing claim, and Professor MacIntyre anticipates the obvious complaint, writing, “Yet our history lies open to view, so it will be said, and no record of any such catastrophe survives.” (3) In response, he presents another striking supposition:

“Suppose it were the case that the catastrophe of which my hypothesis speaks had occurred before, or largely before, the founding of academic history, so that the moral and other evaluative presuppositions of academic history derived from the forms of the disorder

which it [i.e., the catastrophe] brought about. [...] For the forms of the academic curriculum would turn out to be among the symptoms of the disaster whose occurrence the curriculum does not acknowledge.” (4)

In other words, modern history does not record the catastrophe because the catastrophe is invisible to it, because modern history is itself one of the fruits of the catastrophe.

The ‘Disquieting Suggestion’ comes down to this: even though any professional philosopher can recount the history of philosophy, at least in broad strokes, from Thales to Derrida, there is a catastrophic event hidden from view within that history, the effects of which render modern efforts at moral philosophy incoherent at best, but this event and its effects are invisible to the modern academy, even as we suffer their consequences. MacIntyre writes: “One way of stating part of the hypothesis is precisely to assert that we are in a condition which almost nobody recognizes and which perhaps nobody at all can recognize fully.” (4) It is, MacIntyre acknowledges, an implausible theory, but its very implausibility he takes to be evidence that it might be true.

The ‘Disquieting Suggestion’ is a difficult passage for several reasons, including the fact that the historical narrative that unfolds through the rest of the book does not openly identify any events in our history with the calamities, the riots, or the Know-Nothing movement described in that opening paragraph. What, then, is the catastrophe?

2. Recognizing the Catastrophe

To find the catastrophe in the text, we must begin by returning to chapter one to find out what kind of thing we are looking for. Professor MacIntyre writes:

“We shall have to look not for a few brief striking events whose character is incontestably clear, but for a much longer, more complex and less easily identified process and one which by its very nature is open to rival interpretation.” (3)

The catastrophe is not any singular event; it is a series of events stretched out over several centuries; and it is not recorded as a catastrophe because it is not typically interpreted as such. In all likelihood it is familiar to us, but is ordinarily seen as a great achievement, or at least as a positive development. Where, then, do we see such a process described in *After Virtue*?

There are four places where Professor MacIntyre indicates most clearly what he takes the catastrophe of the ‘Disquieting Suggestion’ to be. The first place is in chapter four. After describing the incoherence of moral language in our post-catastrophe culture of emotivism in chapters two and three, MacIntyre turns in chapter four to a discussion of the predecessor to the culture of emotivism, namely the culture of the enlightenment. But here MacIntyre begins by drawing a very peculiar picture of the enlightenment. It is not the French enlightenment

of Rousseau and Voltaire, but a specifically Anglo-Scottish-German enlightenment of Hume, Smith, and Kant; and MacIntyre gives very specific reasons for drawing this peculiar picture:

“What the French lacked was threefold: a secularized Protestant background, an educated class which linked the servants of government, the clergy, and the lay thinkers in a single reading public, and a newly alive type of university exemplified in Königsburg in the east and in Edinburgh and Glasgow in the west. [...]

Hence what we are dealing with is a culture that is primarily Northern European. Spaniards, Italians, and the Gaelic and Slavonic-speaking peoples do not belong to it.” (37)

In short, what gives birth to the culture of emotivism in *After Virtue* is the enlightenment as it played out in the Protestant countries of northern Europe. This might be taken—mistakenly—to identify the catastrophe with the Protestant Reformation, but it certainly does indicate that the Protestant Reformation is an episode in the process that constitutes the catastrophe.

MacIntyre clarifies the identity of the catastrophe in a second place, in chapter five:

“Suppose that the arguments of Kierkegaard, Kant, Diderot, Hume, Smith and the like fail because of certain shared characteristics deriving from their highly specific shared historical background. [...] Whence did they inherit these shared beliefs? Obviously from their shared Christian past compared with which the divergences between Kant’s and Kierkegaard’s Lutheran, Hume’s Presbyterian, and Diderot’s Jansenist-influenced Catholic background are relatively unimportant.” (51)

The focus here is on the peculiarities of the theologies of Luther, Calvin, and Jansen; all three were theological voluntarists, that is, all three posited the divine will as the primary principle of existence. Where Thomas Aquinas, in his synthesis of Christian Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianhylomorphism, always maintained the priority of the intellect in creation,¹ theological voluntarists asserted the priority of the divine will, and this had far reaching consequences for philosophy and theology. So after summarizing some points of agreement among medieval Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers who shared an Aristotelian view of nature and reason MacIntyre writes:

“This large area of agreement does not however survive when Protestantism and Jansenist Catholicism—and their immediate late medieval predecessors—appear on the scene. For they embody a new conception of reason.” (53)

¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei*, q. 3, a. 15, 3rd argument.

MacIntyre's catastrophe is not the Protestant Reformation, nor is it Protestantism combined with Jansenism, rather it is the whole process of that turn from natural teleology to theological voluntarism and nominalism—the foundation of which is typically attributed to William of Ockham—that lead to the voluntarist theologies of Luther, Calvin, and Jansen.

This identification of the catastrophe is confirmed in a third place in *After Virtue*, when MacIntyre sketches twelfth century Christian efforts to work out the apparent conflicts between the philosophical tradition that honored the moral excellence of the cardinal virtues, and the Christian theological tradition that mandated obedience to the divine law. This gets at the real difference between classical and contemporary notions of morality. If I were to formulate the moral question that Aristotle answers in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it would be, “How can I become the kind of a person who has the practical wisdom to recognize what is good and best to do and who also has the moral freedom to act on that judgment?” Thus understood, ethics is about developing a rich, natural understanding of living well. This ceases to be the case when morality is reduced to rule-following. Here MacIntyre looks to Peter Abelard's *Ethics* and finds an approach to ethics that centers on questions about obedience and sin. In this kind of morality, MacIntyre writes:

“Everything turns on the character of the interior act of the will. Character therefore, the arena of virtues and vices, simply becomes one more circumstance, external to will. The true arena of morality is that of the will and of the will alone.” (168)

For Abelard, the central human question, and the central question of his *Ethics* is about salvation and damnation: what constitutes sin? In his *Ethics*, Abelard identifies consent, which we list among the acts of the will,² as the essential character of sin, distinguishing it both from vicious dispositions to sin and from other acts that either precede consent or follow upon it (Abelard 1973, 188–202). The reduction of morality to consent to obey impoverishes ethics and opens the door to the rejection of nature as a source of moral norms. Morality as a rich understanding of living well is replaced by morality as a meeting of two wills, and all other factors begin to fall into the periphery.

This medieval emphasis on the act of the will is not just the product of biblical interpretation; MacIntyre notes that it is also the fruit of the Stoic tradition. Stoicism reduces virtue from a complex account of the functioning of the powers of the soul to a singular perfection of the will, and Stoicism abandons the teleological notion of moral excellence as the perfection of the rational and appetitive powers of the free agent, affirming instead only the unconditional goodness of the will that obeys moral law (MacIntyre 1985, 168–169).

Intellectually, then, voluntarism seems to be the outcome of the Christian and Stoic traditions, but there is another factor that brings Stoicism to prominence from time to time, namely political change. When radical political change

² Thomas Aquinas lists consent *among* the acts of the will; in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre describes it as *the* act of the will.

overturns shared conceptions of the common good, one is left with a culture in which morality appears to demand real personal sacrifice for no other end than obedience to the law. Looking back to the collapse of community life that originally led to Stoicism, MacIntyre writes:

“any intelligible relationship between the virtues and law would disappear. There would be no genuine shared common goods; the only goods would be the goods of individuals. And the pursuit of *any* private good, being often and necessarily in these circumstances liable to clash with the goods of others, would appear to be at odds with the requirements of the moral law. Hence if I adhere to the law, I will have to suppress the private self. The point of the law cannot be the achievement of some good beyond the law; for there now appears to be no such good.” (170)

The political circumstances that brought about Stoicism in the first place are not unique in history, and so MacIntyre proposes that similar circumstances are likely to bring about recurrences in Stoicism whenever they arise.

The identification of the catastrophe with the turn to voluntarism and nominalism is confirmed again in a fourth place in *After Virtue*:

“I have suggested that a great part of modern morality is intelligible only as a set of fragmented survivals from that [Aristotelian] tradition, and indeed that the inability of modern moral philosophers to carry through their projects of analysis and justification is closely connected with the fact that the concepts with which they work are a combination of fragmented survivals and implausible modern inventions.” (257)

The rejection of the Aristotelian tradition with its natural teleology and the transition to voluntarist morality is the philosophical event that corresponds to the destruction of science in the ‘Disquieting Suggestion’.

The events of that historical process are familiar to us, whether we are moderns, post-moderns, or Thomists. We are familiar with the medieval rediscovery of Aristotle, and its rejection; we know about the Black Death and the other complex circumstances that brought medieval culture into decline; we know about the Renaissance and the Reformation; and we know about the secularization that came with the Enlightenment. The difference MacIntyre is proposing is one of interpretation: While these events are commonly read as the history of progress toward individual freedom, they are also moments in the history of the turn to voluntarism that gave birth to the modern culture of emotivism that tyrannizes those traditional moral communities that it does not dissolve.³

³ This summarizes a point MacIntyre made in an interview first published in Italy in 1991. See Borradori 1994.

3. Moral Action and Human Action

The outcome of the rejection of Aristotelian natural teleology in ethics was the establishment of a morality in which obedience to moral norms can be conceived only as an end in itself. The voluntarism of Luther, Calvin, and Jansen made their accounts of moral norms, like their accounts of reward and punishment, essentially arbitrary. Kant's rejection of the moral worth of heteronomy⁴ gives voluntarist morality a new philosophical expression, but does not change its character. Mills affirmation that the "readiness" to serve "the happiness of others by the absolute sacrifice of his own [. . .] is the highest virtue that can be found in man"⁵ sounds noble, but turns out to be only another recurrence of the stoic denial of the private self in a social arena that lacks shared conceptions of the common good.

Taken together, the emphasis on law, the rejection of teleology, and the denial of the private self establish an approach to morality and moral action in which both morality and moral action become unintelligible, for moral action, thus conceived, cannot be accounted for as human action. This is a problem in modern moral philosophy that MacIntyre had already been working on for nearly twenty years when he wrote *After Virtue*. In "Notes from the Moral Wilderness II", MacIntyre wrote:

"We make both individual deeds and social practices intelligible as human actions by showing how they connect with characteristically human desires, needs and the like. Where we cannot do this, we treat the unintelligible piece of behavior as a symptom, a survival, or a superstition." (in: Knight (ed.) 1998, 41)

Human action is so inherently teleological that the normal human response to actions that do not seem to make sense is to ask "what are you doing?" and "why are you doing that?" To disconnect freedom and obedience from salvation, as Luther, Calvin, and Jansen do, to propose that morality is pursued without an end in view, as Kant does, or to affirm that readiness to act in ways that serve the pleasure of others through utter self-destruction is a sign of moral excellence, as Mill does, is to make it impossible to answer these normal human questions in any satisfying way. The answers leave the questions unanswered.

Every human act worthy of the name is pursued for an end, and sound practical rules are nothing but wise counsels, directing the complex web of human actions toward the common good. But when the common good is no longer understood, the rules survive only as social habits, as material survivals of a culture that is formally lost. When European explorers encountered these kinds of unintelligible moral habits among Polynesian people they took these taboo rules to be a sign of primitiveness, but as Alasdair MacIntyre pointed out, first in "Notes from the Moral Wilderness", and again in at least four subsequent works⁶

⁴ See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 2.

⁶ See "Notes from the Moral Wilderness II"; "Some More About 'Ought'" in: MacIntyre 1971, 166–167; 1977, 30–31; 1985, 111–113; 1990a, 27–28, 178–189.

what they had failed to recognize when they made that harsh judgment was that their own moral rules had already become social habits of the same kind.

MacIntyre's critique of modernity has two main points: The first is that modernity, has lost its capacity to understand the real practical wisdom of its traditional morality, and has formulated an approach to moral thinking that is unintelligible, unjustifiable, and ultimately arbitrary. The second is that morality, formulated in this modern fashion, can be used, and has been used, as a tool for social manipulation (MacIntyre 1985, 110). Late modernity, what MacIntyre has called "the culture of emotivism" is an essentially manipulative culture. It does not seek the truth about morality because it has systematically cut itself off from the intellectual resources required to express moral truth, much less to seek it. Consequently, modern moral discourse ceases to be anything but a manipulative tool. MacIntyre writes:

"What is the key to the social content of emotivism? It is the fact that emotivism entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations. [...] If emotivism is true this distinction is illusory. [...] The sole reality of distinctively moral discourse is the attempt of one will to align the attitudes, feelings, preference and choices of another with its own. Others are always means, never ends." (23–24)

These are the main themes of MacIntyre's critique of modernity⁷, and they help to frame up the positive project that has followed upon it.

4. Moving Forward: History, Realism, and Tradition

MacIntyre's critique of modernity, summarized in the metaphor of the catastrophe, is a valuable resource for the contemporary philosopher. MacIntyre's critique of modernity focuses on ideological blindness and lack of self-knowledge, exposing the pretensions of those modern thinkers who claim a tradition-independent approach to the truth. Consequently MacIntyre's critique challenges the contemporary philosopher to investigate three things: history, realism, and tradition. First, by questioning the modern academic historian's understanding of modern history, MacIntyre is challenging the contemporary philosopher to recognize and question the interpretative preconceptions of modern history.⁸ Second, MacIntyre's criticism of modern voluntarism and nominalism indicates the shortcomings of non-realist approaches to philosophy. MacIntyre's later

⁷ Those who are familiar with Elizabeth Anscombe's essay, "Modern Moral Philosophy" 1957 will recognize the parallels between that work and MacIntyre's approach to ethics. MacIntyre cited that work in "Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought'" and acknowledged his debt to—as well as his difference from—Anscombe, *After Virtue* 1985, 53.

⁸ In "An Interview for *Cogito*" (1991) MacIntyre said: "Any adequate narrative of my life would have to emphasize a radical change in it around 1971. [...] In that same period, after 1971, I had occasion to rethink the problems of rational theology, taking seriously the possibility that the history of modern secularization can only be written adequately from the standpoint of Christian theism, rather than vice versa."

Thomistic work, particularly *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990a) and his *Aquinas Lecture* (1990c), show the promise of realism for any investigation of our world that does seek truth. Finally, the plight of the fictional pseudo-scientists in MacIntyre's story indicates something about the fragility of a tradition and the possibility of losing large portions of the tradition-dependent substantive rationality of a community, thus it challenges contemporary philosophers to work diligently to comprehend their own traditions, even as they seek to transcend the limitations of those traditions while doing the work of philosophy within a limited human perspective.

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