Alasdair MacIntyre

The Claims of *After Virtue*

Abstract: After Virtue claims that it is characteristic of contemporary society that its debates are peculiarly unsettlable; that this state of affairs is the result of the failure by the thinkers of the Enlightenment to construct a rational, secular defence of shared moral principles; and that the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues provides the only rationally defensible alternative to post-Enlightenment morality.

After Virtue was a book that arose out of prolonged reflection on the inadequacies of my own earlier work. Two distinct types of question had informed that work. One concerned how the history of philosophical ethics should be written and what its relationship was to the history of the moralities embodied in the life of the societies inhabited by the philosophers. The other was directed towards elucidating the nature of those intellectual enquiries whose subject-matter is constituted by human actions and passions. The first type of concern was expressed in A Short History of Ethics (New York 1966), the second in The Unconscious (London 1958). Both were partly motivated by my increasing recognition of the gross inadequacies of Marxism in both these areas. Both were expressed and related to each other and to that recognition in a book of essays Against the Self-Images of the Age (London 1971), a book whose largely negative and none too systematic character expressed the nature of the conclusions which I had reached by 1971.

Even then however I recognized that those negative and unsystematic conclusions presupposed a set of positive affirmations about the moral and social history of the cultural and social order which we inhabit and that these affirmations in turn were bound to express some particular moral and social stance of a positive kind. But it took me the almost ten years in which I wrote After Virtue to discover what these affirmations were. After Virtue makes seven central claims.

1. It is a distinctive feature of the social and cultural order that we inhabit that disagreements over central moral issues are peculiarly un-

settlable. Debates concerned with the value of human life such as those
over abortion and euthanasia, or about distributive justice and property
rights, or about war and peace degenerate into confrontations of assertion
and counter-assertion, because the protagonists of rival positions invoke
incommensurable forms of moral assertion against each other. So, for ex-
ample, in debates over abortion conceptions of individual property rights
which were originally at home in the social philosophies of Adam Smith and
Locke are used to defend a pregnant woman's rights to do what she will
with her own body, conceptions of what justice requires in the treatment
of innocent life whose original context was the medieval understanding of
what biblical divine law prescribes are advanced to forbid the doing of
harm to a human foetus and utilitarian views are deployed against both.
Detached from the theoretical and social contexts in terms of which these
conceptions were originally elaborated and rationally defended, the as-
sertions of each of these rival positions in this and other debates have
characteristically and generally become no more than expressions of
attitude and feeling. The use of moral discourse in our culture has become
what some positjvistically inclined moral philosophers took all moral dis-
course to be. From them I borrow the expression 'emotivist' to describe
our moral condition.

2. What brought this state of affairs about? One centrally important cause,
it is argued in <u>After Virtue</u>, was the failure of what I called 'the En-
lightenment project'. The thinkers of the Enlightenment set out to replace
what they took to be discredited traditional and superstitious forms of
morality by a kind of secular morality that would be entitled to secure the
assent of any rational person. So in Scotland, England, France and
Germany alike philosophers as different as Hume, Bentham, Diderot and
Kant tried to formulate moral principles to which no adequately reflective
rational person could refuse allegiance. The attempt failed. What it be-
queathed to its cultural heirs were a set of mutually antagonistic moral
stances, each claiming to have achieved this kind of rational justification,
but each also disputing this claim on the part of its rivals. Hence the
continuing clash between various types of Kantian moral philosopher and
various types of utilitarian in a series of inconclusive engagements. It was
natural that one conclusion drawn from this failure to settle moral disputes
rationally was that reason was impotent in this area; hence not only Ameri-
can and British emotivism, but also Kierkegaard's philosophical progeny.

3. Another consequence of these unsettled and unsettlable debates was the
releasing into the culture at large of a set of moral concepts which derive
from their philosophical ancestry an appearance of rational determinateness
and justification which they do not in fact possess. So that appeal to them
appears to make an objectively reason-supported claim whereas in fact such
appeals lack rational backing and can be put to the service of a variety of
rival and antagonistic purposes. Because they disguise the purposes which

they serve, they are useful fictions. The most important members of this class are the concept of human rights and that of utility or welfare.

Insofar as a moral culture is emotivist the relationship between individuals will be manipulative. The manipulative mode is accorded social respect by modernity through the prestige which the concept of managerial effectiveness enjoys. And this too functions as a moral fiction, a fiction because its application presupposes the availability of a set of social scientific laws, knowledge of which will enable managers of control social reality; but we do not in fact know of any such laws. The thinkers of the Enlightenment who taught us to search for them once again misled us. Social reality has a kind of unpredictability which the Weberian managerial ethos cannot acknowledge without revealing how much of the claims of modern private and public bureaucracy rests on deception and self-deception.

4. The philosopher who understood best that the Enlightenment project had failed decisively and that contemporary moral assertions had characteristically become a set of masks for unavowed purposes was Nietzsche. Nietzsche however generalised this insight into an overall account of the genealogy of morals. And in so doing he raised two questions. Is his history a true history? And is there perhaps a mistake lying at the root of the failure of the Enlightenment project which Nietzsche failed to understand? That mistake, so I suggest in After Virtue, lay in the rejection of Aristotle's ethics and politics which immediately preceded and to some degree made necessary the Enlightenment project. And I go on to argue that Aristotle and Nietzsche represent the only two compelling alternatives in contemporary moral theory.

5. Chapters 10 to 14 of After Virtue (AV) provide an interpretative history of changing conceptions of the virtues from the archaic Greek society depicted in the Homeric poems to the European middle ages. This history is intended both to provide a challenge to Nietzsche's genealogical account and to provide the materials for identifying a core concept of the virtues, an identification which requires an account in terms of three distinct stages in the elaboration of an adequate conception of the virtues. The virtues are first of all those qualities without which human beings cannot achieve the goods internal to practices. By a "practice" I mean "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (AV 175). Such types of activity as farming and fishing, the pursuit of the sciences and the arts, and the playing of games such as football and chess are practices. Politics, as Aristotle understood it, and as it was sometimes

embodied in institutional life in the ancient and medieval worlds was a practice. Modern politics is not.

This characterisation of the virtues in terms of practices is necessary, but not sufficient for an adequate specification. Virtues are also to be understood as qualities required to achieve the goods which furnish individual human lives with their telos. And I argue that the unifying form of an individual human life, without which such lives could not have a telos, derives from its possessing some kind of narrative structure. Individual human lives however are only able to have the structures that they do because they are embedded within social traditions. And the third stage in specifying the nature of the virtues is that which explains why they also have to be understood as qualities required to sustain ongoing social traditions in good order.

6. It was a failure in the later European middle ages to sustain the ongoing tradition of the virtues, understood in both an Aristotelian and a Christian way, that led to the sixteenth and seventeenth century rejections of Aristotelian ethics and politics and so opened up the possibility of the Enlightenment project. During the period in which a traditional understanding of the virtues was no longer possible, but in which the Enlightenment project had yet to collapse, there was a revival of certain originally Stoic notions of virtue (as a singular noun), influential both in social life and in philosophical theory, especially in Kant's rendering. But we now live in an aftermath where neither the virtues nor virtue can be central to the general moral culture. We live after virtue in a period of unresolvable disputes and dilemmas, both within contemporary moral philosophy and within morality itself.

7. I argue at various points in the book that although the rejection of Aristotelian ethics and politics in the historical circumstances engendered in and after the later middle ages is intelligible, it has never yet been shown to be warranted. And I conclude that when moral Aristotelianism is rightly understood, it cannot be undermined by the kind of critique that Nietzsche successfully directed against both Kant and the utilitarians. I therefore conclude that Aristotle is vindicated against Nietzsche and moreover that only a history of ethical theory and practice written from an Aristotelian rather than a Nietzschean standpoint enables us to comprehend the nature of the moral condition of modernity.

The reader may find reference to the following books and articles by me useful:

Marxism and Christianity, London 1968

Against the Self-Image of the Age, London 1981

Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science, in: The Monist 60, 1977, 453-472

How Moral Agents Became Ghosts, in: Synthèse 53, 1982, 295-312

Moral Philosophy What Next?, in: Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Morality, edited by S. Hauerwas and A. MacIntyre, South Bend/Indiana, 1983

The Magic in the Pronound 'My', in: Ethics 94, 1983, 113-125

Critical discussion of <u>After Virtue</u> can be fcund in:

O. O'Neill, Kant after Virtue, in: Inquiry 26, 1983, 387-405

R. Gaita, Virtues, Human Good, and the Unity of a Life, in: Inquiry 26, 1983, 407-424

S.R.L. Clark, Morals, Moore, and MacIntyre, in: Inquiry 26, 1983, 425-445

A. MacIntyre, Moral Rationality, Tradition, and Aristotle: A Reply to Onora O'Neill, Raimond Gaita, and Stephen R.L. Clark, in: Inquiry 26, 1983, 447-466

R.J. Bernstein, Reflections on MacIntyre's <u>After Virtue</u>, in: Soundings 67/1, 1984

A. MacIntyre, Bernstein's Distorting Mirrors: A Rejoinder, in: Soundings 67/1, 1984

A. MacIntyre, After Virtue, Second edition with a new chapter replying to Criticism, South Bend/Indiana 1984

D.Z. Phillips, Critical Notice, in: Mind 93, 1984, 111-124

J.B. Schneewind, Virtue, Narrative, and Community: MacIntyre and Morality, in: Journal of Philosophy 79, 1982, 653-663

J.R. Wallach, Review, in: Telos 57, 1983, 233-240