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ETHICS AND POLITICS

Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most creative and important philosophers working today. This volume presents a selection of his classic essays on ethics and politics, focusing particularly on the themes of moral disagreement, moral dilemmas, and truthfulness and its importance. The essays range widely in scope, from Aristotle and Aquinas and what we need to learn from them, to our contemporary economic and social structures and the threat which they pose to the realization of the forms of ethical life. They will appeal to a wide range of readers across philosophy and especially in moral philosophy, political philosophy, and theology.

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE is Senior Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a Fellow of the British Academy. His publications include *A Short History of Ethics* (1967), *After Virtue* (1981), *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), and numerous journal articles.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
PART I LEARNING FROM ARISTOTLE AND AQUINAS	
1 Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against some Renaissance Aristotelians	3
2 Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against some modern Aristotelians	22
3 Natural law as subversive: the case of Aquinas	41
4 Aquinas and the extent of moral disagreement	64
PART II ETHICS	
5 Moral dilemmas	85
6 Truthfulness and lies: what is the problem and what can we learn from Mill?	101
7 Truthfulness and lies: what can we learn from Kant?	122
PART III THE POLITICS OF ETHICS	
8 Three perspectives on Marxism: 1953, 1968, 1995	145
9 Poetry as political philosophy: notes on Burke and Yeats	159
10 Some Enlightenment projects reconsidered	172
11 Social structures and their threats to moral agency	186
12 Toleration and the goods of conflict	205
<i>Index</i>	224

Cambridge University Press

0521670624 - Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2

Alasdair MacIntyre

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

The essays in this volume were written between 1985 and 1999, after I had recognized that my philosophical convictions had become those of a Thomistic Aristotelian, something that had initially surprised me. All of them give expression to that Thomistic Aristotelian standpoint, albeit in very different ways. The first four are concerned with the interpretation and defence of Aristotelian and Thomistic positions. The remaining eight contain only occasional references to Aristotle or Aquinas and sometimes none at all. Nonetheless each arrives at conclusions that are supportive of, derived from, or at least consistent with a Thomistic Aristotelian stance, even though in one case – that of the content of the rule forbidding the utterance of lies – my conclusion is at odds with Aquinas's own. The great majority of present and past Aristotelians are of course not Thomists. And some Thomists have been anxious to stress the extent of what they take to be the philosophical as well as the theological differences between Aquinas and Aristotle. It is therefore important to make the case for understanding Aristotle in a way that accords with Aquinas's interpretation and in so doing it is necessary to distinguish and defend Aristotle so understood from a number of rival Aristotles. The first two essays are a contribution to those tasks. In their original version they were delivered as the Brian O'Neil Memorial Lectures in the History of Philosophy for 1997/98 at the University of New Mexico and I am grateful to the faculty and students of that department for their critical and stimulating discussion.

One point that I emphasize in those essays is that for Aristotle ethics is a part and aspect of politics and that the human good is to be achieved in and through participation in the lives of political communities. This is a familiar and uncontroversial thesis with respect to Aristotle. It is less familiar when made about Aquinas. Yet misunderstanding of Aquinas is inescapable, if we do not remember that on his view it is through achievement of common goods that we are to move towards the achievement

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0521670624 - Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2

Alasdair MacIntyre

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Preface

of the human good and that the precepts conformity to which is required for the achievement of those common goods have the character of *law*. Aquinas's account of law was in its thirteenth-century context developed as an alternative and rival to accounts that informed the law-making and law-enforcement of such rulers as Louis IX of France and the emperor Frederick II. And, although Aquinas envisages the institutionalization of law in terms that are partly Aristotelian and partly thirteenth century, he provides a considerable part of the resources necessary to ask and answer the question: what would it be to develop a politics of the common good and the natural law here and now?

Yet of course the claim that one and the same set of goods are to be achieved and one and the same set of precepts obeyed in widely different social, economic, and cultural settings is itself in need of elucidation and defence of more than one kind. It seems to follow, for example, from what Aquinas says about the knowledge of the precepts of the natural law that he takes all or at least most human beings to possess that we should expect to find respect for one and the same set of moral rules in most social and cultural orders. What we in fact find is a very high degree of moral diversity. And in "Aquinas and the extent of moral disagreement" I catalogue a number of the more striking examples of radical moral disagreement between and sometimes within cultures. I then argue that, insofar as the various moral stances which result in such disagreement are at odds with the precepts of the natural law, they represent failures in practical rationality, as Aquinas understands it, directing our attention to the sources of those failures.

If practical rationality requires us to conform to the precepts of the natural law, it seems to follow that it must be possible to conform to these precepts without inconsistency. They must never make incompatible demands upon us. Yet, if this is so, it seems that there can be no such thing as a moral dilemma, a situation in which the only courses of action open to someone are such that she must either obey this precept and, by so doing, violate that or avoid the violation of the latter precept by failing to obey the former. I have made a promise to do whatever you ask me to do on your birthday. What you ask me to do turns out to be something that it would be wrong to do. So it seems that now either I must do wrong by doing what you ask or I must do wrong by breaking my promise. There is no third alternative.

Some of the most perceptive of recent moral philosophers, including Bernard Williams, have held that the occurrence of moral dilemmas is a brute fact of the moral life and that any theory that entails a denial of their

Cambridge University Press

0521670624 - Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2

Alasdair MacIntyre

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

ix

occurrence must be in error. The debate about these claims is still ongoing and the editors of *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* invited me to survey the contributions to this controversy in a supplement designed to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of that journal in 1940. “Moral dilemmas” is a revised version of my article. In it I conclude – and, when I started to write the article, I was not at all certain that I was going so to conclude – that Aquinas was right in holding that moral dilemmas do indeed occur, but only as the result of some prior action that was itself a violation of some precept of the natural law.

It is the conclusion of the argument developed in the next two essays that puts me on one particular topic at odds with Aquinas. Those essays were Tanner Lectures delivered at Princeton University in 1994 and the published version owes a great deal to those who commented on them on that occasion, Christine Korsgaard, Onora O’Neill, and Quentin Skinner. My aim was to state the case for and against Kant’s unqualified and unconditional condemnation of lying, drawing such resources as I could from Mill. For anyone who inhabits a postEnlightenment culture enquiry into fundamental moral issues has to begin with Kant and Mill. It is when and insofar as they leave us resourceless that we have to go elsewhere. And I have argued, most notably in *After Virtue*, that they do at crucial points leave us resourceless. But in my Tanner Lectures I wanted to make sure that I had identified what could be learned from them before trying to go further. What I took and still take myself to have learned from them is this: that Kant is right in his contention that only a categorical and unconditional rule regarding truth telling can inform human relationships, if those are to be relationships between practically rational agents; and that Mill is right in his contention that no rule can be adequate, unless it allows for those occasions when it is not just permissible but a duty to lie.

We do not need to and we should not follow Mill in adopting a consequentialist standpoint. Mill himself was often uneasy with his own consequentialism. But the considerations that seemed to him to make it necessary to take a consequentialist view of lying can be given their due weight by a better formulation of the categorical rule concerning truthfulness and lying than Kant provided. I attempt to supply just such a formulation in the second of these essays, in so doing disagreeing with Aquinas as well as with Kant.

The last five essays address political questions, answers to which are presupposed by any sufficiently developed moral philosophy. The first of them was written as an introduction to the 1995 edition of my *Marxism*

Cambridge University Press

0521670624 - Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2

Alasdair MacIntyre

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Preface

and Christianity, first published under the title *Marxism An Interpretation* in 1953, and then in a revised version under its present title in 1968. It reasserts the truth of that in Marxism which has survived every critique and it attempts, although too briefly, to suggest how Marxist, Aristotelian, and Christian insights need to be integrated in any ethics and politics that is able to reckon with contemporary realities.

“Poetry as political philosophy: notes on Burke and Yeats” approaches some of the same questions in another way. It was written for a *Festschrift* for my colleague and friend, the late Donald Davie, an excellent poet and a very great interpreter of poetry. Just because of the claims that I have made for the importance of tradition incautious readers have sometimes supposed that I am or should be sympathetic to Edmund Burke. Davie was a discriminating admirer of Burke and I used this essay to define our differences about Burke as well as to suggest an interpretation of some of Yeats’s later political poetry.

“Some Enlightenment projects reconsidered” is an attempt to distinguish that in the political claims of some Enlightenment thinkers, most of all Kant, that should still be reaffirmed from that which should now be put in question. About any set of claims as to what norms should govern our normal and political lives we need to ask what it would be for those norms to be institutionalized, to be embodied in practice. It is my thesis in this essay that, effective as the theses and argument of Enlightenment thinkers were in exposing what was unjust and oppressive in various eighteenth-century regimes, the form that their institutionalization has since taken has had outcomes very different from those hoped for by Kant, by the utilitarians, and by other Enlightenment thinkers. The Enlightenment has failed by its own standards.

Some relevant features of the social order and the institutions that we now inhabit are identified in “Social structures and their threat to moral agency.” Here two problems are posed. One is that of whether and how far ignorance concerning our own actions, their character and their consequences, is culpable. The other is that of the kind of moral reflection that is required of us, if we are to act as we ought. The type of social context that provokes these questions in a peculiarly contemporary way is that of the growing compartmentalization of each sphere of social activity, a compartmentalization such that each sphere increasingly has its own roles governed by its own norms, with little or no social space preserved for effective critical reflection on the overall ordering of social life.

The final essay, “Toleration and the goods of conflict,” asks what we should make of the views advanced on toleration by Locke and by Mill.

Cambridge University Press

0521670624 - Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2

Alasdair MacIntyre

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

The conclusions of my argument are that we badly need to be *intolerant* of the expression of certain lamentable points of view, such as that of those who deny that the Holocaust ever happened, but that we should not make the state the instrument of our intolerance. And I also argue that we can recognize the need for such intolerance without quarreling at all with some at least of Mill's arguments in favor of freedom of expression and of the toleration of opposing standpoints.

Every one of these five essays on the politics of ethics adopts a negative and critical stance to the dominant norms, values, and institutions of the contemporary social order. What may seem to be missing is any statement of an alternative to that order, an alternative that would give expression to some conception of a social and political order that, by embodying the precepts of the natural law, would direct us towards the achievement of our common goods and educate us to become citizens who find their own good in and through that common good. But it is important that the construction of such an alternative cannot begin from any kind of philosophical or theoretical statement. Where then does it begin? Only in the struggles, conflicts, and work of practice and in the attempt to find in and through dialogue with others who are engaged in such struggles, conflicts, and work an adequate local and particular institutional expression of our shared directedness towards our common goods.

Of course every negative critique has positive implications and the more detailed the critique the more detailed these implications are. And of course the same theoretical resources, drawn for the most part from Aristotle, Aquinas, and Marx, need to be put to work both in negative critique and in articulating the goods and goals of particular political and social projects. But philosophical theorizing cannot construct blueprints for designing the future after the manner of Fabian Socialism or Soviet Marxism – or rather, it cannot do so without producing effects very different from those that were hoped for. So that, if at a certain point my thinking on political matters seems to stop short, that is by intention.

Finally, let me reiterate my gratitude to all those whose critical comments upon these essays rescued me from various errors and to Claire Shely for her extraordinary work in preparing this volume. In the introduction to the first volume of my essays I named those to whom I have been greatly indebted for philosophical discussion over extended periods of time. I remain in their debt for the work published here. And I once again add to their names that of my wife, Lynn Sumida Joy, without whom none of this would have been possible.

Cambridge University Press

0521670624 - Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2

Alasdair MacIntyre

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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