

# Alasdair MacIntyre

Edited by

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# Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>page xi</i>
Introduction MARK C. MURPHY	1
<b>1</b> MacIntyre on History and Philosophy GORDON GRAHAM	10
<b>2</b> Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre JEAN PORTER	38
<b>3</b> MacIntyre in the Province of the Philosophy of the Social Sciences STEPHEN P. TURNER	70
<b>4</b> Modern(ist) Moral Philosophy and MacIntyrean Critique J. L. A. GARCIA	94
<b>5</b> MacIntyre and Contemporary Moral Philosophy DAVID SOLOMON	114
<b>6</b> MacIntyre's Political Philosophy MARK C. MURPHY	152
<b>7</b> MacIntyre's Critique of Modernity TERRY PINKARD	176
<i>Bibliography</i>	201
<i>Index</i>	221

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# Introduction

MARK C. MURPHY

In a 1991 interview, Alasdair MacIntyre summarized the history of his own philosophical work as follows:

My life as an academic philosopher falls into three parts. The twenty-two years from 1949, when I became a graduate student of philosophy at Manchester University, until 1971 were a period, as it now appears retrospectively, of heterogeneous, badly organized, sometimes fragmented and often frustrating and messy enquiries, from which nonetheless in the end I learned a lot. From 1971, shortly after I emigrated to the United States, until 1977 was an interim period of sometimes painfully self-critical reflection. . . . From 1977 onwards I have been engaged in a single project to which *After Virtue* [1981], *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* [1988], and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* [1990] are central. (MacIntyre 1991a, pp. 268–269)

The seven chapters that follow deal, for the most part,<sup>1</sup> with aspects of MacIntyre's mature position, the theses that have emerged from the "single project" – I will call this, for shorthand, the "*After Virtue* project" – to which *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, and (since that interview) *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999) have contributed. My aim in this Introduction is to provide, albeit sketchily, some context for the emergence of MacIntyre's mature view. I want to say something, that is, about the pre-1971 inquiries that he labels "fragmented." It is true that MacIntyre's writings during this period are remarkably diverse in the topics treated, in the styles employed, and in the fora in which they appeared. One does not find the singleness of purpose and the coherence of thought that mark his later work. But there is nonetheless a set of concerns and commitments exhibited in these writings that makes intelligible the trajectory of MacIntyre's work to and beyond *After Virtue*.

## 1. SOCIAL CRITICISM, IDEOLOGY, AND PHILOSOPHY

The direction of MacIntyre's early work is made intelligible by his search for an adequate standpoint from which to engage in large-scale social criticism, his conviction that Marxism was the most promising standpoint on offer, and his view that available formulations of Marxist doctrine were nonetheless ultimately inadequate to this task.

MacIntyre's intellectual work has always been at the service of social criticism. (This is true not only of his early writings, but also of the work belonging to the *After Virtue* project. The notion that the MacIntyre of the *After Virtue* project is some sort of social and political conservative is given the lie by the extent to which his later work emphasizes the ways in which virtue theory and natural law ethics are countercultural and indeed revolutionary: see, e.g., "Sophrosune: How a Virtue Can Become Socially Disruptive" [MacIntyre 1988c] and "Natural Law as Subversive: The Case of Aquinas" [1996a]. See also Knight 1996.) The social criticism to which MacIntyre aspired, though, was not a piecemeal affair but rather a systematic inquiry into the defectiveness of modern social, cultural, economic, and political institutions. To engage in such systematic critique requires a standpoint from which to carry out such criticism. MacIntyre shows himself in his early work to be preoccupied with major ideologies – Marxism, psychoanalysis, and Christianity are at the center of his focus – that claim to be able to diagnose the ills of modernity and to point the way to a cure.

"Ideology" is employed by many writers in a merely pejorative fashion. (This is no doubt in part a manifestation of the conviction that we have moved beyond the need for ideology – a conviction which, as MacIntyre has argued, seems all too clearly to be itself an ideology; see MacIntyre 1971b, p. 5.) But ideologies as MacIntyre understood them offer the promise of affording a standpoint for large-scale social criticism. Ideologies, MacIntyre wrote, have three central features. First, they ascribe properties to the world beyond simply those knowable by empirical investigation. Second, they concern both fact and value, offering an account both of the way the world is and how it ought to be; they offer a particular picture of the relationship between these factual and evaluative domains. And third, ideologies make themselves manifest in such a way that they define the social lives of their adherents (MacIntyre 1971a, pp. 5–7).<sup>2</sup> It is true that ideologies can isolate themselves from philosophical and sociological challenge so that they become barren, contentless. But in offering a systematic picture of the world, one that can unite the factual and evaluative realms and can be entrenched in the social lives of its adherents, an

adequate ideology is in the vicinity of what one who seeks to engage in wholesale social criticism should be looking for.

The standpoint in terms of which MacIntyre's early work is articulated is a Marxist one. He was at one time a member of the Communist Party (though he left the Party prior to Khrushchev's revelations about the moral horrors of the Stalinist regime) and continued to be active in socialist causes (Knight 1998, p. 2). But MacIntyre's commitment to Marxism coexisted with deep uneasiness about its ultimate adequacy. Marxism, MacIntyre wrote, has been refuted a number of times; its staying power can be due only to its capacity to articulate truths that are not articulable in other ideological frameworks (*Marxism and Christianity*, pp. 117–118). What MacIntyre had in mind, I take it, was Marxism's account of the distorting effects on human life and human relationships produced by the economic and political institutions of modern capitalism:

When man as a worker becomes himself a commodity, he is fundamentally alienated, estranged from himself. Under the form of labour, man sees himself as a commodity, as an object. Hence as labour he objectifies, externalises his own existence. A consequence of this is that life becomes not something which he enjoys as part of his essential humanity. . . .

[T]o be human is to be estranged. But when man is a being divided against himself, able to envision himself as a commodity, he breaks the community of man with man. (*Marxism: An Interpretation*, p. 50)

It is because MacIntyre took Marxism to be fundamentally right on these points that he had an allegiance to that viewpoint. In fact, MacIntyre's allegiance to this view of the destructive character of the institutions of capitalism, including the modern bureaucratic state, has remained entirely unaltered to the present day; it is, MacIntyre has acknowledged, one of the few points on which he has not held different views at different points in his academic career (see MacIntyre 1994b, pp. 35, 44). Still, MacIntyre was unable to ally himself with any of the formulations of Marxist thought available to him: neither Stalinist "scientific socialism" nor the humanist alternatives to Stalinism popular within the British New Left were ultimately sustainable.<sup>3</sup>

The facing of a choice between these understandings of Marxism was not, by any means, an unfamiliar experience for Marxists. Marxists had faced such a stark choice at least since the formulations of scientific Marxism by Karl Kautsky and of revisionist, humanistic Marxism by Eduard Bernstein (see Kautsky 1906 [1914] and Bernstein 1899 [1993]; for a helpful discussion of these views, see Hudelson 1990, pp. 3–28). Scientific Marxism

emphasizes the notion of Marxism as social science, as articulating laws of social, political, and economic development and transformation that indicate the inevitable path through capitalism and eventually to socialism. Humanistic Marxism, on the other hand, emphasizes the moral element of Marxism, offering a critical account of the moral failures of capitalist society, of the morally imperative character of socialism, and of the morally appropriate means to transform capitalist modes of life into socialist modes of life. Scientific Marxism, one might say, is the Marxism of 'is'; humanistic Marxism is the Marxism of 'ought'.

MacIntyre's early writings take both of these modes of Marxist theorizing as targets. Understood as an inevitabilist account of the development of social forms, scientific Marxism faces, on MacIntyre's view, two insuperable difficulties. First, to take the content of Marxism to be simply a set of social scientific laws is to make Marxism into no more than a tool for those in power to manipulate social change, an instruction manual for how the masses can be manipulated by those in power. It is precisely this understanding of Marxism that is central to Stalinist socialism, in which the state's role was one of adjusting the levers and pushing the buttons that could ultimately bring about universal socialism. Because that perspective was entirely value-free, there were no ways of adjusting the levers and pushing the buttons that could be morally called into question. If there were no more to Marxism than an account of correlations between historical, social, economic, and political states of affairs, then purges, mass killings, and show trials – if employed as a part of those conditions that ultimately bring about universal socialism – could not be criticized from a Marxist standpoint. Thus one fundamental criticism leveled by MacIntyre against the scientific Marxist standpoint was that it was *morally empty* (MacIntyre 1958, p. 32). The other criticism leveled by MacIntyre against this standpoint was that it was, to put it bluntly, false: there are no social scientific laws available to be discovered that would enable the would-be central planner to adjust the levers to bring about the downfall of capitalism and the rise of socialism. Features of human agency preclude the possibility of adequately formulating any such laws (see *Marxism and Christianity*, pp. 82–86; *After Virtue*, pp. 88–102). Scientific Marxism is not only morally empty, it is *scientifically empty*.

It is not surprising, then, that MacIntyre would express admiration for those Marxists who rejected Stalinist socialism on moral grounds. One might also expect MacIntyre to side with the humanistic Marxists; indeed, one recent chronicler of the development of MacIntyre's views has asserted that MacIntyre is clearly in this camp (McMylor 1994, p. 12). But while it

is true that MacIntyre's commitment to Marxism came on account of its capacity to bring into the open the deformities in social relations prevalent in capitalist societies, even early on MacIntyre expressed little confidence that a standpoint could be found from which Stalinist horrors could be criticized and the moral content of Marxism vindicated. Bernstein, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, shows no signs of worry concerning the vindication of the moral content of Marxism; perhaps this is because of his confidence in a generally Kantian philosophical view that persons are never to be treated as mere means but always as ends-in-themselves. MacIntyre, writing in the mid-twentieth century, has no such confidence.

It is not at all surprising that MacIntyre would lack confidence on this score. In the 1950's, the dominant theoretical viewpoints in Anglo-American moral philosophy were versions of emotivism and prescriptivism, according to which moral judgment consists simply in (respectively) expression of emotion (e.g., "rigged trials are wrong" means something like "rigged trials – boo!") or articulation of preference (e.g., "rigged trials are wrong" means something like "let rigged trials not take place"). What MacIntyre cannot see is how, given these understandings of moral judgment, we are to account for the *authority* purported in moral approval and condemnation. When the humanist Marxist condemns the techniques of Stalinist socialism, what is the authority wielded in that condemnation? If all that is going on in such criticism is the critic's reaffirmation of his or her disapproval of the Stalinist's techniques, why on earth should anyone listen to him or her? (*Marxism and Christianity*, pp. 124–127; see also *After Virtue*, p. 68.) The moral critic of Stalinism, wrote MacIntyre, is "often a figure of genuine pathos" (MacIntyre 1958, p. 31). MacIntyre in his early work is just such a figure.

## 2. IS THERE A PATH OUT OF THE "MORAL WILDERNESS"?

MacIntyre confronted the Stalinist and the Stalinist's moral critic, the humanist, in a two-part essay written for the *New Reasoner*<sup>4</sup> in 1958 entitled "Notes from the Moral Wilderness." In it he diagnoses the difficulties in the humanist's position as rooted in the humanist's acceptance of the autonomy of moral principle, that is, that the province of the moral stands independently of and in contrast to the province of natural, social, and historical facts. By cutting the domain of moral judgment off from the domains of history, sociology, economics, and anthropology, the moral critic of Stalinism cuts him- or herself off from any argumentative route to his or her moral

conclusions (see also *Marxism and Christianity*, p. 124). All that remains is arbitrary choice – I approve of these values, I prefer this way of life to that one. But this isolation renders moral criticism ineffective and moral evaluation unintelligible. Such an understanding of morality allows the Stalinist to play the choice game as well: “If [the moral critic of Stalinism] chooses his values in the spirit of *Hier steh’ ich, ich kann nicht anders*, is it not equally open to [the Stalinist] to do the same?” (MacIntyre 1958, p. 35) Morality thus cut off from other realms of judgment and inquiry becomes “like primitive taboos, imperatives which we just happen to utter. It is to turn ‘ought’ into a kind of nervous cough with which we accompany what we hope will be the more impressive of our pronouncements” (MacIntyre 1959b, p. 42).<sup>5</sup>

Both the scientific socialist and the humanist, in their own ways, sever the connection between the factual and the evaluative, and thus preclude the possibility of social criticism from an authoritative moral standpoint. The scientific socialist does so by treating the realm of moral judgment as illusory or merely epiphenomenal; the humanist does so by stripping it of its authority. What is needed is a middle way – a way to connect morality tightly enough to history, sociology, psychology, and other domains to preclude it from being a matter of mere preference or choice, but not so tightly that *what ought to be* becomes simply *what is guaranteed to be*. MacIntyre suggests that this middle way can be achieved by connecting ethics with what we might call *authentic* human desire, desire that is not warped or distorted (MacIntyre 1959b, pp. 46–47). Thus morality is grounded in the ‘is’ of desire, but is not subsumed by it, for he allows that it is authentic desire, not desire that is deformed, that is the standard for moral judgment. The trick is to explain what the Marxist critique of capitalist society presupposes: that we can explain in a non-question-begging way why it is that certain forms of social life distort desire, and precisely how they do so. What is needed, MacIntyre writes, is a “concept of human nature, a concept which has to be the centre of any discussion of moral theory” (MacIntyre 1959b, p. 45). In providing such an account, we will have to be mindful of the extent to which human nature is historically conditioned, and we will have to be mindful that the ethics that we endorse can be institutionalized. As MacIntyre reminds us from his very early work onward, there is no morality for rational beings as such; there is only morality for human beings, as practiced at some time, in some social setting.

Any adequate ethic, then, would have to be historically situated. But MacIntyre realized – in part as a result of an early attempt to write an adequate history of ethics, his 1966 *A Short History of Ethics* (MacIntyre

1991d, p. 260) – that to make the historical condition of human beings a part of the substance of an ethical view is inadequate. It would be, to say the least, paradoxical to hold that the norms of conduct, the virtues and rules that govern the life of a good person, are historically conditioned and exist only as concretely realized in social life, but also to hold that the criteria of rational justification by which we show that this is the correct view of morality are entirely ahistorical and exist apart from the practices of any community of inquiry. History, if it is to enter ethics at the level of substantive moral theory, must also enter at the metalevel, the level at which substantive theories of morality are justified. Such appeals to history characteristically bring with them worries that such a view will fall into a soggy relativism. It would hardly be a victory for MacIntyre’s alternative route in moral theory if that route were justified only according to a theory of rational inquiry that is itself not superior to any of the various theories of rational inquiry that might reject that route.

The path out of the moral wilderness is the formulation of an ethics of human nature – where human nature is not merely a biological nature but also an historical and social nature – and the formulation of an historical, but not relativistic, account of rationality in inquiry. Only accounts such as these would make possible authoritative political and social criticism. The vindication of such a substantive moral outlook, and of a theory of rationality in inquiry that would sustain that outlook, are the central tasks of the *After Virtue* project.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. THE *AFTER VIRTUE* PROJECT

The conclusions tentatively reached by MacIntyre in his early writings concern both what the substance of an adequate morality would be like and what a conception of rationality needed to show the superiority of this substantial morality would have to be like. The chapters in this volume explain how these tentative conclusions reached in MacIntyre’s early work have been developed and connected to each other in MacIntyre’s mature position. Gordon Graham (“MacIntyre on History and Philosophy”) considers MacIntyre’s views on the relationship between history and philosophy, views that culminate in MacIntyre’s notion of a tradition of inquiry. Jean Porter (“Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre”) takes up this notion of tradition in greater detail, analyzing its development over the various works that constitute the *After Virtue* project. Stephen Turner writes on MacIntyre’s contributions to the philosophy of social science

(“MacIntyre in the Province of the Philosophy of the Social Sciences”), contributions that inform (and are informed by) MacIntyre’s views on rationality, morality, and politics. J. L. A. Garcia and David Solomon present a picture of the negative and positive (respectively) sides of MacIntyre’s substantive moral theory: Garcia’s chapter (“Modern(ist) Moral Philosophy and MacIntyrean Critique”) lays out MacIntyre’s criticisms of modern moral philosophy, while Solomon’s (“MacIntyre and Contemporary Moral Philosophy”) shows how that critique developed into MacIntyre’s own distinctive version of Aristotelian ethics. I (“MacIntyre’s Political Philosophy”) discuss MacIntyre’s views on political philosophy, focusing on MacIntyre’s preoccupation with the modern state. Terry Pinkard (“MacIntyre’s Critique of Modernity”) concludes the collection by considering MacIntyre’s criticisms of the assumptions and institutions of modernity, trying to make clear the ways in which MacIntyre is, and is not, himself a modern. A selected bibliography of MacIntyre’s books and most important papers follows.

### Notes

1. The exception is Chapter 3, which deals with MacIntyre’s views on the philosophy of social science. While MacIntyre has continued to write in this area, his main positions were developed along the way to, and play a central role in, *After Virtue*.
2. It seems to me that the notion of “tradition,” which plays such a central role in the *After Virtue* project (see Chapter 2), is a recognizable successor concept to “ideology.”
3. For a discussion of the extent to which the British New Left had its origins in Khrushchev’s revelations concerning the horrors of the Stalin regime, see Chun 1993, pp. 1–4.
4. The *New Reasoner* was an independent journal of socialist thought, founded by E. P. Thompson – an ex-Communist party member – in order to provide a forum in which more adequate debate and criticism of socialist principles and policy could take place. It was published from 1957 to 1959, at which point it merged with another journal, *Universities and Left Review*, to form the *New Left Review*.
5. The comparison of the institutions of morality to the institutions of taboo is a theme to which MacIntyre has returned over and over again in his career: see, for examples, the 1981 *After Virtue*, pp. 110–113, and the 1990 *Three Rival Versions*, pp. 182–186.
6. It is worth reemphasizing that in carrying this inquiry forward, MacIntyre did not take himself to be introducing elements into Marxism that were entirely foreign to it, but rather to be working through the problematic internal to Marxism. In criticizing contemporary Marxist philosophy on account of its intellectual stagnation,

MacIntyre lays out what he takes to be the central tasks facing philosophers who have allegiance to a Marxist viewpoint:

Marx was intimately concerned with two problems that necessarily arise for everyone who engages seriously in philosophy. He was concerned with the perspective of ultimate belief, with the problems which engage the philosophy of religion; and he was concerned with the question of how the philosopher should relate himself to his philosophy and the sense in which philosophy can or cannot affect one's ultimate views and commitments. (MacIntyre 1956, p. 370)

While the bulk of MacIntyre's work early in his career is concerned with rival ideologies, and in particular their relevance for social criticism, he also did a fair bit of work squarely in the philosophy of religion: he co-edited (with Antony Flew) *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* and wrote papers on immortality (1955c), visions (1955d), the logical status of religious belief (1957b), atheism (*Atheism*, pp. 1–55), and other topics in the philosophy of religion. This book does not contain a chapter on MacIntyre's philosophical theology because it has not been a focus of much of his work during the *After Virtue* project. (But see 1986c and 1994a.)