

ETHICS IN THE CONFLICTS OF MODERNITY

Alasdair MacIntyre explores some central philosophical, political, and moral claims of modernity and argues that a proper understanding of human goods requires a rejection of these claims. In a wide-ranging discussion, he considers how normative and evaluative judgments are to be understood, how desire and practical reasoning are to be characterized, what it is to have adequate self-knowledge, and what part narrative plays in our understanding of human lives. He asks, further, what it would be to understand the modern condition from a neoAristotelian or Thomistic perspective, and argues that Thomistic Aristotelianism, informed by Marx's insights, provides us with resources for constructing a contemporary politics and ethics which both enable and require us to act against modernity from within modernity. This rich and important book builds on and advances MacIntyre's thinking in ethics and political philosophy, and will be of great interest to readers in both fields.

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE retired from teaching at the University of Notre Dame in 2010. He is the author of the award-winning *After Virtue* (1981), and his other publications include two volumes of essays, *The Tasks of Philosophy* and *Ethics and Politics* (both Cambridge, 2006), *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue 1913–1922* (2005), and *God, Philosophy, Universities: A History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (2009).

ETHICS IN THE CONFLICTS
OF MODERNITY

An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE



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A shaoghail, tha sinn ann g'a aindeoin;
Tha a'ghriosach theth fo'n luathre fhathast.
George Campbell Hay

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Preface

This essay is divided into five chapters. In the first the questions initially posed about our desires and how we should think about them are questions that plain nonphilosophical persons often find themselves asking. When, however, they carry their attempt to answer these questions a little further, they find that they have, perhaps inadvertently, become philosophers and that they need some at least of the conceptual and argumentative resources which professional philosophers provide. So their enquiry, like this one, becomes philosophical. But philosophy in our culture has become an almost exclusively specialized academic discipline whose practitioners for the most part address only each other rather than the educated layperson. Moreover, those same practitioners have for the last fifty years been harassed by the academic system into publishing more and more as a condition for academic survival, so that on most topics of philosophical interest there is by now an increasingly large, an often unmanageably large, body of literature that has to be read as a prologue before adding to it one more item. Readers should be warned that my references to this literature are selective and few. Had I conscientiously attempted not only to find my way through all the relevant published writing in the philosophy of mind and in ethics but then also to explain how I had come to terms with the claims advanced by its authors, I would have had to write at impossible length and in a format that would have made this essay inaccessible to the lay reader for whom it is written.

Nonetheless, I have worked my own way slowly and painfully – the pain is sometimes, although far from always, the pain of boredom – through what matters in that literature and, if I have readers who are professional philosophers, they can be assured that if I make no reference to a vast body of published work, including their own, it is because nothing in it has given me reason to abandon or to modify the views here expressed and the arguments here advanced. My readers are invited to think their way through my extended argument on their own terms, whatever those terms

may be. My primary aim is not to secure their agreement, since whether I do so or not depends in key part on the convictions and assumptions that they bring with them to their reading, but rather to invite them to redefine their own positions in the light of the case that I make.

The enquiries of the first chapter lead to a philosophical impasse, to a confrontation between two rival and incompatible positions, that of expressivism and that of a certain kind of Aristotelianism, two sets of theses and arguments about the meaning and use of ‘good’ and about the nature of goods, the protagonists of which are unable to provide sufficient reasons for their critics and opponents to change their minds. It matters that from each of these two rival standpoints the relationships between desires and practical reasoning is understood very differently and that the impasse, although theoretical, has important implications for practice. Is there then any way of moving beyond it? My strategy in the second chapter is to turn to another kind of enquiry, one in which I consider some social and historical contexts in which philosophical theorizing on relevant issues has functioned and of how it has functioned in those contexts. I take particular note of how such theorizing may sometimes function so as to generate misunderstandings in ethics and politics by disguising the social and economic realities of particular times and places. I note too that the remedy for such theorizing is, in part at least, better theorizing, theorizing that has the power to make us aware of those same realities. Examples drawn from Hume, Aristotle, Aquinas, Marx, and others provide a first step in rethinking the relationships between philosophical theorizing and everyday practice so that it becomes possible to pose as yet unasked questions about the conclusions at which I had arrived in the first chapter, questions that concern the relevant features of the distinctively modern moral and social contexts in terms of which, so it turns out, we need to understand the rival philosophical claims that I had discussed.

The third chapter of this essay, therefore, is a historical and sociological account, albeit a bare and skeletal one, of key features of the social structures and social life of advanced modernity in the course of which morality took on a new and peculiar aspect and from which the present form of the opposition between the two philosophical standpoints that I discuss in the first chapter emerged. I argue that we can understand how and why the morality peculiar to the modern world, the morality that I name ‘Morality’, has functioned as it has, only if we consider it in relationship not only to the political, economic, and social structures that are distinctive of modernity but also to characteristically modern modes of feeling and desiring. I argue further that we can understand expressivism adequately

only by considering both how it provides a subversive critique of Morality and the limitations of that critique. Those limitations, which turn out to be limitations of expressivism as a theory, are identified in the course of discussing the claims of three notable critics of Morality, Oscar Wilde, D. H. Lawrence, and Bernard Williams, a philosopher whose enquiries were informed by an unusual awareness of the historical and social contexts of those enquiries. It is Williams who does most in enabling us to understand the present situation of the reflective agent and the alternatives that she or he confronts, in part by his insights, in part by the issues that his work raises but is unable to resolve.

In the fourth chapter I am able to return to the original philosophical enquiry, but now with resources for better understanding and for moving beyond the impasse at which we had arrived, not only because I have now been able to identify where it is that expressivism succeeds and where it is that it fails, but also because I am now able to supply a more adequate account of what it is to advance rational justifications in the contexts of practice. The discussion of Williams' views had already thrown important light on what is at stake in our contemporary situation in either accepting or rejecting a NeoAristotelian standpoint in ethics and politics. This fourth chapter is therefore principally a fuller exposition of NeoAristotelianism, and more specifically of Thomism, in its relationship to the moral, political, and economic limitations and possibilities of the contemporary social order. My argument is designed to show that it is only from a Thomistic Aristotelian perspective that we are able to characterize adequately some key features of the social order of advanced modernity and that Thomistic Aristotelianism, when informed by Marx's insights, is able to provide us with the resources for constructing a contemporary politics and ethics, one that enables and requires us to act against modernity from within modernity. Its conclusion is that a certain kind of narrative is indispensable for understanding the practical and the moral life.

The fifth and final chapter exemplifies this thesis by providing a biographical study of the relationship of theory to practice and of desire to practical reasoning in four very different twentieth-century lives, those of the Soviet novelist, Vasily Grossman, of the American judge, Sandra Day O'Connor, of the Trinidadian Marxist historian and political activist, C. L. R. James, and of the Irish Catholic priest and political activist, Monsignor Denis Faul. It was from such as them, quite as much as from Aristotle, Aquinas, and Marx, that I learned to understand both the unity of political and moral enquiry and its complexity, in that its subject matter is at once philosophical, historical, and sociological. One moral to be drawn by

anyone who shares my conclusions is that the present organization of the academic disciplines is inimical to such enquiry.

I am all too aware of having attempted both too much and too little: too little because of the need to engage with adversarial positions in greater depth than I have done, too much because of the extensive ground that I have covered. One consequence is that I have had on a number of occasions to make the same point in different contexts. Readers who are understandably irritated by these repetitions should note that the alternative would have been to refer them too frequently to other passages in the text, so disrupting their reading. Some of the theses that I assert and some of the arguments that I advance repeat, revise, correct, or replace theses asserted and arguments advanced in my earlier books and articles, so that I could have cluttered the text with references to these earlier statements, but it seems better not to do so.¹ I am also happy to acknowledge my debts first of all to those institutions who have provided me with much needed and much appreciated academic hospitality since I retired from teaching in the Philosophy Department of the University of Notre Dame: Notre Dame's Center for Ethics and Culture and its Maritain Center and London Metropolitan University's Centre for Aristotelian Studies of Contemporary Ethics and Politics. I am most grateful for the remarkable generosity of those colleagues in a number of universities who read and commented on an earlier draft of this book: Joseph Dunne, Raymond Geuss, Kelvin Knight, and Elijah Millgram, each from a standpoint significantly different from my own. I learned a great deal from them, although not as much as they may have hoped. I also owe a considerable debt to Jonathan Lear, Jeffery Nicholas, and John O'Callaghan, who commented incisively on particular passages, and to the two readers for the Cambridge University Press for their identifications of errors and unclarities. I am especially grateful to my copyeditor, Jacqueline French. Earlier versions of some parts of this book were read to seminars at London Metropolitan University. I could not have had better critics than those who participated in those seminars and to them too I am immensely grateful. I scarcely need to add that the flaws and errors that remain are mine.

Let me also acknowledge a very different kind of debt. In philosophy it is only rarely that anyone or any argument has the last word. Debate almost always continues, and this is notably so with the topics and issues with

¹ I must, however, note that in Chapter 4 parts of sections 4.6 and 4.7 were originally published as parts of my "Philosophical Education Against Contemporary Culture," in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 87 (2013): 43–56, and parts of section 4.12 as parts of my "Ends and Endings," in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 88, 4 (Fall 2014): 807–821.

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which I am concerned in this book: how normative and evaluative judgments are to be understood, how desire and practical reasoning are to be characterized, what it is to have adequate self-knowledge, what part narrative plays in our understanding of human lives, and what it is to understand these matters from a Thomistic perspective. Each of the positions to which I am committed puts me at odds with philosophers of insight, penetration, and wit who will remain unpersuaded by my arguments. To them I am very much in debt, since it is they who have forced me again and again to rethink those arguments.

My greatest debt of all is to Lynn Sumida Joy, not only for her particular perceptive and instructive comments on earlier drafts of this book, but for making the whole enterprise possible.