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0521670616 - The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume 1

Alasdair MacIntyre

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THE TASKS OF PHILOSOPHY

How should we respond when some of our basic beliefs are put into question? What makes a human body distinctively human? Why is truth an important good? These are among the questions explored in this collection of essays by Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the most creative and influential philosophers working today. Ten of MacIntyre's most influential essays written over almost thirty years are collected together here for the first time. They range over such topics as the issues raised by different types of relativism, what it is about human beings that cannot be understood by the natural sciences, the relationship between the ends of life and the ends of philosophical writing, and the relationship of moral philosophy to contemporary social practice. 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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Preface

The earliest of these essays appeared in 1972, the latest as recently as 2002. In 1971 Colin Haycraft of Duckworth in London and Ted Schocken of Schocken Books in New York had published a collection of my earlier essays, *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays in Ideology and Philosophy*, in which I had set myself three goals. The first was to evaluate a variety of ideological claims, claims about human nature and history, about the human good and the politics of its realization, advanced from the standpoints of Christian theology, of some kinds of psychoanalytic theory, and of some dominant versions of Marxism, the second to argue that, although there were sound reasons for rejecting those particular ideological claims, they provided no support for the then still fashionable end of ideology thesis, defended by Edward Shils and others. Yet these negative conclusions would have been practically sterile, if I were unable to move beyond them. And, if I was to be able to move beyond them, I badly needed to find resources that would enable me to diagnose more adequately the conceptual and historical roots of our moral and political condition.

A third task in *Against the Self-Images of the Age* was therefore to reconsider some central issues in moral philosophy and the philosophy of action. Yet the effect of rereading these essays in 1971, when collected together in a single volume, was to make me painfully aware of how relatively little had been accomplished in that book and how much more I needed by way of resources, if I was to discriminate adequately between what still had to be learned from each of the standpoints that I had criticized and what had to be rejected root and branch. How then was I to proceed philosophically? The first of the essays in this volume, "Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science," marks a major turning-point in my thinking during the 1970s.

It was elicited by my reading of and encounters with Imre Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn and what was transformed by that reading was my

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conception of what it was to make progress in philosophy or indeed in systematic thought more generally. Up to that time, although I should have learned otherwise from the histories of Christian theology and of Marxism, I had assumed that my enquiries would and should move forward in a piecemeal way, focusing first on this problem and then on that, in a mode characteristic of much analytic philosophy. So I had worked away at a number of issues that I had treated as separate and distinct without sufficient reflection upon the larger conceptual framework within which and by reference to which I and others formulated those issues. What I learned from Kuhn, or rather from Kuhn and Lakatos read together, was the need first to identify and then to break free from that framework and to enquire whether the various problems on which I had made so little progress had baffled me not or not only because of their difficulty, but because they were bound to remain intractable so long as they were understood in the terms dictated by those larger assumptions which I shared with many of my contemporaries. And I was to find that, by rejecting the conception of progress in philosophy that I had hitherto taken for granted, I had already taken a first step towards viewing the issues in which I was entangled in a new light.

A second step was taken when I tore up the manuscript of the book on moral philosophy that I had been writing and asked how the problems of modern moral and political philosophy would have to be reformulated, if they were viewed not from the standpoint of liberal modernity, but instead from the standpoint of what I took to be Aristotelian moral and political practice, and if they were understood as having resulted from a fragmentation of older Aristotelian conceptions of the practical life, a fragmentation produced by the impact of modernity upon traditions that had embodied such conceptions. What I discovered was that the dilemmas of high modernity and their apparently intractable character become adequately explicable *only* when viewed and understood in this way. This was the highly controversial claim that I first advanced in *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, Second Edition, 1981) and developed in subsequent books.

It is a claim that may seem to have a paradoxical character. For, if we inhabit a cultural, social, and moral order that we can only understand adequately from some point of view external to that order, how is it possible for us simultaneously to remain inhabitants of that order and yet to transcend its limitations? The answer is that the cultures of modernity are arenas of potential and actual conflict in which modes of thought and action from a variety of pasts coexist with and put in question some of the

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distinctive institutional forms and moral stances of individualist and corporate modernity. So from within modernity critiques of that same modernity from the standpoint of past traditions pose philosophical as well as political and moral questions.

Those who identify themselves with such critiques need to be able to say where they stand on a range of philosophical issues and to give adequate reasons for their commitments. Some of those issues are addressed in the next five essays. “Colors, cultures, and practices” is an enquiry into the range and significance of our agreements and disagreements in our color vocabularies, our perceptions of color, and our ascriptions of color. It begins from Wittgensteinian considerations about how language use is socially constituted and how agreements in our naming of colors within cultures is compatible with significant disagreements between cultures as to how colors are to be named. But these are preliminaries to asking what good reasons there might be for discriminating and classifying colors in one way rather than another and to arguing that the context for such reasoning is provided by practices, notably, for example, by the practice of the art of painting, in which the goods aimed at within some practice at some particular stage of its development may well provide us with grounds – generally and characteristically grounds that are only identified retrospectively – for attending to and discriminating colors in one way rather than another.

A good deal more needs to be said than is said in this essay. But even when this enquiry is carried no further forward, it involves a critical evaluation and rejection of the claims of a sophisticated cultural relativism. The reasons that we have for rejecting such claims have some bearing on the closely related issue of moral relativism and that relativism is confronted directly in “Moral relativism, truth, and justification,” a paper written for a *Festschrift* published to celebrate the splendid philosophical work of Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach on the occasion of their fiftieth wedding anniversary. What my argument is designed to bring out – and I draw upon some of Geach’s insights and arguments in doing so – is the place of the concept of truth in our moral discourse and our moral enquiries. That place is such as to put the theoretical moral relativist at odds with the inhabitants of those cultures on whose moral and other practical claims he is passing a verdict. The inhabitants of every moral culture, it turns out, have already rejected relativism and the problems that relativism was designed to solve, problems arising from radical moral disagreements within and between cultures, need to be approached in a very different way.

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The fourth and fifth essays are concerned with how we ought to understand human beings. For the last three hundred years the project of explaining human thought and action in natural scientific terms has been an increasingly influential aspect of the distinctively modern mind. The sciences to which appeal has been made have undergone large changes. But the philosophical questions posed by that project have remained remarkably the same. So Hegel's critique of the claims advanced by the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is still to the point. And in "Hegel on faces and skulls" I conclude that Hegel provided us with good reasons for rejecting the view that human attitudes and actions are explicable by causal generalizations of the kind provided by the relevant natural sciences, in our day neurophysiology and biochemistry. In "What is a human body?" I argue further that we all of us have and cannot but have a prephilosophical understanding of the human body that is incompatible with treating its movements as wholly explicable in natural scientific terms. This understanding is presupposed by, among other things, those interpretative practices that make it possible for us to understand and to respond to what others say and do. So that in and by our everyday lives we are committed to a denial of the basic assumptions of much contemporary scientific naturalism.

These five essays address familiar philosophical issues. The sixth is very different. Moral philosophers often take themselves to be articulating concepts that are at home in the everyday life and utterances of prephilosophical moral agents, plain persons. But what if the moral concepts that inform the social and cultural practices in which both philosophers and plain persons participate in their everyday social life are in fact significantly different from and incompatible with the moral concepts of the philosophers? What if the moral concepts embodied in everyday practice are not only different and incompatible, but such that the way of life to which they give expression makes it difficult, perhaps impossible to find genuine application for the moral concepts of the philosophers? In "Moral philosophy and contemporary social practice: what holds them apart?" I suggest that just these possibilities are realized in the social and cultural order of advanced modernity and that the conclusions advanced within moral philosophy by rights theorists of various kinds, by proponents of virtue ethics, and by utilitarians are unable, except on rare occasions, to have any effect on contemporary social realities. The practices of individualist and corporate modernity are well designed to prevent the arguments of moral philosophers, whatever their point of view, from receiving a hearing.

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If this is so, then the task of moral philosophers is not only to participate in theoretical enquiry and debate. Theoretical enquiry on moral and political matters is always rooted in some form of practice and to take a standpoint in moral and political debate is to define oneself in relationship to the practices in which one is engaged and to the conflicts in which one is thereby involved. Yet the social and cultural order that we nowadays inhabit is one that prescribes for philosophy a severely limited place, that of a discipline suitable for educating a very small minority of the young who happen to have a taste for that sort of thing. Its modes of public life are inimical to philosophical questioning of those modes and their presuppositions. And philosophers who seek to be more than theorists, whatever their point of view, are either forced into struggle against this marginalization or are condemned to speak only to and with other philosophers and their generally minuscule public. In this situation therefore the questions arise more sharply than at certain other times: Why engage in philosophy? What ends does philosophical enquiry serve? And what kind of philosophy will enable one to move towards the achievement of those ends? These are questions that I address in the four final essays in this volume.

In “The ends of life, the ends of philosophical writing” my enquiry is about the different relationships that may hold between the ends that philosophers pursue in their lives and the ends that they pursue in their writings and about the difference between those philosophical texts that enable us to ask better questions about the ends of life and those that divert us from asking such questions. The case made in this essay is indeed a case for a particular kind of philosophy, but it is not a case for any one philosophical standpoint. Yet this was not because I do not speak and write from a particular point of view. I wrote these essays and I write now with the intentions and commitments of a Thomistic Aristotelian. What these commitments amount to I tried to say, at least in part, in “First principles, final ends, and contemporary philosophical issues,” a revised and expanded version of my 1990 Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University.

In that essay I had three aims. First, I needed to spell out for myself the conception of progress in philosophical enquiry that my work now presupposed, a very different conception from that which I had rejected while at work on “Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science.” Secondly, I hoped to make the Thomist conceptions of first principles and final ends intelligible to at least some of my contemporaries who were and are deeply committed to a rejection of those conceptions. And, thirdly, I wanted to identify the consequences for

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the history of modern philosophy of such rejection. The emphasis of this essay is therefore on the extent and nature of the disagreements between on the one hand Thomists and on the other analytic and postmodernist philosophers. Yet this makes the need to find common ground for debate and enquiry between Thomists and such critics, and the need to argue, so far as possible, from premises that are widely shared, all the more urgent. For in philosophy it is only by being open to objections posed by our critics and antagonists that we are able to avoid becoming the victims of our own prejudices.

Yet it is not always possible to find such common ground and sometimes this is a consequence of the fact that no one engages in philosophy without being influenced by their extraphilosophical allegiances, religious, moral, political, and otherwise. What is important here is twofold: first, not to disguise such allegiances as philosophical conclusions and, secondly, to make their influence on one's philosophical work explicit. The first is a danger that threatens those who fail to recognize, for example, that atheism requires an act of faith just as much as theism does and that physicalism is as liable to be held superstitiously as any religious view. The second is necessary, if one is to clarify the relationship between one's philosophical and one's other commitments. The next two essays are in part concerned to achieve such clarification in respect of my own commitments as a Roman Catholic who is a philosopher. Both are responses to John Paul II's encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio*.

That encyclical is concerned both to insist upon the autonomy of the philosophical enterprise and to identify those philosophical theses to which anyone who affirms the Catholic creeds is inescapably committed. There is clearly a tension between these two themes and in "Truth as a good" I address the nature of that tension and more particularly enquire what understanding of truth is consistent with the Catholic faith. In "Philosophy recalled to its tasks" I have a number of concerns, but most centrally that of the relationship between the enquiries of the academic philosopher and the questioning and self-questioning of plain persons about their own nature and about the nature of things which is central to every developed human culture. In the encyclical we hear the voice not only of the pope, John Paul II, but of the philosopher, Karol Wojtyła, and I engage with it not only as an expression of the church's *magisterium*, but as a significant contribution to a both philosophical and theological understanding of philosophy.

Finally, I need to acknowledge my debts, particularly to those who have been or are my colleagues and to those who have been or are my students

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in the departments and centers to which I belonged at the time that I was writing these essays: at Boston University, at the Center for Kulturforskning of Aarhus University, and at the University of Notre Dame, where since the year 2000 I have been both a member of the Philosophy Department and a fellow of the Center for Ethics and Culture. My late colleague Philip Quinn was especially helpful in commenting on “Colors, cultures, and practices.” I must once again thank Claire Shely for extraordinary work in preparing this volume.

Everyone whose academic life has been as long as mine has incurred a special kind of debt to those with whom they have engaged in philosophical discussions that have extended over quite a number of years. I name them here, both the dead and the living, knowing that nothing I say can express adequately my sense of what I owe to them: Eric John, Herbert McCabe, O.P., James Cameron, Harry Lubasz, Max Wartofsky, Bernard Elevitch, David Solomon, Hans Fink, Ralph McInerny. I add to their names that of my wife, Lynn Sumida Joy, in acknowledgment of a still greater debt.

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