Introduction

After Virtue is, by common consent, Alasdair MacIntyre's most seminal work – and certainly the most cited. Compared to other books in late twentieth-century Anglophone moral philosophy, nothing can match its erudition, breadth of reference or the scope and ambition of its arguments. Its pungent advocacy of a resurrected Aristotelianism, in 'social teleological' mode – or what Kelvin Knight (Chapter 3) calls 'sociological Aristotelianism' – has challenged minds not only in philosophy, but also in political science, sociology, anthropology, theology and even beyond the academy. Late Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, for example, has referred to *After Virtue* as establishing MacIntyre as one of the intellectual *gedolim* ('greats'). It seems bizarre, therefore, that at the same time, and as Charles Pinches (Chapter 11) puts it, 'MacIntyre's work … still lies somewhat off to the side; the bulk of modern moral philosophy goes on as if it had not been written'. Indeed, we find the same old utilitarian and deontological theories retailed in the philosophy journals, albeit with new qualifications and addenda. How is this state of affairs to be explained? Why has *After Virtue* gained more plaudits, if anything, outside philosophy than within it?

At least three immediate, compossible explanations suggest themselves. First, *After Virtue* constitutes a head-on critique of the dominant modes of Anglophone normative theory. Two of MacIntyre's favourite adjectives, 'rival' and 'incompatible', imply that the only proper mode of response to his critique is simply to cease fealty to Kant or Bentham and Mill altogether. It is not surprising, then, that this uncompromising approach to the *practice* of moral philosophy has met with little favour, especially given the *institutional* career paths that depend on its rejection. Second – and here institutions reinforce practice most strongly – *After Virtue* blurs disciplinary boundaries to an extent unprecedented in modern Anglophone moral philosophy. As I suggested above, it draws liberally on political science (e.g. Trotskyism), sociology (e.g. the work of Goffman), anthropology (e.g. studies of *taboo*) and theology (e.g. Aquinas). In the context of a highly, perhaps increasingly

compartmentalised academy, this inter-disciplinary mode of moral enquiry cannot but inspire bewilderment, even hostility. Third, the argument of *After Virtue* is sometimes brusque and even dismissive, for example in its handling of the notion of rights. Although Stephen Mulhall (Chapter 8) provides a brilliant defence of this strategy, once again it is not surprising that many analytic philosophers – who pride themselves on their painstaking meticulousness – have found this a good excuse not to engage with the text more deeply.

While these three explanations have a role to play, they do not take us very far. In order to understand *After Virtue*'s seminality-cum-marginality more fully, we need to employ two concepts central to the text itself. This time the relevant concepts are not 'practice' or 'institution', however, but 'tradition' and 'narrative'. *After Virtue* partakes, in short, of a tradition of moral enquiry that is largely alien to the Anglophone world. That tradition takes its bearings partly from the Greeks, but no less – indeed, perhaps more – from Judaeo-Christianity and Marxism. That this is MacIntyre's *Gedankenwelt* is apparent from his first book, namely *Marxism: An Interpretation* (1953), later revised and republished as *Marxism and Christianity* (1968). Twenty-eight years later, moreover, the traces of this intellectual tradition are still visible in *After Virtue*, which takes Leon Trotsky as seriously as Saint Benedict. This bipolar movement between Christian moral reflection and Marxist critique has characterised much moral philosophy on the European continent. In Germany, one could cite, for example, Ernst Bloch, in France, Pierre Manent, in Italy, Augusto del Noce, and in Poland, Ryszard Legutko. For even if an individual thinker does not combine these two generic interests – Sartre, for instance, was interested only in Marxism – continental moral philosophy has, in general, treated both the Christian tradition and Marxism with great seriousness. By contrast, besides MacIntyre and Charles Taylor – both of whom moved from the 'New Left' to embrace Catholic Christianity – the same cannot be said of its Anglophone counterpart. This points to a deeper, underlying explanation of *After Virtue*'s strange and unwarranted marginality within Anglophone moral philosophy.

If *After Virtue* (or at least much of it) inhabits the 'wrong' tradition, this itself stands in need of explanation, since MacIntyre is himself an Anglophone. At an individual level, it can be explained by MacIntyre's unorthodox life-narrative as a philosopher. Rather than 'Greats' or 'Moral Sciences', he read Classics at Queen Mary College, London, and subsequently studied sociology at Manchester. This freed him, arguably, from the narrow disciplinary constraints then prevalent at Oxford or Cambridge. (Charles Taylor escaped such constraints through

being educated in Québec, an intellectual milieu clearly open to French and other continental influences.) At a societal and cultural level, then, once MacIntyre had made his Christian and Marxist interests plain, his intellectual career could no longer fit within the narratological canons of Anglophone moral philosophy. He was bound to be cast as a philosophical maverick. For Anglophone philosophy as a whole was and is committed to a conception of itself as respecting 'Ni Marx, Ni Jésus' (Revel 1970) – neither Marx nor Jesus. Any work professing to take them seriously is, therefore, automatically at a disadvantage. And this is, I take it, exactly what *After Virtue* did: for having elaborated the Aristotelian origins of virtue theory, it then embeds such theory within the wider concept of a 'practice' (cf. Marxian 'praxis'), only to argue that Christian (and specifically Thomistic) virtue theory is in significant ways an improvement on its Greek predecessors. None of this suited a disciplinary narrative whose guardrails were firmly liberal and non-(even anti-)theistic.

After Virtue's conceptual scheme of practice, institution, tradition and narrative can thus throw light on its own character and reception. Although intellectually ground-breaking and a towering achievement in its own right, it was always going to struggle to enter the Anglophone philosophical mainstream, given the latter's entrenched liberalism and hence allergic response to both Marxism and religious tradition. Of course, much Anglophone commentary has dwelt on *After Virtue*'s supposed 'nostalgia' for the Greek *polis*, and hence its straightforward inapplicability to modern ethics or politics. But I have suggested that the real source of intellectual antipathy lay and lies elsewhere. If so, what are the prospects for *After Virtue* in the twenty-first century? To draw on a concept at the heart of MacIntyre's authorship, that of the 'common good', I suggest it will continue to contribute immensely to the intellectual common good. Its notion of 'goods internal to a practice', and the risks posed to such goods by institutions' focused on external goods, is alone sufficient to ensure its lasting significance. When it comes, however, to the hospitality of academic practitioners and institutions to *After Virtue* and its moral concerns, I think far more circumspection is in order. David Rondel (Chapter 4) may be right that these concerns will become only more pertinent and pressing in the years to come – but whether they are *recognised* as such is another matter. If anything, *After Virtue*'s own hospitality to both Marxist and Judaeo-Christian ideas and arguments will be taken as marks against it – and the story of this remarkable text will continue to be told mainly from the margins.

Let me now outline what lies ahead (i.e. the four parts of this volume and their constituent chapters). Part I tackles the relation between

After Virtue and ethical theory. In Chapter 1, Tom Angier treats the relation between *After Virtue* and virtue ethics, arguing that the former should not be understood as supportive of, let alone a blueprint for, the latter. In fact, *After Virtue* subordinates the virtues to other notions, most saliently practices, traditions, narratives and the social goods that inform these. By contrast, virtue ethics hypostatises the virtues and tries to do 'everything with one thing' (viz. virtue). In order to show the misguidedness of this approach, Angier takes four different 'targets' for the virtue ethical agent – virtue itself, happiness, 'natural' ends and utility or duty – and argues that none of these, taken either singly or jointly, constitutes a genuinely virtuous end. In this way, virtue ethics is self-defeating. Indeed, if an ethic of virtue is to be sustained, it must adopt, explore and develop *After Virtue*'s structuring idea that the virtues are constitutively ordered to a panoply of social goods – goods that lie beyond the virtues themselves.

In Chapter 2, Jennifer Herdt focuses on the relation between virtue and happiness. *After Virtue*'s key foil here is the classical utilitarian conception of happiness, which reduces it to pleasure. This 'naturalistic teleology' belies the complex nature of happiness and thereby fails to supply a decision-procedure for action. Aristotelian *eudaimonia* fares better but is still found wanting, since it rests on a 'metaphysical biology' that MacIntyre (famously brusquely) rejects as no longer tenable. It reflects, moreover, a parochial conception of flourishing that is at home only in the Greek *polis*. MacIntyre proposes, by contrast, a revised eudaimonism that rests on a 'social teleology': viz. humans as essentially cultural and historical animals, who find their good only in and through particular social practices. While this may suggest a collapse into relativism, MacIntyre avoids this by casting social particularity not as a goal but as a necessary matrix within which to discover the universal good. Herdt ends on a more critical note, arguing that *After Virtue* never clarifies whether the eudaimonism it advocates is, as she puts it, 'welfare-prior' or 'goodness-prior'.

In Chapter 3, Kelvin Knight begins by noting *After Virtue*'s ambivalent relation to Nietzsche. On the one hand, Nietzsche pinpoints the failure of the 'Enlightenment project' to justify morality using either de-teleologised desire or de-teleologised reason. On the other hand, Nietzsche's own solution – that of the 'sovereign' individual who 'creates' his own values – falls into the very liberal individualism he seeks to reject. After erudite commentary on Weber and Marx, Knight then interrogates how far Nietzsche's own failure can, according to MacIntyre, be remedied by a return to Aristotle. Echoing Herdt, Knight highlights MacIntyre's rejection of Aristotle's aristocratic prejudices and 'metaphysical biology'.

In place of these, MacIntyre elaborates the notion of goods internal to practices, practices that are sustained, in turn, by institutions. This 'sociological Aristotelianism' enables *After Virtue* to stand against both Nietzschean individualism and Weberian managerialism. Knight further articulates MacIntyre's 'historical sociology of the virtues' through the notion of 'tradition', and he ends by exploring the relation between ethics and politics in both *After Virtue* and MacIntyre's later works.

Knight's *entrée* into the political forms a nice prelude to Part II, which covers *After Virtue* and political theory. In Chapter 4, David Rondel explores *After Virtue*'s critique of liberalism. According to Rondel, MacIntyre criticises 'liberal individualism' for reducing the self to a radical chooser of values, while prescinding from any historical context in which such choice can be rationalised. This liberal conception of the self is commensurate with a 'neutral' conception of politics, with the State reduced to a facilitator of individual preferences, on the basis of purported managerial 'expertise' and its manifold procedures. In this way, the State comes increasingly to resemble a market. While we can discern some coherent and even valuable content to State neutrality, Rondel concludes that *After Virtue*'s critique of liberal individualism, though rhetorically powerful, needs to be more carefully calibrated. In particular, MacIntyre oscillates between liberalism as political theory and liberalism as social or cultural practice. With more precision, however, *After Virtue*'s critique will, Rondel judges, become increasingly pertinent as the twenty-first century unfolds.

In Chapter 5, Nathan Pinkoski places *After Virtue* in the context of the rise of 'postliberalism'. According to Pinkoski, MacIntyre locates the origins of liberalism not in the Enlightenment, but in late mediaeval voluntarism – thereby saddling liberal thought with an unworkable ideal of autonomous choice. Echoing Rondel, Pinkoski then unpacks the 'managerial State' as a political form reflective of this ideal. Since the latter is ultimately unworkable, however, the State cannot but become manipulative, presenting as 'just' what are merely powerful interests and dominant preferences. This pessimistic view of the modern State nevertheless does not spell a return to a baldly 'conservative', let alone 'communitarian' vision. Instead, true to his Marxist inheritance, MacIntyre thinks *any* modern, large-scale political order incapable of upholding the common good. And this stands in tension with the postliberal – yet far more State- and even State-Church-friendly – projects of Milbank, Pabst and Vermeule. Pinkoski ends on a rather disillusioned note: along with MacIntyre, he holds that liberal orders are likely to persist not because they can be justified philosophically, but merely because they have become institutionally entrenched.

In Chapter 6, David McPherson takes up the theme of conservatism. Defining the latter as a 'life-orientation', he parses it along several dimensions. Conservatives are given to recognising human limits, particularly our epistemic and character limits. These suggest the wisdom of an anti-utopian politics, which embraces a 'prudent traditionalism' and constraints on capitalist economy, along with a suspicion of reductive moral theories. Particularly distasteful here is any utilitarian ethic, which treats all goods as commensurable and hence fungible, thereby riding roughshod over the conservative disposition to preserve things that are loved (not only people, but also places). This 'existential stance' guards against alienation and respects the human desire to be 'at home' in the world. McPherson then argues that *After Virtue* reflects these conservative traits in its advocacy of the virtues, which are embedded in practices, and thence also in traditions. Granted, MacIntyre criticises both Burkean and Thatcherite 'conservatism', but this is because he caricatures the former and the latter is merely a variation on liberal individualism. All in all, he is a brand of conservative – except, McPherson notes in closing, in his un-conservative repudiation of the present age. Here *After Virtue* remains Marxist-utopian and serves only to foster alienation.

In Chapter 7, Jason Blakely takes utopia up as a theme in its own right, rescuing *After Virtue*, as he sees it, from both right- ('reactionary') and left- (Marxist) utopianism. On a reactionary reading, MacIntyre sees liberalism as devolving into emotivism and its vices. But this ignores 'virtue liberalism': certain liberal polities' capacity to accommodate practices that foster virtue (as noted by de Tocqueville). Despite this possibility, right-utopians like Rod Dreher continue to advocate a retreat to virtuous enclaves, something inconsistent with MacIntyre's insistence on 'systematic debate' between rival traditions. For left-utopians, MacIntyre's hostility to the liberal market-State licenses the top-down imposition of socialistic equality. But this ignores MacIntyre's strictures on fantasies of social change in the absence of genuine human agency, viz. agency embedded in traditions. In contrast to both these interpretative dead ends, Blakely proposes *After Virtue* as a 'real utopia' (i.e. as advocating the bottom-up practice of the virtues in the context of local communities). This solidaristic vision avoids the Scylla of Dreher-like isolationism, yet also the Charybdis of neo-Marxist statism. It is the harbinger, indeed, Blakely claims, of a 'revived ethical socialism'.

Part III is on *After Virtue* and narrative. Stephen Mulhall (Chapter 8) begins with *After Virtue*'s opening portrayal of 'epistemic crisis', one in which we are unable to engage in scientific enquiry because we have been deprived of those historical narratives in light of which such enquiry is possible. Something similar applies, MacIntyre suggests, to the state of

moral enquiry. And if so, this explains (in part) MacIntyre's willingness to dismiss large swathes of moral discourse, such as 'rights talk': such talk has been disembedded, he implies, from its proper narrative context and hence has become incoherent. In similar vein, MacIntyre turns Nietzsche's etymological enquiry against Nietzsche himself, showing how a *true* 'genealogy' of moral concepts discloses very un-Nietzschean conclusions. More widely, *After Virtue*'s turn to sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, etc., can be seen as affording more 'holistic registers' of narratological resource than those available within Anglo-analytic philosophy. Mulhall ends by highlighting *After Virtue*'s manifold uses of art, literary fiction and (most notably) social 'characters' in constructing its own, unprecedentedly 'non-compartmentalised' approach to moral enquiry.

In Chapter 9, Micah Lott starts by outlining Aristotle's conception of the human *telos* as a life well lived. Such a life must prioritise certain goods over others and arrange them into a coherent whole: in other words, a good life constitutes a unity. MacIntyre builds on this idea with his notion of life as a narrative, which needs to display its own unity. Without such unity, he argues, our lives lack intelligibility and our actions become unaccountable. So far, so good: life *qua* narrative points to the need for 'practical integration' among our ends. But can narrative as such supply those ends with substance or content? Not clearly so, Lott argues. Life narrated as a unified 'quest' is empty apart from a specification of its substantive objects. Equally, a unified narrative can recount a life that is itself disunified or fragmented. There seems, in point of fact, no way to infer from narrative unity *per se* to genuine goods, any more than we need tread a path from moral evils to narrative disunity. Lott rounds off his critique by exploring the several life-stories narrated in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (2016). Here too, he maintains, narrative yields less than it promises – it fails, not least, to provide any determinate conception of a 'perfect' or 'complete' life.

In Chapter 10, Christopher Lutz engages with Jason Blakely's interpretation of MacIntyre's authorship as moving from historicism (*After Virtue*) to a 'tradition-free, ahistorical' naturalism (*Dependent Rational Animals*). In order to do this, he offers a narrative of MacIntyre's intellectual development. Ranging from Marxism to post-Moorean normative theory, MacIntyre, Lutz contends, became critical of both: the former could not sustain just regimes in practice, while the latter had no convincing account of communist injustices. Such an account requires, at root, an understanding of humans as social agents directed to various proper ends, ends that constitute their happiness or fulfilment. And it is this social teleological account of morality that, in effect,

After Virtue embodies. Returning to Blakely, Lutz concludes that *After Virtue* is, despite Blakely's 'discontinuity narrative', perfectly continuous with *Dependent Rational Animals*' embrace of a 'naturalised teleology'. For the latter text simply expounds a naturalistic framework within which any social, traditioned moral enquiry must take place and whose constraints it must respect. Blakely's narrative of MacIntyre's intellectual development is thus ill-founded and should be rejected.

Part IV rounds the volume off by investigating *After Virtue*'s impact beyond philosophy. Charles Pinches (Chapter 11) casts MacIntyre's book as akin to Jewish prophecy. It opens with a 'disquieting', not to say apocalyptic 'suggestion', and it ends with a call for a 'another … St. Benedict'. These are startling notes to strike, comprehensible only against a religious background. A difficulty with this interpretation is that MacIntyre strongly distinguishes between philosophy and theology, and he has explicitly disavowed being a theologian himself. *After Virtue* makes moves, nonetheless, that point towards theology. Crucially, its focus on narrative makes room for the idea that we are embedded in stories that we ourselves do not author. And this indicates the further idea that we have ends that are largely (or most deeply) not up to us to determine. Indeed, a specification of such ends is, in many ways, the task of those 'living traditions' we cannot but inhabit. Pinches concludes by sounding a note of caution about those who, like Rod Dreher, build on *After Virtue*'s prophetic voice to advocate a withdrawal from current liberal political orders. This 'strategy' goes against genuine prophecy, which engages its environment and inspires hope.

In Chapter 12, Mark Retter gives unprecedented attention to *After Virtue*'s relation to legal theory. According to Retter, MacIntyre's concepts of 'practice', 'institution' and 'tradition' all find illuminating application to such theory. Because 'practices' have internal goods, they can supply legal practice with good reasons, reasons that are lacking on Herbert Hart's narrow 'rule of recognition' view. The internal goods at stake form part, moreover, of the political common good, and thus cannot be disjoined from the cooperative virtues. What obscures the usefulness of MacIntyre's conceptual scheme for legal theory is basically threefold. First, MacIntyre over-emphasises the need for joint deliberation about the common good, which leads him to treat large-scale political and legal governance with an exaggerated scepticism-cum-pessimism. (It would have been more fruitful to emphasise the need for subsidiarity in the State.) Second, MacIntyre erects too strong a contrast between rule-following and the virtues. And third, he demonstrates a hostility to lawyers as 'the clergy of liberalism'. But *contra* MacIntyre, the ills plaguing liberal governance are always accompanied by an

'admixture' of virtuous practice, and there is room within generically liberal polities for deliberative (not least legal) challenge to and debate about liberal norms.

In Chapter 13, Paul Blackledge turns his eye to *After Virtue* and business ethics. This conjunction seems untoward in light of MacIntyre's highly critical remarks about this burgeoning sub-discipline. Blackledge argues, however, that MacIntyre's work supplies a key critique of the alienating and exploitative essence of capitalist enterprise. Salient here is the generic 'character' of the manager, which is amoral and wedded to the manipulation of others, employees and customers alike. He or she professes an 'expertise' and unique form of effectiveness, but both are ideological fictions or mystifications. While business ethicists like Geoff Moore present business organisations as varied, and many of them as (at least potentially) virtuous, they ignore the deep structural barriers to *actual* virtuous business practice. Maybe the deepest barrier, Blackledge contends, is capitalism's commitment to the expansion of surplus value, which has inextricably alienating effects on the workforce. This essentially Marxist critique, which comes to fruition in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, is blunted, admittedly, by *After Virtue*'s Weberian treatment of management in abstraction from its capitalist form. Blackledge concludes, nevertheless, that MacIntyre's more purely Marxist insights into managerialism help overcome this Weberian deviation.

Part I

After Virtue and Ethical Theory