

# Jonathan Lear

THE TASKS OF PHILOSOPHY: SELECTED ESSAYS, VOL. 1

by Alasdair MacIntyre.

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ETHICS AND POLITICS: SELECTED ESSAYS, VOL. 2

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IF THERE IS A SINGLE theme running through these collected essays it is the importance of our commitment to truth. Not just to the truth about ourselves and our relations with others, or to the truth about the world: our commitment must be to the *concept* of truth as central to human well being. This, of course, runs counter to one of the philosophical clichés of our time: that there is no such thing as objective truth, that truth is a superstition that we no longer need and would be better off without. Alasdair MacIntyre's original volume of collected essays, published thirty-five years ago, had the title, *Against the Self-images of the Age*. The idea that we can live without truth is the current self-image that he has set himself against.

MacIntyre's writings about truth, relativism and the purpose of moral philosophy have been required reading for decades, not only among philosophers but throughout the humanities and social sciences. His style is at once pugnacious yet sympathetic to those with whom he disagrees; indeed, it

is this combination that lends his criticisms such bite. He gives the impression of someone who is willing to say what he believes without the slightest concern for how unfashionable his views might be, or how bloody-minded he might appear. He writes with verve about life's most important issues; and there is a curmudgeonly openness about his philosophical explorations that is attractive and admirable.

Ironically, the feature that truth's critics find objectionable is the one that MacIntyre values: transcendence. In claiming to hold the truth, he thinks, one is claiming that one's assertions can be vindicated by more than parochial standards of rational justification. We are not only acknowledging that our best beliefs might be false, nor even that our best concepts and theories might fail us as the terms in which we should see the world, but even that our best understanding of what rational justification consists in might be inadequate to the tasks we face. Thus, for MacIntyre, the claim to truth, far from being an arrogant claim to

be piercing the veil of what we could possibly know, is a humble admission that our best efforts to understand may well fail to grasp how the world is. Claiming truth is the way we take on the risk of radical human fallibility.

A central task of philosophy, for MacIntyre, is to grasp this vulnerability and make it explicit. It is not that we can somehow stand outside our intellectual or moral tradition and evaluate it from a neutral standpoint, but that every vibrant tradition has within it tensions and conflicts, and these can be probed with shrewd use of the philosophical and moral imagination. The best minds, precisely by their commitment to truth, will be open to challenges coming from rival traditions. One of the rivalries that most concerns him is that which has opened up in modernity between secular and religious cultures. 'Dialogue returns us to our condition as reflective questioning and self-questioning animals, rather than as those helplessly in the grip of their own particular beliefs. Philosophical dialogue is a remedy for that loss of questioning and self-questioning which characterises so much of belief in secularised societies, whether it is the unreflective and complacent belief of those who are tacitly and complacently dismissive of religious belief or the unreflective and complacent loud-mouthed belief of fundamentalists of every faith.'

MacIntyre is a practising Catholic, and his faith has shaped the direction of his philosophy. But he takes himself to be addressing a wide audience. What is striking about his mode of discourse – at least to this non-

Catholic, indeed, non-Christian reader – is that while he does not confine himself to addressing only Catholics, neither does he put forward arguments that he expects everyone to accept:

It is not always possible to find . . . 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 recognise, 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.

I mention MacIntyre's Catholicism because it plays an important role in his self-understanding. And while I do think there are serious problems with his position – which I shall come to – I don't think they flow from his religious commitment.

In giving his own interpretation of John Paul II's encyclical 'Faith and reason', MacIntyre says, 'It is characteristic of human beings that, whatever our culture, we desire to know and to understand, that we cannot but set ourselves the achievement of truth as a goal. And among the truths to which we aspire, truth about the human good is of particular importance. We move towards that truth by asking what, if anything, the meaning of our lives is, what place suffer-

ing has in our lives, and whether or not death is the terminus of those lives.' Thus for MacIntyre all of us have philosophical aspirations – and the task of the philosopher is to take these shared aspirations and draw them out. Philosophy, properly understood, is a continuation of ordinary life. In this task he believes that contemporary philosophy fails miserably. Philosophy has become so specialised that it has become irrelevant to society at large, a marginalisation due not solely to professionalising tendencies within the discipline, but also to broader tendencies in contemporary society, the most important of which MacIntyre calls 'compartmentalisation'. With the destruction in modernity of a shared sense of the human good, philosophy could survive as an academic discipline only by becoming ever more technical. And then, over in another compartment, there is the unedifying figure of the 'applied ethicist', who is paid to construct some rationale for the latest cost-cutting strategy in the health-care system.

For MacIntyre, modernity ushered in a set of ethical and political problems that we have not yet figured out how to deal with. Politically, he has been a lifelong opponent of liberal capitalism. His central complaint against it focuses on injustice: 'What is necessarily absent in [capitalist] markets is any justice of desert. Concepts of a just wage and a just price necessarily have no application within these markets.' As a young man he tried to marry Christianity and Marxism, an impossible task given their wildly different anthropologies. From a Christian point of view, the Marxist conception of human

nature must look wishfully optimistic, as though all that was really wrong with us was something external, the organisation of society. MacIntyre now regards his effort as a failure, but he still thinks of Marxism as a 'Christian heresy', and still sees both as centrally concerned with correcting social injustice. The modern secular world, as well as much of contemporary Christianity has, he thinks, complacently ignored searing injustices. Moreover, modern liberalism misleads itself about the possibilities of honestly facing such issues. It is not just that the media are controlled by entrenched elites, there is no space within the sphere of modern liberal discourse for the type of debate that is needed. 'Moral argument within liberalism cannot . . . begin from some conception of a genuinely common good that is more or other than the sum of preferences of individuals.' But it is precisely the idea that the good life can be understood in terms of the satisfaction of preferences that MacIntyre holds in contempt. 'Unsurprisingly, *pleonexia*, the desire to have more and more becomes treated as a central virtue.'

In a similar vein, he suggests that an ethical life has become more or less impossible. MacIntyre is a proponent of what is now called virtue ethics: the attempt to ground ethical life in the development of excellences of human character: the so-called virtues. But, taking himself to be following Aristotle, he thinks that it is only within a particular kind of social order that adequate ethical concepts can be embedded: one in which there are fixed and determinate ends to human life; and it is this very idea that modernity has rendered problem-

atic. Thus we are left in a condition of fragmentation and confusion. ‘The fact is that the role and function of the moral and political philosopher, as they emerge in Aristotle’s thought, are such that there seems perhaps to be no place for a genuinely Aristotelian moral and political philosopher in the contemporary conventional academic landscape or indeed the contemporary cultural landscape. And this may seem to confer a paradoxical character on my own enterprise.’

In the face of these challenges, MacIntyre proposes a kind of hunkering down. ‘In this situation what is most urgently needed is a politics of self-defence for all those local societies that aspire to achieve some relatively self-sufficient and independent form of participatory practice-based community and that therefore need to protect themselves from the corrosive effects of capitalism and the depredations of state power.’

However much one may applaud MacIntyre’s concern with injustice, and agree that there are conditions of contemporary life that facilitate indifference to it, it is hard not to conclude that his critique has here taken a serious wrong turn. For starters, he assumes too much as already settled about what the Aristotelian tradition consists in. To take one example: ‘For Aristotle the moral and political philosopher is to function *within the polis*, contributing to the common good of the polis by articulating for the citizens of the polis the ends that they must achieve, if they are to flourish, so that they may understand better what those ends are and how, as rational animals, to di-

rect themselves towards their achievement.’ (my emphasis) This statement looks innocuous as it stands, but it covers over an important ambiguity. It is certainly true that Aristotle formulated his ethical and political philosophy within the context of polis life; it is also true that his conception of the virtuous person placed him inside the polis, contributing to it and flourishing within it. But it is an unjustified stretch to claim that an Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics makes no sense outside some close surrogate of polis life. MacIntyre claims that genuine political life requires shared agreement not only about goods, but also about standards of rational deliberation. If there is to be such agreement, this must, he argues, occur in small communities, where people can be held directly accountable for their beliefs and acts. The structures of modernity, however, are incompatible with all of these requirements. This leads him to a premature pessimism about the possibility of virtue ethics in the modern world, as well as to an unjustified nostalgia for by-passed political structures such as the ancient polis and the medieval commune.

I hope I don’t appear to be a simple-minded apologist for globalisation, when I say that small communities which share a sense of the common good are also often repositories for unexamined prejudice, scapegoating, bullying and resentment. If one is to take virtue ethics seriously, one must attend to the realities of human character-formation. And if one looks to the social and political contexts in which character is formed, it is difficult not to notice that local communities which share a common

sense of the good life, regularly purchase that solidarity by also having an excluded, and reviled other. Whatever problems modernity may pose, one of its virtues is that it has regularly disrupted local structures of prejudice. And this raises a serious challenge to MacIntyre's approach: what is it about a local community's shared sense of the good that makes it good? As we've seen, he points to certain formal features – such as the possibility of direct participation or willingness to engage in debate with rival traditions – but he basically leaves this question unaddressed.

The main point I want to emphasise is that an Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics does not lead in only one direction when it comes to the social and political structures in which a good life must be located. MacIntyre rightly stresses the importance of imagination in ethical life. We need, he thinks, to be able to imagine standpoints other than our own, but we need to take this point further than he does. We need to think through alternative forms of Aristotelianism, ones that are at least potentially more compatible with the social structures of contemporary life. In this regard, I am sorry MacIntyre does not discuss the fascinating work in virtue ethics being done by Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, Michael Thompson and Candace Vogler. As at least an opening move, they have turned away from the contribution a particular culture or political organisation may make to a person's character – his so-called 'second nature'. Instead, they are concentrating on 'first nature': what is it about a human being just insofar as he or

she is human that makes him or her excellent? And, in particular, do any ethical consequences flow from answering this question? The question then is whether we can see an ethical virtue like justice as an excellence of human nature as such, rather than as grounded in the values of any particular culture or any particular historical epoch. (See Michael Thompson, 'What is it to wrong someone?: A puzzle about justice' at [www.pitt.edu/ffimthomps/raz.pdf](http://www.pitt.edu/ffimthomps/raz.pdf).) The problems with this approach are enormous, but so are its possibilities. And it would seem to hold out the prospect of opening up a variety of political and social structures in which a virtue ethics could be embedded. If Aristotelian ethics is to remain a live tradition, one should be able to locate it in political structures radically different from anything Aristotle himself experienced or imagined.

MacIntyre starts to move in this direction himself when, in an essay called 'Social structures and their threat to moral agency', he begins to investigate 'a core notion of the virtues as qualities of human beings as such'. He says that there are two virtues that are sine qua non for all others: integrity and constancy, both of which set limits on one's adaptability to changing social circumstances. Integrity involves holding onto one's core sense of self; constancy requires steadfastness in the pursuit of one's conception of the good life. But rather than think of these as two additional, if important, virtues, it seems to me preferable to conceive of them as two constitutive moments of virtue as such. We have no idea what it would be to think of excellence of

character – whatever the particular excellence – without thinking of it as manifesting integrity and constancy. On this interpretation, MacIntyre would in fact be investigating the structure of virtue itself – independent of any particular social or political formation, or, indeed, any particular choice of virtues.

So where does this leave me? Reading through 22 essays that span thirty years, I am impressed with the integrity and constancy of MacIntyre's philosophical reflection. 'Being a great philosopher,' he says, 'is not at all the same as leading an exemplary philosophical life, but perhaps the point of doing philosophy is to enable people to lead, so far as it is within their powers, philosophical lives.' MacIntyre has a conception of the good life for human beings and he is spending his life explicating it, defending it and encouraging others to take it seriously. I am delighted by the brilliance of his thought, I admire the seriousness of his purpose, I share his enthusiasm for a broadly Aristotelian approach to ethics, but I am unpersuaded by the conclusions he holds most dear.