

Introduction to Alasdair MacIntyre and the Ethics and Politics of Practice

Christopher Lutz

When people speak about Alasdair MacIntyre, they generally begin by talking about *After Virtue*, a book he first published in 1981 that has been spurring debates in contemporary ethics, politics, management, social theory, the philosophy of the social sciences, and the history of philosophy for more than a quarter century now. Speakers begin by talking about *After Virtue* because, too often, that is the only text by Alasdair MacIntyre that they have ever read. Unfortunately, this is as reasonable as it is lamentable, for the justifications for having read only *After Virtue* follow the divisions of the contemporary academy. *After Virtue* is an important book that draws from, and contributes to, many different academic specializations, thus it has commanded a reading from many people that his other works have not. *After Virtue* also stands at a turning point in MacIntyre's career; it is his last fully secular book, and introduces his movement toward traditional Christian thought, thus, for some, it marks the end of his works worth reading, while for others it marks the beginning. So a word of introduction is warranted here, not only for students who have never read Alasdair MacIntyre at all, but also for Christian readers unfamiliar with MacIntyre's early work, secular readers who have not taken up his later work, and specialists who have never had an opportunity to consider the larger picture of MacIntyre's philosophy.

Introduction to MacIntyre

Alasdair MacIntyre was born in Great Britain in 1929 and grew up mainly in London. Both of his parents were medical doctors.¹ He attended Queen Mary College of the University of London from 1945 to 1949, graduating with “an honours BA in Classics.” MacIntyre went on to graduate school at the University of Manchester where he earned his MA in philosophy in 1951.² It was not yet customary for British humanities professors to earn PhDs, so this was MacIntyre’s terminal degree.

From the very beginning of his career, Alasdair MacIntyre has been interested in ethics and politics as an interconnected whole. Where some scholars would present ethics as a study of personal obligations and politics as a study of forms of government, MacIntyre has always seen ethics as a study of the requirements of human relationships and politics as a study of the structures that support or hinder those relationships. We find this in his MA thesis, practically reproduced in paraphrase in Thomas D’Andrea’s, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, we also find it in MacIntyre’s first published book, *Marxism: An Interpretation*,³ and in many of his essays from the 1950s and 1960s, including “What Morality is Not,”⁴ “Hume on ‘Is’ and ‘Ought,’”⁵ “Freedom and Revolution,”⁶ and “Breaking the Chains of Reason.”⁷

One of the major influences on MacIntyre’s early work on ethics and politics was Marxism, which MacIntyre viewed as an indispensable foundation for any truly democratic society, and since we are more accustomed today to think of Marxism as the

¹ D’Andrea, xvi.

² D’Andrea, xvii. The years are drawn indirectly from information about MacIntyre’s age and the number of years spent teaching at Manchester.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism: An Interpretation*

⁴ ASIA

⁵ ASIA

⁶ MEM

⁷ MEM

antithesis of democracy, it is worth taking a moment to consider why MacIntyre would have viewed Marxism in this way.

Marxism arose in response to the industrial revolution, the period when communities united around centuries old craft traditions were made to compete against machines operated by relatively unskilled workers that could produce high quality goods with a speed and consistency that had never been known before. Wherever these competitions took place, the craft communities were overcome by the efficiency of the factories. This meant that independent craft workers, who had owned their own tools and participated freely in the lives of their communities were forced to become employees in the mills, using tools that belonged to someone else, accepting a wage based not on the value of the goods they produced but on the market for the work they was willing to do. Labor itself had become a commodity. The transformation from skilled crafts to industrial production meant two things: First, no craft worker could ever afford the tools required to operate a factory; the means of production belonged instead to the capitalists who owned the factory. Second, since the machinery could be operated by relatively unskilled workers, the workers became increasingly dependent upon the factory, since their employment robbed them of the time to develop any other marketable talent, even as industrialization dried up the markets for any goods they might produce on their own.⁸

Karl Marx viewed the industrial revolution in two ways: as a crisis and as an opportunity. On one hand, maltreatment of industrial workers and the breakdown of traditional communities constituted a crisis of human relationships. On the other hand, the remarkable productivity of modern industry provided an opportunity for revolutionary

⁸ See Karl Marx, "Machinery and Modern Industry," in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 405-556.

change. For Marx believed that if the people were to unite and take ownership of the means of production, they could establish a utopian democratic world, in which everyone contributed to their communities according to their abilities and received according to their needs. Summarizing the goals of the revolution in the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels concluded:

In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.⁹

This was the vision of the future that animated Lenin and Trotsky in Russia's October Revolution of 1917, and it was the same vision that animated MacIntyre's early Marxist work. In 1960, MacIntyre rejected the notion "that socialism and democracy can be separated,"¹⁰ and argued that "the achievement of freedom and the achievement of the classless society are inseparably united."¹¹

To say that Karl Marx viewed the industrial revolution as a crisis and as an opportunity is to say that Marxism has two distinct parts: first, it offers a critique of capitalist economic and political practices; second, it proposes a revolutionary alternative to capitalism. MacIntyre left the Marxist movement behind after he lost faith in its revolutionary solution, but the Marxist critique of capitalism remains a key resource for MacIntyre and an important theme in his mature work.¹²

⁹ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, part II, "Proletarians and Communists.

¹⁰ "Revolution and Freedom," in MEM, 123.

¹¹ "Revolution and Freedom," in MEM, 125.

¹² See "Three Perspectives on Marxism" in *Ethics and Politics*, pp. 145-158.

MacIntyre's career has been marked by two seemingly contrary traits: constancy and change; we will consider his changes first.

As a young academic, MacIntyre was both a Marxist and a member of the Church of England, his first book tried to show that Marxism and Christianity were not so opposed as they were generally taken to be, and that Marxists and Christians could learn from one another. By the early 1960s, he had lost his Christian faith, and had become a committed atheist; while he studied and published on Hume. MacIntyre's achievements in the 1960s included a pair of lectures delivered at Columbia University in New York City on "the Religious Significance of Atheism," and a new book, *A Short History of Ethics*. In the early 1970s MacIntyre finally broke off his affiliations with Marxist organizations and turned his attention to Aristotle. In 1977, MacIntyre published the essay "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," which marked a turning point in his work, which led to the publication of his landmark work, *After Virtue* in 1981. Around this time he also returned to Christianity, first to the Anglican church, and then to the Roman Catholic Church. In 1988, MacIntyre published *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, which took up some questions about the nature of rationality raised by *After Virtue*, and defended, for the first time, the thought of Thomas Aquinas and the adherents of the Thomistic tradition. Since then, MacIntyre has published three more new books, along with two volumes of essays selected from the hundreds of articles and reviews MacIntyre has published. So it is with good reason that commentators often remark that MacIntyre's career has been marked by change.

It is also true that MacIntyre's career has been marked by a virtue he calls constancy. Those who have read MacIntyre's work from all parts of his career know

very well that the main themes and concerns of his ethical and political work have remained the same for more than fifty years. Through his entire career, MacIntyre has written about the role of communities in establishing the goods pursued by their members, and the ethics of participating in the community's pursuit of the good, which includes an account of the discipline required to support the members' free participation in that work. This is MacIntyre's ethics and politics of practice.

Alasdair MacIntyre's Ethics and Politics of Practice

The most important text for understanding MacIntyre's ethics and politics of practice is *After Virtue*, but two other short works help to clarify MacIntyre's project. The first is "Notes from the Moral Wilderness," a pair of essays published in 1958 and 1959. The second is "The *Theses on Feuerbach*: A Road Not Taken," published in 1994. MacIntyre's account of practice is important because it provides a foundation for ethics and politics that appeals to human desire and human reason, and at the same time confirms the best critiques of alternative approaches.

There are generally two conventional theories of ethics in contemporary moral philosophy. The first is an ethics of duty, the second it an ethics of utility. According to the ethics of duty, normal adults are able to recognize that they have certain duties, and morality is about upholding these duties. These duties are unrelated to anything that the agent wants or needs, in fact, these duties are often contrary to human desire. This is the position of Immanuel Kant, who taught that our actions have true moral worth only when we do them out of respect for duty alone. How then am I to know my duties?

A fair assessment of Kant's position seems to entail that one knows one's duties through one's culture, but Kant does not teach that duties come from culture, rather he

teaches that they come from our own rational assessments, and that we give ourselves universal laws. But if it turns out—as it does—that respectable, intelligent, disciplined people from different cultures sometimes differ in their moral judgments in ways that reveal cultural differences, then it follows that Kant is wrong about the origins of duty.

Another approach to the ethics of duty asserts that everyone has a duty to respect the universal natural rights of individuals. The rights in question here are not the constitutional and civil rights that arise from positive law. They are not the traditional rights established by common law and community practice. They are not even the natural rights that John Locke and the Declaration of Independence claim to be granted by God. These are the kinds of natural rights asserted in the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789, which depend on nature alone, and not on any decree of God or any agreement among human beings.

This approach is also problematic for several reasons. First, it imagines the human person in a peculiarly modern, western, liberal, individualist way. Second, it asserts peculiarly modern, western, liberal, individualist judgments about human conduct and human relationships as a norm for all cultures. Third, pretends, as the Kantian individual pretends, to draw these judgments from the pure exercise of reason, rather than from the peculiar community in which they were first framed. Consequently, like Kant's duties formed according to the categorical imperative, natural rights—these peculiar natural rights of modern liberal individualism—must be recognized for what they are: the assertions of their authors.

The second conventional theory of ethics is an ethics of utility. John Stuart Mill, in his book *Utilitarianism*, agreed with Kant that morality could not be about the pursuit

of personal goals and the fulfillment of personal desires. He also agreed that moral philosophy should enable an individual to determine what was right according to a rational assessment.

We are not so apt these days to think of Marxism with the same kind of idealism that colored MacIntyre's work fifty years ago and there are two reasons for this. The first has to do with the historical failure of Lenin and Trotsky's Marxist revolution. The second is rooted in a theoretical critique of Marxism itself.

Historically, by Trotsky's account in his book, *Revolution Betrayed*, the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union was still in its infancy when Lenin died in 1924. Lenin's successor, Joseph Stalin moved to consolidate power around a centralized bureaucratic apparatus supported by a violent and oppressive police state. This Stalinist form of government, which Trotsky called "a deformed workers' state" and "state capitalism," became identified with communism in the Soviet Union. And it was this form of communism that the Soviet Union imposed its satellite states in Eastern Europe when in the wake of World War II. Historically, professedly Marxist governments did much to ruin the reputation of Marxism.

Theoretically, Marxism failed to live up to its pretension that it had a scientific character because its predictions rarely came true. It failed to predict the behavior of people. It failed to predict the actual history of the revolution. It failed to do these things because Marxism is a determinist theory; that is, it presupposes that people are not free when they make rational choices. It also failed because it did not adequately address the mystery of human selfishness; for the classless society may look interesting on paper, but anyone who seriously attempts to establish it is only volunteering to be overpowered by

those who see their effort as an opportunity to establish themselves as the new ruling class.

By Trotsky's account, the Soviet revolution had been betrayed by Stalin, and by Stalinism. It had been betrayed by the formation of a permanent bureaucracy and a permanent police force. It had been betrayed by Stalin's abandonment of efforts to spread the revolution internationally. It had been betrayed by the establishment of party bureaucrats as a new ruling class in the Soviet Union. It had been betrayed by its abandonment of the democratic goals of the revolution, and by Stalin's purges, which had killed nearly all of the leaders of the October Revolution, drove Trotsky into exile and imprisoned or exterminated most of Trotsky's Soviet followers. A Stalinist agent finally murdered Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940.

The criminality of the Stalinist regime began to come to light in the West after Stalin died in 1953. Three years later, Nikita Khrushchev catalogued and condemned Stalin's offenses against "the Leninist principles of Soviet Socialist democracy" in the "secret speech" of February 1956, but when Khrushchev directed the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in October of that year, the result was widespread disillusionment with Marxism and Stalinism across the world.

By the time MacIntyre rose to prominence in Great Britain in the 1950s, British Marxists had split into three discernible camps: the British Labour Party, the Communist Party of Great Britain, and those aligned with neither group. It was from this third group that the New Left would arise, it included Trotskyist critics of Stalinism, and one of these Trotskyists was Alasdair MacIntyre.

For my own great-grandfather, a skilled carpenter who immigrated from Ireland in 1870 with a chest full of tradesman's tools, it meant taking a job at a steel mill. So for him, industrialization was absorbed into the experience of immigration. For communities in Europe, it meant moving from farms and shops to factory towns and becoming what Marx called the proletariat. America grew up with industrialization, and this makes the industrial revolution less visible in American history, but the same could not be said of Europe. MacIntyre explained what drew him to Marxism in an interview in the early 1990s:

Liberalism in the name of freedom imposes a certain kind of unacknowledged domination, and one which in the long run tends to dissolve traditional human ties and to impoverish social and cultural relationships. Liberalism, while imposing through state power regimes that declare everyone free to pursue whatever they take to be their own good, deprives most people of the possibility of understanding their lives as a quest for the discovery and achievement of the good, especially by the way in which it attempts to discredit those traditional forms of human community within which this project has to be embodied.¹³

MacIntyre was drawn to Marxist theory because of its concern with human progress and liberation.

Modern professors are often highly knowledgeable specialists in a single field and unfamiliar with the details of most others, but MacIntyre never saw this as a positive development; his work spans classical literature, modern thought, contemporary

¹³ Borradori interview, quoted in Lutz, TEAM, p. 14.

literature, and the social sciences, and *After Virtue* draws from, and contributes to, many different academic specializations. One consequence of this is that *After Virtue* has been read and reviewed by more people in more fields than most contemporary philosophy books, while many of those readers have been unable to appreciate points in the argument that lie outside of their own specializations.

A second consequence of academic specialization on the reading of *After Virtue* has to do with the book's place in MacIntyre's career. *After Virtue* is MacIntyre's last book of fully secular philosophy. His subsequent books would belong squarely to the literature of Christian, specifically Catholic thought. So MacIntyre's Christian readers have read *After Virtue* without the background of MacIntyre's earlier work, particularly his Marxist writings from the 1960s, while secular readers refuse to follow MacIntyre into what they take to be the occult realm of Catholic literature.

As a result of these two consequences of academic specialization, the early secondary literature on MacIntyre that developed in response to *After Virtue* suffered from a variety of errors. Liberal moral theorists read *After Virtue* to respond to MacIntyre's critique of modern liberal individualism. Bureaucratic Marxist social theorists read *After Virtue* to respond to MacIntyre's critique of what Trotsky had called "bureaucratism."¹⁴ Aristotelians and Thomists of various kinds, along with contemporary virtue ethicists, read *After Virtue* because of the encouragement it gives to the project of reestablishing an ethics of virtue, although they—including myself—find it necessary to respond to what they—indeed we—take to be the shortcomings of *After Virtue*'s account of virtue. Philosophers of the social sciences, philosophers of management, historians of

¹⁴ See Leon Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*.

philosophy, and many others, specializing in a wide variety of fields also read *After Virtue* to respond to MacIntyre's comments as they pertain to their various specializations.