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Alasdair MacIntyre: The Sociologist versus the Philosopher

I. In a New Dark Age?

When values conflict, what is to be done? According to Max Weber, 'the ultimately possible attitudes towards life are irreconcilable and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion'. Reason is helpless here. Compare the Sermon on the Mount with the ethic of manly conduct. Or take MacIntyre's examples of conflicting prevalent views about whether modern wars can be just, whether abortion should be permitted, whether justice requires more or less government regulation and redistribution, and whether it favours claims based on acquisition and entitlement or claims based on need. 'According to our ultimate standpoint', Weber wrote, 'the one is the devil and the other the God, and the individual has to decide which is God for him, and which is the devil. And so it goes throughout all the orders of life'.

This answer, and the whole world view from which it stems, is anathema to the author of this exhilarating and richly rewarding book.[1] In rejecting Weber, and behind him Nietzsche, he mounts a full-scale argument against a whole range of linked contemporary doctrines. In particular, he attacks emotivism (the view that all value judgements are just expressions of preference) which he sees as 'embodied in our culture', and its corollary that there are no objective and impersonal moral standards, as well as the conception of an irreducible plurality of incommensurable values, and the modern liberal view that government and law should be neutral between rival conceptions of the good life. He criticizes the conception of rationality as attaching only to means (ends being individually chosen and

1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981).
This chapter was first published as two book reviews, one in 1981, the other in 1988).

without rational grounding), a view exemplified by social scientists' spurious claims to expertise and the practices of bureaucracies; and also the modern individualist conception of the self, 'abstract and ghostly', distinct from its 'social embodiments', roles and contexts, making choices without criteria, and the associated philosophical concept of the autonomous moral subject in which individuals are primary and society secondary, and 'the identification of individual interests as prior to, and independent of, the construction of any moral or social bonds between them'.

What, then, is the nature of the argument, where does it lead, and is it convincing?

It is at once philosophical and sociological, for MacIntyre holds that no 'adequate philosophical analysis in this area could escape being also a sociological hypothesis, and *vice versa*', since 'we have not yet fully understood the claims of any moral philosophy until we have spelled out what its social embodiment would be'. It is also historical, exploiting classical scholarship and literary criticism through a series of sketches (of Homeric Greece, of Athenian Society and the plays of Sophocles, of medieval conflicts, of Benjamin Franklin and Jane Austen) that tell an overall story of a great moral transformation—a transformation in the meaning of moral concepts and their place in social life: these 'were originally at home in larger totalities of theory and practice in which they enjoyed a role and function supplied by contexts of which they have now been deprived'. In particular, virtue-concepts have 'become as marginal to the moral philosopher as they are to the morality of the society which he inhabits' and 'modern moral utterance and practice can only be understood as a series of fragmented survivals from an older past'.

In the earlier stages of the story—in Homeric Greece, Athens, and medieval Europe

evaluative and especially moral theory and practice embody genuine objective and impersonal standards which provide rational justification for particular policies, actions and judgements and which themselves in turn are susceptible of rational justification.

Both the *polis* and the medieval kingdom are conceived as 'communities in which men in company pursue the human good and not merely as—what the modern liberal state takes itself to be—provid-

ing the arena in which each individual seeks his or her own private good'. In such pre-modern societies,

the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his or her roles, those roles which bind the individual to the communities in and through which alone specifically human goods are to be attained; I confront the world as a member of this family, this household, this clan, this tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom. There is no 'I' apart from these.

In such contexts, the virtues have a central place: they are a crucial component (or as MacIntyre says, *internal* to) the goods men seek—sustaining the relationships necessary to their achievement, the individual's pursuit of the good as a whole life's project or quest, and the historical traditions that such relationships and pursuits embody. MacIntyre draws distinctions between the unreflective and role-centred virtues of Homeric and other heroic societies, the more complex Athenian view, allowing for (limited) questioning and tragic conflicts of good with good, the Aristotelian stress on the unity of the virtues and on a specifically human *telos*, or end, and the medieval, Christian stress on the fact of evil and the quest for ultimate redemption in a community of reconciliation (Aquinas seeking to unite the last two). He notices (if too briefly) their different catalogues and conceptions of the virtues. But from all this he derives a 'partial account of a core conception of the virtues'—incorporating truthfulness, justice, and courage—which are basic to any common pursuit of the good, 'in the light of which we have to characterise ourselves and others, whatever our private moral stand-point or our society's particular moral codes may be'.

The later stages of MacIntyre's story trace the gradual disintegration of these virtue-centred moralities, whose quintessential exponent was Aristotle. They were repudiated, with the rise of science and the rejection of teleology, between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, thereby leading to the Enlightenment project of discovering rational secular foundations for morality. But, says MacIntyre, that project—in the hands of Smith, Hume, Diderot, and, above all, Kant—had to fail, because 'moral judgements are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by these practices'. Both the proper ends of man and the laws of God disappear from the scene. The meaning of moral and other evaluative expression changes. Now what are called state-

ments of 'fact' cannot entail what are taken to be 'evaluative' or 'moral' conclusions and moral controversies become unsettlable.

The breakdown of this Enlightenment project, MacIntyre claims, 'provided the historical background against which the predicaments of our own culture can become intelligible'. Once the modern world has repudiated the moral traditions of which Aristotle's thought was the intellectual core, all subsequent attempts by moral philosophers to provide some alternative rational secular account of the nature and status of morality have failed, and must do so, as Nietzsche saw. Our moral language and practice are in 'grave disorder' arising from

the prevailing cultural power of an idiom in which ill-assorted conceptual fragments from various parts of our past are deployed together in private and public debates which are notable chiefly for the unsettlable character of the controversies thus carried on and the apparent arbitrariness of each of the contending parties.

The modern moral culture of liberal individualism (whose central flaws MacIntyre rather implausibly sees Marxism as reproducing) offers no solution to this disorder. It relies on 'pseudo-concepts' and 'moral fictions', such as 'utility' and 'natural or human rights': belief in them, he says, 'is one with belief in witches and unicorns'. It has little place for 'any conception of society as a community united in a shared vision of the good for man (as prior to and independent of any summing of individual interests) and a *consequent* shared practice of the virtues'. It can issue in no agreement upon any catalogue of these or indeed upon their fundamental importance. Modern politics is 'civil war carried on by other means' and government 'a set of institutional arrangements for imposing a bureaucratised unity on a society which lacks genuine moral consensus'. From an Aristotelian point of view (which is of course MacIntyre's),

a modern liberal society can appear only as a collection of citizens of nowhere who have banded together for their mutual protection.... They have abandoned the moral unity of Aristotelianism, whether in its ancient or medieval forms.

This, then, is where the argument has led: to an embracing of Aristotle as against Nietzsche and Weber. 'The Weberian view of the world', he writes, 'cannot be rationally sustained; it disguises and conceals rather than illuminates and it depends for its power on its success at disguise and concealment.' Only by adopting a modified Aristotelian view, MacIntyre argues—a 'socially teleological

account' which, however, does not rely on Aristotle's metaphysical biology and allows for tragic conflicts of good with good—can we adequately understand where we have got to and how we got there. We will then see the universalism and individualism of modern culture as 'a degeneration, a grave cultural loss', as the modern self 'in acquiring sovereignty in its own realm lost its traditional boundaries provided by a social identity and a view of human life as ordered to a given end'. We will see that all political traditions in our culture, including Marxism, are exhausted and that we are 'in a state so disastrous that there are no large remedies'. What, then, is to be done? On his last page, MacIntyre answers: engage in 'the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.'

Is this argument convincing? Is its account of the Great Transformation as a 'scheme of moral decline', its critique of the central culture of liberal and bureaucratic individualism, its defence of 'the lost morality of the past', and its catalogue of core virtues and human goods rationally compelling?

To ask this question is to reveal a deep inconsistency at its heart. For MacIntyre the sociologist of morals, the 'lost morality of the past', rooted in 'local particularity and community', claiming 'objectivity and authority', licensing the derivation of moral conclusions from factual claims, presupposing a fully social self, is genuinely *lost*: as he says, the possibility of the rational justification it provided 'is no longer available'. Conversely, the universalizing and individualist morality of the present, with its value pluralism, fact-value distinction and autonomous choosing self is, for us, inescapable. How then can MacIntyre the philosopher *appeal* to the 'genuine objective and impersonal standards' embodied in the former, to its denial of the fact-value distinction and its social view of the self to back his critique of the modern ethos? For according to that ethos, these are claims internal to one moral view that have no rationally compelling power.

Not only is the argument inconsistent; it is also circular. How can he justify *choosing* Aristotle against Nietzsche other than by criteria furnished by Aristotle and unmasked by Nietzsche? What justifies his account and catalogue of the virtues if not evaluations deriving from a lost teleological morality of virtue? Why are 'utility' and 'rights'

moral fictions but not the human *telos* and the 'common good'? In short, his argument assumes the truth of his conclusions.

He promises in a future volume to provide a systematic account of rationality, which might rebut these charges. In advance of that, one can only say that this argument for an objective and impersonal ethics—like all the others he finds wanting—also fails to carry conviction. It is, however, fresh, original, and full of incidental insights, though it gets fast and loose when the going gets rough; and it includes a striking discussion of the limited role of generalizations in the social sciences that makes a real and important contribution to the philosophy of social science. This is unquestionably one of the most lively, interesting, and provocative books in social theory to have appeared for at least a decade. If it does not displace Weber's answer, it sheds floods of light on the question.

II. The Way Out, or Back?

After Virtue proclaimed, not without satisfaction, that 'we still, in spite of the efforts of three centuries of moral philosophy and one of sociology, lack any coherent rationally defensible statement of a liberal individualist point of view'. It also offered a promise: that 'the Aristotelian position can be restated in a way that restores rationality and intelligibility to our own moral and social attitudes and commitments.' To redeem that promise, MacIntyre made another: to write a book that would offer an account of what it is to be rational that would both support his restatement of Aristotelianism and justify that support. This is that book.[2]

The trouble with the argument of *After Virtue* was that it was caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, MacIntyre the sociologist of morals offered a compelling account of the fragmented moral world of modernity, riven by unsettleable moral conflicts, speaking an impoverished moral vocabulary, inhabited by rootless and homeless individuals, capable of distancing themselves from their various roles and of making moral choices and decisions on the basis of their 'preferences' and 'values'. On the other hand, MacIntyre the moral philosopher purported to recommend a return to a world we have lost, located in an idealized Greek past, in which there was moral

2 *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

unity, a rich and thick vocabulary of role-centred virtues, where the individual was fully constituted by his place in the social order, where the agonies of moral choice and decision, and indeed moral uncertainty, were unknown because practical rationality came naturally to everyone aware of the requirements of his station and its duties.

But if the sociologist were right, the philosopher could make no such case: 'we' cannot become, in the relevant respects, 'pre-modern'. As Bernard Williams has put it, there is no route back from reflection.

Does *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* show the way out, or back? Far from it. Indeed, it only sharpens the dilemma by offering an account of rationality, as tradition-bound, which itself only serves to reinforce the inaccessibility to post-Enlightenment thought of the very case MacIntyre seeks to make. The thinkers of the Enlightenment and their successors, he writes, 'proved unable to agree as to what precisely those principles were which would be found undeniable by all rational persons.' Consequently, 'the legacy of the Enlightenment has been the provision of an ideal of rational justification which it has proved impossible to attain.'

MacIntyre's solution to this typically modern problem is to extol the virtues of pre-modern societies in which 'there was and is a common stock of beliefs whose expression in language was and is treated as the utterance of evident truth', of the polis as the 'locus of rationality because it embodied the idea of the "good" and the "best" and enabled systematic forms of activity to be "unambigu-ously ordered" and individuals to "occupy and move between well-defined roles'. In such a world, as Aristotle showed, 'the apparent and tragic conflict of right with right' arises from the inadequacies of reason, not from the character of moral reality.

The case is made no more persuasive by the fact that MacIntyre loads the dice throughout. He is consistently charitable towards Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Hutcheson but un-relentingly hostile, above all, to Hume and to modern liberalism generally. Thus Aristotle's justification of slavery and his exclusion of women from citizenship are (plausibly) claimed to be excisable from his thought while leaving his central argument intact; yet Hume is described as 'articulating the principles of the dominant English social and cultural order', an order itself deeply inhospitable to philosophy. Of modern liberalism he has much of interest and depth

to say, not least about its conception of 'the individual', but it is uniformly negative, or at least intended to be so.

Liberalism, too, is a tradition; though, unlike the congregations of evangelical fundamentalists, it does not recognize that it too is a 'community of pre-rational faith', whose 'parish magazine' is the *New York Times*. This is read by the 'affluent and self-congratulatory liberal establishment', whose clergy are the lawyers, and is insensitive to the cultural depth of traditions. Hence the confident teaching of texts from past and alien cultures in translation not only to students who do not know the original languages but by teachers who do not know them either; the conducting of negotiations, commercial, political and military, by those who suppose that not knowing each other's languages cannot debar them from understanding each other adequately; and the willingness to allow internationalised versions of such languages as English, Spanish and Chinese to displace both the languages of minority cultures and those variants of themselves which are local, dialectical languages in use.

Most seriously, MacIntyre's very account of rationality, which after all is the book's central theme, is (and makes a virtue of being) question-begging. The book consists of an 'outline narrative history of three traditions of inquiry into what practical rationality is and what justice is, and in addition an acknowledgement of a need for the writing of a fourth history, that of liberalism.' Liberalism, in his account, turns out to be just another tradition which 'does not provide a neutral independent ground from which a verdict may be passed upon the rival claims of conflicting traditions'. But, as he acknowledges, if this is so, it does not follow that there is no such neutral ground. Nor indeed does it follow that, in political and moral argument, we should not aim for such neutrality and for such perspective-independent bases for agreement as can be found, across cultures and traditions.

MacIntyre boldly asserts that there is a 'deep incompatibility' between 'the standpoint of any rational tradition of inquiry', such as he defends, and the dominant modes of contemporary discussion, academic and non-academic, committed to 'the fiction of shared, even if unformulable, universal standards of rationality'. His case, in a nutshell, is that 'progress in rationality is achieved only from a point of view'.

Moreover, 'one's rationality should not be merely supported by but partly constituted by one's membership in and integration into a

social institution of some one particular type.' So to be rational is to see the moral world from the right institutional standpoint, and to 'engage in the formulation, elaboration, rational justification and criticism of accounts of practical rationality and justice . . . from within some one particular tradition in conversation, cooperation and conflict with those who inhabit the same tradition.'

If any of MacIntyre's readers are persuaded by his arguments, this will, by his own account, be because they are co-inhabitants of his Aristotelian–Augustinian–Thomistic tradition. (They may be old-timers or, like MacIntyre himself, relatively recent immigrants from other quite different traditions.) They will be convinced because, sharing the same history and speaking the same language, they 'have every reason at least so far to hold that the rationality of their tradition has been confirmed in its encounters with other traditions'. The rest of us, *New York Times* or *New Statesman and Society* in hand, may well feel rather left out in the cold.

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Václav Havel: on 'The Power of the Powerless'

I

On Freedom and Power is a remarkable collection of essays which has for some time deserved translation and a wider readership for two sorts of reasons. On the one hand, these essays are important historical documents. They are evidence of great interest to the historian and observer of contemporary communism in Czechoslovakia and within the Soviet bloc as a whole. More importantly, they are valuable texts in their own right. They are essays of interpretation, argument, and analysis that shed light not only upon the nature of contemporary communism but, more widely, on some basic political questions that arise in the West no less than in the East. Moreover, they address these questions in a fresh and challenging way.

As historical documents, they are to be seen as the product and expression of the Czechoslovak experience of 'real socialism' at a moment when the opposition to it crystallized and coalesced in a peculiarly dramatic way. They represent the first flowering of theoretical reflection on the part of a wide variety of intellectuals in the period between the founding of the Charter in 1977 and the subsequent persecution of its signatories and supporters.

One of the first instances of such reflection was Václav Benda's essay, 'The Parallel Polis' (written in May 1978 and circulated in *samizdat* in Czechoslovakia).[1] This argued powerfully for the

This chapter first appeared in 1985 as the Introduction to Havel's *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central Eastern Europe* (London: Hutchinson, 1985). Most of the quotations in the text are from the essays in that book in which Havel's is the title essay.

[1] Published in English in *Palach Press Bulletin* (London: Palach Press, 1979).