

# MACINTYRE AND THE CONFLICTS OF CORPORATE MODERNITY

## GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

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### ABSTRACT

This issue aims to discuss the relevance of Alasdair MacIntyre's *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* from different disciplinary perspectives. This preface briefly presents the theoretical path of MacIntyre before that work (1), then summarises the main results of it (2), and finally highlights the major points discussed by the papers of this issue (3).

### KEYWORDS

Alasdair MacIntyre, Aristotelian tradition, desire, practical reasoning, virtue, human good, narrative.

### 1.

In the panorama of contemporary philosophy, Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-2025) has played the role of a controversial protagonist. Most scholars and students first heard his name when he published *After Virtue* in 1981.<sup>1</sup> This book was mostly acknowledged as an important contribution to the ongoing debate between liberals and communitarians – a discussion inaugurated by John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* ten years before.<sup>2</sup> *After Virtue* was actually much more; it can be considered the first synthesis of a long theoretical journey that started in 1953 with a book on Marxism.<sup>3</sup> In that long time span, the first and ultimate question always was 'What are the rational grounds of any moral and political judgments?'

That question had very strong connections with the ordinary life of MacIntyre, when – after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 – he quit the British Communist Party to join the New Left. The original question then sounded similar to this: 'How is it possible to rationally justify the moral condemnation of

<sup>1</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> A. MacIntyre, *Marxism: An Interpretation* (S.C.M. Press, 1953), revised and reissued as *Marxism and Christianity* (Schocken Books, 1968).

Stalinism and the USSR?’ According to MacIntyre, in fact, both Christianity and the Enlightenment had failed in their projects to develop universal ethics, and they were no longer helpful in directing the conduct of human beings. Unfortunately, no other sound moralities seemed available.

When MacIntyre finally broke with Marxism at the end of the 1960s and moved to the US, he refused to take up the cause of liberal Western societies. He continued living as an ‘intellectual nomad’<sup>4</sup>. Before *After Virtue*, MacIntyre had to walk many theoretical paths, always threatened by relativism and nihilism. If it is impossible to lead life rationally, then Nietzsche would be right. It is not casual that the central chapter of *After Virtue*– the ninth one dividing the book into the first half (*pars destruens*) and the second half (*pars construens*)– was titled ‘Nietzsche or Aristotle?’ It was in Aristotle, in fact– in the ancient and multi-sided Aristotelian tradition, more specifically– that MacIntyre found the intellectual resources to justify a rational ethics capable of tackling the practical questions peculiar to modern corporate societies.<sup>5</sup> During the thirty-five years separating *After Virtue* and *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre went on building and corroborating his practical philosophy. In the 1980s, he realised that his Neo-Aristotelian approach could be strengthened by highlighting the contribution given by Aquinas to the Aristotelian tradition. The result was a ‘Neo-Aristotelianism developed in contemporary Thomistic terms’.<sup>6</sup> That intellectual move, of course, raised a great deal of discussion about its historical and philological consistency and its potential to address contemporary moral and political issues.

## 2.

*Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* can be considered the matured version of MacIntyre’s theory. To give a broad idea of the contents of that thick volume, we can quote MacIntyre at the beginning of the fifth and final chapter of the book:

A single, if complex, theoretical conclusion emerged from the first four chapters of this essay. It is that agents do well only if and when they act to satisfy only those desires whose objects they have good reason to desire, that only agents who are sound and effective practical reasoners so act, that such agents must be disposed to

<sup>4</sup> See the essay by Dario Mazzola in this issue.

<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre’s approach to Aristotle in *After Virtue* was influenced by the second Wittgenstein and by the Hegelo-Marxian line of thought, among others.

<sup>6</sup> A. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016, chapter 4).

act as the virtues require and that such agents will be directed in their actions towards the achievement of their final end.<sup>7</sup>

These are not independent sets of conditions, as the four narratives told in the last chapter illustrate in detail. The first set of conditions is relative to the nature of the desirers and their relationship to practical reason. MacIntyre's handling of this matter is based on the results presented in *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999).<sup>8</sup> The conceptualisation of desires is fundamental for any approach to practical philosophy, as they 'fuel' human actions. MacIntyre's analysis of desires- based also on the achievements of the phenomenological tradition- stresses that inner directionality characterises desires.

Moreover, thanks to the reflexivity of human reason, there is the possibility of distinguishing mere needs from desires. Through his nuanced examination of human desires, MacIntyre can analyse some of their major connections with emotions, tastes, habits and beliefs, as well as with the biological and neurophysiological development peculiar to human animals.

From the perspective of contemporary thought, this is a very important achievement, as it provides ethics with a rich and complex moral psychology.

The first set of conditions strictly connects with the second: To be moral, an action need not satisfy only desires; that is because the objects of desires must be recognised as good by reason. This is a very important point. Human beings are the most rational animals; therefore, they can comprehend human actions only if it is possible to give a rational account of them. This is also true for one's own actions; therefore, the lack of a rational account for an action involves the impossibility of the agent understanding herself.

Thus, agents can be good practical reasoners when they act to satisfy only those desires whose objects they have good reason to desire. This involves the possibility of a conflict between desires and practical reason- something ordinary agents often experience. However, human flourishing requires that rational actions are motivated by the desire for rational goods and, therefore, implies that desires can and must be educated. This is a major thesis, something paradoxical in the view of many modern ethical theories and present liberal morality, which takes desires merely as positive data to establish the emotional resources that enable agents to achieve their goals.

The necessity of educating desires identifies the third set of conditions and the necessity of critiquing desires. Desires can be educated first by institutions such as families, schools and local and religious communities, and second through the exercise of moral and intellectual virtues in those same institutions, in workplaces

<sup>7</sup>MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 243.

<sup>8</sup>A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Open Court, 1999).

and in participation in civic and political life. Through the practice of moral and intellectual virtues, an agent changes by becoming someone who actually desires what is rationally good for her to desire or someone who desires to desire that, at least (i.e. second-order desire).

One of the most peculiar aspects of MacIntyre's theoretical viewpoint is that he examines humans as being in action within those practices where they can flourish.<sup>9</sup> Individuals are usually involved in several practices and are required to fulfil social roles. Correspondingly, the goods pursued in those practices and social roles can be at odds. Therefore, every agent is called to identify and establish an order of priorities. This is not an easy task. Ordering the goods of a human life can be considered rational from a moral viewpoint when the standard has a strong connection with the ultimate good, i.e. the fulfilment of life, what Aristotle called *eu zen* and Aquinas *beatitudo*. This self-conscious directionality towards the goal of life identifies the fourth set of conditions, to flourish as human beings.

In summary, human flourishing involves individuals acting based on their own desires only when the objects of desires are good and they actually desire those objects. The changing of desires is possible by practising virtues. The result is an ordering of goods whose criterion is the flourishing of life.

### 3.

The following papers focus on major points in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.<sup>10</sup> In the rational order of goods, practical rationality functions *intersubjectively*; consequently, agents cannot properly identify their own ultimate good without considering the goods of those who cooperate with them in socio-political practices- called by MacIntyre 'the relevant ones'. In addition, agents cannot identify their own goods if they also do not consider the matter from the perspectives of those relevant others. When agents refuse to do so, they can easily fall into intellectual and moral errors. The result is another paradoxical thesis: To be practically independent, human beings must recognise their dependence on others. In short, we need *friends* to pursue our goods.

As we have observed above, in our ordinary practices, we must exercise virtues. By doing that, we realise that each one of us has an inchoate conscience of the goods and the ultimate good: what MacIntyre calls 'directionality'. This dynamic of practical reason displays a *narrative* structure through which agents understand themselves regarding the stories of their vicissitudes in pursuing the fulfilment of life. One of the main claims of *After Virtue* is that narratives are not forms

<sup>9</sup> MacIntyre provides a definition of practice in *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition), 187.

<sup>10</sup> I don't even try to summarise the following papers: see the abstracts.

imposed by storytellers on human events retrospectively to give them a comprehensible order: 'Stories are lived before they are told- except in the case of fiction'.<sup>11</sup> This claim is also presented in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* and is supported with new arguments.<sup>12</sup> The possibility of telling and retelling the stories of our lives truthfully is an important requirement for fulfilling life. Only narratives can make our lives comprehensible to ourselves and to others.

A crucial consequence is that the narrative resources of a specific culture have great moral and political relevance because they establish the limits of desires and of practical reasoning. Thereby, the compartmentalisation of storytelling peculiar to late-modern societies and the pervasiveness of entertainment and social media, together with the consequent weakening of individual creativity and imagination, are central factors of the present moral and political crises.

For MacIntyre, the major contribution Aquinas gave the Aristotelian tradition was his doctrine about *natural law*. This is perhaps the toughest point for the common mindset to welcome in present corporate societies, where one of the main dogmas is that nothing is 'natural' in human beings- nothing that can limit the possibility of individual self-determination- let alone moral precepts.

On the contrary, MacIntyre holds that those precepts implicitly function when individuals exercise their practical rationality within their social practices and that they can play the role of moral principles and premises of reasoning. When agents do not observe those precepts, their practices fail to pursue their own 'internal goods',<sup>13</sup> and they are therefore misled away from their ultimate ends.

MacIntyre highlights the relevance of natural law within contemporary corporate societies, as its precepts can support a joint reflection and a shared deliberation on the common good. This can be at odds with the functional imperatives ruling corporate societies. Here, natural law can thus be a *critical* and a *subversive* factor and play a *progressive* role.

Moreover, MacIntyre's conceptualisation of natural law can have an interesting impact on epistemology. In fact, scientific research is a practice. Consequently, it is subject to the precepts of natural law but manifests them prominently. Even if scientific and philosophical theories belong to *incommensurable* traditions of research, all are based on practices of research and accordingly are subject to the precepts of natural law. These represent 'standards of justice', both substantive and procedural, which ultimately coincide with the exercise of moral and intellectual virtues. The previous remarks may have significantly impacted how we may reconsider the nature of academic research and the role of universities in corporate societies.

<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 212.

<sup>12</sup> MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 231-242.

<sup>13</sup> On the difference between 'internal goods' and 'external goods', see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188-189.

## 4.

The present issue results from a workshop organised by the Department of Literature, Philosophy and Communication at the University of Bergamo on 6 May, 2024. The aim of the workshop was to gather scholars from different areas of research (theoretical philosophy, history of philosophy, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of law, political science, education and geography) to discuss the relevance of ethics in the *Conflicts of Modernity*, whose Italian edition was newly published. The different affiliations justify the differences in how the authors develop their arguments and in the philological accuracy of the papers. These can be sympathetic to *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. What unites all of them, however, is considering that book a relevant piece of contemporary philosophical research that deserves attention since it tackles the main questions of our corporate societies.