

***Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*, by Alasdair MacIntyre. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 332 pp. ISBN: 978-1107176454**

Matthew Sinnicks, Northumbria University

In the 2007 preface to his most famous work *After Virtue*, originally published in 1981, MacIntyre notes that, perhaps due to “unteachable obstinacy,” he still regards the central contentions of that work as being correct. In this excellent volume it is clear, ten years on, that this conviction still holds. This is a new entry in MacIntyre’s mature project, which has occupied him for the best part of forty years, and refines his previous work by bringing it into contact with recent and contemporary interlocutors. The central conclusion of the overarching argument 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 act as the virtues require, and that such agents will be directed in their actions toward the achievement of their final end (243).

MacIntyre notes that this does not amount to much without specifying the details. Fortunately for the reader, the details are consistently nuanced and persuasive, as we have come to expect of one of the philosophical giants of our time.

Chapter 1 centres on the concepts of desire, goods, and the “good,” setting out the terrain covered by the rest of the volume. This opening chapter begins the task of outlining what MacIntyre, at this stage, refers to as a “Neo-Aristotelian account” in which goods—and therefore rightly ordered desires—are ordered hierarchically. However, far from offering a monolithic account of the human good, MacIntyre notes that a variety of lives can accord with a core sense of flourishing. This core conception is later revealed to have at least eight features: good health, sufficient wealth, good family relationships, good friends, an education that allows one to develop one’s powers, productive and rewarding work, time for intrinsically valuable leisure activities, and, finally, the ability to rationally “order one’s life and to identify and learn from one’s mistakes” (222)—last, but by no means least. MacIntyre suggests there are three basic requirements of virtue acquisition: reliability, truthfulness, and an ability to imagine alternative courses of action—“all three qualities are generally a mark of a good upbringing” (312). Although we are warned of the dangers of being anti-theoretical (273), practice has primacy over theory when it comes to moral education, academic courses in ethics can be considered morally serious only if they teach students the importance of closely reading certain novels (219), and so on. Together these positive claims can be used to meet the criticism, sometimes levelled at MacIntyre, that his moral philosophy is merely negative, and concerned only with highlighting the inadequacies characteristic of our age.

Several preoccupations that concerned MacIntyre in his previous works have returned in updated form. In place of the critique of emotivism, which emerged in

After Virtue as both an inadequate account of ethics and an inevitable consequence of the failure of the Enlightenment Project to rationally ground morality, we have an engagement with recent research in metaethics, which identifies the expressivism of Blackburn and Gibbard as a more sophisticated, though equally inadequate, inheritor of the emotivist mantle. This is a central theme of chapter 1. In place of practices as the bedrock of MacIntyre's account of moral education, in chapter 2 we have an expansive discussion of practical activities, including fairly prosaic forms of work, as sites of moral development. In place of Nietzsche as the most viable alternative to Aristotle *qua* respondent to the peculiar incoherencies of modern morality—here termed 'Morality'—we have Bernard Williams, introduced in chapter 1 and then returned to for a more detailed discussion in chapter 3. Chapter 4 addresses the theme of the politics of community, a central theme in MacIntyre's ethics, most comprehensively covered in 1999's *Dependent Rational Animals*. While Williams is held up as an admirably sophisticated critic of Morality, the concept of the common good, central to any Aristotelian account of ethics and politics, underpins MacIntyre's rejection of Williams' position. For the Aristotelian, moral progress requires "shared deliberation with family members or friends or co-workers or fellow citizens," an argumentative move which is "not one that Williams could have accepted or even entertained" (224).

This focus on shared deliberation is related to the concept of "sociological self-understanding" which appears at several crucial junctures in the argument. To achieve this knowledge—implicit in much everyday reasoning but sometimes lacking in highly educated theorists—we must be able to find some degree of detachment from our various social roles (112), have perceptive and "ruthlessly critical" friends (113), and possess the virtue of humility. This kind of self-knowledge enables us to see what is wrong with preferentialist accounts of wellbeing (216), and presages the introduction of another familiar MacIntyrean theme, the need to understand our lives in narrative terms. MacIntyre argues that Thomistic-Aristotelian evaluation requires a narrative understanding of agents (218), and chapter 5 is devoted to detailing precisely how our lives must be understood as certain kinds of narrative if we are to live well.

In a passage that will be of interest to business ethicists, MacIntyre spells out his opposition to contemporary capitalism in some detail, arguing that it destroys traditional ways of life, creates grotesque inequalities of income and wealth, and depends upon the exploitation of workers. He holds that Marx's critique of capitalism is essentially correct, and suggests that militant trade union action is necessary to achieve even "elementary justice" under capitalism (107). Furthermore, according to MacIntyre, the dominant model of capitalism is inadequate for a variety of reasons: it requires an unwarrantedly optimistic view of risk in stock and commodities markets, ignores the social contexts in which markets operate, incentivises short-termism, and pays inadequate attention to the fact that the livelihood and wellbeing of large numbers of ordinary people are threatened by these other failings (103-104). Nevertheless, despite chastising contemporary market societies for treating the vice of acquisitiveness as a virtue (109), MacIntyre also makes more positive claims about work in contemporary organisations. He approvingly cites Deming's reforms

in Japanese car factories, and notes that in workplaces where employees are treated “as agents with rational and aesthetic powers, even though their labour is still exploited” (131), contemporary work can transform and educate our desires. Given the number of academic papers in the business ethics literature that have drawn on MacIntyre’s concept of a practice, it seems likely that his latest remarks on productive work under capitalism will attract much scholarly attention.

MacIntyre remains at odds with much recent work in Aristotelian ethics, and even lists virtue ethics as another example of a fruitless ethical theory (66). In particular, he is keen to criticise work that has sought to marry Aristotelian insights with positive psychology. While he recognises the value of important discoveries in contemporary psychology, and notes that an adequate ethical education will include studying work on psychological biases by the likes of Tversky, Kahnemann, et al. (192), he argues that the conception of happiness and wellbeing used by positive psychologists is inadequate, and that scientific psychology must be complemented with deeper studies of the human psyche, i.e. the psychoanalytic work of figures such as Freud and Winnicott, and with sociology, a discipline which has received too little attention from contemporary analytic philosophers.

While I sympathise with MacIntyre’s reservations about positive psychology, this theme reveals one of the more troubling aspects of his account. Even if positive psychology reflects a misguided expression of the Aristotelian imperative to combine theoretical and practical study of ethics, MacIntyre’s rejection of the value of subjective satisfaction seems to be so strong that the conception of flourishing that emerges from it strikes me as being questionable. In MacIntyre’s narrative account of the life of Russian novelist Vasily Grossman, he notes that despite his many difficulties, Grossman is to be accounted a *eudaimon*—a flourishing agent—because his concern for truthfulness gave his life a purposefulness and served as a good he directed his life towards, even if his life is “unhappy in the modern sense” (264). At this point, the modern sense of happiness begins to look more appealing.

Without wanting to spoil the highly engaging concluding chapter, note that Grossman was a Jew in Stalin’s Russia who was unable to publish his work freely due to it being deemed anti-Soviet, who was living in constant fear of the state, whose mother died at the hands of the Nazis because Grossman did not act immediately to move her into his apartment when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, and who died an unhappy man, unsure whether his major works would ever be published. On several occasions, MacIntyre describes Grossman as a divided self, and thus presumably at odds with the narrative unity characteristic of a good life. Aristotle held that we need luck in order to flourish, and in that department Grossman was notably lacking. To understand Grossman’s as a good life, then, is to side with Aquinas over Aristotle on the question of whether flourishing (*eudaimonia*) requires the enjoyment of good outcomes and good fortunes (*makarios*). The former held that flourishing could be independent of such good outcomes, whereas the latter disagreed, and held them to be co-extensive (230). MacIntyre sides with Aquinas because of his conception of our final end, which is of necessity beyond finitude.

MacIntyre’s insistence that a final end is needed to make sense of the human good and to integrate our lives seems to be at the root of my modest reservations

about his central argument. Refusing to identify one's good with any particular finite good or set of finite goods is quite different to pursuing a final end "beyond all finite ends ... the final and supreme object of desire" (230), "a good desirable beyond all such goods" (231) but that "does not compete with other goods" (229). Indeed, this final end cannot be specified positively: "we learn how to characterise it as we move toward it ... through a series of denials. It is not this, not that, not that other" (230). MacIntyre rhetorically raises the question "Does one have to be a theist to understand one's life in these terms? Of course not" (231). I am not so sure it is obvious we can make sense of a rejection of finite goods—including "intellectual, moral [and] even spiritual excellence" (53)—as the ultimate criteria of a good life in non-theological terms, and the ending of the book suggests the same. Having noted that a full conception of a perfected and completed life is beyond the scope of the present work, MacIntyre concludes "here the enquiries of politics and ethics end. Here natural theology begins" (315).