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Justice and Tradition: MacIntyre on Justice

A review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Alasdair MacIntyre, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

Alasdair MacIntyre introduces this truly remarkable work of scholarship with the following succinct summary of its purpose:

“In 1981 I published the first edition of *After Virtue*. In that book, I concluded both 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” and that “the Aristotlean tradition can be restated in a way that restores rationality and intelligibility to our own moral and social attitudes and commitments.” But I also recognised that these conclusions required support from an account of what rationality is, in the light of which rival and incompatible evaluations of the arguments of *After Virtue* could be adequately accounted for. I promised a book in which I should attempt to say what makes it rational to act in one way rather than another and what makes it rational to advance and defend one conception of practical rationality rather than another. Here it is” (p. ix)

What follows is a truly engrossing account of the internal development of Greek ethics, particularly focussing on Aristotle (384-322 BCE), the rational theology of St. Augustine (354-430), St. Thomas Aquinas’s (1225-1274) blend of Augustinianism and Aristotleanism (on the last page of the book, MacIntyre reveals himself as a Thomist) and David Hume’s (1711-1776) bourgeois moralism, wedded to rational scepticism. These four currents are selected from the near-infinite array of traditions he could have written about, selected because they constitute the genesis of his own ethics and that of the society he is a part of. And his advice to the reader who wishes to continue the investigation is:

“We, whoever we are, can only begin enquiry from the vantage point afforded by our relationship to some specific social and intellectual past through which we have affiliated ourselves to some particular tradition of enquiry, extending the history of that enquiry into the present ...” (p. 401)

“For each of us, therefore, the question now is: To what issues does that particular history bring us in contemporary debate? What resources does our particular tradition afford in this situation? Can we by means of those resources understand the achievements and successes, and the failures and sterilities, of rival traditions more adequately than their own adherents can? More adequately by our own standards? More adequately also by theirs? It is insofar as the histories narrated in this book lead on to answers to these questions that they also hold promise of answering the questions: Whose justice? Which rationality?”. (p. 402)

Though there is much to be learnt from the details of the narrative, I do not

intend to recapitulate here what MacIntyre has said. The main target of his critique is *liberal individualism* and the challenges posed to all of us, by a world in which liberalism is the dominant governmental and social power. (MacIntyre's conception of liberalism, and his critique of it, generally extend to the "conservatism" of people like George W. Bush. It seems to me that liberal individualism, as MacIntyre understands it, encompasses the most essential features of mainstream conservatives such as Bush, though clearly in his case there are overlays of "traditionalism" and anti-liberal ideas.)

I shall try to present the most salient points of MacIntyre's argument against liberalism here, though it would not be possible to do him justice without reproducing his extensive and detailed account.

MacIntyre convincingly proves that rationality and ethics are inseparable; that it is impossible for the unjust person to think rationally, or for the irrational person to be just. Consequently, the liberal presumption of a shared, ahistorical, "objective" rationality which can be brought to bear to resolve differences in values and conceptions of justice, is a delusion. He further shows that no conception of justice and ethical life is possible outside of some real community in some place at some time, and that liberalism, despite its protestations, is *a tradition*, along with founding fathers, sacred texts, hierarchy, political power, social interests, institutions, etc., etc., like any other tradition, and he discloses the particular features of modernity which underlie liberal individualism. Liberalism differs from other traditions though, in it does not recognise itself as a tradition, harbours the illusion that it is able to fully comprehend other traditional modes of thought, and subsume their needs within itself, and that it is invulnerable to criticism from outside of liberalism. This self-deception leaves it vulnerable.

The other element of the book which the reader receives as a free gift along with the ethics, is an immensely rich description of the "dialectic", *how traditions of thought change*, both through internal struggle, through the disclosure of new problems within itself, in response to challenges from outside, and through the merging of rival traditions.

Liberal Individualism

According to MacIntyre, liberalism had its beginnings, within his own Scottish current of philosophical development, with Reid's criticism of David Hume. Hume himself marks a transition point. David Hume's radical break from the traditions of Scottish Protestantism, MacIntyre describes as follows:

"Property and the rules for its safeguarding and transmission - the rules which on Hume's view specify the content of justice - thus are made the focus for pride, love, hatred, and humility. Our passions according to Hume are such that they produce in us a definition of our interests in terms of our relationship to property, and it is as propertied or unpropertied in particular ways and to particular degrees that we participate in those social exchanges and transactions whose outcome is either the increase or diminution, or at least the sustaining or the undermining, of the pride and love felt by particular individuals. The rights of property are absolute. There is and can be no standard external to them in the light of which

some particular distribution of property could be evaluated as just or unjust. Justice on this view serves the ends of property and not vice versa”. (p. 295)

and

“Hume’s accounts, [require the context] of a society structured in terms of modes of satisfaction of desire, within which transactions and exchanges for mutual benefit are organised, while the overall social order provides formally and informally for the sustaining and enforcement of the relationships embodied in such transactions and exchanges. ... in which evaluation is primarily in terms of the satisfaction of consumers. ... the individual as envisaged by Hume engages in practical reasoning *qua* member of a type of society in which rank, property, and pride structure social exchanges.” (p. 298)

In this sense, Hume’s ethics already shares with that of Hegel, having *property* as the fundamental category of ethical life. Earlier ethical traditions had never elevated property to this over-riding level. According to the Calvinist ethics of his time it was just for a person facing starvation, for example, to steal in order to feed their family. Despite this adaptation to the growth of bourgeois society already dominant in England, Hume still identified himself with the Scotland of his day, a community rich in shared meaning, philosophical sophistication, social mores and an intellectual tradition. MacIntyre describes Reid’s criticism of Hume in the following terms:

“With [Thomas] Reid [1710-1796], ... the exercise of fundamental rationality, practical or theoretical, was taken to require no particular type of social setting. ... his books appeared in a period in which a number of other such philosophical conceptions of practical rationality as a property of individuals apart from and prior to their entry into social relations were being elaborated, most notably by Bentham in England and Kant in Prussia ... we move into a world in which the exercise of practical rationality, if it is to occur at all, has to be embodied in social contexts of fundamental disagreement and conflict”. (p. 325)

Thus, the social bases of liberalism are two-fold: the raising of property to the status of the primary social relation, and the loss of community, the loss of the capacity to appeal to or rely upon shared meaning beyond the satisfaction of individual desire.

MacIntyre uses an analysis of the use of place names in foreign countries to point out the difference between a place name for the inhabitants of an area where the name has multiple shared meanings and connotations, and the use of either same name in the context of a foreign language, or the use of a foreign name. For a foreigner, the place name is nothing but a reference pointing to a spatial location, having lost all the connotations and layers of meaning present when a native-speaker utters the name. He refers to this impoverished kind of meaning as “reference.” Nominalism is thus the characteristic epistemology of liberal society.

“the conception of pure reference, of reference as such, emerges as the artefact of a particular type of social and cultural order, one in

which a minimum of shared beliefs and allegiances can be pre-supposed.” (p. 379)

This observation succinctly points to an interconnection between rationality and ethics, for by the customary use of words simply in the form of reference, all the objects referred to lose their social significance, and one creates the illusion of an “objective” world which can be talked of by means of “pure rationality”, in abstraction from the social relations which have, in fact, created and shaped the thing and given it its social significance. The sole remaining social relation mediating between people is therefore *property*. MacIntyre believes that English and the other international languages are now impoverished in this way.

Maintenance of the illusion of “objectivity” is essential, and MacIntyre sees the universities as playing a crucial role in the maintenance of this illusion. Since academics rely for their livelihood on disproving each other’s theories, the resulting interminable and esoteric debate continuously re-establishes the impossibility of consensus.

“In the course of history liberalism, which began as an appeal to alleged principles of shared rationality against what was felt to be the tyranny of tradition, has itself been transformed into a tradition whose continuities are partly defined by the interminability of the debate over such principles. An interminability which was from the standpoint of an earlier liberalism a grave defect to be remedied as soon as possible has become, in the eyes of some liberals at least, a kind of virtue”. (p. 335)

Far from this failure to find any firm ground undermining liberalism, MacIntyre believes that it reinforces it, because one of the fundamental bases for liberalism is the conviction that no comprehensive idea (to use Rawls’ term) can enjoy majority, let alone unanimous, support. This then justifies the ban on governments pursuing the general good.

“Any conception of the human good according to which, for example, it is the duty of government to educate the members of the community morally, ... will be proscribed. ... liberal individualism does indeed have its own broad conception of the good, which it is engaged in imposing politically, legally, socially, and culturally wherever it has the power to do so, but also that in doing so its toleration of rival conceptions of the good in the public arena is severely limited.” (p. 336)

Such a ban on governments pursuing the social good of course serves a very definite social interest.

“The weight given to an individual preference in the market is a matter of the cost which the individual is able and willing to pay; only so far as an individual has the means to bargain with those who can supply what he or she needs does the individual have an effective voice. So also in the political and social realm it is the ability to bargain that is crucial. The preferences of some are accorded weight by others only insofar as the satisfaction of those preferences will lead to the satisfaction of their own preferences. Only those who have something to give get. The disadvantaged in a

liberal society are those without the means to bargain.” (p. 336)

and consequently,

“The overriding good of liberalism is no more and no less than the continued sustenance of the liberal social and political order”. (p. 345)

In each of the historical settings that MacIntyre investigates, he is able to show that the type of justice and the type of rationality which appears to the philosophical spokespeople of the community to be necessary and universal, turns out to be a description of the type of citizens of the community in question. Accordingly, the justice of liberalism and the rationality of liberalism is simply that justice and that rationality of the “citizens of nowhere” (p. 388), the “outsiders,” people lacking in any social obligation or any reason for acting other than to satisfy their desires and to defend the conditions under which they are able to continue satisfying their desires. Their rationality is therefore that of the objects of their desire.

As an aside, it should be remarked that if Aristotle’s ethics is that of an ancient Greek *polis*, for example, this does not mean that such an ethic is no longer possible. To the extent that there are institutions and “life-worlds” which replicate the essential conditions of the ancient *polis*, where “activities are hierarchically ordered by the *for sake of* relationship” (p. 107), then Aristotle’s ethics would become viable to the same extent. More generally, liberalism may be the dominant ethic today, but it is by no means excluded that other traditions which are able to bring to bear on liberalism a history of practical critique, cannot be sustained and, given the inherent vulnerability of liberalism, successfully challenge its dominance.

“The conclusion to which the argument so far has led is not only that it is out of the debates, conflicts, and enquiry of socially embodied, historically contingent traditions that contentions regarding practical rationality and justice are advanced, modified, abandoned, or replaced, but that there is no other way to engage in the formulation, elaboration, rational justification, and criticism of accounts of practical rationality and justice except from within some one particular tradition in conversation, cooperation, and conflict with those who inhabit the same tradition. There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other.” (p. 350)

Relativism and Perspectivism

By **relativism**, MacIntyre means the view that the ethics and rationality of any tradition is valid within a given tradition and cannot be devaluated from outside that tradition; thus one tradition is as good as another, and no tradition can make any greater claim on our allegiance than another. By **perspectivism**, MacIntyre means the converse view that the ethics and rationality of any given tradition of enquiry is valid, but *only* from the perspective of that tradition; its adherents cannot perceive the failure of their standpoint as a result of the criticism from any other standpoint; truth can only be the sum of infinitely many

complementary standpoints. Both viewpoints deny the possibility of truth and validity *as such* in any tradition of thought, and equally, deny the possibility of a tradition *failing* by its own standards.

MacIntyre shows convincingly that neither position can be sustained in respect to the traditions of enquiry described in his book. All traditions of life and therefore of philosophy have standards by which they are able to judge the adequacy of their own account; under the impact of criticism from outside or by the disclosure of new problems from within, all traditions of enquiry, all communities, are continually changing, frequently finding that former beliefs have become obsolete and sometimes undergoing 'epistemological crisis', perhaps merging with other currents or collapsing. While no tradition can exclude the possibility that its current beliefs and practices may become outmoded, within its own terms; conversely, all traditions have the capacity to subject others to criticism and frequently such criticisms succeed and rival traditions change under the impact of such challenges.

MacIntyre believes that perspectivism and relativism are post-Enlightenment trends which were only made possible by the Enlightenment's claim to have dispensed with traditional beliefs. By accepting the Enlightenment's claim to objectivity, postmodern relativism and perspectivism are blind to their own status as traditions rooted in a very impoverished mode of life.

The Cartesian and Hegelian Challenges

MacIntyre introduces two other ideas which shed light on the nature of modernity: (1) the **Cartesian** challenge that philosophy must make a "fresh start", basing itself on propositions which are evident and demonstrable to any sane person without reference to any prior or independent authority, and (2) the **Hegelian** challenge, that sooner or later all valid currents of enquiry must arrive at the same end point, each being but stages along the road to the same place.

MacIntyre claims that the Cartesian challenge functions to undermine the claim of any philosophical current which cannot be justified in terms of the consciousness of an isolated, "citizen of nowhere" and his or her desires, and consequently smuggles in the beliefs and illusions liberal individualism as the only valid starting point.

In relation to the "Hegelian challenge", he points out that every way of life hitherto exists in *some* place and *some* time and that up till now a multiplicity of ways of life and their attendant belief structures and notions of justice, stubbornly refuse to "become vehicles of self-realisation of *Geist*" (p. 361).

To deny validity to any such 'localism' is to deny to the validity of the premises of any other tradition, not locating itself in the cosmopolitan *anomie* of the world market.

What's Next?

So, how to proceed against liberalism, against the way of life in which human relations are governed by the world market? As remarked above, MacIntyre advises each of his readers to look to their own tradition for the resources to take such a challenge forward. For his own part, MacIntyre will look to his own Thomist tradition of ethical and rational enquiry.

I agree; the significant contribution MacIntyre has already made as a Thomist

scholar, has proved the point. For my part, I also believe that I should look to my own tradition for the resources to fight against liberalism, that is, Marxism in particular, and more generally the whole range of interconnecting currents of radical opposition to capital which have flourished or floundered, as the case may be, continuously over the past 170 years since the Chartist rebellion in England and the 1830 revolution in Paris.

So, what's new?

I believe that the case is proved, that rational, or "instrumental", politics cannot by itself be successful without *ethical politics*, and vice versa. That is to say, if we correctly understand what MacIntyre has demonstrated for us, ethical conceptions are not immutable, but subject to change, and, being intimately connected with rationality, ethical politics is to change the way people conceive of their own life and their reason for living. Rational debate based simply on interests and personal aspirations cannot succeed however.

Secondly, any of us who wish to take this struggle forward, should advise others, not simply to jump aboard one's own bandwagon, but rather, as MacIntyre advises, look to *their own* tradition, *their own* vocation, how it must change and how it can contribute to change.

But also, none of the processes of ethical change which MacIntyre investigates deal with the prospect that, as pre-supposed by liberalism, no shared way of life, no single world-wide community of shared values and meanings, is attainable. If we leave out of account for the immediate future at least, any prospect of any substantial portion of the modern world committing to a genuine shared ethos, then we still face the problems of multicultural nature of the modern nation-state and the domination of the world market over social life, the two characteristic challenges of modernity.

It may be possible to educate the followers of liberalism, and dissuade them of the delusion of objectivity and transcultural rationality, to make them aware of the impoverishment of the conception of meaning as "reference as such." Notwithstanding the fallacies of perspectivism and relativism, the good for one community is not the good for another. And yet we all share the same world. The unification of the world effected by the world market is something that most of the enemies of liberalism want to sustain just as much as do the supporters of liberalism, even if by other means. In the main, few want to return to village life.

The condition of life essential to the ancient *polis*, according to MacIntyre, is that all the activities which were meaningful within the life of the *polis*, were carried out *for the sake of* some other good, all such activities making up a chain of *for the sake of* relationships, serving the good of the *polis*. For the citizen of an ancient *polis*, it is therefore *rational* to do what one *ought* to do. On the face of it, the functional institutions of modernity, the corporations, institutions, universities, health services, townships, voluntary organisations, unions, clubs, churches, societies, and so forth, which to a significant extent continue to co-exist with the market, can be visualised as a viable environment for an ethical life, much as the ancient *poleis*.

In the ancient *polis*, for example, "everyone" was restricted to the free, male citizens of the given *polis*; foreigners, women and slaves were not part of

“everyone”. One of the gains of Christianity and later of modernity was the extension of the constitutive ideal of “human being” across which notions of equality and citizenship extend, to cover really all human beings.

This notion of universality, which is really the product of the world market, has to be brought together with the opportunity that every person must have to participate in a particular practical institution whose good is *for the sake of* the good of humankind. As MacIntyre pointed out in *After Virtue*, in the modern world, the same institutions which provide the opportunity for such participation invariably also *corrupt* people by rewarding effectiveness by satisfying people’s desires, that is by providing *external rewards* for effectiveness, as opposed to the rewards *internal* to the practice itself.

The site of the struggle against liberalism cannot then be the “public domain” of media debates, election campaigns, academic journals and so on, addressing itself to “citizens of nowhere” who speak all languages but understand none. For here, MacIntyre has shown, genuinely ethical dialogue confronts almost unsurmountable difficulties within such a domain. The site of struggle must be *within* the institutions of practical life.

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