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MacIntyre, A. (2016) *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity – An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning and Narrative*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 322 pages. ISBN: 978-1-107-17645-4 Hardback

This book is both a summation and distillation of MacIntyre’s ‘mature project’ which began with *After Virtue* in 1981. This argued that the failure of Enlightenment moral philosophy to achieve its aim of a rationally justified and universally applicable ethics was inevitable because adherence to ethical schemes could only be justified within a teleological account of the human agent which the Enlightenment denied. The virtue traditions, in all their variety, had provided both accounts of ethical action and of its justification which avoided this problem and were not vulnerable to the devastating Nietzschean critique of Enlightenment moral philosophy. *After Virtue* argued that the replacement of the virtue traditions by Enlightenment moral philosophy was explicable in terms of the loss of those local communal contexts in which such traditions were secured. Despite the inherent pessimism of this account *After Virtue* became a classic and was quickly taken up across a range of disciplines, principally as a source of critique. Other than Aristotle, MacIntyre is the most widely cited writer by business ethicists working on the virtues (Ferrero and Sison 2014).

Business ethicists and other management scholars have used MacIntyre’s work to address the often vexed relationships between the types of professional practice that require and develop virtues and the institutional contexts that support but potentially threaten them. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* is the first volume since *After Virtue* in which MacIntyre discusses the context of work and will be of particular interest to those working on virtues in business.

These arguments about work appear and have always appeared in MacIntyre’s broader and ongoing enquiries into moral philosophy and philosophy of action. In particular, ‘Notes from the Moral Wilderness’, an essay from 1958, argued that the moral philosophies of modernity-Kantian, Utilitarian, Contractarian and the rest, fail to provide convincing reasons as to why we should act in one way rather than another and much of MacIntyre’s subsequent work has attempted to account for and remedy this. Unlike the Nietzscheans and emotivists with whom he took issue in *After Virtue*, the genealogists he targeted in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990) and the expressivists whose arguments are considered here, MacIntyre holds that the failure of Enlightenment schemes to justify moral judgments is not a permanent condition but rather a passing feature of modern philosophies and the fragmented social structures to which these give expression.

However, both Liberal Aristotelian and Marxist critics have accused MacIntyre of failing to provide guidance to contemporary agents as to what to do other than lament. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* responds to this charge. At the same time, it provides devastating critiques of alternative contemporary schemes of self-understanding, including positive psychology (pp. 193-197) and preference maximisation (pp. 102-105) whilst intriguingly adding ‘Virtue Ethics’ to the list of failed modern moral philosophies (p66).

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre argued that for some quality to count as a virtue it must operate in the contexts of practices, individual lives understood in narrative terms and the traditions of relevant communal settings. In *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* the individual life so understood is in the foreground. The texts are consistent but the perspective has shifted and with it a revised definition of the virtues as: “just those qualities that enable agents to identify both what goods are at stake in any particular situation and their relative importance in that situation *and* how that particular agent must act for the sake of the good and the best.” (190 – emphasis retained)

If we understand that the standards by which our actions should be judged are independent of us and we have a considered appraisal of our options, then and only then can we develop a coherent narrative as to how our lives are unfolding and justify our actions by these standards in these contexts. Desire, practical rationality and narrative are thereby pregnant with mutual implication and it is to their relationship that MacIntyre devotes the five chapters of this work.

Chapter One returns to the insight MacIntyre found in Kuhn’s analysis of paradigms (Caiazza 2014). It presents ‘two rival standpoints’ (x) about the relationship between desires and practical reasoning; those of Neo-Aristotelianism and of expressivism. Adherents to these positions neither characterise good and goods nor understand the relationship between desire and practical reasoning in compatible ways. MacIntyre develops arguments about their conflicts with his usual rigour and concludes that neither position has the theoretical resources to convince the other ‘by appeal to standards that the other recognizes’ (63). The response to this conundrum is not to abandon these arguments but to recast them in the social and historic contexts in which they find a home.

Chapter 2 illustrates how the presuppositions of social orders inform the claims of philosophers. Two opening examples draw parallels between Aristotle’s exclusions (of women, labourers, non-Greeks) and Hume’s claims to universality of positions contested widely in his own time. The main work of the chapter however is to demonstrate that Aristotelian and Thomistic theses about common goods were not so much defeated between the thirteenth and eighteenth century but rather lost the social contexts in which they had once found application. As feudal societies gave way to early capitalism the contexts in which public judgments were made were themselves transformed; abstract *moral* reasoning by individuals replaces shared *practical* reasoning about common and individual goods. The philosophers of Enlightenment give expression to this new self-understanding and their proposed moral restraints (Kantian, utilitarian and the rest) are best understood as arguments for altruism. The debt that this argument owes to Marx was largely hidden from readers of *After Virtue* but the remainder of Chapter 2 both endorses Marx’s Aristotelianism and argues that Aristotelians need to learn about the relationship between philosophical claims and social contexts from Marx.

Chapter 3 reformulates the argument that expressivists confuse a powerful critique of the failures of Enlightenment ‘Morality’ in use with a critique of the meaning of moral claims as such. The expressivist critique is explored not only in the work of its best contemporary exponent (Bernard Williams) but also in the work of influential artists (represented here by Oscar Wilde and DH Lawrence). Though mocked by artists and unmasked by philosophers, MacIntyre maintains that modern ‘Morality’ survives because it performs a disciplinary function essential for the maintenance of the social order; that of providing secular and supposedly authoritative reasons for limiting desire: “What this recognition of the distinctive authority of Morality by plain nonphilosophical persons involves is a conviction that there is such a conclusive reason, even if they are unable to say what it is.” (p. 136).

Christopher Lutz (2012: 179-181) has characterised one of the objections to MacIntyre’s work as ‘the nostalgia critique’, represented in this journal by John Dobson (2009) and by others elsewhere (e.g. Nussbaum, 1989). This argues that MacIntyre’s withering account of capitalism is rooted in a nostalgic longing for simpler times and therefore has little to say about what we should do in the present. Chapters 4 and 5 address this concern.

Chapter 4 asks how a contemporary agent could develop a coherent answer to the question of how to rank order goods? Two possibilities emerge: the practical rationality of the conventional preference maximizer and that of the NeoAristotelian (though what matters are the views themselves and not their titles). Whilst for the former no “genuinely unconditional commitments” (p. 188) are possible, the latter identify and pursue the common goods at stake in the contexts of family, school, workplace and political community; but they (we) cannot do this alone. First, both achievements and failures to achieve common goods at any of these levels profoundly effects the potential for their achievement by others. Second, shared practical deliberation about the pursuit of common goods in each of these contexts requires us to reflect upon and if necessary amend our desires, to regulate our relationships according to the precepts of natural law and to develop the virtues. MacIntyre uses the examples of commonly owned fishing fleets in Denmark and the political organization of the favelas in Brazil to illustrate the organization of local political communities for the achievement and defence of such common goods. The conclusion of *After Virtue*, that we need to develop particular types of local community, is maintained, but fleshed out with examples.

Chapter 5 exemplifies the relationships between desire, practical reasoning and narrative self-understanding through the narration of four very different lives, all directed to the pursuit of particular goods and all committed to particular theoretical standpoints. This somewhat dramatic ending to a philosophical work is no artistic flourish however, but rather illustrates the relationship between the pursuit of a life directed towards the achievement of a coherent set of goods and the ability to narrate that life in the context of those social, institutional and practice-based contexts in which we have lived them. So it was for CLR James to change the course of his life through reflection on his beloved practice of cricket and so it should be for all of us.

So what of the relevance of this text to the uses to which MacIntyre’s work has been put in business ethics? The first point to note is that the relationships between the development of virtues and the achievement of goods internal to practices within some or other institutional context is confirmed (explicitly on p38). In the new text, however, internal goods are more obviously a species of common good, the common good of workplaces which should stand in the same relation to its institutional context as the common goods of families, schools, the political community and others should stand to theirs.

One of the challenges for MacIntyrean work in business ethics has been to reconcile the use of his ideas with his ongoing hostility to both capitalism and modernity. This book provides the first occasion in which MacIntyre endorses a contemporary business organization as an institutional setting for practices and a management initiative for enhancing the experience of work. The former is provided by Cummins Engines, the latter by Deming (1986). Cummins’ development of the Diesel Engine required two decades of painstaking improvement and ongoing investment from a local bank before it ever turned a profit. MacIntyreans looking for illustrations of practice-sustaining market relationships (such as those provided by patient capital) will cite this example for decades to come.

Deming’s reforms in Japan created cellular production through which: “work was directed to an end which they [the workers] could make their own.” (p. 130). A further illustration from a quite different context draws on Tom Burns’ studies of the BBC in the 1960s (Burns 1977). Both Illustrate the type of workers’ control over production that MacIntyre endorses and in which “More experienced workers become teachers. Managers become enablers.” (132). The contrast between this understanding of the potential of managers and their condemnation in *After Virtue* is stark and will doubtless occupy pages of this and other journals.

Many of the criticisms that are likely to come the way of this book are consequent upon the breadth of its scope and its directedness towards a general readership. There are arguments which, as MacIntyre admits, are presented too briefly, there are arguments which will fail to satisfy experts in particular fields (e.g. the exhortation of Deming may surprise critics of TQM) and little is said about contemporary Virtue Ethics except for a brief critical remark. Such issues are inevitable in an extended argument about the development of NeoAristotelian, Thomist, modern and expressivist moral philosophy and whose theses require an understanding of both material transformations in technology, economics, social structures and politics and related transformations in their conceptualization over the last several hundred years.

MacIntyre argues that contemporary disciplinary boundaries act to prevent us from asking certain types of questions, precisely those he wishes to ask, and it follows that these boundaries must be overcome for him to provide the answers found here. But these are not the only boundaries he has sought to transgress.

This is not only an academic treatise; MacIntyre challenges his readers about their own understandings and choices and in particular to my and your attitude towards, relationship with and capacity to learn from those whose voices routinely go unheard. How then to improve? Whilst Kahneman’s (2011 and elsewhere) work on human error is rightly cited, MacIntyre neglects research by Grant (e.g. 2012) and others that supports an Aristotelian understanding of the relationship between experience and desire. If the reformation of desire is pre-requisite to moral agency, then empirical material beyond the biographical would have helped readers’ intent on amending their own and others’ desires. One conclusion that we would likely share is that the reformation of desire does not come from reading books.

Books are judged against a variety of standards and as the early social media responses to this one indicate, MacIntyre has produced a page-turner. One reason is his flair for aphorism and these are littered throughout. Two particular favourites: [Oscar Wilde] “failed to observe that those who lead stylish lives are rarely great artists and that great artists rarely lead stylish lives.” (p. 143) and: “In contemporary English, to be happy is to be and feel satisfied with one’s present state or some aspect of it, whether one had good reason to feel satisfied or not.” (p. 54). Humour is a virtue after all.

The reception of this book will differ in highly predictable ways between the representatives of the conflicting positions it addresses. Economists will be contemptuous of its adherence to surplus value, Marxists will find its politics wanting, Liberal Aristotelians will despair of its Thomistic insistence on rank ordering goods, post-colonial theorists and feminists will continue to wonder at the narrowness of its understanding of oppression. Those who accuse MacIntyre of nostalgia and those who accuse him of relativism will remain unsatisfied but will have to provide new arguments of their own. Those who have followed MacIntyre’s work will find that there is little here that has not been argued before, though in some cases, such as the critical distinction between public and common goods, only in quite obscure sources. It is in the integration of these ideas that this book’s true value lies. For those who are new to MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflict of Modernity*, provides an ideal place from which to begin.

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