

This chapter examines and then critiques the ambitious attempts of the influential modern philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre to address modern morality's relativistic leanings (see this volume's Introduction). It argues that – though the critique of modernity and its Enlightenment roots may have merit – the solution MacIntyre offers (by appeal to classical philosophy) ultimately fails.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A DIAGNOSIS OF SELF-MALAISE: ON MACINTYRE'S *AFTER VIRTUE*

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Alasdair MacIntyre's work in ethics follows in the footsteps of twentieth century efforts to put the ideals of Enlightenment and modernity on trial, and his book *After Virtue* diagnoses a wide-spread malaise in contemporary moral discourse. As a corrective to this condition, MacIntyre offers a remedy along Aristotelian-Thomistic lines. He specifically conceives of a recovery of these lines that would allow for a common ground in moral debates which would reveal the normative and teleological character of the human good. However, within these pages, I argue that MacIntyre underestimates how his moral corrective is actually a re-inscription of the Enlightenment project, and thus equally doomed to failure. I do this by sketching out three different lines. First, I present MacIntyre's dismal appraisal of modern moral discourse, which has long since abandoned a reliance of Aristotelian principles of ethics. Second, I outline an informative disjunction MacIntyre sets up between having to choose between a Nietzschean or an Aristotelian model of ethical action. Last, I argue that MacIntyre's own choice, simultaneously based on, but also diverging from, Aristotle fails because his revamped account of the virtue formation so necessary for modern human flourishing leaves open a space for its development according to contingent histories and traditions, which implies an attenuated account of the virtue ethics he seeks to recover, and vindicates, rather than condemns, the Enlightenment's attempt to liberate moral theories from its strict teleological forbears.

1. MacIntyre's Diagnosis of Present Moral Danger

In a 2009 published interview with Alex Voorhoeve, MacIntyre reiterated his belief that it is possible for us to recover rationality into our moral deliberation.¹ His strategy calls for adopting an Aristotelian-Thomistic paradigm capable of allowing human life to flourish by overcoming the lack of common ground which came to dominate post-Enlightenment discursive practices. Voorhoeve's interview sums up much of his subject's previous work in moral philosophy and shows MacIntyre's adherence to positions he developed in his ambitious and provocative book *After Virtue*, wherein he argued that modern models of moral discourse are locked in hopeless states of disarray.²

MacIntyre's analysis of such models finds them so fragmented and disjointed from formerly unified schemes of discourse as to be unable to provide either the coherence necessary for moral debate or the capacity to recognize and make sense of its confusions, confluences and disorientations.³ He traces these failures to Enlightenment strategies which (i) promoted the project of self-legitimation, (ii) attempted to figure out the world for oneself, and (iii) broke decisively with previous function-oriented (or teleologically-based) understandings of human living.⁴

According to MacIntyre's narrative account of this break, it is precisely the accumulated failures of an Enlightenment ethos that took flight from the authority of tradition, which situates us presently within the midst of a

¹ Alex Voorhoeve, "Alasdair MacIntyre: The Illusion of Self-Sufficiency." In *Conversations on Ethics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 111-131.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1984).

³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 55.

⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 59.; MacIntyre gestures toward, but soon abandons, Kant's teleological historical writings (MacIntyre 1984, p. 23), which comprise no small contribution toward an Enlightenment inspired viewpoint (*Absicht*) of what might be reasonably anticipated for the human species to achieve following its unique destinal purpose. In his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective*, Kant (2006, p. 5 [8:18]) famously warns against abandoning a teleological theory of nature plan for humanity, lest one be consigned to the dismal reign of chance (*trostlose Ungefähr*) replacing the guiding thread of reason (*Leitfadens der Vernunft*). By positing the notion of there being guiding threads in history, Kant believes that the regulative assumption of teleology (even if only heuristically) can aid us in promoting not only our natural, but also working toward our rational ends.

“moral calamity.”⁵ On his view, contemporary moral theories betray their barren state by leaving us “no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.”⁶ One corollary of this incoherence is that it places us in a trapped, no-way-out emotivism, in which there is no common ground because “all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of reference...attitudes or feeling.”⁷

MacIntyre’s diagnosis determines that the emotivist consequences for modern morality are dire because it leaves us in a kind of *de gustibus non disputandum est*⁸ kind of ethical arena which produces no more than a ‘we’ll just have to agree to disagree’ state of affairs. In this arena, which espouses a ‘to each one’s own’ point of view, thereby ensuring that there can be no disputing one’s ethics, emotivism inculcates a form of self-seclusion or radical individualism that takes moral judgments as utterances of feelings that merely express attitudes of either approval or disapproval. MacIntyre points out the emotivism is hard pressed to answer “What kind of approval [or disapproval]” is being expressed; either it cannot rationally legitimate its belief in its moral pronouncements or it conveys the vacuous or “empty circularity” of its beliefs or disbeliefs.⁹ Consequently, on MacIntyre’s reading, the modern emergence of emotivism emanated out of the collapse of Enlightenment theories, and attests to our loss of a unifying framework which is capable of defending and adjudicating moral judgments on rational grounds.

⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, ix.; The narrative character of MacIntyre’s work is set against the voluntarist conception of morality and selfhood. MacIntyre’s philosophy stresses a certain teleological projection of human ends rather than the exertion of a radically free will, e.g., in which will replaces reason (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 114, 201-205.)

⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 6.

⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 11-12. MacIntyre argues that emotivism is false as a theory of meaning. To say, e.g. “‘This is right’ or ‘This is good’...does not mean the same as ‘Hurrah for this!’ or any of the other attempts at equivalence suggested by emotive theorists” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 13.)

⁸ There is no disputing about taste.

⁹ The “vacuous circularity” of emotivism is reminiscent of the famous dilemma in Plato’s *Euthyphro*: does P approve of x because P thinks x is good or does P think x is good because P approves of x? MacIntyre traces this circle by showing how emotivists claim that moral judgments express feelings of approval of moral judgments (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 12-13). For the Euthyphro dilemma see Plato 1997, p. 9 (10a).

In the course of shaping his critique, MacIntyre gathers a constellation of Enlightenment superstars, e.g., Immanuel Kant, Denis Diderot, David Hume, and Adam Smith, all of whom, he argues, failed to provide necessary rational coherence for their moral theories. Chiefly, it was their collective oversight of what he takes to be the functional, telic character of human ends¹⁰ that led them to shared failure.¹¹ That the moral theories themselves were widely divergent is of no consequence. No matter whether the theories were based either on sentiment and passions (à la Hume) or on the formal, constitutive preconditions of reason (à la Kant), they all collapsed by failing to establish any “connection between the precepts of morality and the facts of human nature.”¹² In other words, for MacIntyre human morality is *essentially* joined with human nature.

The inability of the Enlightenment thinkers to note this necessary conjunction was an assault on Aristotelianism, and its overthrow led precisely to the contemporary dislocated, fragmented moral theories from which we are left to choose.¹³ Consequently, we might attempt to summarize MacIntyre’s concerns in this leg of his argument as follows: 1. Our present state of moral discourse is a consequence of an unsuccessful Enlightenment project, which, because of the discrepant relation between determinate human nature and autonomous moral imperatives, has failed to provide the common ground necessary for moral debate and rational justification.

2. Genealogy or Teleology?

MacIntyre sees it as his task to recover and reemploy this missing common ground for substantive rational deliberation,¹⁴ which has been replaced by

¹⁰ See especially, MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 55-59.

¹¹ Here I leave aside MacIntyre’s Christianized Aristotelianism in his critique of the Enlightenment project’s dismissal of divine authority and ordained law, although it is clear how powerfully it informs his Thomistic idea of “man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential nature.” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 52-54.) The following passage is especially telling: “[T]he divine moral law is still a schoolmaster to remove us [from man-as-he-happens-to-be toward man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*], even if only grace enables us to respond to and obey its precepts.” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 54.)

¹² MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 56.: my italics.

¹³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 118.

¹⁴ The claim that the modern age shows signs of absentmindedness is a common thread running through twentieth-century critiques of modernity. In his critique of purposively minded philosophical historiography, Karl Löwith (1949) regards its discourses as forgetful of its eschatological character, and it is modernity’s obliviousness to the secularization framework that challenges any claims to historical self-

modern theories of relative individualism, secularization theories of self-assertion,¹⁵ nihilistic theories of disenchantment, theories of a cold, calculating, instrumentalization of reason, and detached meta-ethical debates. One cannot fail to note how MacIntyre's philosophy is rich in its scope, and, more strikingly, how it is oriented toward providing a crucial historical payoff. As such, it is a past-, present-, and, more importantly, a future-looking philosophy.

The diachronic character of MacIntyre's thought leads to a key juxtapositional disjunction he sets up between choosing the guiding hand of either Aristotle or Nietzsche,¹⁶ which comprise two competing theoretical alternatives,¹⁷ "Nietzsche's moral philosophy is matched specifically against Aristotle's by virtue of the historical role which each plays,"¹⁸ upon which hinges the future of moral philosophy. As we have seen, MacIntyre holds that Enlightenment normative theories failed to provide the common ground necessary for moral deliberation. This failure makes way either for a morality incapable of rationally defensible deliberation (in the mode of Nietzsche and emotivism) or for a way to affirm a morality wherein rational adjudication is possible, as was exemplified, MacIntyre believes, in the classical ethics of virtue (in the mode of Aristotle). The former disjunct, MacIntyre avers, is a modern disaster, and he opts instead for an idiosyncratic modification of Aristotle's legacy.

However, MacIntyre grants that Nietzsche's philosophy was not only an offshoot of Enlightenment failure, it also holds value (if only in a negative sense) because of its "historic achievement"¹⁹ of contributing to our understanding of the moral stakes involved.

legitimacy. Moreover, in her excellent study of Hans Blumenberg's challenge to Löwith in his monumental *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Elizabeth Brient relates how, among others, "Heidegger tells the story of the 'forgetfulness of Being,' [and] Freud that of 'repression.'" See Brient 2002, p. 13.

¹⁵ See, for example, Hans Blumenberg's thesis of self-assertion, which "means an existential program, according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him" (Blumenberg 1983, p. 138).

¹⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 109.

¹⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 110.

¹⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 117.

¹⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 113.

i. Nietzsche

In setting up this disjunction, MacIntyre argues that Nietzsche was a perceptive reader of culture and understood the utter illusions of Enlightenment ideals. Moreover, he saw the ramifications of Enlightenment moral pretensions, namely, that it offers no reason to think that morality can be validly objective and rationally justified. However, MacIntyre also believes that Nietzsche's understanding and diagnosis of Enlightenment sickness didn't just speak for the morality weakening his own time because, in a way, "Nietzsche is the moral philosopher of the present age."²⁰ MacIntyre thus describes Nietzsche's import to contemporary ethical theory as a foil to Enlightenment theories that rejected Aristotle's moral philosophy:

[I]t was because a moral tradition of which Aristotle's thought was the intellectual core was repudiated during the transitions of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries that the Enlightenment project of discovering new rational secular foundations for morality had to be undertaken. And it was because that project failed, because the views advanced by its most intellectually powerful protagonists, and more especially by Kant, could not be sustained in the face of rational criticism that Nietzsche and all his existentialist and emotivist successors were able to mount their apparently successful critique of all previous morality (MacIntyre 1984, p. 117).

According to MacIntyre, Nietzsche recognized that Enlightenment ideals which gave pride of place to subject-centered theories of morality left themselves with no legs upon which to stand. The Enlightenment's subjectivist ethos whether of, *inter alia*, a Humean theory of sentiments or a Kantian theory of duty, leaves us without the possibility of forming a morality that is justifiable along common grounds, and, hence, with no morality at all. MacIntyre recognizes that Nietzsche had the acuity to detect the theoretical shortcomings of Enlightenment luminaries, but also questioned any attempt to hold out for a rational vindication of morality.²¹ However, as stated, MacIntyre also recognizes something constructive in Nietzsche's philosophy, which, although presented as a clear and present

²⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 114.; Our present age morality, is, for MacIntyre, emotivist and thus without ethos.

²¹ Nietzsche's diagnosis of modern morality identifies the tyranny of the weak as an "idée fixe," namely, that the definition of the good is baptized by "those to whom the good has been done," i.e., from the perspective of the needy and unexceptional. Briefly, so-called slave morality is internalized by the herd to exercise fallacious *ad misericordiam* as a virtue. See Nietzsche 1956, pp. 160-61, and Nietzsche 1973, pp. 175-76.

danger, also offers a platform from which can emerge the potential for a recovery of morality. In other words, while Nietzsche's philosophy represents, for MacIntyre, the disastrous and destructive character of emotivist and existentialist interpreters of morality, its findings can still point us in the direction of seeking to recover what the Enlightenment theories forsook:

[T]he defensibility of the Nietzschean position turns in the end on the answer to the question: was it right in the first place to reject Aristotle? For if Aristotle's position in ethics and politics – or something very like it – could be sustained, the whole Nietzschean enterprise would be pointless. This is because the power of Nietzsche's position depends upon the truth of one central thesis: that all rational vindications of morality manifestly fail and that belief in the tenets of morality needs to be explained in terms of a set of rationalizations which conceal the fundamentally non-rational phenomena of the will. My own argument obliges me to agree with Nietzsche that the philosophers of the Enlightenment never succeeded in providing grounds for doubting his central thesis: his epigrams are even deadlier than his extended arguments. But, if my earlier argument is correct, that failure itself was nothing other than an historical sequel to the rejection of the Aristotelian tradition. And thus the key question does indeed become: can Aristotle's ethics, or something very like it, after all be vindicated? (MacIntyre 1984, pp. 117–18).

Consequently, MacIntyre's *Nietzsche or Aristotle* question is set up to reject the vacuous ethos of Nietzsche, and to consider seriously the substantive ethos/culture of Aristotelian moral philosophy.

ii. Aristotle

In contrast to the Nietzschean alternative for modern morality, MacIntyre embarks on his project to reconstruct the salient points of an Aristotelian virtue ethics by vindicating its unifying ethos. His main focus is on the essentially inherent teleology shared by human beings, which, if developed according to its purpose, can lead to the kind of virtue formation that is required to achieve happiness or *eudaimonia*,²² and thus contribute to the establishment of virtuous human communities. However, although MacIntyre believes that he can give such an account, he acknowledges that the Aristotelian framework will need to undergo modern modifications in order to fashion fresh legs for its run at modern moral relevancy.

²² MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 148.

In this sense, MacIntyre, the avowed Aristotelian,²³ is also performing a sort of genealogy in which supporters of a tradition overcome its theoretical exhaustion through amendatory action:

[I]t is clear that if we are to make a new start to the enquiry in order to put Aristotelianism to the question all over again, it will be necessary to consider Aristotle's own moral philosophy not merely as it is expressed in key texts in his own writing, but as an attempt to inherit and to sum up a good deal that has gone on before and in turn as a source of stimulus to much later thought. It will be necessary, that is, to write a short history of conceptions of the virtues... in which Aristotle's is only a part (MacIntyre 1984, p. 119).

However, although MacIntyre's summary of the history of the virtues will include Aristotle's only in part, he nonetheless proceeds to offer an inflexible, hardline remedy as its only solution: "If a premodern view of morals and politics is to be vindicated against modernity, it will be in *something like* Aristotelian terms or not at all."²⁴ This writing of history is basically an attempt at the kind of rhetorical genealogy MacIntyre has espoused elsewhere, in which such alterations,

enables the adherents of a tradition of enquiry to *rewrite its history in a more insightful way*. And such a history of a particular tradition provides not only a way of identifying the continuities in virtue of which that tradition of enquiry has survived and flourished, as one and the same tradition, but also of identifying more accurately that structure of justification which underpins whatever claims to truth are made within it.²⁵

Although MacIntyre takes up the banner of Aristotelianism, and regards his task as re-inscribing the unifying ethos of Aristotle's notion of virtues into modern moral discourse, his modified account, the "*something like*" Aristotle that is required will depart from Aristotelianism in significant ways.

Consequently, we might attempt to summarize MacIntyre's concerns in this second leg of his argument as follows: 2. In answer to our present moral malaise, MacIntyre considers that we have only two options open to us: the non-ethos of Nietzsche or the ethos of the Aristotelian tradition. He rejects

²³ MacIntyre believes Aristotelianism is the most philosophically powerful moral thought of pre-modernity (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 118.) Aristotle is "*the* protagonist against whom I have matched the voices of liberal modernity" (p. 146), and that Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* "is the most brilliant set of lecture notes ever written" (p. 147).

²⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 118.

²⁵ See MacIntyre 1988, p. 363. My italics.

the former, accepts the latter, but not without an attempt to *modify* its salient features to suit our modern predicament.

iii. MacIntyre's Modifications of Aristotelian Tradition

At this point, one can begin to see that MacIntyre's ameliorative project is less a re-inscription than a re-fashioning to fit what he perceives as our present moral failure. Most significantly, we see him departing from Aristotle's metaphysical biology, which is at the heart of his natural and social teleology.²⁶ In addition, MacIntyre rejects Aristotle's famous, if controversial, account of the unity of the virtues.²⁷ His reasoning is that the virtues, which are dispositions that sustain those practices that can lead us toward fulfilling human goods, are not all compatible.²⁸ Virtues may conflict, at different times and in different places. Moreover, we also see MacIntyre's rejection of Aristotle's commitment to the Greek city/state as the *only* adequate *mise-en-scene* for the development and practice of virtues.²⁹

Consequently, MacIntyre's project calls for a bolstering of Aristotelian principles in a way that might follow the spirit but not the letter of those principles, and would be unrecognizable to Aristotle. These modifications contribute one by one to either erase or correct Aristotelian principles and precepts as MacIntyre deems fit, which is itself an act of freeing a modern moral system from its original influences and is the very same thing he sees as wrong in modern moral discourse. By developing a quasi-Aristotelian account of the virtues not by identifying them as metaphysically timeless

²⁶ See especially, MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 157-59, 162-63, 196-97.

²⁷ Near the end of Book VI in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (2001) announces the 'unity of virtues' thesis, which states that the virtues do not exist independently of each other. He claims that a person with one moral virtue must possess all others. He acknowledges that possession of moral virtue comes from the acquisition of practical wisdom, which is considered an essential and adequate condition for a moral virtue. For example, this is confirmed when Aristotle states, "It is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, or practically wise without moral virtue" (1144b 30-32).

²⁸ MacIntyre shifts significantly from Aristotle's unity of virtues when he writes that we may "understand the virtues as having their function in enabling an individual to make of his or her life one kind of unity rather than another" (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 189.)

²⁹ "What is likely to affront us—and rightly—is Aristotle's writing off of non-Greeks, barbarians and slaves, as not merely not possessing political relationships, but as incapable of them" (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 159.)

inner intelligences that fulfill their immanent natures, but rather by situating the virtues within a historically constituted context, MacIntyre is weakening, not strengthening, Aristotelian principles. Moreover, MacIntyre recognized that Aristotle put forward not just a metaphysical biology, but also a social and political teleology. Here is Aristotle's account in his *Politics*:

[I]t is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity.... The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing... but he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.³⁰

However, unlike Aristotle, MacIntyre identifies a tension between the natural and the social, and thus takes a turn away from Aristotle's biology, not only because it might be perceived as offensive to our contemporary sensibilities, e.g., Aristotle's arguments that some human beings are naturally suited to slavery,³¹ but also, more importantly, because it gives an account of human, social, and political nature that is too locked in to Aristotle's own situated historical time and thus cannot offer the kind of shared standard of virtues that apply to our own time. This break from Aristotle's natural teleology means that the social context wherein the virtues are situated recognizes that certain virtues, dispositions, practices and actions are right if they fulfill the value of some historically situated *telos*, which may or may not be the goal of any natural striving.³²

MacIntyre's account of the virtues is thus "social teleological" rather than naturally teleological. What this means is that the entelechy which he is after describes teleological processes within human social life, not outside it. Thus we come to MacIntyre's overarching aim: he wishes to inscribe a crucial historical component to Aristotle's philosophy³³ and revive the

³⁰ See Aristotle's *Politics* (2001), 1252^b34-1253^a5 & 1253^a25-30. Aristotle's understanding that 'the state is prior to both the family and the individual' is not a temporal priority, but rather should be read as an actuality that guides the potentiality. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle affirms that "actuality is prior to potency," but only as guiding, not temporal, principle. A man is not temporally prior to a boy, but is what the boy aims to become. Similarly, a state is not temporally prior to families and individuals, but is what families and individuals aim at creating in their natural, goal-driven development.

³¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 158-59, 162.

³² MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 196-197.

³³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 194.

Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics by placing it within the context of social life rather than in biological life.

The payoff of MacIntyre's modified Aristotelianism is that he thinks it can transcend the Babel of incoherence he perceives in modern moral theories by laying out the common ground, historically situated and viewed according to present needs, that a functional, social teleology of virtues can provide. Aristotelianism might be "the most powerful of pre-modern modes of moral thought"³⁴ but it seems inadequate to context of our present social needs, so something like it *and not like it* will have to be vindicated. We might attempt to summarize MacIntyre's concerns in this third leg of his argument as follows: 3. MacIntyre recognizes that there are aspects of Aristotle's philosophy that are, for us, a thing of the past that ought to remain in the past. In order to revivify the Aristotelian tradition, he tries to strengthen it by construing Aristotle's teleology along functional social lines that recognize certain virtues and actions as conducive to the human good. MacIntyre believes his historically situated, social teleology can provide the coherence so necessary for substantive moral deliberation, which can challenge those incoherent moral theories that have us in a state of moral chaos.

3. MacIntyre's Fantasies

As we have seen, MacIntyre's attempt to provide an alternative to the "moral calamity" of contemporary ethical discourse is riddled with several holes. Indeed, I believe that his attempt to revivify the Aristotelian tradition of morality itself entombs Aristotle's philosophy in a virtual mausoleum of moral philosophy. As we have seen, MacIntyre attributes the rise of an ethos-less morality, which he takes to be exemplified by post-Nietzschean existentialism and vacuously circular emotivism, as rising out of the ashes of a failed Enlightenment project, which, above all, has failed to provide the common ground necessary for moral debate and rational justification. He attempts to answer this failure by having us make a limited choice between either a morality incapable of rationally defensible deliberation (i.e., Nietzsche's) or a morality wherein rational adjudication is possible, but that will need to be tailored to fit modern times (i.e., Aristotle's), thus delivering his all-or-nothing selection of not really Aristotle, but rather that "something like it," which we might call MacInstotle.

MacIntyre proceeds to pave a road away from the Nietzschean alternative and toward a modified Aristotelianism that is itself an amendatory

³⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 118.

action which aims at strengthening what can only be taken as an acceptance of Aristotle's discredited natural teleology.³⁵ He thus perceives a tension between Aristotle's natural, social, and political teleology, and ultimately rejects Aristotle's metaphysical biology while supporting a social teleology of virtues (really, just functional dispositions) that aim at fulfilling historically contingent human goods. His attempt at revivifying Aristotelian moral philosophy along modern lines, i.e., without the strong teleological lines of Greek antiquity, is a grand attempt that tries very hard to succeed at fashioning something new out of something old, but, in the end, the pouring of new wine into old skins succeeds only to burst the skins. Hence, I find that MacIntyre's project fails on at least two counts.

First, MacIntyre fails to register fully how his modification of Aristotle's philosophy, an Aristotle for the modern age, as it were, vindicates the Enlightenment's liberation from its teleological parentage. Indeed, we see this in MacIntyre's insistence on splitting apart the natural from the social from Aristotle's framework, which only serves to weaken it through an attenuated attempt at replacement. Function-oriented moral philosophies like Aristotle's failed to gain traction not because they were overlooked or misapplied, they faded because of new challenges to how a constantly evolving natural and social world became understood by human beings, worlds in which essentialist teleological strategies proved too inadequate. Rather than perceiving the abandonment of teleological descriptions of man and world as a sign of modern malaise, MacIntyre should instead heed the call for developing radically new strategies (whatever they might look like) that can succeed at supplanting the dominance of current, ethos-less moral discourses. So, in this case, MacIntyre is playing into the hands of Enlightenment philosophers who were right to break new ground in their theories of self-assertion and self-legitimation.

Second, MacIntyre's allowance for the teleological development of the virtues along contingent, historical lines not only attempts to rewrite and amend the Aristotelian tradition, it also verges on wiping it out entirely. Here we see the irony, which has preoccupied much of modernism and postmodernism, playing its hand in MacIntyre's theory. He believes that we live, if not in a God-forsaken, then in a morality-forsaken world. Contemporary moral discourse is dead in the water: we have all agreed to disagree, and to leave it at that. Consequently, such "morality" is really no morality. However, MacIntyre admits that his modified Aristotelianism allows for the formation of the virtues not along the natural-social teleology

³⁵ Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (New York: Modern Library, 1993 [1859]) is held as one of the last nails in the coffin for notions of teleology with regard to final causality.

of Aristotle, but rather as developing and guided within historical social contexts; hence, his social teleology.

MacIntyre asserts that past conceptions of virtues can be in conflict with present and future virtues. If virtues can be in conflict, and virtues are constitutive of morality, then, it seems to follow, that morality, too, can be in conflict. And this leaves us not only back at square one, but seems to pin down MacIntyre to offering a less than consistent prescription of a once coherent scheme, which convicts him to his own charge of not recognizing the “quixotic character,” if not also to the chimerical construction, of his self-appointed task.³⁶ What this means, if I am following MacIntyre’s premises correctly, is that either morality is but a historical construct and must be viewed independently of other “moralities,” or, what seems utterly inimical to MacIntyre’s project, that there is no such thing as morality that we can identify either in history or in our present age. The premises of MacIntyre’s argument seem to suggest this course, which risks reducing the virtues to a mere *façon de parler*, thus supplying the ammunition to blow up its own project. And there matters remain.

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³⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 55.

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At the core of this chapter’s argument lies an irony: MacIntyre unwittingly commits the same error as his target. This should not be taken to imply that appeal to teleological principles or classical schools of thought is doomed to similar failure. (The problem lies not in these, but in how MacIntyre’s use of them – by preserving too strong a role for historical contingency – fails to give a real, objective grounding for virtue.) A general lesson of additional value is exemplified in the parallel drawn here between MacIntyre and Nietzsche: both have negative projects of merit, though in neither case does this translate to a successful positive project. Put perhaps too pithily, being right about what is wrong does not exclude being wrong about what is right.