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A SOUND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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In my judgment, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is the only sound, practical, and undogmatic moral philosophy in the whole Western Tradition. That judgment is shared to some extent but not wholly by Professor Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue*.

After Virtue is a fine piece of historical scholarship in the field of moral philosophy. It ranges over the whole tradition of Western thought in the field of morals from the early Greeks to the present day. It is well worth reading for the comprehensiveness and clarity of the intellectual narrative it presents, if for no other reason. But there is another reason for reading it, and that is its central message, to which a reader should pay close attention. It is this on which I wish to concentrate within the brief compass of this review. Other reviews of this book have paid too much attention to the historical scholarship, too little to the book's philosophical message, and none to the relation of the one to the other.

The briefest way to summarize the philosophical thesis of *After Virtue* is to explain the title. Professor MacIntyre maintains, and I think quite rightly, that without the Greek, and especially the Aristotelian, conception of moral virtue as an habitual disposition of man's appetites or desires that put him on the pathway toward leading a good human life, moral philosophy is simply bankrupt.

When Rome replaces Greece, and Roman Stoicism (with its insistence that nothing more than a will in conformity with the laws of nature and of reason is needed for a sound morality) ignores the sound common sense in Aristotle's insight that good fortune as well good habits are needed for a good life, Western moral philosophy turns in the wrong direction.

A brief respite from this misdirection occurs in the late Middle Ages, when the moral theology of Thomas Aquinas reinstates Aristotle's conception of the role of moral virtue and of good fortune in the pursuit of temporal (and, therefore, imperfect) happiness. But after that, and especially from the eighteenth century down to our own day, Western moral philosophy goes the whole way toward its present bankrupt condition. As MacIntyre clearly and cogently points out, all attempts to lay the foundation of a sound morality after the concept of virtue is abandoned are necessarily doomed to failure.

To touch only the high spots, among the points to which MacIntyre calls our attention are (a) Hume's failure to find a basis for moral sentiments in the passions; (b) Kant's unsuccessful version of ancient Stoicism's appeal solely to the laws of reason; (c) the fumbling efforts of J. S. Mill's *Utilitarianism* to restore happiness as the ultimate end to be sought, rendered self-defeating by Mill's hedonistic error of identifying happiness with the maximization of pleasures or satisfactions without any basis for differentiating between good pleasures or satisfactions and bad pleasures, and also by his substitution of the general happiness (or the greatest good for the greatest number) for individual happiness as the ultimate end; and, finally, (d) the complete denial of objective truth to any moral judgments (judgments that categorically prescribe what ought to be sought and ought to be done), which leads to the emotivism and the so-called noncognitive ethics prevalent in our own day.

In surveying this demise of sound moral philosophy, MacIntyre heaps excessive and unwarranted praise on the part that Nietzsche played, attributing to him penetrating critical insights that justified the wholesale dismissal of all the modern views with which he was

acquainted, and substituting for them nothing but his own brand of nihilistic skepticism. That, in my judgment, makes Nietzsche the villain rather than the hero of the story.

In the first place, we did not need Nietzsche to justify our dismissal of the errors made by moral philosophers since the eighteenth century. An understanding of all the fundamental insights that make Aristotle's Ethics the only sound, practical, and undogmatic moral philosophy would have sufficed for that. In the second place, Nietzsche's contribution, if it has any merit at all, is nullified by the nihilistic skepticism which he thought was the only alternative to the doctrines he rejected. His ignorance, misunderstanding, or neglect of Aristotle's *Ethics* is unacceptable. MacIntyre's juxtaposition, in several chapters, of Nietzsche vs. Aristotle, as if this presented us with a genuine choice, is also unacceptable.

That, however, is not the only serious fault with the philosophical message that is interlaced with the historical narrative in MacIntyre's book. The bankruptcy of moral philosophy in modern times does not stem solely from the loss of the concept of moral virtue and the attempt to substitute for it moral laws or rules of conduct, the validity and utility of which have been so successfully challenged. It stems also from the loss of the other elements that, in Aristotle's Ethics, are inextricably connected with the concept of virtue.

These elements are as follows:

(1) a nonhedonistic and totally nonpsychological conception of happiness as identical with a whole life well-lived, because virtuously conducted and accompanied by the blessings of good fortune;

(2) an understanding that happiness, so conceived, is not experienceable or enjoyable at any moment in the individual's life, that it functions as the ultimate end for which everything else is a constitutive or an operative means in the same way that an architect's vision of a building to be erected functions as the end to be aimed at, with the one difference that the building, when erected, exists and endures, whereas a good life when completed is over and done with;

(3) the crucial insight that moral or prescriptive judgments have a different kind of truth from that of factual or descriptive judgments, by conformity with right desire instead of by conformity with reality;

(4) the distinction between natural and acquired desires, together with the distinction between real and merely apparent goods—real goods being the objects of natural desires (or inherent human needs), and merely apparent goods seeming to be good only because individuals have acquired desires for them and so happen to want them;

(5) the understanding that though everyone uses the word happiness as the name for an end that is never a means—that is, something to be sought entirely for its own sake—not all human beings have the same ultimate good in mind when they pursue happiness;

(6) the rejection of individualistic relativism on the grounds that the happiness everyone ought to seek is the same for all because the real goods we naturally desire are the same for all; which leads to

(7) the conception of happiness not as the summum bonum but rather as the totum bonum, a whole life made good by the cumulative attainment of all the real goods that are the objects of the natural desires common to all human beings because they share the same specific nature; and to

(8) the distinction between these real goods as the constitutive elements of happiness (or a whole life made good) and the moral virtues as the operative or functional means whereby happiness is achieved, but

(9) only, of course, if their presence is accompanied by the blessings of good fortune.

All of the foregoing nine points are summarized in the single sentence in which Aristotle defines happiness as a whole life that is lived in accordance with complete virtue and is accompanied by a moderate amount of the external goods that are the goods of fortune. The role that virtue plays cannot be understood without an understanding of all the other elements in the picture. Virtue, as Aristotle says, may make a man morally good, but by itself it does not produce the happiness of a morally good. life.

Centuries later, a single sentence in Augustine's little treatise on the happy life also encapsulated the Aristotelian doctrine. Happy is the man, Augustine said, who, in the course of a complete life, has everything he desires, provided that he desires nothing amiss; or, in other words, provided that his life is lived in accordance with right

rather than wrong desires. It cannot be so lived without moral virtue when that is understood to be identical with right desire—desire for the real goods that everyone naturally needs.

Though MacIntyre insists that without the concept of moral virtue a sound moral philosophy cannot be developed, his account of the role that moral virtue plays in a sound moral philosophy is deficient because he either neglects entirely or does not pay sufficient attention to all the other elements in the picture, with which moral virtue is inextricably connected. This has serious consequences for his discussion of virtue and for his effort to replace Aristotle's Ethics with a doctrine that he thinks will be more acceptable, more congenial or palatable, to contemporary tastes.

For one thing, he fails to distinguish between two radically different senses of the word good—the adjectival use of good (along with better and best) to grade objects of any sort (e.g., a good knife, and good coffee), for which such other words as fine, finer, and finest can always be substituted; and the substantive use of the word in the plural to name goods that are objects of desire. With the exception of the adjective good in the phrase "a good man," only the latter use of good has moral significance.

This failure on MacIntyre's part underlies his erroneous dismissal of Hume's correct insight that valid prescriptive judgments, which declare what we ought to seek or do, cannot be derived from true descriptive statements about what does or does not exist in reality. There is no way of validating prescriptive judgments except in terms of Aristotle's distinction between prescriptive and descriptive truth, one by conformity to right desire, the other by conformity to reality. In the light of this distinction, it is then possible to formulate one self-evident prescriptive principle: we ought to desire everything that is really good for us; all real goods ought to be desired.

Nothing more than this one self-evident first principle is needed to arrive at other prescriptive truths based on true descriptive statements about the natural desires or needs of all human beings, the objects of which are all real goods that are rightly desired and, therefore, ought to be desired.

MacIntyre's deficient understanding of Aristotle's *Ethics* may also account for his failure to see that another basic difference of the greatest importance between Aristotle's moral philosophy and modern ethical doctrines is the primacy of the good over the right in the one, and the reverse of that in the other.

For Aristotle, the ultimate end to be sought by the individual is his own happiness, the totality of all real goods attainable by virtue and good fortune in a whole life. It is not the general welfare of the political community, nor the general happiness—the happiness of others. One aspect of moral virtue, justice, is concerned with the welfare of the community and the happiness of others; but, unless each individual knows what is really and ultimately good for himself or herself and aims at it, the individual cannot know what is really good for others, to which they have a right because they need every real good for their happiness. Nor will the individual be inclined to avoid injuring others by depriving them of real goods or interfering with their attainment of them, unless he understands that he cannot aim at, or attain, what is really good for himself without also acting justly toward others; that is, without injuring them.

The moral laws or rules of conduct that modern ethical doctrines substitute for the concept of moral virtue are exclusively concerned with right and wrong conduct toward others rather than with the good that the individual ought to seek for himself or herself.

Last, but not least, of the consequences of MacIntyre's argument to be pointed out is his rejection of Aristotle's teaching concerning the unity of virtue, a doctrine reinforced by Aquinas's treatment of the four cardinal virtues (temperance, courage, justice, and prudence) as four aspects of virtue, not four distinct and separable virtues. Aquinas also treats all the other traditionally named virtues as things to be annexed to one or another of the four cardinal aspects of unitary virtue.

The reason why this point is important is that to omit or reject it prevents us from understanding what Aristotle meant by "complete" or "perfect" in that crucial sentence in which he defined happiness as a life lived in accordance with complete or perfect virtue, not just in accordance with some virtues in the absence of others or together with the vices that replace them. It also prevents us from understanding why an individual is obliged to act rightly or justly toward others in order to pursue happiness for himself or herself.

This can be made intelligible only if it is impossible to be courageous, temperate, and prudent without also being just, precisely because the four virtues named are not virtues capable of existing separately. They are only four aspects of virtue, the existence of any one of which is impossible without the coexistence of the other three.

Not to understand the unity of virtue and the inseparability of its four cardinal aspects is not to understand moral virtue itself. Moral virtue is the habit of right desire. Desire can be right in two ways, not one—right in aiming at the end which ought to be sought because it consists in the totality of all real goods, and right in the choice of the means to be employed in acting for the rightly desired end. Prudence is that aspect of virtue which is involved in the right choice of means; temperance and courage in private life, and with them justice in relation to others, are the aspects of virtue which are involved in rightly desiring or aiming at the one ultimate good—the happiness we are all morally obliged to seek.

The intemperate individual, the glutton, drunkard, or sluggard, cannot be prudent, because any means chosen will be chosen for the wrong end. Similarly, the unjust individual, the thief, cannot be prudent; he can only be cunning and clever, Aristotle tells us, because his conduct is not directed to the right end.

For the same reason, an individual cannot be temperate and cowardly, or courageous and intemperate; that is, an individual cannot have an habitual right desire for the end he ought to seek (as indicated by his being temperate or courageous) and at the same time also have an habitual wrong desire for things he ought not to seek, because the latter are incompatible with the end he ought to seek (as indicated by his being cowardly or intemperate).

This brings me finally to MacIntyre's own project of trying to retain something akin to the notion of virtue (but certainly not identical with the Aristotelian conception of it as summarized above) and to develop a moral philosophy for our day that will be more acceptable than Aristotle's doctrine to current prejudices—for that is all they are.

One of these prejudices, MacIntyre tells us, is the scientific prejudice against Aristotle's "metaphysical biology," which, in his view, provides the indispensable underpinnings for Aristotle's moral philosophy. This scientific prejudice, it should be pointed out, is to be found mainly if not exclusively among social scientists, not biological scientists. It is a prejudice against the notion that all human beings, as members of the species homo sapiens, share a common, specific nature and all the species-specific properties that genetically belong to that specific nature.

If the affirmation of a specific nature and species-specific properties is metaphysical biology, then twentieth-century biological sci-

ence is metaphysical when it looks upon the genetic code as having programmed, in the same way, the development of individual members of a species, all drawn from the same gene pool. The same picture, but not the same words, is to be found in Aristotle's doctrine that individuals of the same species have the same potentialities for development and their normal development consists in the actualization of such potentialities.

This basic biological insight, which is not metaphysical at all in any correct sense of that term, does, of course, underlie Aristotle's moral philosophy. The crucial notion of the natural desires that are inherent in all members of the human species because of their common human nature (together with the notion of the real goods they aim at) rests on the biological fact that all human beings have the same specific potentialities (i.e., the same genetic program) for development and that these potencies are appetitive tendencies to be fulfilled by their actualization.

To say, as Aristotle does, that all men by nature desire to know is to say that all, having minds, have a potentiality for knowing, and that this potentiality is a natural desire or tendency—a need to be fulfilled by the acquisition of knowledge, which is something really good for every human being to possess.

The other contemporary prejudice that Professor MacIntyre wishes to placate by his deflated version of Aristotle's moral philosophy is one that he calls "individualistic liberalism." Briefly stated, it consists in the opinion that everyone should be free to conceive happiness in his own way and to seek it accordingly. Those espousing such individualism are necessarily affronted by a doctrine which proclaims that happiness can be rightly and wrongly conceived, that rightly conceived it is the same for every human being, and that, with minor differences in accidental respects, it must be pursued in the same way by all—that is, by virtuous conduct accompanied by the blessings of good fortune.

Any attempt to avoid these two contemporary prejudices, neither of which is defensible, must result in a moral philosophy that is as defective as Mill's utilitarianism. MacIntyre makes no reference to an excellent contemporary work in moral philosophy (G. H. von Wright's *The Varieties of Goodness*) which, like his own, expresses great admiration for Aristotle's *Ethics* while, at the same time, giving reasons for substituting something else for it that is not as good.

Professor von Wright tells us his reason for turning away from Ar-

istotle's teleological ethics in the direction of Mill's utilitarianism. Referring to Aristotle and Mill as representative of the two main variants of teleological ethics, he writes:

> The one makes the notion of the good of man relative to the notion of the nature of man. The other makes it relative to the needs and wants of individual men. We would call the two variants the 'objectivist' and the 'subjectivist' variant respectively. I think it is right to say that Aristotle favoured the first. Here my position differs from his and is, I think, more akin to that of some writers of the utilitarian tradition.

The same prejudices are here apparent—against the affirmation of man's specific nature and for individualistic liberalism. Neither prejudice, in my judgment, can be regarded as a good reason for replacing Aristotle's *Ethics* with a moral philosophy that is less sound, and that is especially deficient because it cannot combine a principle of moral obligation with the teleological consideration of means and ends.

It must be said in Professor MacIntyre's favor that he acknowledges the deficiencies in what he has been able to come up with so far as a substitute for Aristotle's ethics. He promises further developments in a forthcoming book, but I do not think he can succeed in the project he has set for himself if he persists in the positions he has taken so far. 🕮

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