



POLITICS & POETICS
A Journal for Humane Philosophy

Alasdair MacIntyre's Ethics of Practical Reasoning: Morality in Practice

Author: Christopher Lutz

Article ID: 349640

Article publication date: March 2018

Article version: 1.0

Appears in *Politics & Poetics* - A Journal for Humane Philosophy
ISSN: 2543-666X

Part of Issue on

Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity:
A Special Issue on the Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre
2018

Politics & Poetics is a peer-reviewed journal of the humanities with a focus on philosophy, seeking to contribute to a reconciliation of political and literary discourses. It offers a forum for discussion for the human person as both a political and a literary animal.

For submissions and enquiries please contact editor@politicsandpoetics.co.uk.

www.politicsandpoetics.co.uk

Alasdair MacIntyre's Ethics of Practical Reasoning: Morality in Practice¹

Christopher Lutz

Professor of Philosophy,

Saint Meinrad Seminary & School of Theology, St Meinrad, Indiana.

Alasdair MacIntyre's moral philosophy is unconventional in two ways. Among modern and contemporary philosophers, MacIntyre's work is unconventional because it rejects the standard theories of Kant and Mill and looks for a guide to human action in the work of Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle. Yet MacIntyre's work is also unconventional among Thomistic philosophers, because MacIntyre rejects the modern epistemological projects in Thomism² that looked to Thomistic metaphysics to find a basis for moral epistemology. MacIntyre's new book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (*Ethics*, henceforth) presents this approach more clearly than some of MacIntyre's earlier works, but it may confound readers who expect a more conventional approach to the subject.

Conventional moral philosophy examines 'moral reasoning'; MacIntyre does not. The phrase 'moral reasoning' appears only four times in the text of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*,³ and then only in criticisms of analytic moral philosophy in the first half of the book. The phrase never comes up in the second half of the book⁴, in which MacIntyre talks about 'practical reasoning'⁵ and 'practical intelligence'⁶, but never 'moral reasoning'. This is because one of the goals of *After Virtue* is to reject

¹ I wish to John O'Neill for his feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 69.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981; 2nd ed. 1984; 3rd ed. 2007), 2, 20, 20, and 66.

⁴ For the division of *After Virtue* into the 'critical argument' and the 'constructive argument', see Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 1-2.

⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 28, 45, 53, 56, 62, 66, 82, 161, 162, 197, 223, and 271.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 154, 155, 161, 162, 163, and 241.

the notion of ‘the moral’⁷ that serves as the focus of modern moral philosophy.

The difference between ‘moral reasoning’ and ‘practical reasoning’ is the central theme of *Ethics*.⁸ At the beginning of this book, MacIntyre ‘puts to one side’ the conventional notion that morality is a study of universal moral norms and obligations until he is ready to dismiss it in §I.10. MacIntyre engages conventional morality — Morality with a big ‘M’ — critically only much later, in chapter three. *Ethics* is not a guide to reasoning about universal moral norms; the starting point of the book is a person with desires trying to decide what to do, trying to determine which of the things that she apprehends as goods are really choice-worthy. MacIntyre’s moral philosophy is a guide to practical reasoning.

The goal of this essay is to place *Ethics* in the context of MacIntyre’s larger project. The essay has three parts. The first part considers the consistency of MacIntyre’s work. The second part reviews Aquinas’s Aristotelian account of human action. The third part argues that practical philosophy can be moral philosophy because human action is inherently teleological, and this teleology is ultimately natural. I will conclude with some observations about the role of MacIntyre’s ethics in his revolutionary Aristotelian ‘Utopianism of the present’.⁹

I. The Consistency of MacIntyre’s Work

In its rejection of ‘Morality’, *Ethics* bears striking similarities to MacIntyre’s 1957 essay, ‘What Morality Is Not’¹⁰, in which he rejected R. M. Hare’s widely respected contention ‘that it is of the essence of moral valuations that they are universalizable and prescriptive’.¹¹ MacIntyre contended, on the contrary, that ‘A whole range of cases can be envisaged where moral valuations are not universalizable’.¹² In the concluding section of the essay, MacIntyre argues that Hare’s thesis reveals nothing about morality, but only hampers the investigation of morality, by imposing an unacknowledged presupposition as a discovered fact:

⁷ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance, and Utopia’, in *Virtue and Politics*, eds. Kelvin Knight and Paul Blackledge, (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 11-19, @16.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘What Morality Is Not’, *Philosophy* 32 (1957), 325-35. Reprinted in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1971; republished, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 96-108.

¹¹ ‘What Morality Is Not’, 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, 99.

‘To assert that universalizability is of the essence of moral valuation is not to tell us what ‘morality’ means or how moral words are used. It is to prescribe a meaning for ‘morality’... and implicitly it is to prescribe a morality’.¹³

To discover what morality really is, MacIntyre recommends that we consider how real people apply knowledge to choices about action. Thus, he dismisses modern theories about universalizable maxims and turns his attention to novels that illustrate the particular and prudential nature of moral judgment through narratives.

Ethics follows a similar outline. MacIntyre dismisses conventional secular academic moral theory. He proposes an approach he could not have defended in 1957: Thomistic Aristotelianism to investigate morality in terms of the prudential practical decisions of ordinary people. Finally, he exemplifies this kind of practical reasoning through narratives about real people and their moral transformations: Soviet journalist and author Vasily Grossman, United States Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, Trinidadian Marxist journalist and author C. L. R. James, and Northern Irish Catholic priest Denis Faul.

Given the conversions and transformations that marked MacIntyre’s career between that 1957 essay and this 2016 book, their similarities may seem surprising. Yet through all of his changes, MacIntyre’s central concern has remained the same. From *Marxism: An Interpretation* (1953)¹⁴, through ‘Notes from the Moral Wilderness’ (1958)¹⁵, to *After Virtue* (1981) and its successors, MacIntyre has investigated moral philosophy as a study of practical reason and human action. For him it is a quest for the prudential, a guide to action that is neither arbitrary nor expedient, and that is therefore able to make absolute demands.¹⁶ *Ethics* presents the fruit of this study, distilling its results into a new, streamlined argument, freed from historical controversies and dramatic flourishes that distracted many readers of *After Virtue*. The result is a remarkably lucid

¹³ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism: An Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1953). *Marxism*, henceforth.

¹⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Notes from the Moral Wilderness I’, *New Reasoner* 7 (Winter 1958-9), 90-100; and ‘Notes from the Moral Wilderness II’, *New Reasoner* 8 (Spring 1959), 89-98. Reprinted in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 31-40 and 41-49. Reprinted in *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, ed. Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Brill, 2005; Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), 45-57 and 57-68. All page citations follow Knight, *The MacIntyre Reader*.

¹⁶ See ‘Notes from the Moral Wilderness’; see also, Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Can Medicine Dispense with a Theological Perspective on Human Nature?’ in *Knowledge, Value, and Belief: The Foundations of Ethics and Its Relationship to Science*, Volume II (Hastings on Hudson, N.Y.: The Hastings Center, 1977), 25-43.

introduction to MacIntyre's moral philosophy, an approach we may call his ethics of practical reasoning. That project has been a consistent one.

MacIntyre's first book, *Marxism: An Interpretation* (1953)¹⁷, already looks to practice¹⁸, and to narrative¹⁹, rather than to conventional moral theories, to seek moral progress in communal political life.²⁰ MacIntyre's 1957 essay, 'What Morality is Not', parallels certain points in Elizabeth Anscombe's book, *Intention*²¹, a seminal work in action theory, which was published the same year. In her book, which MacIntyre references early in *Ethics*²², Anscombe shows that the Aristotelian practical syllogism is not 'ordinary reasoning leading to such a conclusion as: "I ought to do such and such."' ²³ Rather, Aristotle's practical syllogism was merely calculative and supports various non-moral uses of 'ought' and 'should'.²⁴ She concludes:

It will have become clear that the practical syllogism as such is not an ethical topic. It will be of interest to an ethicist, perhaps, if he takes the rather unconvincing line that a good man is by definition just one who aims wisely at good ends. [...] It can only come into ethical studies if a correct philosophical psychology is requisite for a philosophical system of ethics: a view which I believe I should maintain if I thought of trying to construct such a system; but which I believe is not generally current.²⁵

Accepting the 'current' view that ethics studies moral norms, Anscombe therefore treats merely calculative practical reasoning as something outside of ethics.

In 1958, Anscombe took a more firmly critical stance on the disconnect between contemporary ethics and philosophical psychology in her landmark essay, 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.²⁶ Here she defends the thesis 'that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy;

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism: An Interpretation*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17, 61, 111.

¹⁹ Passage from Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, quoted in MacIntyre, *Marxism: An Interpretation*, 115-116.

²⁰ MacIntyre, *Marxism: An Interpretation*, 121-122.

²¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957; 2nd ed. 1963; Harvard University Press, 2000).

²² MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 5.

²³ Anscombe, *Intention*, §33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, §35.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, §41.

²⁶ G. E. M. Anscombe 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958), 1-19.

that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking'.²⁷ Anscombe finds contemporaneous secular theories of duty and obligation incoherent in their justification of moral principles, and consequentialist in their application of them. She therefore judges that it is time to reconsider the entire enterprise.²⁸

A year after Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy', MacIntyre also questioned the entire enterprise of moral philosophy in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness', published in *The New Reasoner*, a journal of the British New Left. 'Notes' raises urgent questions about the rational justification of the moral condemnation of Stalinism.²⁹ The criminality of Stalinism was morally revolting to many people, but the challenge of making a rationally justified moral critique of it reveals the deepest weaknesses of modern moral philosophy, particularly for Marxists. Marx himself had rejected modern liberalism as an invention designed to fence off private interests from community needs.³⁰ To adhere to the tradition of dialectical materialism was to deny the plausibility of those theories. Thus, the Marxist who complained that a putatively Marxist government was morally wrong for violating people's rights was caught in a self-contradiction.

MacIntyre criticizes adherence to modern morality on two grounds. First, from the standpoint of modern liberal individualism, moral judgments have no authority:

Why do the moral standards by which Stalinism is found wanting have authority over us? Simply because we choose that they should. The individual confronting the facts with his values condemns. But he can only condemn in the name of his own choice.³¹

Secondly, from the standpoint of action theory, adhering to modern morality is unintelligible behaviour:

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁸ MacIntyre cited 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in his 'Hume on "Is" and "Ought"', *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), 451-468. Reprinted in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 109-124. See note 20, *Philosophical Review*, 467, *ASIA*, 124.

²⁹ For MacIntyre's definition of Stalinism, see MacIntyre, e-mail correspondence with C. S. Lutz, April 14, 2010, quoted in Lutz, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue*, 20.

³⁰ See Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', review of Bruno Bauer, *The Jewish Question* (Braunschweig, 1843), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>, accessed 11 December 2017. See also Lutz, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue*, 24.

³¹ MacIntyre, 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness', part I, in Knight, *Reader*, 34.

We make both individual deeds and social practices intelligible as human actions by showing how they connect with characteristically human desires, needs, and the like. Where we cannot do this, we treat the unintelligible piece of behaviour as a symptom, a survival, or a superstition.³²

Kant, Mill, and their respective traditions, deliberately separate moral behaviour respecting rights, duties, and obligations from actions that connect with human desires, needs, or the like.³³ So MacIntyre complains, '[t]he "ought" of morality is utterly divorced from the "is" of desire'.³⁴ Obeying morality is supposed to have nothing to do with any benefit that might come to the agent from doing so. Why do it, then? These theories cannot tell us.

Conventional moral philosophy cannot justify the moral condemnation of Stalinism. But, MacIntyre suggests, if morality could be reconnected to desire and to history, interested human agents might rediscover moral absolutes.³⁵ He then pursues this enquiry until it bears fruit in *After Virtue*.³⁶ Since then he has continued to develop this approach to moral philosophy in his mature work.

The ethics of practical reasoning initially sets aside questions of duty and obligation to begin instead by investigating the conditions and habits of character needed to support 'independent practical reasoning'.³⁷ Where modern moral philosophy takes freedom³⁸ for granted and seeks knowledge of duties, the ethics of practical reasoning seeks to understand human action and to overcome the various kinds of unfreedom that can hinder us in our choices. It therefore pursues the kinds of freedom³⁹ characteristic of human flourishing.⁴⁰

³² MacIntyre, 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness', part 2, in Knight, *Reader*, 41.

³³ See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 15-17 (399-401), and 59 (442); See also Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: MacMillan, 1965), 632-634 (A800/B828-A803/B831), and 636 (A806/B834; see also John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Oskar Piest (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 15, 20-23. See also Lutz, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue*, 19-25, 76-87.

³⁴ MacIntyre, 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness', 41.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, part 2, 47.

³⁶ MacIntyre connected *After Virtue* to 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' in the book's preface. See *After Virtue*, 2nd ed., ix-x; 3rd ed., xvii-xviii.

³⁷ See MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 81-98.

³⁸ By 'freedom' I mean the kind of internal moral freedom that is traditionally called 'freedom of indifference'. For treatments of the role of 'freedom of indifference' since Ockham, see Thomas Osborne, 'Ockham as a Divine-Command Theorist', *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 1-22; see also Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, OP, (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995; *Les sources de la morale chrétienne* (University Press Fribourg, 1985, 1990, 1993).

³⁹ MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 112.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

In this project, MacIntyre, who had been educated in Greek and Latin classical literature, analytic moral philosophy, and Marxist political thought, eventually found allies in Plato, Aristotle, Augustine⁴¹, and Aquinas, as well as the tradition they participated in. Like Leon Trotsky, whom MacIntyre respected for ‘providing throughout his life a defence of human activity, of the powers of conscious and rational human effort’⁴², these classical and medieval philosophers had discovered that cultivating the practices of rational human agency is difficult. The Thomistic Aristotelian ethics of practical reasoning that MacIntyre defends in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Dependent Rational Animals*, and *Ethics* builds on MacIntyre’s early Marxist work, because it studies human action in order to understand the difficulties that may hinder human agency and to find ways to overcome them so that its adherents may flourish as human beings.⁴³

The central questions for MacIntyre’s ethics and politics still reflect something he wrote in 1960:

Because the individual exists in his social relations and because the collective is a society of individuals, the problem of freedom is not of the individual against society but the problem of what kind of a society we want and what sort of individuals we want to be.⁴⁴

‘The problem of freedom’ — the problem of human flourishing — is a moral problem to be solved in common with others. Such flourishing cannot be individualistic, MacIntyre insists, because common goods shape our individual goods and friendships shape our awareness of our common and individual goods.⁴⁵ In his 2009 interview with Alex Voorhoeve, MacIntyre stresses, ‘In sum, our lives are structured by asking “What do we want?”, not “What do I want?”’⁴⁶ The problem of renewing human agency was already central to MacIntyre’s first book, *Marxism*; it remains the central problem in *Ethics*.

⁴¹ MacIntyre describes himself as an “Augustinian Christian” in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 10.

⁴² Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Breaking the Chains of Reason’, in *Out of Apathy*, ed. E. P. Thompson (London: Stevens and Sons, 1960), 195-240; reprinted in *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, eds. Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 135-166, @166.

⁴³ See *Ethics*, 49-40.

⁴⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Freedom and Revolution’, *Labour Review*, Feb./Mar. 1960, 19-24. Reprinted in *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, ed. Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 123-134, @129.

⁴⁵ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 99-118.

⁴⁶ ‘The Illusion of Self-Sufficiency’, interview by Alex Voorhoeve, in *Conversations on Ethics*, ed. Alex Voorhoeve (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 111-131, @122.

Thomas Aquinas's Aristotelian Account of Human Action

To understand MacIntyre's mature Thomistic Aristotelianism, we need to understand Aquinas's account of human action, on which it is built. The main texts to examine are Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologiae*. The *Summa Theologiae* is divided into three parts (*prima*, *secunda*, and *tertia*); Thomistic philosophers focus on the first two, the first part (*prima pars*) which considers the nature of the created world, including the human person, and the two divisions of the second part, (*prima-secundae pars* and *secunda-secundae pars*)⁴⁷ which examine the causes of human actions and the virtues and vices of human agents, respectively.

At this stage in the argument, we examine human action as Anscombe did in *Intention*, considering 'practical reasoning' or 'practical syllogism' as 'calculative' rather than 'ethical'.⁴⁸ Immediately we face a stumbling block: in his account of human action, Aquinas held that 'every agent acts for a good'⁴⁹ and that 'the appetite desires nothing except under the rational character of a good',⁵⁰ These claims apply to evil actions as well as good ones. To see how an evil agent might choose evil 'under the rational character of good', we need to understand Aquinas's terms, beginning with the word 'good'.

For Aquinas, 'good' and 'evil' are natural terms corresponding to the objects of pursuit and avoidance that Aristotle presents in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

There being three objects of choice and three of avoidance, the noble, the advantageous, and pleasant and their contraries, the base, the injurious, the painful, about all of these the good man tends to go right and the bad man go wrong, and especially about pleasure; for this is common to the animals, and also it

⁴⁷ Those unfamiliar with the *Summa Theologiae* find the divisions and their abbreviations confusing. The *prima pars* is abbreviated Ia or I; the *prima-secundae*, Ia-IIae or I-II; the *secunda-secundae*, IIa-IIae or II-II; the *tertia*, III.

⁴⁸ Anscombe, *Intention*, §§33-37.

⁴⁹ 'omne agens agit propter bonum', Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, ch. 3, ¶ I. Quotations from *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Hanover House, 1955-57). <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3a.htm>, accessed 20 December 2017.

⁵⁰ 'nihil desiderat appetitus nisi sub ratione boni', *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, ch. 62, ¶ 7.

accompanies all objects of choice; for even the noble and the advantageous appear pleasant.⁵¹

Citing Aristotle, Aquinas defines ‘good’ as ‘appetible’: ‘The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable’.⁵² Aquinas allows that true goods are perfective of the agent; they promise to bring the potentialities of a thing to completion: ‘goodness signifies perfection which is desirable’.⁵³ So we may be wrong about goods. Nonetheless, he endorses Aristotle’s division of the objects of choice as a division of goodness, ‘this division properly concerns goodness as such’.⁵⁴ In his account of human action, as in Anscombe’s, we understand ‘good’ to mean ‘desirable’. MacIntyre has used the term ‘choice-worthy’ to express the same notion.⁵⁵

We perform human acts every time we decide to do something. We do not decide to digest food or to grow hair, although we do decide when to eat and when to cut our hair. Involuntary behaviours or ‘acts of man’ can be set aside. The Thomistic account of ‘human acts’ examines only our voluntary actions.⁵⁶

Following Aristotle, Aquinas holds that human acts move through a process. Aristotle describes this process in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.4 and 3.5, distinguishing ‘wish’ directed toward ends from ‘deliberation’ concerning means⁵⁷, prior to the actions by which we achieve our ends: ‘The end, then, being what we wish for, the means what we deliberate about and choose, actions concerning means must be according to choice and voluntary’.⁵⁸ Aquinas examines this process more closely, beginning with the apprehension of goods.

We may apprehend goods either by sense or by intellect. We apprehend fragrant flowers, delicious foods, comfortable clothing, or a warm bed by the sense powers. These are immediately desirable to what Aquinas calls the ‘concupiscible appetite’ as ‘suitable’ things.⁵⁹ We

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), bk. 2, ch. 3 [1104b 29-35].

⁵² ‘Ratio enim boni in hoc consistit, quod aliquid sit appetibile’, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 1, co. Quotations from *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/summa/index.html>, accessed 20 December 2017.

⁵³ ‘bonum dicit rationem perfecti, quod est appetibile’, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 1, ad 1.

⁵⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 6, co.

⁵⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre uses ‘choice worthy’ for ‘good’ in ‘On Having Survived the Academic Moral Philosophy of the Twentieth Century’, in *What Happened In and To Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Fran O’Rourke (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 17-34, @ 25 and 27.

⁵⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 1, a. 1, co.

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.2 [1111b 27-28].

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.5 [1113b 3-5].

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 81, a. 2, co.

apprehend other things by our interior sense powers, particularly by the cogitative power⁶⁰, as ‘hurtful’ things that ‘hinder what is suitable’, such as a prowling wolf or a stormy sky. The concupiscible appetite inclines us to flee from such things; while another sense appetite, the irascible appetite, inclines us to ‘resist’ and to fight.⁶¹ We apprehend intelligible goods through the intellect. These include keeping a healthy diet, changing the oil in the car, and maintaining healthy relation in our homes and communities. When we apprehend these intelligible things as goods we desire them by our rational appetite or will.

There are some intellectual goods, however, specifically the knowledge and contemplation of God, that are sought by the intellect and known by the intellect, but cannot be apprehended by our natural abilities. Even Adam in the state of innocence could not know God through God’s essence or angels through theirs.⁶² Aquinas argues in the first article of the *Summa Theologiae* that sacred theology learned through revelation is necessary for human life precisely to enable us to apprehend the end we seek as human beings:

Firstly, indeed, because man is directed to God as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason [...] But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation.⁶³

Thus, grace and revelation become necessary parts of Aquinas’s anthropology and ethics.

For Aquinas, the first step in the process leading to action must be the apprehension of the end. Thus, Aquinas writes, ‘[v]oluntariness requires an act of knowledge in the same way as it requires an act of the will; namely, in order that it may be in one’s power to consider, to wish, and to act’.⁶⁴ We may be wrong about goods. Thus, misapprehension of goods becomes a problem in the study of practical success and failure.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, I, q. 78, a. 4, co.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, I, q. 81, a. 2, co.

⁶² *Ibid.*, I, q. 94, aa. 1-2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, I, q. 1, a. 1, co.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 6, a. 3, ad 3. ‘to consider, to wish, and to act’ translates ‘considerare et velle et agere’.

In the second step in the process of rational human action, the will or ‘rational appetite’, which is directed to the intelligible good, wills the good as understood by the practical intellect:

The goodness of the will depends properly on the object. Now the will’s object is proposed to it by reason. Because the good understood is the proportionate object of the will; while sensitive or imaginary good is proportionate not to the will but to the sensitive appetite: since the will can tend to the universal good, which reason apprehends; whereas the sensitive appetite tends only to the particular good, apprehended by the sensitive power. Therefore the goodness of the will depends on reason, in the same way as it depends on the object.⁶⁵

Aquinas divides the activity of the will, noting that the rational appetite first wills the end and then wills the means. He distinguishes three acts of the will regarding the end, ‘volition, enjoyment, and intention’⁶⁶, and examines each in turn.⁶⁷ With ‘intention’, the will has settled on doing something (various things at once, both short and long term⁶⁸); the next step is to do it or to figure out how to do it.

The relation between the sense appetites and the rational appetite marks another problem for rational human action. The sense appetites cannot overpower the rational appetite: ‘the lower appetite is not sufficient to cause movement, unless the higher appetite consents’.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, the sensitive appetites can resist: ‘we experience that the irascible and concupiscible powers do resist reason, inasmuch as we sense or imagine something pleasant, which reason forbids, or unpleasant, which reason commands’.⁷⁰ The mastery of the lower appetites by reason becomes an important problem for moral philosophy.

After this consideration of the volition of the end, Aquinas turns to volition of the means. Here he distinguishes five acts of the will: choice, counsel, consent, use, and command. Two of them, counsel and consent, correspond to Aristotle’s deliberation. *Counsel* is an inquiry concerning means:

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 19, a. 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 8, prologue.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, I-II, qq. 8-12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 12, aa. 2, 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, I, q. 81, a. 3, co.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, I, q. 81, a. 3, ad 2.

Counsel properly implies a conference held between several; the very word (*consilium*) denotes this, for it means sitting together (*considium*), from the fact that many sit together to confer with one another.⁷¹

We do not take counsel about everything, but only ‘about things that admit of doubt’.⁷² Counsel identifies possible means to attain an end; consent approves possible means.⁷³

The remaining acts of the will (choice, use, and command), move the powers of person to do something. Here a description of the process as a series of steps may be misleading, since, for example, ‘use’ occurs when we use our intellectual powers to make the kind of enquiry involved in counsel. The acts identified with volition of means mix together, meaning deliberation and action are not discreet ‘steps’. With choice, use, and command, the agent *chooses* the means to employ⁷⁴ and *uses* interior powers or exterior objects to bring things about.⁷⁵ In another respect, the will *commands* the act and brings it about.⁷⁶

Bearing in mind the complexity of the subject matter and without intending to reduce it to a simple procedure, we can summarize the Thomistic account of human action roughly into four phases: (1) the human person apprehends a good, (2) intends that good as an end, (3) deliberates the means to attain it, and finally, (4) acts to attain the end. A trivial example illustrates the process: A person walks into an unfamiliar, darkened room and wants to be able to see. So, this person looks for a light switch and, finding it, turns on the lights.

More complicated examples illustrate the same process: An early career scholar realizes the importance of participating in professional meetings and decides to submit a paper for an academic conference. The scholar takes counsel with senior colleagues, deliberating about what kind of presentation to submit and how to secure funding for travel expenses. Months later, our scholar boards a plane with a carefully written paper in hand.

Very complex examples, like career choices, are often shaped events and circumstances lying beyond our control. Nonetheless, there are moments when we take ownership of the flow of our lives, when a person

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 14, a. 14.

⁷² *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 14, a. 3, co.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 15, a. 3, co.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, I-II, qq. 13.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, I-II, qq. 16.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, I-II, qq. 17.

decides to become a teacher or a scholar or a carpenter, when one decides to be employed in this place or that. Those moments begin when a person recognizes goods to be sought and looks for ways to attain them.

For Aquinas, 'the subject matter of moral philosophy is human action'.⁷⁷ Since human action can go well or badly, one problem for moral philosophy is to discover those excellent habits of character, the virtues, that will enable a person to subject desires and fears to rational judgment with temperance and fortitude, so that the person may follow the good of reason prudently, willing just means to attain truly good ends.⁷⁸ The theological virtues, infused by divine grace, likewise perfect the powers involved in human action,⁷⁹ reorienting the person so completely to the supernatural end that different moral virtues must accompany them.⁸⁰ The virtues, both as summarized formally in the *prima-secundae pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* and as examined substantively in the *secunda-secundae pars*, are nothing but the excellences of the human agent in each of the steps outlined above. Thomistic moral teaching examines the virtues and the vices because failure, often unacknowledged, often unintended, can attend every part of human action.⁸¹

Thomistic moral teaching also recognizes law and the need to obey law, but even Aquinas's treatment of law is rooted in practical reasoning. For, the laws that bind human agents are directed to the common good⁸², and thus to the agent's good. The natural law in us is a participation in the divine wisdom that directs us by our inclinations to our proper acts and ends, *i.e.*, to our good.⁸³ Aquinas holds that all of the moral precepts of the Old Law belong to the natural law⁸⁴, directing us to our good, for the primary purpose of divine law is to teach human agents to pursue the good, their good, effectively:

it is by law that man is directed how to perform his proper acts in view of his last end. [...] But since man is ordained to an end of eternal happiness which is inproportionate to man's natural faculty, as stated above (I-II, q. 5, a. 5), therefore it was necessary that,

⁷⁷ Ralph McInerney, *Ethica Thomistica* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982, revised ed. 1997), I.

⁷⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 61, a. 2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 62, a. 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 63, aa. 3, 4.

⁸¹ See *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 39-40.

⁸² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 90, a. 3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2; q. 94, a. 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 100, a. 1.

besides the natural and the human law, man should be directed to his end by a law given by God.⁸⁵

The Thomistic moral tradition is a tradition of practical philosophy investigating practical reasoning. MacIntyre's Thomistic work since the 1980s, when he began to identify himself as an Augustinian Christian⁸⁶ and a Thomist⁸⁷, has brought renewed attention to the role of practical reasoning in the ethical work of Aquinas.

Moral philosophy must be practical philosophy.

We act for a variety of ends, some more proximate, some more ultimate, some more crucial, some merely optional. Attaining our more crucial and more ultimate ends often requires us to abandon some of our more proximate, merely optional ends. Working diligently toward a variety of ends at once demands that we employ means that do not interfere with each other. Pursuing conflicting ends or pursuing various ends by conflicting means can only lead to practical failure.⁸⁸

We assess our practical failures in terms of the ends of our actions. An alcoholic drink or two among friends can be pleasant, but a person who needs to drive home after a party, but has gotten intoxicated there anyway, fails practically in terms of being able to drive home. Winning arguments and prevailing in conflicts with adversaries is sometimes appropriate, but a highly talented professional whose bad temper, and poor judgment prevent him from advancing toward career goals fails, practically, in terms of reaching those goals. Cultivating peace and justice in society is good and noble, but a political party that tries to impose peace and justice at gunpoint would fail, practically, in terms of its Utopian goal. People who do these things fail practically, they fail as agents, not because someone has declared that one *should* be able to drive a car, or that one *has a duty* to reach certain career goals, or that political parties *are duty-bound* to promote justice by peaceful and just means, but because these agents do not succeed at the things they are trying to do. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas all treated this kind of failed agency in their moral works.

Studies of Aristotle and Aquinas often begin as Aristotle and Aquinas do, by discussing the highest good or ultimate end. For Aristotle it is 'an

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 91, a. 4, co.

⁸⁶ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 10.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 402-403.

⁸⁸ See discussions of 'failure' in MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 39-41, 191.

activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue'.⁸⁹ For Aquinas, 'final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the divine essence'.⁹⁰ But there is a problem with this approach. Not everyone apprehends the virtuous life or a life with God as their highest good, as the end that should regulate all of their choices. So, there appears to be a conflict between these authors and the desires of ordinary people.⁹¹ Hence there is a temptation, rooted in a preconception that moral philosophy is a study of rules and obligations, to identify the highest good as the end that a person *is supposed to* desire, as the goal that we *should* pursue, as *the thing we are supposed to want*. This move seems warranted in one sense – Aristotle and Aquinas did hold that we would desire these ends and measure our actions by their pursuit if we understood things properly – but this move opens the Aristotelian tradition to two charges of apparent arbitrariness.

The first charge follows a mistaken impression that Aristotle and Aquinas see the ultimate end as a state of affairs. MacIntyre's 1977 rejection of Aristotle's ultimate end comes to mind: 'All those remarkable virtues are to be practiced, all that judgment and prudence is to be exercised so that we may become – upper middle-class Athenian gentlemen devoted to metaphysical enquiry'.⁹² Why should anyone want to be an Aristotelian *megalopsychos*?⁹³ And against Aquinas, why should an atheist want to be a Christian saint? These ends appear arbitrary. MacIntyre rightly concludes that 'any attempt to specify the true end for man by describing some state of affairs, the achievement of which will constitute that end, is bound to fail in a parallel way'.⁹⁴ This charge of arbitrariness is deeply mistaken; for Aristotle and Aquinas saw the *summum bonum* as an activity⁹⁵, but we need not explore MacIntyre's error here.

The second charge has to do with the reason for determining the final end at the outset. Since the ultimate end stands as the measure of all

⁸⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, (New York: Random House, 1941), 1.13 [1102a5-6]; see also 1.7 [1098a 17-18].

⁹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 3, a. 8, co; see also *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 3, ch. 37.

⁹¹ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, Penguin Books, 1981) Part I, ch. 6, ¶¶ 6-7.

⁹² Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Can Medicine Dispense with a Theological Perspective on Human Nature?' in *Knowledge, Value and Belief*, eds. H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. and Daniel Callahan (Hastings-on-the-Hudson; Hastings Center, 1977), 25-43. Reprinted in *The Roots of Ethics: Science, Religion, and Values*, eds. Daniel Callahan and Tristram Engelhardt Jr. (New York and London: Plenum, 1981), 119-137; 132.

⁹³ For Aristotle's treatment of his moral ideal, the *megalopsychos* (μεγαλόψυχος), see *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 4, chapters 3-4. Ross translates '*megalopsychia*' (μεγαλοψυχία) as 'pride' and '*megalopsychos*' as 'the proud man'.

⁹⁴ MacIntyre, 'Can Medicine Dispense with a Theological Perspective on Human Nature', 132.

⁹⁵ MacIntyre, *Ethics*, § 4.7, 201; § 4.11, 227-231.

subordinate ends, it may appear that the ethics of practical reasoning cannot determine anything at all until this overarching good has been identified. If this were the case, then it would seem necessary to defend ‘what Sarah Broadie has denounced as “the Grand End view of practical wisdom”’, a position that MacIntyre likewise rejected in ‘Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against some Modern Aristotelians’.⁹⁶

Beginning a *philosophical* examination of the teleology of human acts by trying to determine the ultimate end is a mistake for two reasons, first because controversy over the ultimate end becomes an obstacle to examining teleology at all, and, secondly, because answering questions about ultimate ends can be deferred while we consider the teleology of human acts more proximately. So, MacIntyre agrees with ‘one aspect of Broadie’s condemnation of Grand End views’.

We do not proceed by first acquiring a vision of the Grand End and only secondarily deducing from it what we ought to do. [...] And Broadie is clearly in the right in rejecting this both as an interpretation of Aristotle’s views and as an account of practical experience.⁹⁷

We begin instead from the proximate, and later, pursuing the questions that flow from our experience, we discover further questions about further ends. Hence *Ethics* begins with questions about proximate desires but ends with an invitation to natural theology.⁹⁸

Returning to our three failures – a person too intoxicated to drive home, an intemperate professional who cannot advance in his career, and a political party whose methods prevent them from realizing their goals – notice that in each case, the telos that measures the agent’s choice is merely something that the agent wants. *Why* the agent wants it is a separate question. *Whether* the agent *should* want it is yet another question. We must return to those questions later; but those questions are not our starting points. A philosophical examination of the teleology of human acts needs to begin with the dumb fact that agents act for ends that they want.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Sara Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 198-202, quoted in Alasdair MacIntyre ‘Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against some Modern Aristotelians’ in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays Volume 2* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22-40 @ 22.

⁹⁷ MacIntyre, ‘Rival Aristotles’, 25.

⁹⁸ MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 315; see also 55-56.

⁹⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, book III, ch 3. See also, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 1, a. 6, co.

Practical questions follow from considerations about those proximate ends. What would it take to turn failure into success in each case? Sobriety is enough in the first case. The intemperate professional's success in the second case might require thoroughgoing moral reform, in which friends and counsellors would play important roles. Re-evaluating appropriate means to political goals in the third case is a more difficult problem. In each case, though, the desired proximate end is the first measure of the agent's acts.

The excellences of human agency, the virtues, are nothing but the qualities of mind and character that enable human agents to apprehend their ends adequately and to pursue them effectively. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre examines the excellences of human agents teleologically, not by asserting the importance of becoming either an Aristotelian *megalopsychos* or a Christian saint, but by considering what it takes to live as an excellent human agent.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's exposition of the qualities of excellent agents moves through three levels: First, seeking excellence in practices requires certain virtues.¹⁰⁰ But an excellent practitioner may nonetheless live the rest of his life badly¹⁰¹, so the initial definition of virtue is incomplete.¹⁰² Moving beyond excellence in practices, in the second level, seeking excellence in our whole lives requires additional virtues.¹⁰³ But again, it is possible to conceive of excellence in one's life in an impoverished, individualist way that ignores one's debts to, and responsibilities for, one's community.¹⁰⁴ Thus, thirdly, a richer sense of moral excellence must also involve repaying those debts to one's community and encouraging that community to improve, even if doing so entails challenging the community to right historical wrongs.¹⁰⁵

MacIntyre does not venture to define the ultimate telos of human action in *After Virtue*, except in the form of 'a provisional conclusion' that presents it as an activity: 'the good life for man is the life spent in seeking the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is'.¹⁰⁶ In keeping with an insight from Karl Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach¹⁰⁷, the argument begins from the known –

¹⁰⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187-199.

¹⁰¹ See Ralph McInerney's fictional example of Thaddeus Skillen in *Ethica Thomistica*, 3-4.

¹⁰² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 199-203.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 204-219.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 220-222.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 222-225; see also MacIntyre, *Ethics*, § 4.3, 182-183.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁰⁷ Mentioned in MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 84-85; its greater significance will be explored later in this essay.

from what we already want and what we are already trying to achieve – to chart a provisional course into the unknown toward what we want to achieve beyond our current horizons. It is possible to have a philosophical discussion of our ends, so understood, even if we find it impossible to define our ultimate ends completely. Ends comes first in our practical deliberations. But a thorough definition of the ultimate end need not come first in our investigation of human acts.¹⁰⁸

In *Ethics* MacIntyre once again demands a practical approach to teleological ethics. In §1.8, ‘The NeoAristotelian conception of the human agent’¹⁰⁹, MacIntyre discusses the moral formation required for a human agent to flourish. Beginning in our own experiences of the requirements of ordinary life, the demands of our family lives, and the requirements of practices in which we try to do well, we learn what to want and what to pursue, and what habits to strengthen if we want to succeed in these things.¹¹⁰ In the course of things we discover, to some extent, that moral growth and development, however we might understand that, is indispensable to our success, even if we fail to develop ‘good judgment and rightly directed desire’¹¹¹ in some areas of our lives. If things go well, we will acknowledge the roles of our communities and friends in our lives, in helping us to recognize and pursue goods, particularly common goods.

Eventually, MacIntyre argues, we may look for the kind of end that might give order to all of our other choices about goods, and here he lists the final ends of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Boethius, and Aquinas.¹¹² But MacIntyre does not propose any Grand End here. Instead, he makes a procedural point about the philosophical pursuit of the final end:

But we make a mistake, if we try to characterize the life of practice in theoretical terms before we have described it in its own terms. What needs to be considered first is the place that the conception of a final end, of an ultimate human good, has in the life of a practice. For it is only in making practical judgments and choices, through the exercise of the virtues, that each of us discovers in our lives a certain kind of directedness toward a final end that is our own, toward

¹⁰⁸ See MacIntyre, ‘Rival Aristotles’, 25.

¹⁰⁹ MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 49-59.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 53.

perfecting and completing the lives that are our own,
by living out what in terms of our particular abilities
and circumstances we judge to be the best lives for
us.¹¹³

To discover the final end is to discover it through our own desires.

MacIntyre's position is consistent with Aquinas's, although it may appear to be at odds with some of Aquinas's interpreters. It is always a mistake to reduce the telos – even the true telos, even the *summum bonum* and *finis ultimis* of scholastic thought – to *the thing we are supposed to want*. Certainly, because our teleological acts are ordered to ends, and because some ends are only means to higher ends, it makes sense to ask about higher and higher ends, and it makes sense to ask what the highest end might be. It even makes sense to say that we *should* want the *summum bonum* as adequately defined. But if we think of the ultimate end only as the thing we are *supposed to pursue*, and not as the thing that we *already want*, if we think of the discovery of the highest good as the imposition of a kind of moral imperative rather than as the illumination of a mystery about our desire for the good, then we risk separating morality from desire in a way that would be quite foreign to Aristotelian and Thomistic moral agency, and quite foreign to MacIntyre's work.¹¹⁴ Although, it could be quite consistent with modern moral philosophy, or the voluntarist moral theologies that preceded it.

The highest good, what Aristotle calls *eudaimonia* and Aquinas calls *beatitudo*, both translated conventionally, although poorly, as 'happiness',¹¹⁵ is not an imposed moral imperative. For, it is already the object of our desire. MacIntyre writes: 'As both Aristotle and Aquinas point out, this is a state in which every rational agent desires to be. So our end state is to be one in which desire is finally and justifiably satisfied'.¹¹⁶ A brief review of Aquinas's treatment of the highest good supports MacIntyre's interpretation.

Aquinas gave two long arguments, one in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the other in the *Summa Theologiae*¹¹⁷, like Aristotle's argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*¹¹⁸, sifting through different kinds of goods to determine what the final end and highest good must be. In these

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹⁴ See MacIntyre, 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness'; see also Lutz, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue*, 75-106.

¹¹⁵ MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 54.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, book III, chapters 26-33; *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, questions 1-6, q. 2, a. 8.

¹¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book I.

arguments, there is no question of reducing the *finis ultimis* or *summum bonum*, to *the thing that we are supposed to want*. The purpose of these arguments is to identify the goal that will bring human desire to rest.

Thus, the beatific vision is not just ‘what one *should* want’; on Aquinas’s analysis, it is the thing that *we already do* want,¹¹⁹ whether we apprehend it as such or not.¹²⁰ For the Thomistic Aristotelian, anyone who cannot apprehend the beatific vision as the ultimate end will find questions about the ultimate end frustrating. Such an agent suffers frustration inasmuch as he does not succeed in doing what he is trying to do, namely, to discover what will truly satisfy his most human desire in order to pursue it effectively. Such an agent fails in the same way that Plato’s orators and despots fail, as ‘they do nothing that they wish to do, practically speaking, though they do whatever they think to be best’.¹²¹

The clarity that MacIntyre brings to the role of desire in teleological ethics has been one of the great strengths of his work since the 1950s. It is the entire purpose of *Ethics*. The modern separation of moral philosophy, understood as a study of duties and obligations, from the study of human action, understood as a psychological examination of human choices, doomed modern moral philosophy to incoherence, reducing the demands of morality to unintelligible taboos.¹²² MacIntyre’s Thomistic Aristotelianism, contrariwise, reconnects practical philosophy and moral philosophy, showing how attention to the conditions and habits required for human flourishing may enable moral agents to rediscover, renew, and redevelop the moral virtues.

Desire and agency: from ethics to politics

The importance of desire and agency in MacIntyre’s ethics flows into his political thought, because ‘for Aristotle and for Aristotelians, ethics is part of politics’.¹²³ In ethics we ask how we might become the kind of agents who have the practical wisdom to recognize what is truly good and best for us to do and who have the moral freedom to act on our best judgment. In politics we ask how we might form the kind of community that shares the practical wisdom to recognize our common goods¹²⁴, and

¹¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 82, a. 1.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, I, q. 82, a. 2.

¹²¹ Plato, *Gorgias* (+466 d-e).

¹²² For comprehensive list of ‘taboo’ references in MacIntyre’s work, See Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004, 2009), 195, note 46.

¹²³ MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 178.

¹²⁴ MacIntyre treats common goods in *Ethics*, § 4.2, 168-176.

that enjoys civic friendship sufficient to bind ourselves together to advance and defend those goods.

MacIntyre illustrates the connection between virtuous agency and productive local politics with two examples in *Ethics* §4.3. In the first, the fishing crews in the Danish community of Thorupstrand formed a ‘cooperative company that purchased a common pool of [fishing] quotas’ so that the local fishing crews could maintain their way of life in competition with big commercial fishing operations.¹²⁵ Creative political agency enabled the fishermen of Thorupstrand to defend well established common goods.

The second example of the interplay between ethics and politics begins with the founding of a school in the impoverished slum of Monte Azul in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1975. Over time, that school developed into a highly effective centre for cooperative political activity. In Monte Azul, members of poor families that had been politically passive, voiceless, and forgotten learned to work cooperatively to discover and pursue common goods:

Particular working groups and more general groups have met regularly for deliberative discussion on how to define and achieve the common goods with which they are concerned, on how to obtain the resources needed for their struggles, and how to mobilize political support [...] And that achievement of common goods has enabled numerous individuals to identify and achieve individual goods.¹²⁶

In Monte Azul, advancement in human agency at an individual level led to advancements in political agency in the community, which led to further achievements for individual agents. At Monte Azul, as at Thorupstrand, ethical achievement was the means to political achievement and vice versa. MacIntyre’s Thomistic Aristotelian ethics and politics help to map a way toward more ideal social conditions. In this sense, his Thomistic Aristotelianism has a qualifiedly Utopian character.

To paraphrase MacIntyre’s early reading of Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*, the truths about politics that can change the world can be discovered only in practice. In Aristotelian terms, the goal of political life

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

is the activity of political life; and as one learns to play the harp well or badly by playing the harp well or badly,¹²⁷ so we learn, or mislearn, the practices of political life. In his 2007 London paper, 'How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary', MacIntyre spoke of his political method as 'Utopianism of the present' and what he described there was a political discipline that refuses to separate the goal of political life from the method of political life, that refuses any 'sacrifice of the present to some imaginary glorious future'.¹²⁸ It is a discipline to be lived in communities struggling by means of shared practical reasoning to become schools of the virtues.

Modern, secular, individualist, liberal, civil society – a society that theorizes its genesis in the choices of individuals to join it – is hard pressed to serve as such a school. It is for this reason that those who seek a better way of life must seek communities that acknowledge relationships and goods that do not depend upon arbitrary choices, where community members, bound by personal and civic friendship can hold one another to account. Only such communities can help to form virtuous citizens and statesmen, who may in turn transform civil society according to ideals that no one has yet imagined. *Ethics* presents these lessons, once again, with clarity.

¹²⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1.

¹²⁸ MacIntyre, 'How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary', 16-17.

Works Cited

Anscombe, G. E. M. 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958): I-19.

_____. *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957; 2nd ed. 1963; Harvard University Press, 2000).

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Ross, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941).

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* (London, Penguin Books, 1981).

Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: MacMillan, 1965).

_____. *Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1990).

Lutz, Christopher Stephen. *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

_____. *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004, 2009).

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 'Breaking the Chains of Reason', in E. P. Thompson, ed. *Out of Apathy* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1960), 195-240; reprinted in Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, eds. *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 135-166, @166.

_____. 'Can Medicine Dispense with a Theological Perspective on Human Nature?' in *Knowledge, Value, and Belief, The Foundations of Ethics and Its Relationship to Science*, Volume II (Hastings on Hudson, N.Y.: The Hastings Center, 1977), 25-43.

_____. 'Can Medicine Dispense with a Theological Perspective on Human Nature?' in *Knowledge, Value and Belief*, H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. and Daniel Callahan, eds. (Hastings-on-the-Hudson; Hastings Center, 1977), 25-43. Reprinted in *The Roots of Ethics: Science, Religion, and Values*, Daniel Callahan and Tristram Engelhardt Jr., eds. (New York and London: Plenum, 1981), 119-137.

_____. 'Freedom and Revolution,' *Labour Review*, Feb./Mar. 1960, 19-24. Reprinted in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism*, ed. Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 123-134.

_____. 'How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance, and Utopia', in Kelvin Knight and Paul Blackledge, eds. *Virtue and Politics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), II-19.

_____. 'Hume on "Is" and "Ought"', *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), 451-468. Reprinted in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 109-124.

_____. 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness I', *New Reasoner* 7 (Winter 1958-9), 90-100; and 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness II', *New Reasoner* 8 (Spring 1959), 89-98. Reprinted in Kelvin Knight (ed.), *The MacIntyre Reader* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 31-40 and 41-49. Reprinted in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism*, ed. Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, (Brill, 2005; Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), 45-57 and 57-68.

_____. 'On Having Survived the Academic Moral Philosophy of the Twentieth Century', in *What Happened In and To Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Fran O'Rourke (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 17-34.

_____. 'Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against some Modern Aristotelians' in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays Volume 2* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22-40.

_____. 'The Illusion of Self-Sufficiency,' interview by Alex Voorhoeve, in *Conversations on Ethics*, ed. Alex Voorhoeve (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 111-131

_____. 'What Morality Is Not', *Philosophy* 32 (1957), 325-35. Reprinted in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1971; republished, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 96-108.

_____. *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981; 2nd ed. 1984; 3rd ed. 2007).

_____. *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

_____. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

_____. *Marxism: An Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1953).

_____. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

Marx, Karl. 'On the Jewish Question', review of Bruno Bauer, *The Jewish Question* (Braunschweig, 1843), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>. See also Lutz, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue*, 24.

McInemy, Ralph. *Ethica Thomistica* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982, revised ed. 1997).

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*, ed. Oskar Piest (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1957).

Osborne, Thomas. 'Ockham as a Divine-Command Theorist', *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 1-22.

Pinckaers, Servais, OP. *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, OP, (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995; *Les sources de la morale chrétienne* (University Press Fribourg, 1985, 1990, 1993).

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, Quotations from *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Hanover House, 1955-57). <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3a.htm>.

_____. *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/index.html>.