

Book Review

MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*¹

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Almost a decade after his last book (*God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of Catholic Philosophical Tradition*, 2009) Alasdair MacIntyre has once more graced his readers with an opus poised to equal, if not surpass, his now classic work, *After Virtue* (1981). Quite frankly, it is very tempting to take this latest offering from the Scottish-American philosopher as an updating of his reconstruction of Aristotelian ethics which he proposed, via the aforementioned magnum opus, as a philosophic remedy to mitigate the interminable moral disagreements spawned by modernity. Anyone with adequate familiarity with the MacIntyrean literature would not miss a sense of both continuity and contiguity between the present text and the themes developed elsewhere by MacIntyre. Its comparative worth notwithstanding, the book easily qualifies as a stand-alone reader which could be conveniently enjoyed either by an avid MacIntyrean or a newbie who forays into his oeuvre for the first time. In other words, while an exposure to MacIntyre's writings could be of help, in particular, his critique of modern ethics, its absence by no means poses a barrier to the uninitiated given MacIntyre's proclivity to write in his usual pedagogic, magisterial style. Simply put, the text at hand, like most materials authored by him, is a testament to that rare virtue among philosophers, especially the great ones, to give their thoughts an organic structure, clarify their premises, hint at their conclusions, define their terms and provide transition segments which would allow the reader to sustain his attention in between narrative and conceptual shifts. This indeed is a positive feature but something that is not without paradox considering MacIntyre's avowed aversion to ethics' unfortunate decadence into a field of academic philosophy. As in his other writings, MacIntyre, in this particular book, raises his concern against ethics' narrowing into a compartmentalized knowledge domain under the watch of the so-called experts—theorists, professors, researchers, consultants—who

¹ Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 322pp.

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are able to devise a system that explains and resolves every imaginable ethical question but excludes in the process the very person from whom it comes and for whom it matters. Referring to the difficulty of overcoming the depth of philosophic disagreements among modern ethics' schools of thought, MacIntyre inquires: "Does the impasse at which I arrived perhaps result from the nature and limitation of such enquiry, enquiry that is narrowly academic? ... Yet what the compartmentalization of contemporary social life ensures is that those who do have these important life experiences in armies or factories, or farms, or prisons, or whatever are generally educated, just as professional philosophers are, to believe that philosophical reflection and enquiry are matter for academic specialists and not for them. Perhaps, however, at least so far as moral and political philosophy are concerned, this is a mistake. Perhaps philosophers need to begin from everyday questions of plain persons, the plain persons that they themselves were before they took to the study of philosophy."² Among the many attributes adopted from both Aristotle and Aquinas, it is perhaps this insistence on the unique and inalienable capacity of the ordinary person to reason and act ethically in pursuit of what is good which marks MacIntyre for me as a compelling Thomistic Aristotelian thinker. Both Aristotle and Aquinas believe that a human person is an ethical agent who has it in her the impetus to engage in rational practices such as inquiry and deliberation in view of her progressive attainment of human flourishing. The exclusion of the average person coincides with modernity's estrangement of reason from the moral debates which weigh down our culture today. The interminable character of these debates, however, is definitely, for MacIntyre, not a reason to lose hope. While there may not yet be a painless end to these debates in sight, his reconstructive Thomistic Aristotelian scheme assures us that we are never out of options.

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² Ibid., 70-71.