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MacIntyre and Classical Philosophy

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Alasdair MacIntyre is a polarizing figure. On the one hand, critics have him condemned him as a conservative, a communitarian, an anti-liberal, a Marxist, a Catholic revanchist, or some combination of these. On the other hand, his admirers have feted him for heroically resisting the liberal pieties of the Western academy, reinstating the claims of "tradition" in the face of an increasingly ahistorical, and certainly anti-historicist intellectual consensus. But wherever people stand on MacIntyre, everyone can agree he is an exceptionally erudite presence in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Anglophone philosophy. No one comes close to his range of reference, and this is reflected in the extraordinary breadth of his publications.[1]

A key part of MacIntyre's erudition consists in his classical learning: having studied Classics at Queen Mary College as an undergraduate,[2] he—notwithstanding his Marxist and Christian trajectory—has never abandoned his roots in classical philosophy. The purpose of this chapter is to assess MacIntyre's elaboration and transformation of those roots from 1966 to 2016. My argument will be that, over this highly productive half-century, his engagement with classical philosophy demonstrates

1. MacIntyre's extensive work on moral philosophy and its history covers Aristotelianism, Augustinianism, Thomism, Marxism, animal ethics, phenomenology, and analytic ethics—to mention only some highlights. For details, see the bibliography.

2. See, e.g., MacIntyre, "On Not Knowing," 61–62.

more continuity than change. Uncovering and unpacking this continuity, however, is not a straightforward task.

A Short History of Ethics

The first edition of *A Short History of Ethics* appeared in 1966,[3] and contains MacIntyre's first systematic treatment of classical philosophy. Notably, he spends far longer on Plato (chapters 3–6) than on Aristotle (chapter 7), which inverts the subsequent pattern of his work, where Plato becomes a subordinate figure and Aristotle takes center-stage.[4] A plausible diagnosis of this initial, comparatively strong interest in Plato is that, in the mid-sixties, MacIntyre was still more affiliated with mainstream Marxism, so Plato's marked anti-egalitarianism—at least in the *Republic*, to which MacIntyre devotes a substantial fifth chapter (33–50)—was more in his sights as an intellectual target. But whatever his underlying motives, MacIntyre's critique of the *Republic* is comprehensive and unrelenting. Plato is presented as having made cardinal errors on at least six, seminal fronts.

First, Plato is logically at fault in the way he construes the Forms (40–41). He refers to them using the innovating, hypostatizing use of *itself*. For instance, he speaks of the "beautiful itself," as if we could infer from a mere description to a transcendent object, viz., Beauty *per se*. It follows that Plato effectively conflates meaning and reference. And this logical error generates a second, epistemological error, namely, that corresponding to Forms (for example, Beauty) and the objects that "participate" in them (for example, the many beautiful things), there are two basic modes of cognition: knowledge and belief (respectively). In this way, Plato runs together "the different ways in which individuals may acquire and hold their beliefs"—namely, without the warrant of reason and argument, or, alternatively and by contrast, with it—with a difference in "subject matter" (41).

The third mistake Plato makes, MacIntyre contends, is political. Here the criticism he enters is not formal but substantive. Not only does Plato enjoin the rulers of Kallipolis (his perfected city-state) to tell "noble lies," he does so in the name of an "ideal state [that] can never become real" (45). And both of these (by turns, repugnant and despairing) recommendations bear witness to what MacIntyre calls Plato's "deep pessimism" about political

3. MacIntyre, *Short History*.

4. It is worth pointing out that he devotes very little space to Hellenistic (i.e., post-Aristotelian) classical philosophy, a pattern which is reinforced in his later work. I will hence not be documenting his sparse and sporadic engagement with Cynicism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Scepticism, etc.

life (45). These criticisms demonstrate nicely two preoccupations which will characterize MacIntyre's own work: that is, an entrenched egalitarianism on the one hand, and his own brand of pessimism on the other (in this latter respect, his work is far more Platonic than Aristotelian—or so I will argue).[5] Plato's fourth error, according to MacIntyre, is moral. Central here is Plato's privileging of intellectual over appetitive pleasures, thereby displaying what MacIntyre calls his "utterly deplorable puritanism" (46). This reflects, moreover, Plato's fifth, moral psychological, error, namely his divorce of reason from desire in the soul (47). Unlike Aristotle, who both sees and affirms the possibility of reason's informing and guiding appetite, "reason, in the Platonic scheme, can only dominate, not inform or guide, appetite, and appetite of itself is essentially irrational" (47).

Plato's sixth error, on MacIntyre's account, is metaphysical, and centers on the Forms. In effect, Plato takes a model of justification appropriate to geometry, and applies it to matters of conduct. As MacIntyre expounds things: "To treat *justice* and *good* as the names of Forms is to miss at once . . . that they characterize not what is, but what ought to be. . . . And it always makes sense to ask of any existing object or state whether it is as it ought to be" (49–50). This explains both Plato's certitude about the nature of justice and goodness, and his willingness to impose his certitudes upon others—without having metaphysical warrant for either. To add insult to injury, moreover, things get no better in Plato's last dialogue, the *Laws*, where—even in the absence of the Forms—he upholds "a paternalistic and totalitarian politics" (56).

All in all, then, MacIntyre's treatment of Plato in *A Short History of Ethics* is highly critical. Plato's core "theoretical" (logical, epistemological, and metaphysical) and "practical" (political, moral, and moral psychological) commitments are, on MacIntyre's account, deeply flawed and mutually reinforcing. And although he presents Plato's theoretical and practical commitments as on a par, it is evident that the latter—centrally, Plato's hierarchism and elitism—are what he finds most objectionable. Is his treatment of Aristotle more affirmative?

MacIntyre plainly finds salutary those respects in which Aristotle moves away from Plato. Logically and metaphysically, he welcomes

5. For MacIntyre's continued, strong commitment to social egalitarianism, see, e.g., MacIntyre, "Review Essay"; for his avowed pessimism, see, e.g., MacIntyre, "Replies." In the former, he holds that "we inhabit a society marked by gross and increasing economic inequalities and by a variety of other unjust inequalities" (716). In the latter, he endorses Williams's judgement that "he and I agreed in our pessimism" (201) and refers to his own "general pessimism about moral modernity" (216). I shall say more about what this "general pessimism" consists in below.

Aristotle's critique of the Form of the Good. Whereas Plato's referral of all goods to a transcendent Form renders "good" a "single and unitary notion," Aristotle argues (cogently) that we use the word in judgments in all the categories (61). This reflects the fact that different goods fall under different sciences, a fact that Plato's indexing of sciences to Forms cannot accommodate (on pain of there being only one science of good things). MacIntyre further endorses Aristotle's claim that speaking of the Good "itself" explains nothing about any actual good. "To call a state of affairs good," he adjures, "is not necessarily to . . . relate it to any object that exists, whether transcendental or not; it is to place it as a proper object of desire" (61). In this respect, Aristotle's logical and metaphysical departure from Plato represents a gain also in terms of moral psychology. And this internal relationship between goodness and desire is captured by Aristotle's pluralist logic and metaphysics of value; by contrast, Plato's transcendent Good renders the relation between goodness and desire opaque.

If Aristotle makes real progress by repudiating Plato's logic, metaphysics and moral psychology of goodness, he also makes real progress ethically. For whereas the early Plato countenances the claim that it is better to be tortured on the rack than to have a soul burdened with moral guilt, Aristotle holds, more commonsensically, that "No one would call a man suffering miseries and misfortunes happy, unless he were merely arguing a case" (60). Once again, this reflects Aristotle's plausible idea that goods are necessarily desirable, and bads necessarily undesirable. (Granted, this does not tell us how to endure a society in which the just man is crucified (60)—but, at this early stage in MacIntyre's authorship, he presents this lacuna as bearable.) MacIntyre also praises Aristotle's more technical contributions to moral psychology and theory. As we've seen already, he agrees with Aristotle's view that "There is no *necessary* conflict between reason and desire, such as Plato envisages" (64), a view grounded in Aristotle's far greater integration between soul and body. But he also supports Aristotle's elaboration of the practical syllogism, including the controversial notion that just as a theoretical syllogism concludes in a proposition, so a practical syllogism concludes in an action (71–72).

It is plain, therefore, that for the young MacIntyre, Aristotle is preferable (overall) to Plato. Where Aristotle fails, and perhaps does even worse than Plato, is in his politics—including aspects of his ethics. An example of the latter is Aristotle's elaboration of the ethical mean, which MacIntyre describes as having a "falsely abstract air," being of "no practical help," and amounting to an increasingly "arbitrary construction" (66–67). Aristotle's application of the mean, moreover, gives a "first indication that Aristotle was . . . [a] 'supercilious prig'" (66). Why so? Because, according to

MacIntyre, it is priggish to understand the righteously indignant man as upset by the undeserved good fortune of others (66). And this points to a wider critique, namely, that Aristotle's list of the virtues is little more than an (over-schematized) intellectual version of upper-class Greek life (67). This would be less reprehensible, MacIntyre maintains, if Aristotle were unaware of any alternatives. But in point of fact, he was not: he was aware of the undeserved suffering embodied in Socrates's life and moral philosophy, yet "when Aristotle considers justice he so defines it that the enactments of a state are unlikely to be unjust provided that they are properly enacted" (67–68). MacIntyre infers that Aristotle has merely rewritten the table of the virtues in line with his own class-bound conservatism (68).

This moral-cum-political critique is underlined throughout MacIntyre's chapter on Aristotle. Aristotle's assumption that wittiness and magnificence, for example, are virtues, betrays an unmistakable "social bias" (68). His moral attitude to prosperity is, moreover, "priggish" (76–77). Key here is Aristotle's character-ideal of great-souledness, or *megalopsuchia*, which MacIntyre says embodies a "peculiar brand of condescension" (78), with its prizing of infallibility, social superiority, and self-sufficiency. And this ill-founded ideal of *autarkeia*, or self-sufficiency—which, as I will outline, MacIntyre revisits in *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999)[6] in equally depreciatory terms—is entrenched further by Aristotle's understanding of *theōria*, or contemplation, as the locus of primary fulfilment. As MacIntyre holds, this "self-sufficient occupation" reinforces Aristotle's ideal as restricted to a "small leisured minority," at home in a "hierarchical social order," which values above all an "extraordinarily parochial form of human existence" (82–83). In the end, therefore, Aristotle—despite his aspiration to universality—remains deeply wedded, MacIntyre concludes, to "social obscurantism" (83).

After Virtue

In summary, while *A Short History of Ethics* shows admiration for Aristotle's formal philosophical abilities, it heavily criticizes his ethical and political ideals. By the time of *After Virtue* (1981),[7] fifteen years later, we see both continuity and change.

On the one hand, the space MacIntyre devotes to Plato is noticeably reduced (he confines his comments to Plato on the unity of the virtues (140–45)). On the other, MacIntyre continues to be unforgiving of what

6. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*.

7. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

he calls Aristotle's value "blindness" (159). This is evident from "Aristotle's writing-off of non-Greeks, barbarians and slaves, as not merely not possessing political relationships, but as incapable of them" (159). This blindness is compounded, moreover, by Aristotle's exclusion of "the peculiar excellences of the exercise of craft skill and manual labor" from his catalogue of the virtues (159). As in *A Short History of Ethics*, MacIntyre also praises, however, Aristotle's formal achievements in ethical theory: "Aristotle's account of practical reasoning," he remarks, "is in essentials surely right" (161). For instance, the conclusion of a practical syllogism is, indeed, a kind of action, and this forms part of "a statement of necessary conditions for intelligible human action . . . that must hold for any recognizably human culture" (161). MacIntyre goes on to précis his threefold formal agreement with Aristotle in chapter 14 ("The Nature of the Virtues"). First, he accepts, broadly, Aristotle's analysis of voluntariness; of natural, character and intellectual virtue; and of the passions. Second, he endorses "an Aristotelian view of pleasure and enjoyment." And third, his own "account . . . links evaluation and explanation in a characteristically Aristotelian way": *contra* the canons of the "modern social sciences," moral and political actions and events can be not only evaluated, but also explained (at least in part) by the presence or absence of the virtues (e.g., justice) in social life (see 197–99).

These deep continuities, of both criticism and affirmation, mask a wider discontinuity, however, between 1966 and 1981. Whereas in *A Short History of Ethics* MacIntyre had focused on Aristotle *per se*, in isolation from any wider project, in *After Virtue* he focuses instead on "Aristotelianism." The latter constitutes, in effect, a proleptic critique of what are now MacIntyre's main intellectual targets: namely, what he refers to as "the Enlightenment Project" on the one hand, and the corollary of its failure on the other, viz., what he calls the "modern liberal individualist world" (156). As MacIntyre elaborates in chapter 12 ("Aristotle's Account of the Virtues"), what lies at the heart of Aristotle's virtue theory is the idea that human life and action are teleological. That is, human beings have a nature which is end-directed: the end in question is *eudaimonia*, or flourishing, and this can be achieved only in and through practicing the virtues. When Aristotelian teleology was rejected, therefore, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so-called "Enlightenment" philosophers had to replace it—on pain of leaving the moral life without foundations. It is MacIntyre's core argument in *After Virtue* that these attempts at replacement not only failed, but had to fail. And while I can hardly do justice to his complex and fascinating account of why this is so, I can nonetheless provide a brief summary of it.[8]

8. For more detail, see chapter 5, "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying

According to MacIntyre, the great dividend of a teleological moral metaphysics is that it supplies a basically threefold schema, within which ethical claims and injunctions can be rationalized. As he puts things, "Within [Aristotle's] teleological scheme there is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature. Ethics is the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from the former state to the latter" (52). In the absence of this "teleological scheme," new modes of grounding moral obligations (or "oughts") have to be found—yet, on MacIntyre's philosophical narrative, none can be. Philosophers like Hume, for instance, confine their grounding to contingent desires such as "sympathy," a desire he claims to be universal. But not only do such desires depend on and fluctuate with individual psychology, they also—since they are deprived of any over-arching teleological framework—prove incapable of underwriting an intelligible and motivating human *telos*. Philosophers like Kant, for their part, have recourse not to human desire, but rather to human reason, in the hope that this will generate (or perhaps constitute) the proper grounding for ethics. But here too, the Enlightenment project of justifying morality had to fail. For in the absence of a teleological metaphysics, reason devolves into a merely formalistic system of imperatives, which have no intelligible, constitutive end, and furthermore do not admit of truth or falsity. Once again, the intellectual scaffolding that gave them sense has been dismantled, rendering them little more than a series of moral "taboos."[9]

This intellectual genealogy is, of course, highly condensed as it stands—yet MacIntyre does a great deal to fill in its manifold lacunae. Key among these is his defense of the controversial Aristotelian commitment to evaluative facts, a commitment impugned by Moore and the purported "naturalistic fallacy" (see, e.g., 148). But notwithstanding the justificatory work which remains to be done, MacIntyre's argument is clear overall, and energizing in its boldness. Aristotle's commitment to teleology is, on his view, the linchpin of subsequent ethical theory, and by removing this essential element of moral metaphysics, Enlightenment

Morality Had to Fail." This title is slightly misleading since MacIntyre believes that it was not the project of justifying morality *as such* that had to fail but rather the Enlightenment version of this. Its failure was owing to its repudiation of teleology, which, according to MacIntyre, remains the only defensible foundation for morality.

9. In chapter 9, entitled "Nietzsche or Aristotle?," MacIntyre makes precisely this claim, viz., that—at least by the nineteenth century—"morality," and the moral philosophy it sponsored, had degenerated effectively into a set of unrationalized and unrationalizable imperatives (see esp. 111–13). It was Nietzsche's historical task, according to MacIntyre, to unmask these taboos and hence to reveal (despite his own purposes) the cogency of the Aristotelianism that had been so fatefully abandoned.

and post-Enlightenment philosophers necessarily evacuated their own conceptual schemes of exactly that on which those schemes depended for their persuasiveness and coherence.

The move away from Aristotle had, moreover, other, related costs. By strongly privileging moral laws over moral virtues, the Enlightenment philosophers became unable to rationalize those common goods that moral laws were understood traditionally as subtending. The upshot of this was a kind of rule-fetishism, combined with the inability to settle conflicts between extant moral rules (see 119, 152–54). At the same time, once such common or shared goods were no longer part of the moral theoretical superstructure, goods became privatized, and thus vulnerable to being construed as objects of consequentialist aggregation and maximization (see 150–51). On both these fronts, MacIntyre argues, the abandonment of Aristotelianism had baleful implications for morality and moral theory, both of which became increasingly liberal and individualistic.

Lest all of this suggest that *After Virtue* is an unqualified paean to Aristotelian *teleological* metaphysics, it should be emphasized that what MacIntyre gives with one hand, he takes away with the other. For although he holds that "Aristotelianism is *philosophically* the most powerful of premodern modes of moral thought" (118), he also believes that, in the form which Aristotle gave moral teleology, it cannot withstand modern criticism. This is because that teleology rests on what MacIntyre refers to as a "metaphysical biology"[10] that is not only indefensible after Darwin, but also unsustainable in light of what we now know about human cultures and their historical development. As he puts matters, "Aristotle writes as if barbarians and Greeks both had fixed natures and in so viewing them he brings home to us . . . the ahistorical character of his understanding of human nature" (159). This ahistoricity is fatal to his brand of *teleology*, since it blinds him to, for example, the "transience of the *polis*" (159) and, worse, the moral equality of freemen and slaves (these never being slaves "by nature," 160). As MacIntyre concludes, "any adequate teleological account must provide us with some clear and defensible account of the [human] *telos*; and any adequate generally Aristotelian account must supply a teleological account which can replace Aristotle's metaphysical biology" (163).

This is an entrée to MacIntyre's construction of his own *teleological* metaphysics, a metaphysics cast in the non-"biological" idiom of "practices," these being embedded within culturally diverse and historically changing "traditions" and "narratives." While the details of this construction lie beyond the scope of this chapter, suffice it to say that MacIntyre

10. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 58, 148, 163, 196, 237.

views this replacement metaphysics as both genuinely teleological and genuinely Aristotelian. As he writes, "if it turns out to be the case that this socially teleological account can support Aristotle's general account of the virtues as well as does his own biologically teleological account, these differences from Aristotle himself may well be regarded as strengthening rather than weakening the case for a generally Aristotelian standpoint" (197). I will not comment on the difficult and controversial issue of whether MacIntyre's "socially teleological account" of the virtues in *After Virtue* is indeed an adequate and well-founded alternative to Aristotle's own account. What is uncontroversial and, moreover, worth highlighting, is that by no one's lights—least of all MacIntyre's—is his account Aristotelian in the sense of conveying the fullness of Aristotle's ethics and metaphysics. By MacIntyre's own admission, Aristotle lacked an historical consciousness (146), and certainly was no historicist. So in this, far from unimportant, respect, *After Virtue* represents a definitive departure from Aristotle. MacIntyre's next great work affirms and deepens this departure—though, as we shall see, it is a departure that, later in his authorship, is revised and even (to some extent) overturned.

Whose Justice? Which Rationality?

MacIntyre's next book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988),[11] contains his most extended and fine-grained engagement with classical philosophy. In one respect, it represents a return to *A Short History of Ethics*, insofar as Plato, and particularly the *Republic*, are afforded a whole chapter ("Plato and Rational Enquiry"). But the *Republic*, with its focus on the virtue of justice, is treated essentially as a foil and propaedeutic to Aristotle—hence the titles of the two following chapters: "Aristotle as Plato's Heir" and "Aristotle on Justice." Unlike *After Virtue*, then, we are back to Aristotle *per se*, rather than, primarily, to Aristotelianism—albeit an Aristotle who (as we shall see) conveys salient lessons for the future. And, unlike *After Virtue*, both Plato and Aristotle are subordinated essentially to a more encompassing intellectual narrative, the *telos* of which is Aquinas (see chapters 10–12). This reflects MacIntyre's entry into the Catholic Church in the intervening years, along with his increasing adherence to Thomism as a tradition of philosophical enquiry.

Chapter 5 presents the *Republic* as, at its core, an agonistic philosophical drama (72). On the one side, there are the sophists and rhetors, while on the other, there is Socrates, the representative of true philosophy. This conflict has

11. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*

long roots: in the previous chapter, MacIntyre cites the historian Thucydides, who affirms both the sophistic reduction of argument to eristic (or winning at all costs), and rhetoric as a means of achieving this (see 65–68). MacIntyre accordingly sees three features as crucial to Thucydides's "standpoint." First, he disjoins virtue from intelligence, conceiving of the latter as a means-end skill, where the ends in question are morally indifferent (65). Second, he reduces justice to the will or interest of the (politically) strong (65): as MacIntyre puts it, he conceives of justice as "entirely at the service of effectiveness, a justice to which desert is irrelevant" (66). And third, Thucydides understands rhetoric as essential to the prosecution of this *Machtpolitik* (66). A key mark of rhetoric, moreover, is its conception of persuasion as arational—indeed, as necessarily arational. As MacIntyre writes,

> the fundamental connection which a skilled rhetorician has to establish between himself and his audience has to be nonrational. He cannot offer his audience any rationally defensible account of the ends which, on his view, he and they ought, if they are rational, to pursue; he has instead to appeal to ends which he and they do in fact already share and to hopes and fears defined in terms of those ends (67).

Plato's *Republic* appears on the philosophical scene as, in effect, a rejoinder to Thucydides (68). For the Platonic Socrates, it is the "goods of excellence" that are rationally overriding, even if they are continually threatened by the "goods of effectiveness" (69). Hence virtue or *aretē* conditions both theoretical and practical rationality, while the latter conditions virtue (69). Socrates pursues his critique of Thucydides (in the guise of Thrasymachus) by denying also his second axiom, namely, that justice reduces to "the will of the stronger." While accepting Thasymachus's portrayal of how actual polities function and how their rulers behave, he rejects the idea that injustice can be ultimately effective (70). Instead, it will bring those who practice it to ruin. And this then casts a long shadow over Thucydides's third axiom, viz., the notion that rhetoric is the best and most effective mode of achieving one's political ends. Not only does Periclean or Gorgianic oratory, with its "nonrational manipulation," make its adepts and hearers worse (70). It also fails, ultimately, in its aims, since whereas true *technē* or skill is constitutively aimed at the good, oratory is a mere *empeiria* or knack, which has no well-founded or systematic *telos* (70). Indeed, it places itself at the mercy of its current hearers, with all their rational inadequacies and practical fickleness.

By the close of *Republic* I, the outcome of this threefold *agōn* is, nevertheless, inconclusive. For neither side—sophists and orators on the one

hand, Socrates on the other—espouse premises which their opponents accept. They each subscribe to different conceptions of *technē*, and Socrates's "elenctic" method of question and answer cannot arrive at "a rationally grounded conception of goods and of the good which can claim the status of knowledge" (73). It is the task of *Republic* II–IV to dramatize Socrates's attempted overcoming of these deficiencies—by appeal to his "twin notions of a *polis* [city] and a *psuchē* [soul] which are in good order" (73). What constitutes this "good order"? Socrates relies here essentially on the idea of *logos* or reason, which provides the soul with knowledge of genuine goods, these standing in contradistinction to the pseudo-goods of passion and appetite (73–74). A city, therefore, which is governed in accord with such knowledge will be a just city, while a soul so governed will be a just soul (74). The trouble with this account is that, once again, it is unable to refute its rival "in terms that would be acceptable to the protagonists of that [rival]" (75). Sophists and rhetors, in other words, simply do not acknowledge any epistemic standard beyond the extant wants and demands of a particular culture, a standard to which that culture is answerable and by which it is properly judged (77).

Socrates's response to this argumentative *impasse* is embodied in the "theory" of Forms. As MacIntyre relates, this theory rests on a new "science," that of "dialectic," which is "the science of the intelligible . . . [providing] a new resource of rationality" (78). Dialectic discerns not justice-for-a-particular-culture, or justice-at-a particular-time, but "justice as such, of the *eidos* [form] of all partial and one-sided exemplifications and one-sided elucidations" (79). It follows that dialectic stands opposed to the sophists and their rhetor-allies, involving, as it does, "a rejection of any conception of justice, understood in terms of timeless, impersonal, and nonperspectival truth" (81). The question is, however, whether this proposed solution to the problem of justice is cogent. According to MacIntyre, it faces an overwhelming challenge. For even if the nature (or Form) of justice is known by dialectic, the latter requires a highly exacting training; and "no one participating in the conversation of the *Republic* has had such a training" (82). It follows that "what Plato offers us is radically incomplete" (83), and "the sophistic and Thucydidean view of human reality" (83) remains unvanquished. This, for MacIntyre, is precisely the challenge to which Plato's pupil, Aristotle, rose. As he puts it, "The Aristotle whom I am going to present is . . . one whose fundamental enterprise was to complete, and in so doing to correct, Plato's project" (85). For the MacIntyre of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* then, it falls to Aristotle to argue for "objective and independent standards of justice" (86), the only standards that can withstand the relativism of the sophists and the "nonrational persuasion" (86) of the orators.

On this basis, and at the risk of simplification, one could say that whereas *After Virtue* casts Aristotelianism as the antidote to the moral and moral philosophical failure of the "Enlightenment Project," *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* casts Aristotle as the antidote to the political philosophical failure of Plato. But how, exactly, does MacIntyre understand this *Aufhebung* or completion and correction of Plato? Once more, his approach draws on both history and philosophy. On the one hand, Aristotle accepts Plato's commitment to the *polis* or city-state as the only appropriate context in which justice and the other virtues can be developed (89–90). On the other hand, Aristotle rejects Plato's utopianism, that is, his apparent refusal to countenance any actual *polis* as an instantiation of "the best possible type of polis" (90).[12] Thus *Nicomachean Ethics* V holds that "justice-as-it-ought-to-be-understood [is] implicit in the practice of justice-as-it-is" (90), while the *Politics*, with its catalogue of different constitutions, constitutes "a handbook for practice in a way quite alien to the spirit of the *Republic*" (90). MacIntyre stresses, nonetheless, that Aristotle's departures from the *Republic* are always only a "redoing" of Plato (94), never a root-and-branch repudiation of him. And this can be seen in the way those departures are in line with Plato's last dialogue, the *Laws*. Just as, for instance, the *Laws* reconfigures *eidos* to mean not "Form" but "species" (94), and describes certain extant constitutions as "well-ordered" (95), so Aristotle, too, adopts these anti-utopian positions as his own.

If the *Republic* is *aufgehoben* by Aristotle's ethical-cum-political theory, one might infer that that theory's anti-utopianism mirrors MacIntyre's own. But this would be too hasty. Indeed, chapter 7, "Aristotle on Justice," throws this inference into severe doubt. For what we find here is an excursus on the ethical-cum-political "standpoint of modernity" (111), which, according to MacIntyre, is systematically resistant to a key aspect of Aristotelian justice. The aspect in question is the exclusion of *pleonexia*, or acquisitiveness, i.e., "acting so as to have more as such" (111). This, for Aristotle, is a vice, since while it reflects a "zeal for life," the life in question is not, he maintains, the "good life" (*Politics* 1257b41). This is because the latter is mediated by the virtues, one of which is temperance (i.e., proper control of appetite), and another of which is justice (which enjoins fair distribution of goods). MacIntyre shares Aristotle's principled hostility to *pleonexia*, and judges, accordingly,

12. Here MacIntyre makes a controversial assumption, namely, that the *Republic* is thus "utopian." While Strauss has argued for this interpretation (see Strauss, *City and Man*), it is not clearly the correct one. For more on the realizability of the perfectly just *polis*, see Burnyeat, "Utopia and Fantasy" (which argues against Strauss), and Morrison, "Utopian Character" (which carves out a subtle mid-position, viz., that the ideal human society may be closely approximated).

that it sets both him and Aristotle in systematic and ineluctable opposition to "the dominant standpoint of peculiarly modern societies" (112). As he summarizes matters, "the adherents of that standpoint recognize that acquisitiveness is a character trait indispensable to continuous and limitless economic growth, and one of their central beliefs is that continuous and limitless economic growth is a fundamental good" (112).

The relevance of this to utopianism is that, given MacIntyre's Aristotelian, and hence anti-*pleonectic* conception of justice, it is doubtful whether—under specifically modern conditions—justice can be realized (or even approximated). That is, the *Aufhebung* of the *Republic* is threatened, and Platonism about justice reinstated, if the political condition of modernity is as bleak as he makes out. Now it is true that, from *A Short History of Ethics* onwards, MacIntyre explicitly distances himself from Platonism. As late as his "Replies" (written in 2013), he avows "the deep philosophical divide between . . . Platonism and my Thomistic Aristotelianism."[13] But at the same time, these "Replies" elaborate in detail the politically unregenerate nature of modernity. As MacIntyre contends, in the UK and US "significant progress towards educational and social equality in the last forty years, let alone income equality, has been nonexistent" (203). Modern states, he claims, lack "the kind of grass roots institutions through which . . . ordinary citizens . . . can identify their shared needs and . . . common good" (204). It follows that, for MacIntyre, "an Aristotelian politics here and now will be a politics in opposition to politics as now understood, the politics of the elites of the contemporary state and market" (207). At best, true politics will inhabit "the margins of modern societies," where "local grass roots projects" can resist the "modern state-and-market" (211).

This is precisely the pessimism, I take it, to which I adverted in note five above, a pessimism reflected, moreover, in the dramatic concluding judgement of MacIntyre's "Replies," that "If one understands citizenship as Aristotle and Aquinas understood it, as a participation in civic friendship directed towards the achievement of common goods, then contemporary liberal political societies have no citizens."[14] But if so—and very similar claims are made in "Particularities"[15]—have we not returned to the utopian landscape of the *Republic*? Given the stringency, indeed, of MacIntyre's requirements on justice, are we not on the verge of Augustinian Platonism, for which "there was no justice in pagan Rome," and

13. MacIntyre, "Replies," 216.
14. MacIntyre, "Replies," 220.
15. MacIntyre, "Practicalities."

"Justice exists only in that republic which is the city of God"?[16] To this verdict there is, no doubt, the objection that such Christianized Platonism is incompatible with Aristotelian anti-utopianism. But it may be that MacIntyre has prepared the way for this transformed and frankly pessimistic Aristotelianism in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* For it is there that, in chapter 6, he writes that "the possibility of further dialectical development always remains open, and it is this which renders possible the work of a tradition elaborating upon, revising, emending, and even rejecting parts of Aristotle's own work, while still remaining fundamentally Aristotelian" (101). Perhaps this logic of traditioned enquiry opens the way to a heavily Platonized Aristotelianism—the kind of Aristotelianism, in fact, which Thomism (on MacIntyre's construal) turns out to be.

One dividend of this reading is that it provides a riposte to those critics who argue that MacIntyre's is an "amputated" Aristotelianism, deprived of any real political application or even possibility of such.[17] Although this criticism captures MacIntyre's refusal to endorse any current régime, it obscures the reason for this: namely, that under modern (i.e., liberal and individualistic) conditions, no régime can, on MacIntyre's account, even approximate justice.[18] In this way, it also obscures how far MacIntyre has—notwithstanding his disavowals—Platonized Aristotle. For by his lights, Aristotelianism must become "revolutionary," where "revolution" involves not replacing one modern polity with another, but rather only local, incremental action, which is aimed at fostering genuine community.[19] As he puts things in "Particularities," under conditions where "genuinely rational shared deliberation becomes impossible," "political actions take the form of resistance to the established order in some local situation in which there is a need to organize."[20] Organization here is directed not at the common good of society, but rather at "the goods of families, of schools, of workplaces"[21]—precisely because the common good of society is in principle beyond reach. This is "just that

16. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 155.

17. The term is that of Descombes, who writes that MacIntyre's Aristotle is an "Aristote amputé de sa philosophie politique" (see Descombes, "MacIntyre en France," 136). This view is developed in more detail by Perreau-Saussine in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, a nice summary of which is given in his "Spiritualité Libérale." For an excellent critique and partial defense of Perreau-Saussine on MacIntyre, see Pinkoski, "Manent and Perreau-Saussine."

18. For further on this, see the chapter by James Kelly in this volume.

19. See Blackledge and Knight, *Virtue and Politics*, esp. chapters 1 and 15.

20. MacIntyre, "Particularities," 642.

21. MacIntyre, "Particularities," 643.

conception of justice to which the deprived and excluded appeal,"[22] since no other conception is now possible. While this is, admittedly, very far from the historical Aristotle, it could well be characterized as Platonized Aristotelianism: one adapted to modern conditions, and hence confined to that local, small-scale level, which for both Plato and Aristotle (though not for most modern philosophers) is the proper locus of *politikē*.[23]

Dependent Rational Animals and Beyond

With *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, we reach the end of MacIntyre's detailed, systematic, engagement with classical philosophy. His next book, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (published in 1990),[24] builds on the architectonic of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* to deepen and further justify the idea that Aristotelianism and Augustinian Platonism were themselves *aufgehoben* by and within the Thomistic synthesis. The key chapter is chapter 5, "Aristotle and/or/against Augustine: Rival Traditions of Enquiry." MacIntyre argues here that the "Aristotelian account of nature, both theoretical and practical, was not merely harmonized with an Augustinian supernatural theology but shown to require it for its completion, if the universe is to be intelligible" (123). Aquinas achieves this synthesis partly by harmonizing Aristotelian and Augustinian methods of enquiry, and partly by integrating apparently incompatible Aristotelian and Augustinian ideas within one account. For instance, "Aquinas was able to show how the will, conceived in Augustinian fashion, could both serve and yet mislead the mind, as conceived in Aristotelian fashion" (124). The trouble with this narrative of appropriation and integration, from the point of view of this chapter, is that it subordinates Platonism and Aristotelianism

22. MacIntyre, "Particularities," 644.

23. In chapter 8 of *Whose Justice?*—on "Aristotle on Practical Rationality"—MacIntyre returns, in detail, to Aristotle's formal theories of action and deliberation. I suggest that he dwells on these because he takes it that Aristotelian practical rationality is commensurate, and commensurate only, with a "politics" of *local* action and deliberation. There is thus no real tension or disparity between MacIntyre's formal and his political concerns. The *polis* is "the form of social order whose shared mode of life already expresses the collective answer or answers of its citizens to the question 'What is the best mode of life for human beings?'" (133); "it was because Aristotle judged that no form of state but the *polis* could integrate the different systematic activities of human beings into an overall form of activity in which the achievement of each kind of good was given its due that he also judged that *only* a *polis* could provide that locus" (141). I shall come back to MacIntyre's localism towards the end of this chapter, when I look at *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.

24. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*.

to Augustinianism and Thomism, and thus, for our purposes, proceeds at too high a level of abstraction. It is nonetheless worth close attention if one is concerned not with Plato and Aristotle *per se*, but wants to get to grips with MacIntyre's wider project of elaborating and justifying Thomism as a tradition of moral enquiry.

Of more direct relevance is *Dependent Rational Animals* (published in 1999).[25] This represents another departure for MacIntyre, since, as he puts matters in his "Preface," both *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions* had underestimated "the degree and the importance of the differences in [Aristotle's and Aquinas's] attitudes to the acknowledgement of dependence" (xi). Central here is the way in which Aquinas overturns Aristotle's valuation of invulnerability and independence, a valuation on full display in his account of the *megalopsuchos* or "great-souled man." As MacIntyre holds:

> The magnanimous man, who is on Aristotle's account, a paragon of the virtues, dislikes any recognition of his need for aid from and consolation by others. He "is ashamed to receive benefits, because it is a mark of a superior to confer benefits, of an inferior to receive them" (*Nicomachean Ethics* IV, 1124b9–10).[26]

And MacIntyre pursues this moral critique of Aristotle also later on, underlining and diagnosing Aristotle's repudiation of the "virtues of acknowledged dependence." As he writes: "We recognize here an illusion of self-sufficiency, an illusion apparently shared by Aristotle, that is all too characteristic of the rich and powerful in many times and places, an illusion that plays its part in excluding [others] from certain types of communal relationship" (127). In this way, he recalls his excoriation of Aristotle's character-ideal in *A Short History of Ethics*, and, moreover, his contrast in *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* between Aristotle, who "finds no place among the virtues for either humility or charity," and Augustine, who maintains that "without humility and charity there can be no such virtue as justice" (163).

In short, *Dependent Rational Animals* uses Aristotle's emphasis on human animality against Aristotle himself, highlighting how Aristotelian magnanimity cannot recognize the vulnerability of our animal condition, and hence cannot honor the "virtues of acknowledged dependence." And this is of a piece with Aristotle's depreciation of those most likely to experience such vulnerability. As MacIntyre puts it, "In neither ethics nor politics did [Aristotle] give any weight to the experience of those for whom the

25. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals.*

26. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 7.

facts of affliction and dependence are most likely to be undeniable: women, slaves, and servants, those engaged in the productive labor of farmers, fishing crews, and manufacture" (6). So while the disparaging tone of *A Short History of Ethics* has gone, the moral critique remains the same.[27] It should be noted, nevertheless, that none of this detracts from MacIntyre's fundamental endorsement of the *form* of Aristotle's moral philosophy. *Contra* Kant, Aristotle is right, according to MacIntyre, to emphasize "our resemblances to and commonality with members of some other intelligent animal species" (8). He is right, furthermore, to tie practical rationality to deliberation within the *polis*, since only this provides the requisite context within which the virtues can be discerned and developed (9). As MacIntyre maintains in "Rival Aristotles" (delivered in 1997–1998), Aristotle—whatever his moral myopia—is justified in restricting moral deliberation to "small-scale local communities," with shared goals, and concomitantly "shared standards of rational justification" (39).[28]

This focus on small-scale, local communities as the proper locus of deliberation and action returns, in full-blown form, in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (published in 2016).[29] Here MacIntyre recapitulates the idea that the modern state-cum-market is deeply inhospitable to any well-founded (i.e., Aristotelian) practices or modes of practical rationality. We thus encounter several fine-grained, empirically rich narratives of "grass roots" communities, along with their forms of resistance to the dominant political order (see esp. §4.3). The question this raises, once again, is whether this localist vision of the common good is genuinely Aristotelian, or closer (in

27. Albeit now with the positive upshot that Thomism corrects Aristotle's moral philosophical deficiencies.

28. Rapp argues that this leaves out Aristotle's substantive ideal of rationality, which privileges not our animality but rather our kinship with (perfectly rational) divinity (see Rapp, "Virtues and the Common Good"). In this way, Rapp charges, *Dependent Rational Animals* offers a merely "one-sided" account of human nature, in which vulnerability and dependence get "all the attention" (23). One might also raise the question of how this attention is consistent with MacIntyre's Thomism, a tradition for which rational contemplation constitutes the highest virtue. Indeed, Lutz, himself a Thomist interpreter of MacIntyre, argues that MacIntyre's moral *teleology* is tenable only if it is a substantively rational *teleology*. As he writes, "Aristotle's teleology is intellectual, and so is Thomas Aquinas's. . . . Thomas argues that human happiness 'consists in an operation of the speculative . . . intellect . . . in the contemplation of divine things.' In this he echoes Aristotle" (Lutz, *Tradition*, 137). Although this is well-taken, Lutz goes on to claim that "MacIntyre's intellectual teleology is consistent with the intellectual teleology of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas" (137). This seems, by contrast, wholly inaccurate: not only in light of the anti-intellectualism of *A Short History of Ethics*, but also given what we have seen in *Dependent Rational Animals*—namely, the privileging of practical virtues like *misericordia* (compassion) over purely intellectual virtue (see chapter 10).

29. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity.*

virtue of its political pessimism) to a form of Platonism. Granted, MacIntyre demonstrates, all the way from 1966 to 2016, an unwavering allegiance to Aristotle's formal analysis of deliberation and action. But given that he strongly condemns Aristotle's ethical and intellectual character-ideals in *A Short History of Ethics*, eviscerates his "metaphysical biology" in *After Virtue* in favor of a "social teleology," denies that Aristotelian justice can be realized in the modern state in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and makes *megalopsuchia* the central moral target of *Dependent Rational Animals*, one might be forgiven for doubting whether MacIntyre's moral philosophy is Aristotelian in any substantive sense. When it is considered, further, that MacIntyre's own "traditioned" mode of enquiry is avowedly historicist—a mode he acknowledges is at odds with Aristotle's own[30]—this doubt will, I take it, only increase. Perhaps, as I have suggested, these doubts can be accommodated and allayed by understanding MacIntyre as a Platonizing Aristotelian. Having laid out the evidence as best I can, I leave it up to the reader to draw their own conclusion.

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30. NB: "Aristotle of course recognized that he had predecessors. Indeed he tried to write the history of previous philosophy in such a way that it culminated with his own thought. But he envisaged the relationship of that thought to those predecessors in terms of the replacement of *their* errors or at least partial truths by *his* comprehensively true account. From the standpoint of truth, on Aristotle's own view, once his work had been done, theirs could be discarded without loss. But to think in this way is to exclude the notion of a tradition of thought, at least as I intend it" (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 146).

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