

MacIntyrian Challenges to the Modern Study of Paul

Introduction

IN 1981 ALASDAIR MACINTYRE DROPPED A BOMB ON THE EMERGING post-modern world. The effects of *After Virtue* continue to be recognizable not just in philosophical ethics, but across the humanities through the sciences and out into the non-university world.¹ His claim was not just that the two main options in modern ethics, deontology and utilitarianism, were two sides of the same dead-end coin. His claim was no less than that the modern world had lost the ability to make sense of what it was doing or saying.

My claim is that, among these other effects, MacIntyre's work raises significant challenges for readings of Paul. In particular, MacIntyre shows how notions of human agency and the moral life have changed with the abandonment of a classical model that spoke of human action in terms of virtues and vices, desires and passions, reason and intention. Thus, for instance, one obvious challenge for readers of Paul seems to lie in the most basic concept of virtue as a disposition of the person to consistently act in particular ways. Modern Pauline studies for the most part has no way of making sense of a notion of habit and the sort of human agency implied therein, and this creates insurmountable difficulties to understanding

1. *After Virtue*, hereafter AV; 2nd edition 1983, 3rd edition 2007. In academic philosophy see Cunningham, ed., *MacIntyre*; Knight, *Aristotle to MacIntyre*; Smith, *Virtue Ethics*. In Christian ethics see Murphy et al., *Virtues and Practices*; Lutz, *Tradition*; Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians*. In education see MacIntyre and Dunn, "Alasdair MacIntyre," 1–19. As an inspiration of the "new monastic movement" see Wilson, *Living Faithfully*.

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some central areas of Pauline theology. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate and illustrate this claim.

I proceed as follows. First, because MacIntyre does not think his challenge can be articulated except in the form of a story, we are involved in a selective retelling of MacIntyre's narrative of the development of the highly intertwined topics of an "ethic of virtue", grace and human agency, and the notion of the self or subject as they are pertinent to the study of Paul. I set out MacIntyre's account in these specific areas rather fully since many New Testament scholars will be unfamiliar with this work. At points it will be helpful to fill out his argument by drawing on the work of others who have told similar stories with differences that are important for us. Second, I examine major trends in academic Pauline theology in light of MacIntyre. As will become clear, a history of the sort MacIntyre provides significantly illuminates the modern construal of Paul's theology. A central purpose of my use of MacIntyre's account is to show just how contingent and, often, arbitrary, most current work on Pauline theology in these areas is. Thus I argue that, because New Testament scholars tend to ignore such issues, they often end up reconstructing Paul in their own "common sense" modern grammar of human agency and the moral life. It is precisely the obviousness of this grammar and hence its appropriateness for reading Paul that I want to call into question. Beyond this, however, the review of contemporary scholarship in the light of MacIntyre's work allows me to expose several errors in Pauline research regarding the relation between divine and human agency. The first is a reading of Paul usually ascribed to Luther in which Christians are saved in a state of sin and are more or less destined to remain sinners for the rest of their lives: on this view, justification happens only forensically, "before God." The second sees Christians as transformed from a previously sinful state—and very radically so—by an invasive infusion of the Spirit that almost magically realizes the creation of holy lives. Both of these are hyper-Augustinian soteriologies and both, I will suggest, are unPauline. A third type, however, will variously insist that holiness is a part of Paul's theology without insisting on magical moral change, but also without any explanation of how and why Paul should think such a change occurs. I argue that none of these three moves are able to make sense out of Paul because they lack any account of human action in classical terms. It is to the details of such an account that we now turn.

The Classical Tradition of the Virtues

MacIntyre uses “virtue” as a shorthand for a whole tradition. While sometimes scholars contrast a “virtue ethic” with an “ethic of obligation,” we will see that this is both too simple and does not go to the heart of the matter.² Nor is it just the case that virtue names a moral philosophy in which account is made for the fact that people have certain dispositions to act in certain ways. Rather, for MacIntyre “virtue” names a particular way of talking about human action that is ultimately incommensurable with modern and post-modern accounts of the same. These differences come out below.

MacIntyre’s account of the virtues has to arise from and take place within a historical narrative because for him there can be no such thing as moral theory as such.³ Accounts of human action are always accounts of specific historical practice that arise within and as a part of concrete political, economic and social conditions (it is thus no surprise that he has learned much from Marxism). Action theory cannot fail to be part of such conditions, and it is because of this that it is helpful at times to read his account of virtue as a particular narrative account of the “self.”⁴ In other words, we are dealing here with moral psychology.

Aristotle

MacIntyre’s story about the development of what we are calling a classical account of the virtues begins, more or less, with Homer and “heroic society,” but it fits our purposes to begin with his important and substantial account of Aristotle. For Aristotle the central question is not just, as with Homer, about what it means to be good as father or craftsman or fisherman but what it means to be good as a *human being*. Answering such a question is the goal of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, which provides for MacIntyre’s a sort of archetype and point of reference for every other account of the virtues. Other accounts will continually orient themselves to this work, sometimes heuristically and sometimes evaluatively.

2. MacIntyre labors at times to dispel the notion that a virtue ethic is to be contrasted with one based on rules, especially in his later work. See *Dependent Rational Animals*, 103–5. Hereafter *DRA*.

3. See MacIntyre’s *Three Rival Versions*, esp. 170–215. Hereafter *TRV*.

4. MacIntyre himself does this from time to time. See *AV*, 129; *DRA*, 83–87.

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Aristotle says that every activity aims at some good since human beings naturally aim at some goal. The good is defined in terms of the nature of the goal. This teleological or means-ends reasoning that is simply a given part of human nature makes up for Aristotle what MacIntyre calls a basic “metaphysical biology.”⁵ Human beings are simply hardwired (biology) to pursue certain goods (metaphysics). The highest good is happiness (εὐδαιμονία), since happiness is that for the sake of which we do everything else and which we do not pursue for the sake of any other end. Virtues are then those dispositions that tend to the attainment of the end, and vices the contrary. Virtues are, however, not merely instrumental to, but constitutive of, the good life, since for Aristotle one cannot attain the good short of its practice.⁶ Thus virtues are part of the *definition* of the good life, and, as with Homer, actions are evaluable *factually* in terms of whether or not they do or do not contribute to the attainment of the end.⁷

The anatomy of Aristotelian virtue involves several essential elements. Virtues are dispositions of the soul (as the “form” of the body) to both *act* and *feel* in particular ways in particular circumstances. These habits of disposition determine what we find pleasant or desirable: our tastes are determined by our virtues.⁸ The central reason for this is that for Aristotle the way we acquire virtue is not, as on some readings of Plato, by the simple apprehension of the good, but rather by means of training and discipline. This is what it takes to form our habits so that to be (say) a just person simply is to have habits to act justly, which is to act a certain way in particular situations.⁹ The capacity for figuring out which situations require which sort of habited action belongs to the virtue of prudence. There are, in other words, no absolute rules for the application of particular kinds of actions, so prudence is necessary for the exercise of the virtues; without it there can be no application of the right acts to the right circumstances, which is of course to say that there can be no right

5. It is to be noted that in *AV* (148) MacIntyre had argued that such metaphysical biology could be discarded while retaining much of the rest of Aristotle’s ethics. He retracts this, however, in *DRA* (x), saying that “I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology was possible”.

6. MacIntyre, *Short History*, 61–63. Hereafter *SHE*.

7. *AV*, 150.

8. *Ibid.*, 149–50. So there is no necessary conflict between reason and desire as there was for Plato. On the soul see *SHE*, 64.

9. *SHE*, 64.

acts at all (for part of the definition of the latter is that they must be wisely applied).¹⁰

For each virtue there are two corresponding vices, since for Aristotle the virtues are the mean between two extremes. Hence, for instance, courage is the mean between cowardice and rashness. But this example illustrates well the point made above that such a disposition to courage requires the habituation of both what we would call “reason” and what we would call “emotion” (the passions). So reason is habituated to rule over emotions and the emotions themselves are thereby habituated to respond differently than they would if untrained. It is important to note that such training of the passions is not repudiation thereof. The passions are neither good nor bad *per se* but must be made to tend to the end of the good.¹¹

MacIntyre points out that friendship is the most important virtue for Aristotle because it is the presupposition of the initial constitution of community.¹² It is, in fact, the presupposition for the exercise of the cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, prudence and courage. Justice, in other words, presupposes the conditions set by friendship and only the existence of friendship allows that virtue to be practiced. Such a relationship means that for Aristotle outside the *polis* there can ultimately be no justice in the strict sense.¹³ The *polis* is the fundamental context in which the pursuit of the virtues makes sense, because they can only be attained in a community in search of the common good.¹⁴

10. Ibid., 66–68; AV, 155; see of course the extended treatment “Aristotle on Practical Rationality” in MacIntyre’s *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 124–45. Hereafter WJWR.

11. It is vitally important to understand the deep difference between what we now call “emotions” and what the ancients meant by its various approximations that are variously rendered as “passions,” “desires,” or “emotions.” Modern emotions are often viewed as untreatable, largely uncontrollable, entirely passive feelings set off by external stimuli to which we might be able to learn to change our behavioral *reaction*, but which are themselves just a given part of our psychophysical, historically conditioned, existential temperament, to which teaching and argument are irrelevant. In the classical view, however, emotions were highly if difficultly treatable, and it was the task of the philosophical school to provide such a remedy. There is of course a massive literature on the topic, but foremost studies include Nussbaum, *Therapy*; Sorabji, *Emotions*; Engberg-Pedersen, *Hellenistic Philosophy*.

12. AV, 156; DRA, 147–55.

13. WJWR, 141–43.

14. Thus justice that attains between (say) Athens and Sparta is only justice named metaphorically and derivative of justice internal to Athens itself. On the other hand, however, the ideal of friendship to the pursuit of happiness allows Aristotle to solve the most pressing practical problem he faced in the *Ethics* and that is that the polis that he

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This is the basic Aristotelian account that is so important for MacIntyre both positively and negatively. Moreover, something like this basic account of human action can be found across the ancient world as we approach the Middle Ages. Whether in a Platonic or Aristotelian configuration, what emerges is a common vocabulary of action-description in terms of passions and desires, virtue and vice, ultimate and proximate ends, training and habituation. We may call this the classical account of human action. We can so name this classical tradition because the language it uses to describe human action has much more in common, from Aristotle to Aquinas, than all its component authors do with the moral language of the modern world.

Augustine

MacIntyre writes that Augustine developed a critique of a Stoic description of action (most explicitly in the *City of God* where he sees it as the general form of pagan philosophy).¹⁵ The direction and order of human desires is for Augustine the work of *voluntas*: desires are voluntary and so implicitly a part of the process of reasoning and action. Aristotle (and Plato) had been unable to explain convincingly how someone might know what is best and yet fail to do it. They had to refer either to an imperfection of knowledge or inadequate training. But Augustine held that the passions were *misdirected* by the will. And to position the will in the right direction is the job of God's grace, for only by being so directed can human action ever hope to be rightly ordered. Because the human practice of the good is the product of grace at such a fundamental level, the central vice is a vice of the will as well, pride, which is opposed to the most fundamental virtue, humility. So the "[practical] rationality of right action . . . is not the fundamental determinate but a secondary consequence of right willing."¹⁶

In leveling such a critique against the stoics, concomitant with his newly expanded notion of *voluntas*, Augustine also broke with his own Platonic heritage. What this means is that we genuinely seem to have "a new account of the genesis of action."¹⁷ Specifically, contra Plato, Augustine saw in the *Confessions* and in the lives of others that the full apprehension

concludes is necessary for the good life does not exist. Only friendships can hold out the hope of such attainment.

15. *WJWR*, 154.

16. *Ibid.*, 158.

17. *Ibid.*, 154.

of the form of justice is itself not sufficient to generate right action. Rather, we have to direct our love, or rather have it directed, towards that form, and this by directing it towards a life that embodies that form in act, the life of Christ.¹⁸

MacIntyre leaves much of Augustine's account of the virtues implicit. But because Augustine will play such an important role later in the history of the concepts we are interested in, both in Aquinas and especially in MacIntyre's account of the Reformation, it is useful to set this out a bit more fully in regard to two key points. First, it is important to see that Augustine has a fully-fledged doctrine of the virtues. The second point, which is tightly bound up with the first, is to see the way that his doctrine of grace is integrated therein. This takes us beyond MacIntyre, but is of great import for contemporary Pauline scholarship.

Augustine has a doctrine of the virtues as dispositions of an agent to act in accordance with the good. What is important for us is the plain fact that for Augustine advancement toward God in the life of the virtues is necessary for salvation. The church is visibly different from the earthly city precisely in the fact that its practices are different: the church is holy, virtuous. This means, as Jennifer Herdt says, that "talk of habituation and human striving must go hand in hand with talk of conversion . . . Augustine's defense of Christian virtue as true virtue rests on the fact that we are responsive to grace rather than passive in the face of grace; our own agency, striving to imitate exemplars of virtue, remains central, and our final good, enjoyment of God, is possible only through our own active involvement."¹⁹ Thus Augustine says in the *City of God* that "eternal life is the Supreme Good and eternal death the Supreme Evil, and . . . to achieve the one and escape the other we must live rightly."²⁰ One is trained and habituated by the practices of the church.²¹

The virtues have their place for Augustine within the dynamic of the divine interaction of God with humanity. Many contemporary portrayals of Augustine's theology of grace are complicit in readings of the anti-Pelagian writings as a discourse in which a disembodied, abstract, divine agency called "grace" interacts with other similar hypostizations like "sin", "will" and "man". This schema is then interpreted as a one-sided rebuttal of Pelagius in favor of the irresistibility of grace to the exclusion of any

18. Ibid.

19. Herdt, *Virtue*, 47–48.

20. Augustine, *City of God* XIX.4; quoted in Herdt, *Virtue*, 50.

21. Herdt, *Virtue*, 67, 70–71.

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genuine human agency.²² It is at such a view of Augustine that Michael Hanby takes aim in his book *Augustine and Modernity* by placing Augustine's response to the Pelagian controversy within the broader context of his Trinitarian theology and ecclesiology. He writes that

[f]ew contemporary analyses of the doctrine of grace acknowledge the ontological stakes of the question, just as few analyses of Augustine's ontology consider the relevance of his doctrine of grace. As a consequence, the former almost inevitably turn on the attempt to dissect the willed movement into action and passion, delineate the human from the divine contribution and, quite predictably, protect the human contribution from violation by the causality of grace. . . . Presuming that the ontic and ontological status of humanity, nature and God are self-evident, [these sorts of studies] then implicitly reduce God to one object among others, dialectically juxtaposed to creation. Coextensive with this reduction is the reduction of grace to an immanently causal force, is an impoverished view of causality, whose precise connection to its effects is presumed to be accessible. This manner of framing the issue has the a priori effect of making God less than transcendent and immutable . . . Briefly put, this attempt to delineate and make discrete the respective contribution of the "two agents" is simply bad theological grammar. We are therefore warranted in viewing the Pelagian problem within the context of the larger question of causality.²³

In other words, the reason the Pelagian controversy is so important to Augustine is that it calls into question a traditional Christian understanding of creation and Trinity. The Pelagian controversy is, for Augustine according to Hanby, a debate about God.²⁴

22. See, for instance, Weaver, *Divine Grace*: "As the Augustinian scheme developed, the connection between human actions and their outcome in eternity diminished, for at every point grace exercised sovereignty over the self, its desiring, its meritorious activity, and its reward" (67).

23. Hanby, *Augustine*, 82.

24. We can see this more clearly by considering ways that Hanby takes up concerns in common with Kathryn Tanner's similar concerns in *God and Creation*: "For *creatio ex nihilo* entails the notion of divine immutability as a corollary. Creaturely existence or prime matter can have no prior claim to God's activity without locking God into a real relation to his creation . . . Hence the relation of divine cause to created effect cannot be dialectical. . . . Rather, God's causality of temporal effects cannot in any way be thought to effect a change in God's own agency, or a compromise of God's simplicity. Augustine's incessant rebuttal of the Pelagian position, that grace cannot originate with us, simply transposes this logic into the category of sanctification. Human merit

Hence, dealing with the problem of divine and human agency requires a reconfiguration of our speech about God. In the first place, it means that God cannot be properly spoken of as “cause” in any normal sense of the word, and certainly any modern sense of the word. “There is no proper analogy by which a ‘causal mechanism’ for creation from nothing can be brought into view. Creating, as opposed to merely causing, remains a mystery in the most profound sense.”²⁵ What Hanby points out is that to speak of God as cause is to risk misunderstanding because the normal grammar of causal relations holds between *creatures*. But God is not a creature—not one “being” among others, however different—and so framing the issue this way is dangerous, for our language is bound to fool us. Equally though, to speak of God’s agency merely contrastively, as not-finite, not-material, and so on, is, as Tanner has shown, to bring God down “to the level of the world and the beings within it in virtue of that very opposition: God becomes one being among others within a single order. Such talk suggests that God exists along side the non-divine, that God is limited by what is opposed to it [*sic*], that God is as finite as the non-divine beings with which it is being contrasted . . .”²⁶ A proper interpretation of Augustine, that is, cannot characterize God “by contrast with any sort of being, [so that God] may be the immediate source of being of every sort.”²⁷

Such is the case, argues Hanby, for Augustine. God’s grace does not compete with human agency because God’s transcendence means he is not limited to cause and effect as it operates in his creatures. Hence, to set up the Creator-creature relationship as cause-effect or action-passion is to misunderstand Augustine. Rather, we should really say that “God is not *an* agent. This God is not one actor alongside others, whose agency can be treated as an efficient quantifiable force in relation to the force of other agencies. Nor are creatures patients awaiting actualization prior to God’s gift of being.”²⁸ Put positively, because, and just as, God is the creator (since the logic of transcendence in relation to creation is the same in relation to grace), God “brings being out of nothing. This ‘causal’ activity is manifest in the creature as effect, *precisely in the creature’s own actuality*

cannot be antecedent to the activity of grace without similarly rendering the divine act finite and reactive” (Hanby, *Augustine*, 83).

25. Hanby, *Augustine*, 84.

26. Tanner, *God and Creation*, 84.

27. *Ibid.*, 45–46.

28. Hanby, *Augustine*, 85.

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*and activity.*²⁹ God's agency, for Augustine, is the very condition of the possibility for creation's contingency in general and human freedom in particular. God, in his transcendence, is able to cause our very contingency. In other words, because there is no competition, no *zero sum* cooperation (this does not exclude other types of cooperation), it is right and proper for a creature to claim action and being as *his own*. In this way we can and should

understand creatures to exhibit their status as creatures, as received effects, in their active response to the call to form from the divine *vox*. Paradoxically, this movement is utterly distinct and yet utterly indistinguishable from the movement of the *vox* in them. In consequence it is a response, a movement which *belongs to creatures precisely insofar as it belongs to God*. Hence Augustine says that 'whatever the soul possesses, and whatever it receives, is from God; and yet the act of receiving and having belongs, of course, to the receiver and the possessor.'³⁰

Indeed, to deny this in most cases would be to deny God's transcendence and capability of bringing about free will in his very act. Ironically, then, so many pious disavowals of agency and competency (sc. virtues, holiness) turn out to be derived from, and ascribed to, a domesticated deity.³¹

This means that in a significant sense it is false to claim that for Augustine God's grace *causes* our good acts. There is no simple "mechanism" in play, no way we can speak merely of the respective contributions of the "two agents." Rather, God's "agency" (which is not a creaturely agency) is the condition of the possibility of any genuine human action at all. Moreover, Augustine's "self", in Hanby's terms, is always un-integrated prior to doxological formation. In less prolix terms, the only thing that can unify the self and make it truly "free" is participation in the practices of the

29. Creation itself exists for Augustine *within* the Trinity, in the Father and Son's reciprocal love and delight, which is the Holy Spirit. So to exist is to exist in such a relation and sanctification is the Spirit's drawing us into this plenitude of love, so that we literally are more than we were before. So selfhood, being at all, is doxological: "It is only through delight in Christ, a gift of the mutual delight between the Father and the Son, that 'I' can finally be myself" (Hanby, *Augustine*, 91).

30. Hanby, *Augustine*, 89.

31. Thus, Hanby argues that to divide action from passion is actually the precondition for the Pelagian opposition to Augustinian grace. "With no real reciprocal relation between the related terms, there is no causal connection, no immanent force, and thus no immanent exclusivity or competition, between cause and effect." The language of "domestication" is that of Placher, *Domestication*, who takes up much the same concern. See esp. his chapter on "Grace and Works in Modern Thought" (146–63).

church, which is to act in Christ to move toward a desire for God. This is, in the end, the only action that is both fully mine and fully rational. Augustine

invokes christological mediation as the answer to his own dissipation. This move once again situates both the self and its knowledge within the ambit of trinitarian gift, and makes the means to the acquisition of that knowledge neither a self-objectification nor a sacrificial self-negation, but a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. To recover oneself in this sense, however, is only to further the soul's ecstatic reversal by opening it in charity to the Body's participation in the doxological sacrifice of its Head. . . . [S]elfhood, insofar as it has become selfhood, is, once again, *ecclesiastically* constituted.³²

This brief survey, supplementing and in some important ways correcting MacIntyre's account of Augustine, is meant to establish several main features of Augustine's theology in preparation for our later use of it. We have seen, first, that Augustine has a full account of the virtues, which are constituted precisely as *our* virtues only because they are actualized by God's grace; second, this means that Augustine has a non-competitive account of the interaction between divine and human "agents"; third, this implies that Augustine does not have a Cartesian notion of the "self"³³;

32. Hanby, *Augustine*, 100.

33. See Hauerwas's response to Taylor's account of the Augustinian self (Hauerwas, "Sources,") expanded by Hanby (*Augustine*, 8–12). Taylor argued that, for Augustine, the road from the lower to the higher (the divine) passes from the outer to the inner. Thus God is not just "out there" illuminating the world of ideas, as the Good is for Plato, but is the inner light of the soul itself. We can thus find God when we take up a stance of radical reflexivity, where we try to experience our experiencing. This turn makes the language of inwardness irresistible. This does not get us all the way to Descartes, but it does establish the first person stance. For Augustine, the development of the will is twofold: (1) He takes up the development made by the Stoics that humans have the same perceptions as animals do but that we have *prohairesis*, "moral choice." (2) But Augustine goes beyond Plato's and Aristotle's explanations of evil in humans. Augustine's two loves introduce the fact that our stance could be radically perverse: we might see the good and turn our back on it anyway, because of Adam's sin. We must first be healed through grace. The tricky part is putting *prohairesis* together with the will. The former is strong or weak, the latter good or evil. What this means is that for the first time it might be the will that determines what we are in a position to know. So we discover that we are dependent upon God most in those powers that are most our own (will and intellect). Both Hauerwas and Hanby show that properly contextualizing Augustine as *theologian* and not just philosopher makes such a reading deeply problematic.

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fourth, Augustine's theology of grace and nature is not abstracted from the concrete practices that make up the church; they are, rather, the necessary ways of talking about God for those who take part in them.

The depth of our account of Augustine has been necessitated by the fact that a critical reading of MacIntyre in light of the work of Hanby, Herdt, and others reveals that an abandonment of a notion of virtue and a competitive conception of divine and human agency go hand in hand. This will become clearer below, but it is enough to say that without a notion of virtue as truly one's own disposition toward God as the ultimate good we are led to assert constantly a competitive overriding of our own actions by God's grace to explain the performance of good acts.

Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas is the hero of MacIntyre's later works. He is so because, for MacIntyre, he was able to plausibly (which is not to say always convincingly) overcome the conflict between the two great traditions of moral description we have treated so far: Augustine and Aristotle. The former was the canonical extra-canonical text in the Middle Ages, and the latter had been recently revived in the form of an Arabic translation of the *Nichomachean Ethics*.³⁴ Augustine represented the deepening, and triumph of, Platonism and parts of the Ciceronian tradition even as he rejected the latter's Stoic elements and the implicit nihilism of Plotinus. Thomas brought the newly revived Aristotelianism (as well as a keen knowledge of the Eastern Fathers and Gregory the Great) to bear on all of this. Thomas represents, in other words, a focal point where all these various traditions of virtue converged.

Thomas' account includes both acquired and infused virtues. The former are attained by the habituation of practice, the latter by the habituation of the Spirit. The acquired virtues direct us toward the proximate end of happiness in this life, while the infused direct us to our final end in the enjoyment of God. Even the infused virtues, however, are habits that must be retained by practice: "Aquinas is concerned to make clear that the gifts dispose rather than displace human agency. Grace heals and elevates human character, but always in ways that stand in an organic relation to human agency."³⁵

More specifically, *caritas* is the (Aristotelian) "form" of all virtue. Without it the other virtues lack the kind of directedness they require.

34. For a full account see *WJWR*, 165–82 and *TRV*, 127–48.

35. Herdt, *Virtue*, 73.

Charity itself, however, is the gift of the Holy Spirit, not to be acquired by moral education.³⁶ And the virtues are, as for Augustine, necessary for salvation:

Salvation is made possible through the bestowal of infused virtues, dispositions to act. Human beings must act to increase these virtues and bring them to perfection, and only through this process will they become persons capable of enjoying God, capable of their own ultimate good. It is true that, since they are infused rather than acquired through human action, these virtues are most basically divine gift rather than human accomplishment . . . At the same time, it is important to recall Aquinas' insistence that the infused virtues are indeed virtues, that they transform the person's own will such that she herself is intrinsically ordered to God, rather than being shoved mechanically . . . The infused virtues, rather than functioning as an excuse for passivity, are a disposition to act and are therefore fulfilled only through action.³⁷

MacIntyre notes that this means that, for Aquinas, it takes *practice* to understand what we say about the good (natural or supernatural). So practical reason (*prudentia*) is a way of responding to the various questions that confront us about what is best to do when.³⁸ Prudence has the form of premises and subordinate conclusions, but we do not, like Euclidian geometry, grasp the whole once we grasp the premises. Rather, we don't grasp the principles until we understand the conclusions.³⁹ In other words, *prudentia* is supremely practical in that it arises from the "experience" of trying to live justly. This notion, MacIntyre rightly sees, is at odds with the way the modern world has sought to talk about morality in the first place. Specifically, this account diverges in the sharpest way with what Charles Pinches calls the "ethical principle monism" of Kant (categorical imperative), Hume (consensus about the passions) and Bentham (utility), and more recently Rawls (the fairness principle).⁴⁰ None of these regard the moral life as a journey towards conceiving the first principle as an end, and none of these authors require the virtues in Aquinas' sense for the coherence of their program.

36. WJWR, 204.

37. Herdt, *Virtue*, 89.

38. WJWR, 196–97.

39. *Ibid.*, 254.

40. Pinches, *Theology and Action*, 40–44.

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For Aquinas, on the other hand, without the virtues *there can be no right moral action*. A wicked woman cannot perform a just action in the same way that a just woman can. A child begins with rules intended to direct the will by providing a standard of right direction (*rectitudo*). But the right kind of rule following is not possible without education into the moral virtues.⁴¹ Every situation has aspects that fall under rules and aspects that do not. In some cases rules that do apply are very important and sometimes not: knowing which and how to act is the role of *prudentia*, which is the counterpart of God's ordering all things to their end by his *providentia*. *Prudentia* is the ability to see and act with the grain of the universe.

MacIntyre says that while Augustine used the grammar of the "will" to accuse his Roman counterparts of only a semblance of virtue, Aquinas integrated Paul and Augustine's doctrine of the defective human will with Aristotle's account of practical reasoning to form a "single, unified, complex account of human action as such."⁴² MacIntyre goes on to illustrate just how complex the "self" is for Thomas. First, the intellect judges some end good, with its virtue of prudence. An act of the will towards that end is elicited, an *intentio*, which may be directed towards immediate ends, distant ends, or a variety of ends. (*Intentio* distinguishes a genuine act of the will from a mere wish.) Will consents to the means judged appropriate by the intellect in the process of deliberation. This terminates in *electio* (note how different the grammar is from our "choice"), and the will then consents to the means, and commands an act that completes the action, implementing the *electio*.⁴³

It is important to see that this is at once a picture of human action and a picture of the "soul." As such, this is an outline of what we would usually call the "self" that is quite different from a modern "self." The latter, as we will see, is often reducible to brute will-power. This means necessarily that, as with Augustine, Aquinas' picture of God's interaction with the human agent will be necessarily different than those with different psychologies. But, most basically, this account is much more complex than the relatively punctiliar notion of the subject to which moderns are accustomed.⁴⁴ One

41. *WJWR*, 194.

42. *Ibid.*, 184.

43. *Ibid.*, 190.

44. Aquinas learned from Augustine that all action implies something that is desired. This is important because it means that the object of an action is necessary, and so intention of it necessary, for there to be any action at all, since otherwise there is no motivation for action. (Transposed into the Pelagian controversy, this means that

important fact for our purposes is that, relative to a modern account, a classical account of action in terms of the virtues simply has a greater variety of “points” at which divine-human interaction could take place. This is a further way in which the eclipse of the virtues is implicated in an inability to conceive of a non-competitive divine-human cooperation.⁴⁵

MacIntyre’s Synthetic Account of Human Action

From this account of the classical tradition of the virtues MacIntyre develops his own. It is noteworthy, however, that he is not simply offering a historical “survey” of virtue from which he picks and chooses the best pieces and discards the rest. This would give the impression that one stood outside such a tradition in order to look at it “objectively” without changing anything.⁴⁶ Rather, he takes his account to be a development of the

grace is simply the always-prior presence of God as the object necessary before any “move” can be made towards him. For Augustine there is no engine to human action in the will itself apart from desire. The will has no last say as “power of choice.” To the extent, therefore, that any account of grace and nature absorbs these Kantian assumptions, it will necessarily be Pelagian. Hanby, *Augustine*, 100, comes close to making this point.) For reason always has to be appetitive (hence Augustine and Aquinas’ *voluntas*) and so for them the Stoics are wrong precisely in their theory of action: they provide nothing that would *motivate* action. “Reason cannot cast out passion without dividing its own house,” since reason would be unmotivated so to do. “We are moved to action by what is judged to be desirable . . . We are moved by delight in what attracts us, which is to say we are moved by what has the character of the beautiful” (Hanby, *Augustine*, 100). Indeed, on a Stoic account, we cannot even *desire* beatitude. So, for Augustine and Aquinas, “[c]hoice between alternatives is not a sign of the will’s freedom to choose but its bondage to an internal division of desire . . . in a single-minded love for the good . . . the need for choice never arises” (Hanby, *Augustine*, 99–101). So “choice” is not the last moment, but rather merely “consent” that “denotes our acting at last with the continence of a unified desire toward that which supremely attracts us. And to the degree that the fact consented to accords with the good of doxology, it denotes the restoration of the Trinitarian image in us (Hanby, *Augustine*, 93). Again I take it that Hanby is making the claim that the form of free action is church practice, and that this is the only way to be formed in God’s image. Thus the place of desire in an account of action is one of the sharpest ways that this classical account diverges from the post-Kantian. For the latter, there is a contrast between inclination and desire (SHE, 86–87). This point regarding Kant and Aquinas is similarly made by McCabe, *On Aquinas*, 101–3.

45. See here Reinhard Hütter, “Grace and Free Will,” 521–53. He quotes Bernard Lonergan that “because [God] is a transcendent cause, there can be no incompatibility between terrestrial contingency and the causal certitude of providence” (546). The whole article is relevant.

46. See his earlier conceptualization of this in SHE, 1–4 and his more mature

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rationality embodied in the tradition that he has outlined. This is another way of saying that the historical account he gives throughout his work, and which we have just inadequately sketched, is not an optional extra that could be added on to a purely theoretical and timeless account of the virtues.⁴⁷

If this is the case, one of the first questions that MacIntyre has to answer is about the possible coherence of such an account given the existence of varying conceptions of the virtues in different societies. For Homer, virtues are the abilities to fill certain roles *qua* roles, while for Aristotle, they are the abilities to live the good life *qua* human being. The New Testament adds new virtues like humility and charity, which Aristotle would have rejected. Likewise Aristotle thought riches good, but in the NT the rich man is evil and the *slave* is good. Looking more broadly, things become even more complex. For Ben Franklin, virtues empower *utility*, while Jane Austin introduces the virtue of “constancy.”⁴⁸ How are we ever to construct a concept of virtue out of all of this?

MacIntyre begins with the notion of a practice. A practice is a “coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human behavior through which goods internal to that practice are realized in the course of trying to achieve excellence in that activity, with the result that the virtues and conceptions of the end and the goods are extended.”⁴⁹ A practice, in other words, provides the arena for the exhibition of the virtues, and their definition. Examples include the maintenance of hospitals, painting, the science of chemistry, or the playing of chess.⁵⁰

accounts in *WJWR*, 349–69 and virtually the whole of *TRV*.

47. A detached account is impossible for several related reasons. MacIntyre has learned from Wittgenstein that to understand a concept is not simply to have certain “ideas” about it; it also involves certain types of behavior and the ability to act in certain ways. So, “to possess a concept involves behaving or being able to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances, to alter concepts, whether by modifying existing concepts or by making new concepts available or by destroying old ones, is to alter behavior” (*SHE*, 3). Because concepts such as virtue or human action cannot be given without reference to human action, one cannot tell a history of ideas without reference to the concrete history in which that history of ideas takes place. And of course once you have said this, the notion of a history of ideas in the traditional sense has already been abandoned. This claim against the possibility of a pure history of moral ideas is for MacIntyre simply another part of his claim that morality is not a sphere that can be theorized about apart from the lived practices of a specific society.

48. *AV*, 184–87.

49. *Ibid.*, 187.

50. *Ibid.*

So there can be no true “goods” in the classical sense without the notion of a practice. But equally there can be no practices without the distinction between goods internal and external. So in chess, while making the right move achieves an objective good internal to the game, impressing onlookers by making that right move achieves an external good: “To judge someone good in some role or at discharging some function within some socially established practice is to judge that agent good insofar as there are goods internal to that activity that are genuine goods, goods that are to be valued as ends worth pursuing for their own sake, if they are to be pursued at all.”⁵¹

But such delimited spheres of practice must give way to conceiving all of life in such teleological terms. For when we make judgments about the best way for individuals or communities to order their lives to the good *per se*, we commit ourselves to a stance on the good not just for this or that human practice and so this or that role, but for human beings in general.⁵² This is to take a stance on what it is for a human to flourish. At the same time what

it is for human beings to flourish does of course vary from context to context, but in every context it is as someone exercises in a relevant way the capacities of an independent practical reasoner that her or his potentialities for flourishing in a specifically human way are developed. So if we want to understand how it is good for humans to live, we need to know what it is to be excellent as an independent practical reasoner, that is, what the virtues of independent practical reasoning are. But we need to know more than this . . . having raised the question of what specifically human flourishing consists in, we find almost immediately, just as Aristotle did, that it has become the question of what the virtues are and of what it is to live the kind of life that the exercise of the virtues requires.⁵³

51. *DRA*, 66.

52. *Ibid.*, 67.

53. *Ibid.*, 77. It is important to stress that MacIntyre does not mean “independent” in any absolute sense, for practical reasoning is always within a community. “By independence I mean both the ability and the willingness to evaluate the reasons for action advanced to one by others, so that one makes oneself accountable for one’s endorsements of the practical conclusions of others as well as for one’s own conclusions” (*ibid.*, 105).

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In other words, one only finds out what the good is in the midst of practical experience.⁵⁴

With the notion of goods internal and external to practices in place, MacIntyre offers the definition of a virtue as a quality which tends towards achieving goods internal to a practice and the lack of which prevents us from attaining such goods.⁵⁵ But we can contextualize this account further. In *Dependent Rational Animals* MacIntyre gives an explanation of the virtues by showing their (necessary) place in an account of the development of a human being.

The difference between human beings and other animals is not that we have language while dogs do not but that we are able to reflect upon our reasons for action and ask if the reasons are good while dogs simply have reasons for action.⁵⁶ In this way babies and small children are the same as dogs. But while we say that dogs can live well or flourish as such, this is not the case with babies or small children. In order to flourish *qua* human, human beings have to develop the capacity for reflecting upon their reasons for acting.⁵⁷ Children act in the first instance simply for the satisfaction of bodily pleasures and desires. A significant part of development comes as they slowly learn to distance themselves from those desires and to ask if such fulfillment is what is *best*. This involves not just the development of reason but also of the slow training of the desires themselves so that now in fact the child desires that good which was better in the first place.⁵⁸

First, the child learns that pleasing its parents rather than crying is to be chosen in order to get food or praise. From this intermediate stage the parents will have to teach the child not to act so to please them but to act for what is truly better. Once the child has become sufficiently detached from both its own desires and the influence of others it becomes slowly and for the first time a mature practical reasoner. The qualities that are cultivated in this transformation of desire, motivation, and action, are called virtues, and so a lack of virtue names the reason that one fails to attain what is good and best.

54. Ibid., 113. Even in Christian variations of the classical account wherein the good is given by revelation, the true character of that good is only apprehended successively as one journeys towards it.

55. Ibid., 191.

56. Ibid., 54.

57. Ibid., 64–65.

58. See *ibid.*, 76.

But what is needed for any such development to take place is unconditional acceptance and a situation of trust and security. This is usually provided by the parents, who teach the child that their commitment to it is not threatened by the child's failure or by circumstance. In such an atmosphere the child is free to playfully test his experience and explore his world, knowledge of which is necessary for practical reasoning. The child is also free to take her first actions toward distancing herself from her desires and choosing a higher good for its own sake and so form the virtues. Absent such a situation of "trust based on experience", however, the process will be significantly stunted.⁵⁹ The child may become isolated from both parents and others, since the former does not provide support and the latter are a threat. As a result, of course, the child is unable to develop the virtues necessary to judge and attain the good.

In this connection, MacIntyre notes that, contrary to popular modern opinion, desire is not a sufficient condition for action, in that a desire can never by itself be the major premise in a practical syllogism. The practical syllogism has the form: X is good (major premise), doing Y will attain X (minor premise), and the conclusion is an action. But the major premise can never be "I desire X" because it is always possible and reasonable to ask why at this time I should act on this desire rather than another.⁶⁰ There is, in other words, internal to the logic of a practical syllogism, an ordering of goods. My reason for acting will always have to be that I want such and such *and* that I judge fulfilling this desire the best alternative.⁶¹

The virtues always develop in a relation of mutual dependence. We can see this as MacIntyre makes his own short-list of cardinal virtues. The three central virtues of almost all practices, which unite the history from Homer to Austin, MacIntyre proposes in *After Virtue*, are justice, courage and honesty. Justice is the quality of giving to each what is owed and it requires the virtue of prudence for its application (it is curious therefore that it is not listed). Honesty or truthfulness is the virtue of self-submission to others and critique of oneself and others. Courage is the ability to execute

59. *Ibid.*, 85.

60. On the practical syllogism: *SHE*, 71–73; *AV*, 161–62; *WJWR*, 138–40.

61. What this means is that the virtues are necessarily going to have an "objective" quality to them in the sense that they cannot be reducible to what is desired or what is generally approved of or useful, since the virtues are specifically the training of the desires. "Just because our degree of success or failure in first acquiring and then practicing the virtues determines in significant measure what it is we find agreeable and useful, the characterization of the virtues, in Humean terms, as qualities that are generally and naturally agreeable and useful is misleading" (*DRA*, 87).

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justice and honesty. Elsewhere MacIntyre treats variously numerous other virtues, notably temperance and generosity. But already we can see how it is that, whatever ordering and importance we give to our catalogue, by their nature the virtues cannot be treated individually. A virtue is cultivated with the help of virtues, while a lack in one area often will be to the detriment of several others.

Because such virtues are always part of a community practice, they will always be *political*, as for Aristotle the virtues were what was required for the good of the *polis*. The good of the community, in other words, will be the external structure that defines the nature of the virtues so that, without such a communal structure with common ends and roles, any determinate account of the virtues will be impossible. In other words, “we need to act for common goods in order to achieve our flourishing as rational animals.”⁶² And “common goods,” of course, presuppose a community of people with shared goals. Every step of the way this involves dependence on others. Morality is not something that we *could* do on our own, as it is for Kant; human action is not accidentally but essentially socio-political. “In the context of particular practices we generally have no one else to rely on but those who are our expert coworkers, to make us aware both of our particular mistakes in this or that practical activity and of the sources of those mistakes in our failures in respect of the virtues and skills.”⁶³ Thus for any achievement of the good for a person to be possible that person will have to have pursued goods that are truly common.⁶⁴

MacIntyre goes on to suggest that a concept of virtue implies that a human life has the character of a narrative. For to hold an account of the virtues, whatever it may be, is to describe human life as progress through harms and dangers to some end, wherein virtues and vices are those abilities that allow or hinder the attainment of that end. In other words, in order to know what the virtues are we will have to know some things about what the specific dangers are and how progress is to be measured.⁶⁵ MacIntyre notes that we cannot characterize action apart from intentions and beliefs and we cannot understand intentions and beliefs apart from a setting and its changes through time (a story). Every action has and presumes for its intelligibility a history, a narrative. Without these the question, “What is he doing?” will be unanswerable, and action will

62. *DRA*, 119.

63. *Ibid.*, 96–97, see also 99.

64. *Ibid.*, 109, 113, 119.

65. *AV*, 204–12.

be unintelligible. Thus, there is no such thing as ‘behavior’ in itself, apart from these things. Rather, we order intentions causally and temporally in relation to the agent’s history and the history of the setting. This means that narrative history is the basic genre of human action.⁶⁶

That there is a narrative quality internal to all human action that constitutes its particularity means two significant things. First, human action is inexpressible in terms of strict causality, and this turns out to constitute another objection to a view of divine agency as construed on the analogy of physical causality. For action so construed is not sufficiently explicable.⁶⁷ This is because any account of the divine comingling with human action has to take account of the continued existence of human intentionality in order to avoid not only the evacuation of free will but also the ultimate lapse of human action into incoherence.⁶⁸ To say that something is caused

66. In this way it becomes clear that because the virtues involve the training of desire and thus a different view of the good from someone who does not have them, it is also true that the virtues are only recognizable as such by those who have them. Others, indeed, may see the same virtuous actions as harmful. What this means, however, though I do not find MacIntyre making this point, is that to the extent that one lacks the virtues necessary to recognize virtuous action as such one may also misconstrue the story in which those actions make sense. So it turns out that moral development will significantly influence our ability to understand and rightly characterize actions and their stories, including our own.

67. See MacIntyre “Hegel,” 81–83: “A particular historical event cannot on Hegel’s view be dissolved into a set of properties. One reason for this is that such a situation has to be characterized in terms of relations to earlier particular events and situations. There is an internal reference to the events and situations that constitute its history . . . To respond to a particular situation, event or state of affairs is not to respond to any situation, event, or state of affairs with the same or similar properties; it is to respond to *that* situation conceived by both the agents who respond to it and those whose actions constitute it as the particular that it is. . . . Just because this concreteness is not constituted by a mere collection of properties, it *evades causal generalizations and so makes causal explanation*, whether phrenological or neurophysiological, inapplicable” (my italics). In other words, “a certain kind of causal explanation will not give us the understanding that we require of self-conscious rational activity” (82). This constitutes a significant difference then, between psychology and social sciences on the one hand, and the natural sciences on the other, however much this would be denied by the former. “For what we can observe in nature is, so to speak, all that there is to discover; but what we can observe in human beings is the expression of rational activity, which cannot be understood as merely the sum of the movements that we observe” (83). The question then of course becomes whether MacIntyre is right that there is no “intention” internal to nature.

68. In other words, for our purposes, there may be buried into either or both of the views of Paul that I will be opposing a sort of anachronistic physicalism wherein neurochemistry is the “cause” of behavior and so God would need to act directly on

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by God, in other words, is not to deny the internal “human” narrative that gives that action intelligibility. To be sure, there are times when it seems that the divine and human agent have come together in such a way that the human narrative breaks off and that an action or set of actions lack sufficient continuity with a human narrative. We call these miracles. But so to name them is to say that this is not the normal mode of divine interaction with human agents.

Second, the narrative quality of human action brings us to the heart of MacIntyre’s positive proposal, namely, that we simply cannot make sense out of our lives without something like the classical tradition of the virtues. This is the argument he makes at the close of *After Virtue*. Because human beings tell stories and only understand themselves and their world as such, the first question of life is not “what am I to do?” but “what kind of stories do I find myself in?” Without the latter we would have no roles with which to respond to the former. We would have no way to characterize our own actions and would have no idea what to expect from others. Thus the unity of life consists in the unity of a narrative in a single life. To ask ‘What is the good life for me?’ is to ask how best to bring that narrative to completion.

Thus far narrative. But the virtues are a necessary part of the unity of life, since these are the abilities that allow us to sustain practices necessary to achieve internal goods, overcome obstacles, and come to a greater knowledge of the good. Without virtues we would have no practices—only, for example, utilitarian emotivism. MacIntyre names a common history of practice or practices over time that constitutes a continuous argument as to the nature of the good for that practice a “tradition.”

What happened so that we no longer talk about our actions this way?

The Breakdown of the Classical Synthesis in Modernity

MacIntyre’s work is perhaps most poignant in its narration of the incoherence of the culture of modernity, including American society. Such incoherence arises for him to a significant extent because of the breakup of a

something physical in a manner that makes us think of God’s cause and effect in the same way as that between physical objects. So MacIntyre (“Hegel,” 78) says that “[B]uried in [the] dubious contentions [of the old science of phrenology], is one that is less obviously dubious, that is indeed familiar and widely accepted. I mean of course the thesis that there are biochemical or neural states of affairs, processes and events, the occurrence and the nature of which are the sufficient causes of human action.”

classical account of human action. What our society currently is, and what it continues to try to go on living with, are incompatible bits and pieces of different accounts of action that were never designed to fit together in the first place.⁶⁹ That is, the language in which we moderns describe our actions is an incoherent jumble of fragments taken from their proper place in the classical model and haphazardly assembled in a new, nonsensical arrangement. The modern attempt to make sense out of and guide our lives, for MacIntyre, is therefore futile apart from a revival of virtue.

MacIntyre thinks that the current bureaucratic, emotivist cultural situation is a failure of *both* philosophy and society (since the two are never separable) to find a rational alternative to what he sees as a broadly Aristotelian framework that hitherto dominated. “Emotivism,” as he uses the term, names that broad family of moral theory and practice wherein “all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling.”⁷⁰

In this section I want to press MacIntyre’s narration of this development into the service of three interrelated points. First, MacIntyre’s work suggests, most obviously, that a radical change in the concept of “the self” (the soul) has happened, especially in the last three hundred or so years. In fact, the very development of our grammar of the word “self” goes hand in hand with this change. Second, this means a necessary change in the way that we talk about the human body. Ours is a world that does not have bodies in the same way it used to. Finally and correlatively, the way that we talk about the interaction of divine and human agency has changed. These three points all arise as a result of a culture that has suffered the loss of the notion of virtue. What are the characteristics of such a culture and how did we get here?

MacIntyre thinks he can date one of the most important turning points in our cultural history to the years around 1780. This date suggests itself because the two last works of the classical view of human agency, Hume’s *Treatise of Human Understanding*, and Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, were published in 1759 and 1740, while two significant works that *break from* that tradition, Kant’s *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* and Reid’s *Essays on the Active Power of the Human Mind* were published in 1785 and 1788 respectively. Hume and Smith represented a minimum necessary to be classified as classical theorists since they took the passions—though in truncated form—to be central to the moral life.⁷¹

69. So begins AV, 1–2.

70. AV, 12.

71. See MacIntyre, “How Moral Agents Became Ghosts,” 295–312.