

MacIntyre on Virtue

Work and the Human Condition: Spring 2009

I. Review of *After Virtue*

II. Aristotle or Nietzsche?

III. MacIntyre's History, In Brief

IV. MacIntyre's Three-Stage Account of Virtue

Overview of *After Virtue*

Ch's 1-3: Where We Are Now: Emotivism as a Philosophical Theory and as a Social Condition

Ch's 4-6: History of the Failure of the Enlightenment Project, and How it Led to Emotivism

Ch's 7 & 8: Critiques of Managerialism (i.e., applied emotivism)

Ch. 9: The crux – Premodern Virtue or Emotivism?

Ch's 10-13: History of Premodern Virtue

Ch's 14 & 15: MacIntyre's Own Account of Virtue

Ch's 16 & 17: The degeneration of virtue today

Ch. 18: The Closing of his Argument

Nietzsche or Aristotle?

Three Alternatives:

1. The Enlightenment Project: Ethics can be provided with a rational, secular foundation based on an account of human nature – *Rationalism, Modernism*
2. Nietzsche: Ethics is nothing but a disguise for individual assertions of will – *Emotivism, Post-modernism*
3. Aristotle: Ethics is grounded on some conception of human *telos* – *Aristotelianism, Pre-modernism, Anti-modernism*

MacIntyre rejects (1).

Project: To vindicate the Aristotelian tradition against Nietzsche and Emotivism.

MacIntyre's History of Virtue

Point: To trace the development of the virtues, so as to reveal common features that run through the tradition.

Stages:

1. The Heroic Tradition

self = social role

virtues allow for success in one's role

agôn = contest

action determines motives

no conflicts among virtues

2. Classical Athens

self = citizen of a city-state (*polis*)

virtues determined by place in *polis*

motives not entirely discerned in action

conflicting roles → conflicts among virtues

a. The Sophists

virtues ensure success in actual *polis*

b. Plato

virtues ensure success in ideal *polis*

virtues are in harmony

c. Sophocles

virtues are of a citizen with multiple roles

virtues can conflict, as roles conflict

d. Aristotle

virtues are of a man

man is by nature one who lives in a *polis*

need good fortune, habituation

virtues are in harmony

MacIntyre's Account of Virtues

Three Stages:

1. A Practice.

“By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (187).

Key Concepts:

- complex activities
- internal goods
- standards of excellence
- definitive standards
- extending conceptions of ends and goods

Contrasts

Internal vs. External Goods

Practices vs. Technical Skills

Practices vs. Institutions

First Account of Virtue:

“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable use to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (191).

Problems:

- Possibility of evil practices
- Problem of disharmony in a human life
- Lack of balance, proportion (Gauguin)

2. Narrative Unity of a Human Life.

Human life must be understood in narrative form.

Actions only make sense as part of some possible narrative.

The narrative form for human life is a quest.

Second Account of Virtues:

“The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good”
(219).

3. A Life Lived Within A Tradition.

Our identities are largely constituted by our roles.

Therefore, what is good for us depends on our roles.

“... we approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone’s son or daughter, someone else’s cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this claim, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles” (220).

Third Account of the Virtues:

“The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual may seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context” (223).

Thoreau, *Walden*:

*“I went to the woods because I
wished to live deliberately...”*

Next Week: Idleness

No Class Meetings, No Work Due.

Instead, *Live Deliberately.*

Monday, May 18: Turn in a one-page account of what you did with this time, why, and what good it furthered.