

Introduction to the Special Issue on Alasdair MacIntyre

Dominic Burbidge & Nathan Pinkoski

In *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, Alasdair MacIntyre reiterates and deepens the project he initiated in *After Virtue*: to help rational agents become independent practical reasoners. Through becoming independent practical reasoners, rational agents discover what is good, leading them to realise unified, coherent, and flourishing lives. That kind of moral enquiry, however, is distorted and thwarted by the dominant culture of modernity, the culture of emotivism and expressivism, and the institutions it forms. Hence MacIntyre writes that ‘so many of us lead potentially incoherent lives, lives that remain as coherent as they are only because and so long as certain questions go unasked, certain issues ignored or avoided or suppressed.’¹

If emotivism and expressivism habituates this ignorance, avoidance, and suppression, then the modern university institutionalizes it. One might think that in the university, ostensibly dedicated to ideals of openness and discussion, the promise—or at least the provocations—of MacIntyrean enquiry would find a ready arena for debate. Yet this is far from the case. The institutional features of the modern university are in large part to blame for keeping MacIntyrean enquiry marginal. As MacIntyre himself has observed, his enquiry is ‘deeply incompatible’ with the ‘conventional academic disciplinary boundaries’ that are found in the university, making it hard for his questions to secure a proper hearing.² Moreover, MacIntyre suggests that there is a considered effort to marginalise MacIntyrean enquiry. ‘If the central theses in favour of which I have been arguing for nearly twenty years are true,’ he writes, ‘then we should expect them to be rejected by the most articulate and able representatives of the dominant culture of modernity.’³

This pessimism about the modern university is compounded by the fact that many of us, as academic professionals within the modern university, are first-hand witnesses to these institutionalised expressions of incoherence. Nevertheless, we should not despair. Part of the lesson that MacIntyre imparts to us is that resistance to and subversion of modern institutions, including the modern university, remain possible. It remains possible to use the resources of the modern university to diagnose its problem more precisely, helping rational agents avoid the many pitfalls that distort and thwart enquiry. Moreover, it remains possible to use the resources of the modern university to foster the kind of enquiry that directs

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 204.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Postscript to the Second Edition,’ *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 264.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘A Partial Response to My Critics,’ in *After MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 283.

rational agents therein toward their true ultimate good or final end. But the condition for these activities is that we ask the right questions.

We believe that this volume represents the fruits of one such exercise. Based on the practices of rational deliberation and critical engagement that characterize MacIntyrean enquiry, we have brought together a series of articles that creates a modest arena for debate around *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.

Our effort to connect debate with MacIntyrean enquiry will be met by an objection from the dominant voices within the university—notably, liberal voices. Debate entails a conversation from opposing points of view, often involving points of view that are strongly in contrast with one another. It thereby entails a commitment to plurality. How is it possible to connect MacIntyrean enquiry with plurality, since MacIntyre is ostensibly an opponent of plurality, one who rejects modern pluralism and longs for the homogeneity of older, pre-modern communities and institutions?

Because the critical argument of the *After Virtue* project draws attention to the problem of the breakdown and fragmentation of ethical traditions, MacIntyre's liberal critics have concluded that he regards ethical and political conflict as an inherent problem, and therefore that he regards ethical and political pluralism as an inherent problem. For liberals, MacIntyre's goal is seemingly to replace pluralism with a parochial ideal. Ronald Beiner, for example, criticizes MacIntyre on these grounds. Deploying MacIntyre's defence of pre-modern theory and practice against him, Beiner inspects MacIntyre for how he evaluates one pre-modern institution, the medieval university. While Beiner concedes that MacIntyre is critical of the medieval university, he nevertheless accuses MacIntyre of romanticizing this pre-modern university by playing down or accepting its parochial character.⁴

MacIntyre, however, insists that he hardly celebrates a parochial ideal and rejects exclusion in education, since he advocates for 'reckoning with insights and arguments of thinkers of widely different points of view.'⁵ His assessment of the medieval university confirms this. MacIntyre's considered assessment of the medieval university is that it failed. Foreshadowing the failure of the modern liberal university, the medieval university failed precisely because opposing points of view did not reckon with each other.⁶ The plurality found within the medieval university, as in

⁴ See Ronald Beiner, 'The Parochial and the Universal: MacIntyre's Idea of the University,' *Revue internationale de philosophie* 2:264 (2013), 174.

⁵ See Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Replies,' *Revue internationale de philosophie* 2 :264 (2013), 213-14. In answering Beiner's question about whether the exclusionary problems of the medieval pre-liberal university were '*actually more weighty*' than the liberal university, MacIntyre's high normative standard makes it impossible to conclude one form of exclusion is 'better' than another. Liberalism brings a set of problems distinct from pre-modern problems. Since liberal institutions have their own exclusions, one cannot conclude that a pre-modern institution is worse or better than a modern liberal institution.

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1988), 206.

the case of the opposing traditions of Augustinianism and Aristotelianism, did not translate into open debate between these traditions (with the notable exception of Thomas Aquinas). Augustinians and Aristotelians tended to follow in the footsteps of Duns Scotus, whose manner of compartmentalising rational enquiry closed off possible Aristotelian developments to Augustinian theses.⁷

MacIntyre's sharp defences of pluralism should make it clear that the anti-pluralist objection from his liberal critics does not pass muster and is not an obstacle to MacIntyrean enquiry. Both MacIntyre and his liberal critics agree that pluralism is good. Where MacIntyre's account of pluralism contrasts from the liberal account, however, is his view concerning the implications of ethical and political pluralism. For MacIntyre, pluralism provides an opportunity to deepen a rational agent's understanding of his or her good, as well as the ultimate good or final end. In committing ourselves to conversation and debate, to rational deliberation, we are committing ourselves to a rational enquiry with other rational agents. As a shared rational enquiry in search of a better understanding, rational deliberation presupposes the fallibility of rational agents: that I, as well as those with whom I argue, are capable of error. As Ashleen Menchaca-Bagnulo has observed, this is why in MacIntyrean enquiry 'conflict is constitutive of truth in inquiry and practice.'⁸ Pluralism and conflicts between rational agents holding diverse views are in MacIntyre's account salutary. They reinforce our need to learn from others what is true.

What troubles MacIntyre is that liberal theory and practice, in a bid to construct a political community on a non-metaphysical foundation, surrenders shared rational enquiry into the human good. Whether or not liberals regard conflicts over foundational and metaphysical principles as ultimately resolvable or irresolvable, they do hold that in a political community these conflicts can and ought to be suspended. Liberals urge us to take pluralism as a permanent fact, to be celebrated for its own sake. The reason is that liberals regard pluralism as the expression of individual selves living authentically within the same political community. But while this standpoint purports to celebrate pluralism, it paradoxically ceases to celebrate conflict as a salutary opportunity to learn from others. Since conflict can and ought to be suspended in a liberal political community, when conflict between authentic selves does arise, it is not welcomed as an opportunity to learn. Conflict becomes a crisis.

This liberal theory and practice finds institutional expression in the modern university. The modern university is the university of emotivist subjectivism, where finding 'truth' is first and foremost about being true to

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1990), 151-54, 162; Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 97-98; MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 93.

⁸ Ashleen Menchaca-Bagnulo, 'Desire, Conflict, and Tradition in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*,' *Expositions* 14:1 (2020), 92.

yourself. This elevates a particular kind of therapy. The first step in this journey is to identify the arbitrary construction of the self that has hitherto taken root in your life. Diminishing and denying human agency, you are urged to affirm the arbitrary construction of the self, and then abdicate any responsibility for who you are or what informs your actions. This exercise yields the conclusion that you must feel good about yourself, as a first step in realising that the arbitrary construction came from outside. It came from society, from example, or from religion, or from parent 1 and parent 2, or from mis-designation of your body. If you were to write a diary of your life, you would see that at various moments you were told certain things as if they were True, when really there is only 'truth', and that in fact those who told you Truth were engaged in an effort to limit your authentic self. Ultimately, only you can identify your authentic self, and any questions raised about what should inform your desires is a potential intrusion or assault against your authentic self.

The upshot of this therapeutic activity is that the realm of ends ceases to be a realm where rational agreement is possible. In a university built around this therapeutic activity, it becomes impossible to have critical and constructive conversation between rational agents who admit of their rational agency, acknowledge their power to reflect and reconsider their desires, and redirect their desires toward different ends. Conflict is not an opportunity for fruitful exchange. It is a cause for anxiety, for complaint. Conflict must be avoided and the institution of the university is expected to deploy its powers to diminish it. Conversation and debate are sacrificed to the cause of reconciling desires that ultimately admit of no queries concerning how they are rationally justifiable. Hence this institution nurtures not a set of students who have the habit of moral self-examination, but a set of characters who are not able to 'engage in moral debate.'⁹ *Sede sapientiae vacante.*

MacIntyrean enquiry is the antithesis of this theory and its institutional realisation. By encouraging rational agents to engage in moral debate, MacIntyrean enquiry hardly encourages these rational agents to take up a parochial ideal. As we have seen, the commitment to conversation and debate is premised on pluralism, and regards pluralism between opposing viewpoints as salutary. Conflict is a good thing. Even deep conflict, whether over foundational or metaphysical principles or the meaning and substance of the human good, is good. For conflict provides a tradition of enquiry, the opportunity to revise its always tentative conclusions, deepening its understanding of reality. This is why those belonging to the tradition to which MacIntyre belongs, Thomistic Aristotelianism, must welcome and encourage conflict. Participants in this tradition do so not just to resist and subvert the liberal institution identified above. They also do so to deepen their awareness of their own ignorance. Hence the conversation and debate between those holding conflicting views reinforces the beautiful teaching of

⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 30.

Socratic ignorance that constitutes classical, pagan philosophy, as well as the *docta ignorantia* that appears in Augustinian, Christian philosophy.¹⁰

If this practice were expressed in the institutional setting of a new, doubtless very different university from that which dominates the modern landscape, it would be a university of *listening*.¹¹ In this university, truth is found by hearing others as part of a tradition. Truth requires a development of the student's capacity to listen and then to speak. Such a university teaches students to suspend judgement as they listen to others, and then, at the appropriate time, to judge. The process, repeated over the course of their studies, nurtures humans who listen in order to evaluate in a deeper and more profound way their own views and the views of others. In deepening their evaluation and understanding of certain positions, students enter into a tradition. This tradition builds over time and is capable of sharing what it knows with others, who can in turn challenge, revise, and deepen it.

While building this institution is of course beyond our capabilities at the moment, we can at least begin at the beginning. Our task is to foster conversation and debate between conflicting views. The research agenda of this volume is then as follows. Following Alasdair MacIntyre's own plan in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, the volume's aim is to foster 'an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental arguments are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict.'¹² Those two kinds of conflict are *internal*, between adherents of the same tradition; and *external*, between those who subscribe to different, competing traditions. In this volume's nine essays, we have provided a small sample of both kinds of conflict, hoping that the exercise of listening to external and internal challenges to MacIntyre will deepen the rational enquiry that we pursue in common.

* * *

The volume's first three essays are primarily concerned with conflicts external to Thomist Aristotelianism. At issue in all three essays is a critical engagement with MacIntyre's conception of politics. In his contribution, Geoffrey Sigalet presents a challenge to MacIntyre drawn from legal theorist and political philosopher Jeremy Waldron. Waldron argues that moral realism has no advantage over non-realism on how to best design political institutions; likewise, Sigalet contends that MacIntyre fails to demonstrate the relevance of his moral realism to designing political institutions. For Sigalet, MacIntyre's account is insufficiently political,

¹⁰ St Augustine, *Epistola ad Probam* 130, Ch. 15 §28.

¹¹ See Dominic Burbidge, 'Listening: An Antidote to the Modern University's Incoherence,' *The Public Discourse*, June 2nd 2017. <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/06/19426/>.

¹² MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 12.

because he does not tell us what kinds of institutions can house authentic Aristotelian politics. MacIntyre is committed to key moral principles, such as inclusion and integration, and aims to foster democratic communities. Nevertheless, he offers no general account of how the principles of inclusion and integration should shape the details of democratic institutions that maintain democratic communities—even the democratic institutions of the local communities to which he professes his allegiance.

Alexander Duff challenges MacIntyre's interpretation of Thomist Aristotelianism as itself external to Thomist Aristotelianism, because it departs from the traditional understanding of politics that Aristotle presents and that Thomas Aquinas maintains. MacIntyre's refusal to accept any orientation by the 'best regime' or make a prudential assessment of existing regimes abstracts from the ordinary citizen's experience of politics. While MacIntyre provides an astute account of politics as deliberation, he neglects the phenomenon of rule. Duff challenges MacIntyre from an account of Aristotelianism inspired by Leo Strauss. Strauss, and more contemporarily Émile Perreau-Saussine and Pierre Manent, who follow in Strauss's footsteps, accentuate the political in their interpretation of Aristotelianism, for they contend that it is integral for correctly understanding and interpreting Aristotle's teaching.

Like Duff, Stephen Salkever is interested in bringing Leo Strauss's insights on Aristotle to bear on Alasdair MacIntyre's Aristotelianism. Salkever, however, draws attention to themes that Strauss's Aristotelianism shares with MacIntyre's. In *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, Salkever sees MacIntyre's account of politics moving closer to that of Strauss, as MacIntyre softens some of his criticisms of the contemporary political order while still contending—like Strauss—that modern liberal democratic theory cannot serve as the basis for re-thinking the contemporary political order. The heart of Salkever's comparison, however, is his attention to the account of philosophical enquiry that Strauss and MacIntyre aspire to recover from Aristotle and classical Greek philosophy. Following Aristotle, both Strauss and MacIntyre characterize *prohairesis* (thoughtful choice) as a central component of the human good, presenting an account of philosophical enquiry that is sceptical or zetetic, where truth is the goal of philosophical enquiry, but where philosophical conclusions remain tentative and open to revision.

In important ways, the first three essays speak from standpoints external to MacIntyre's project of moral enquiry. Yet as we observed initially, an important objective of MacIntyrean moral enquiry should be to recognise the conflicts internal to a tradition, and foster debate between conflicting points of view from those who subscribe to the tradition of Thomist Aristotelianism. Jonathan Sanford's essay warns us that many of those who purportedly subscribe to Aristotelian moral enquiry in fact reject some of its most important tenets. It is important for MacIntyrean enquiry to recognise this, for some positions that masquerade as conflicts internal to the tradition of Thomistic Aristotelianism in fact represent conflicts external to that tradition, promulgating presuppositions that are hostile to

authentic Thomistic Aristotelian moral enquiry. As Sanford writes, ‘any purported NeoAristotelianism in the thrall of what MacIntyre names “Morality” represents not a new branch jutting out from the Aristotelian trunk, but rather a severed limb grafted onto an altogether different tree.’ In his essay, Sanford outlines ten principles that a genuinely Aristotelian moral enquiry must embrace.

Internal conflicts frame Christopher Lutz’s contribution. As he notes that, even amongst Thomists, MacIntyre’s approach to ethics is unconventional because MacIntyre does not reason from metaphysics to find a basis for moral epistemology. The starting point for MacIntyre is instead a rational agent, with desires, deciding which of the things she apprehends as good are genuinely choice-worthy. Ethics must be a guide to practical reasoning and to action. That is MacIntyre’s approach in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. Lutz shows how this text, and the approach therein, is consistent with and develops themes MacIntyre pursues in earlier works. MacIntyre builds his mature Thomistic Aristotelianism off Aquinas’s account of human action. Rather than beginning with a theoretical or philosophical account of the final end, as some Aristotelian and Thomistic accounts urge, MacIntyre counsels a reorientation toward more proximate considerations: it is through clarifying her own desires that a rational agent eventually comes to discover the final end.

One of the most important internal challenges facing MacIntyre’s Thomistic Aristotelianism is whether MacIntyre’s commitment to a historicist, tradition-based rationality successfully avoids relativism—as Thomism must. Sympathetic to MacIntyre’s Thomist critics who are concerned about his historicism, Bruce McCuskey argues that there is in MacIntyre an implicit understanding that temporal progression will resolve debates over truth claims. This is not to deny that MacIntyre is a metaphysical realist. Rather, McCuskey’s concern is that MacIntyre’s metaphysical realism derives its substance from aspects of reality, namely temporal progression, which cannot sustain the totality of human rational activity. To remedy this problem, McCuskey’s innovation is to deepen MacIntyre’s Thomism through exegesis of Aquinas’s *Disputed Questions on Truth*. McCuskey develops an account of the central criterion of truth and falsity in MacIntyre’s account of tradition-based Rationality as an embodied, distended law of non-contradiction and shows how this criterion is implicit in MacIntyre’s writings, including in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.

Tamás Paár addresses another conflict internal to Thomism in his contribution, debating how to initiate a more fruitful dialogue between MacIntyre’s Thomistic-Aristotelianism and transcendental Thomism. In spite of MacIntyre’s criticisms and apparent disagreements with transcendental Thomism, mostly for too readily adopting the presuppositions of modern philosophy (especially modern epistemology), Paár argues that the two strands can learn from each other. Both share a commitment to the centrality of dialogue and share some of the ethical and political presuppositions for what is required to foster dialogue. Through

a careful attention to MacIntyre's approach, Paár argues that at times MacIntyre relies on methods of argument that transcendental Thomists develop. On this basis of their shared conviction that conclusions can always be clarified and better understood through further conversation, Paár sketches a way forward for addressing persisting epistemological disputes between MacIntyre and transcendental Thomists.

Two final essays in the volume deepen our understanding of MacIntyre's own positions. As we noted above, one of MacIntyre's most important claims in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* is that 'so many of us lead potentially incoherent lives' as a result of the dissonance between our own self-understanding and the social order. In 'On Running Away to the Circus,' Ron Beadle shows how MacIntyre's example of the circus provides the context for understanding how a coherent relationship between a rational agent's self-understanding and the social order can arise. The circus, Beadle argues, provides a context for the type of virtuous local political community that MacIntyre affirms. It is moreover a real, contemporary example of a sustainable local political community, showing that MacIntyre is hardly a nostalgic for pre-modern forms of community that are never to return.

In 'A Radical's Critique of Rights,' Kelvin Knight demonstrates the context and nuance informing MacIntyre's infamous declaration in *After Virtue* on natural and human rights: that belief in them is 'at one with belief in witches and in unicorns.'¹³ Rather than taking this to be a rejection of natural or human rights *tout court*, Knight shows how MacIntyre has defended the language of natural and human rights in particular historical, legal, and political contexts. The concept of natural and human rights has been and can be used in revolutionary ways. What leads MacIntyre to criticise the concept of rights, however, is how the claims for rights based on a natural and universalist morality endorse particular social and political orders. For example, David Hume's advocacy for natural and universal morality was the endorsement of the 18th century British social and economic order. Nowadays, the uses of the concept of human rights endorse the contemporary social and economic order, disguising our deeper reality of exploitation and domination.

These contributions magnify and accelerate growth in MacIntyrean enquiry. We believe they represent a vigorous contribution to debate both internal and external to the tradition. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* is a work of staggering importance and implication, and the authors of this special issue give its arguments the respect they deserve.

¹³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 69.