Alasdair MacIntyre and *After Virtue*

Kai Nielsen

I

I think it is well to begin an examination of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* by looking at some revealing remarks he makes in his preface about (a) his way of looking at moral philosophy and (b) what he takes to be the moral features of Marxism. Though he remarks that his present work emerged out of reflection on his dissatisfaction with his previous work, he still does quite deliberately carry over from his previous work a way of viewing things, widely shared outside of moral philosophy but not shared by many moral philosophers. That view is this: that in properly doing moral philosophy (1) "we have to learn from history and anthropology of the variety of moral practices, beliefs and conceptual schemes" and (2) that it is unrewarding to "study the concepts of morality merely by reflecting, Oxford armchair style, on what he or she . . . say or do." (viii) The contrast here with such orthodox moral philosophers as Hare, Foot, Gewirth, Parfit or Nozick, could not be greater and there is even considerable distance from Rawls, though Rawls is not particularly concerned with what we mean when we say such and such.

MacIntyre also carries over from his earlier work, including his very early Marxist work, a rejection of liberalism and individualism. That is something that runs very deep with him. But he also carries over from his work from his middle period, after he had rejected

Marxism, a certain way of delineating and explaining what he regards as the moral impoverishment of both liberalism and 'orthodox Marxism'. Indeed, as different as they are, he thinks they suffer from a similar modernist malaise. It is his belief that the moral impoverishment of Marxism is rooted both in features distinctive of Marxism and, as well, in what it has inherited from liberal individualism. Nor is there, MacIntyre argues, a way of infusing moral content into Marxism by grafting liberal values on to its historical materialism and its political sociology. Rather, he argues,

> Marxism's moral defects and failures arise from the extent to which it, like liberal individualism, embodies the ethos of the distinctively modern and modernizing world, and that nothing less than a rejection of a large part of that ethos will provide us with a rationally and morally defensible standpoint from which to judge and to act—and in terms of which to evaluate various rival and heterogeneous moral schemes which compete for our allegiance. (viii)

In his earlier work, MacIntyre not only described and interpreted the "variety and heterogeneity of moral beliefs, practices and concepts", he also appraised or made evaluative judgments on these different moral beliefs, practices and concepts. His *A Short History of Ethics*, for example, is an account of the rise and decline of different moralities and moral philosophies. But this itself requires, or at least most certainly seems to require, a normative place to stand and some justification for taking that stance. In this way, unlike Rorty, he takes a rationalist road. But this stance was not spelled out, let alone justified, by MacIntyre in his earlier work. It is this lacunae that MacIntyre seeks to fill in in *After Virtue*. He asserted, or at least strongly suggested, in his work prior to *After Virtue,* "that the nature of moral community and moral judgment in distinctively modern societies was such that it was no longer possible to appeal to moral criteria in a way that had been possible in other times and

places." (vii) But what, then, could MacIntyre be appealing to if his own analysis was correct? *After Virtue* tries to provide the answer. His later Thomism and neo-Aristotelianism seeks to fill this out.

While he is ambivalent and, indeed, I believe, ambiguous about so characterizing it, MacIntyre's view is a deeply pessimistic view, perhaps even a despairing view, of our human condition. (4-5; 243-45) He believes that while "the language and appearances of morality persist . . . the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed." (5) This is, he believes, what our modernizing culture has dished out for us.

It is MacIntyre's belief that we have not always lived in such a morally fragmented culture. What he takes to be "those various concepts which inform our moral discourse were originally at home in larger totalities of theory and practice in which they enjoyed a role and function supplied by contexts of which they have now been deprived." (10) We have ended up with something he calls expansively 'emotivism'. Our moral views have become fragmented. This has been a long historical change and, indeed, he claims a disastrous one. But during this change—that is, within the last three hundred years—some of our very central moral vocabulary has undergone a significant change in meaning, but not to our advantage. "In the transition from the variety of contexts in which they were originally at home to our contemporary culture, 'virtue' and 'justice' and 'piety' and 'duty' and even 'ought' have become other than they once were." (10) But we must not forget that it is not only MacIntyre's thesis that the language of morality has changed but that he claims "the language of morality passed from a state of order to a state of disorder." (10) One of the symptoms of this disorder is the meaning change of central moral terms. Another is "the fact

that we simultaneously and inconsistently treat moral argument as an exercise of our rational powers and as mere expressive assertion." (10) This plainly does not square with his later full-scale Thomism.

II

MacIntyre seeks to trace the key episodes in our social history that led to and brought about the fragmentation of morality and indeed largely displaced morality and brought about a culture in which what he calls emotivism could culturally flourish. (35) MacIntyre believes that these key episodes in our social history were also episodes in the history of philosophy "and that it is only in the light of *that* history that we can understand how the idiosyncrasies of everyday contemporary moral discourse came to be and thus how the emotivist self was able to find means of express." (35)

A key part of that social history, as he sees it, is the social history of *the culture of Enlightenment* with its distinctive and unified philosophical view of the world—a philosophical view of the world which in the form of cultural artifact became widely disseminated and in which philosophers became the rather culturally marginal figures they are now. (35-36) While it is important to recognize how *the Enlightenment was a secularization of Protestantism* or, more cautiously, the extent to which this is so, it is also important to recognize how it involved a very deep change in the modes of belief. In this Enlightenment culture key questions arise about the "justification of belief, and most of all about the justification of moral belief" which could not possibly have arisen in the Homeric Age or in the world of the Icelandic or Irish sagas or, for that matter, even in Hellenistic societies or in many primitive societies.

If we look at the development of the Enlightenment we will discover growing progressively from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a development of a distinctive concept of morality and a conception of the domain of the moral. (37-39) Prior to the Enlightenment, MacIntyre contends, there was no such conception of the domain of the moral. With the Enlightenment came

the scholarly use of the vernacular. But prior to its use we should remember that "in Latin, as in ancient Greek, there is *no* word correctly translated by our word 'moral'; or rather there is no such word until our word 'moral' is translated back into Latin." (37) Indeed the English word 'moral' is:

> [T]he etymological descendent of the Latin "*moralis"* and that, like its Greek predecessor "*ethikos"*, has a meaning very different than our word "moral". Rather, both "*ethikos"* and "*moralis"* mean "pertaining to character", where a person's character is nothing other than his set dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead one particular kind of life. (37)

Even the early uses of the English word 'moral' do not have the modern sense which the word began to acquire in the sixteenth century. Developing from that, from the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, 'moral' acquired a sense which was "at once general and specific"—it became "the name for that particular sphere in which rules of conduct which are neither theological nor legal nor aesthetic are allowed a cultural space of their own." (38) And this was accompanied by attempts to provide a rational justification of morality conceived in that way as a distinct domain with a cultural sphere of its own. This became an important project for that secularization of Protestantism that, MacIntyre has it, was the Enlightenment.

It is a central thesis of *After Virtue* that "the breakdown of this project provided the historical background against which the predicaments of our own culture can become intelligible." (38) In an attempt to justify this claim MacIntyre recounts in *After Virtue* "in some detail the history of that project and its breakdown." (38) The conception of the ethical which emerges with the Enlightenment and continues, though with increasing ambivalence, to be believed in our time is one in which the "ethical is presented as that realm in which principles have authority over us independently of our attitudes, preferences and feelings. How I feel at any given moment is irrelevant to the question of how I must life." (40) But, MacIntyre claims, this comes more under ambivalent fire as the Enlightenment unfolds. Moral principles, for Hume and for Kierkegaard, as different as they were, come to seem more and more to be dependent for their acceptance on choice: indeed a

radical choice about how to live one's life and what sort of a person to be. (40) The Enlightenment wants to have it both ways: the ethical can have some rational basis and with that authority, and it can also be the object of radical choice. But what we need to see is that this is incoherent for morality cannot have both of these features. If it has a rational basis it cannot be a matter of radical choice and if it is a matter of radical choice it cannot have a rational basis. (41) People like Kierkegaard, Pascal and Hume, to say nothing of such contemporary chaps as Ayer, Hare, Hägerström, Hedenius, Sartre, Camus and Nowell-Smith, want it both ways but that is something they cannot have. (41) But this incoherence, or at least an incoherence rather like it, is, MacIntyre would have it, intrinsic to the whole Enlightenment project of allegedly providing, though falsely, MacIntyre claims, "a rational foundation for a justification of morality." (42) This, MacIntyre argues, is an illusion.

Vis-à-vis the Enlightenment project, it is useful to compare Kant and Kierkegaard. Their actual concrete moral beliefs were very similar. Indeed, the content of their moral belief systems were very close to being identical. But Kant argued that morality was required by reason: a rational person could not but be committed to it, while Kierkegaard argued that the same morality rests on a rationally arbitrary choice. As we have now come to see rather clearly, and as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche saw before us, the Kantian belief as a decisive or even an indecisive test for the maxims of morality is a myth. Radically different things can be consistently universalized. Where Kant saw the basis of ethics in reason, Kierkegaard saw it in choice. But, unlike Nietzsche or (later) Sartre or Camus, Kierkegaard "combines the notion of radical choice with an unquestioning conception of the ethical." (41) That is, unlike Nietzsche, he accepts the *content* of the old morality. That takes the crucifixion of the intellect, Kierkegaard stridently claims, but that crucifixion should wholeheartedly be taken. This is a rationally arbitrary choice and, indeed, arguably an irrational choice. But clearly it is non-rational.

What is crucial to note, MacIntyre claims, is that both the Kantian and the Kierkegaardian version of the Enlightenment project fail. There is no reason why egoism, amoralism or indeed class

amoralism cannot be consistently universalized; and, as we have seen, morality, if it is genuine, must have *authority* over us. Yet Kierkegaard, while accepting that, also claims with equal stress that "the principles which depict the ethical way of life are to be adopted *for no reason* but for a choice that lies beyond reason just because it is the choice of what is to count for us as a reason." (41, 45) Kierkegaard is committed to saying that fundamental ethical principles or even a commitment to the moral enterprise itself are adopted for no reason yet, unlike Nietzsche who breaks with the Enlightenment project, Kierkegaard also believes that morality must continue to have authority over us. But that which is adopted for no reason cannot have authority over us or at least not such authority as anyone touched by the modernizing tendencies of the Enlightenment could accept. (41)

To make the historical links we need in our explanation of how morality is our culture has fragmented, we need to see, MacIntyre argues, how Kant's failure and Kierkegaard's failure are linked. MacIntyre puts it thus: Kierkegaard and Kant agree in their substantive conception of morality but Kierkegaard inherits that conception together with the distinctively modern understanding that the project of giving a rational vindication of morality has failed. Kant's failure provided Kierkegaard with his starting point: "that the act of choice had to be called in to do the work that reason could not do." (45) But in turn, Kant's appeal to reason was an appeal which he brought into place against what he took to be an earlier failure, namely the failure of Hume to ground morality in desire or sentiment (45); indeed, to empirically ground it in spite of what Hume said about the is and the ought. Just as Kierkegaard's account was a reaction against what he took to be Kant's failure, so Kant's account was a reaction against what he took to be Hume's failure.

However, there are some not inconsiderable number of contemporary philosophers, Russell and Ayer, Stevenson and Hägerström, Mackie and Monro, Blackburn and Harmon, among others, who do not believe that a suitably sanitized Humean version of this Enlightenment project is shipwrecked. Annette Baier is a striking example of that. MacIntyre believes that these in *a broad sense* contemporary Humeans continue to feed on the negative power of their arguments against the

alternatives, principally (again, broadly speaking) of Kantian rationalism and theistic conceptions of ethics, including Thomistic ones. What does not come over forcefully as any advance over Hume is their own positive attempts to found morality on desire. (48) But conflicting desires, different pecking orders of incommensurable desires and the like abound. Morality tries to ask which of these desires should be acknowledged and which given pride of place and which inhibited, frustrated or re-educated. (46) But in answering this question we cannot use the desires themselves as some sort of criterion. As MacIntyre puts it against the Humean and, in effect, the Deweyian:

> Just because all of us have, actually or potentially, numerous desires, many of them conflicting and mutually incompatible, we have to decide between the rival claims of rival desires. We have to decide in what direction to educate our purposes. Hence those rules which enable us to decide between the claims of, and so to order, our desires—including the rules of morality—cannot themselves be derived from or justified by reference to the desires among which they have to arbitrate. (46)

We cannot get the desirable from what is desired under certain conditions. We have "rival and incompatible desires and rival and incompatible orderings of desire." (46) To have a rational foundation for morality, "to provide a shared, public rational justification of morality", we cannot rationally appeal to still further desires or to our strongest desires or to reflective desires to sort things out here. To point out that most of us have natural sympathies which direct us to seek compossible desires or to seek the maximization of desire for as many as possible does not give the person without such desires, without such natural sympathies, any reason to adjudicate conflicts of desire as it would the person with such natural sympathies. Where our ethical beliefs are thought to have an ultimate foundation in desire, we can have no rational support for "adherence to general and unconditional rules" of morality.

Hume's actual set of concrete moral beliefs were conservative and they shared considerable content with both Kant's and Kierkegaard's actual moral beliefs, as well as Burke's. However, their various pictures of the grounds for their shared substantial morality are, to put it mildly, quite

different and often conflicting. But Hume no more succeeds in his attempt to erect a foundation for morality, and often in conflicting desires, than they did in reason or choice. (46-48) And later philosophers broadly in Hume's corner such as Russell, Ayer, Stevenson, Hägerström and Heldenius, did not succeed where Hume failed.

What we can see, MacIntyre concludes, is that the Enlightenment project, far from "providing a rational vindication or morality, had decisively failed." (48) And this, MacIntyre argues, has an import far beyond philosophy for we live in a world, already by Hume's, Kant's and Kierkegaard's time, of secular rationality. In a world in which what Max Weber called the progressive de-mystification of the world was starting to come on stream, as our current jargon has it. Religion in such a world could no longer provide such a shared background and foundation for moral discourse and attention. It was not unnatural to think, in a time before philosophy had become a marginal activity, that philosophy could step in and replace religion. Even Feuerbach after his dismissal of the philosophies of his time went on to rather incoherently articulate a philosophy of the future. This replacement of religion by philosophy was a pervasive Enlightenment belief. The failure of philosophy to provide any such "public, shared rational or justification" explains why in our culture, and in our predecessor Enlightenment culture, morality became fragmented and through and through was taken to be problematic. It is also a partial explanation of why philosophy in our culture has lost "its central cultural role" and has become "a marginal, narrowly academic subject" (48)—or so, and not without reason, MacIntyre believes. Here he is one with Rorty and with me.

IV

While MacIntyre views this history from tradition to secular Enlightenment as a net loss, MacIntyre is perfectly aware that many see, as I do, this change in culture as a liberation. We do not see its result as a Nietzschean nihilism. He turns to a consideration of such arguments in Chapter 6 of *After Virtue.* He sees both utilitarianism and Kantianism (ethical rationalism)—traditions coming

down to our own time—as efforts to find a new rationale for morality after the collapse of the initial

Enlightenment's attempts to replace the medieval synthesis. He sees both of them as fatally flawed.

His central arguments about this, as I have just remarked, occur in Chapter 6 of *After Virtue*.

He starts his account thus:

> The problems of modern moral theory emerge clearly as the product of the failure of the Enlightenment project. On the one hand, the individual moral agent, freed from hierarchy and teleology, conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority. On the other hand, the inherited if partially transformed rules of morality have to be found some new status, deprived as they have been of their older teleological character and their even more ancient categorical character as expressions of an ultimately divine law. If such rules cannot be found a new status which will make appeal to them rational, appeal to them will indeed appear as a mere instrument of individual desire and will. Hence there is a pressure to vindicate them either by devising some new teleology or by finding some new categorical status for them. The first project is what lends its importance to utilitarianism; the second to all those attempts to follow Kant in presenting the authority of the appeal to moral rules as grounded in the nature of practical reason. Both attempts, so I shall argue, failed and fail; but in the course of the attempt to make them succeed social as well as intellectual transformations were accomplished. (60)

Jeremy Bentham, a consistent and thoroughgoing utilitarian, tried to replace the classical

tradition's conception of human nature with a new conception which he thought would provide us

with an adequate rationale for moral and social theory. Human beings should be looked at

astringently as beings whose only motives for action, or at least their fundamental springs of action,

are attraction to pleasure and aversion of pain. An enlightened, non-superstitious morality, Bentham

has it, will develop maxims of morality for which the maximum of pleasure all around and the

minimum of pain all around will provide moralities' *telos.* (60) But Bentham failed, as did J. S. Mill as

well, to take adequate account of a motivational problem for his ethical theory. How do we get from

the *factual psychological thesis* that humankind has two and only two fundamental motives, pain and

pleasure, to the moral thesis "that out of the alternative actions or policies between which we have

to choose at any given moment we ought always to perform that action or implement that policy which will produce as its consequences the greatest happiness—that is, the greatest possible quantity of pleasure with the smallest possible quantity of pain—for the greater number?" (61) One could accept the psychological thesis and reject the moral thesis or reject the psychological thesis and still accept the moral thesis. But it was the establishment of the psychological thesis that was the most pressing problem for Bentham. He thought that without that morality would be groundless. Moreover, Bentham and J. S. Mill as well, as consistent empiricists, were uncompromising empiricists. Still, their problems were legion. First, there were good grounds to think the psychological thesis false. Our motivations are more varied than what that thesis gives us to understand. It is very difficult indeed to ascertain what the ultimate springs of human action are or even such talk makes sense. It may be little more than a bad metaphor. But even if our motivations are just as Bentham says they are, he has not shown how a rational person who cultivates realizing his own happiness, and perhaps also that of his relatives and friends, must go on to care about the greatest happiness of all sentient life, or at least of all humankind? How do we get from it is rational for me to care about my happiness and the happiness of my pals or tribe to I ought to care equally for the happiness of all humankind? Many people in Northern Europe ask why we should care about what they regard as the lazy Southern Europeans, i.e., Greeks, Italians and Spaniards? Whatever we in general would say about the is and ought distinction, how do we make a bridge here? Even if there is no *dichotomy* between the is and the ought, how do we go from knowing that something is plainly just the case to knowing that it ought to be the case? Putnam is right that sometimes they intractably run together but something they do not and then how can we determine in those cases what we should do? We need skyhooks there but we do not have them. Bentham has not shown how it is (or even that it is) that a rational person must make that transition or any transition like that. Utilitarians after Bentham, e.g., Mill and Sidgwick, do not fare any better. (Indeed, even Sidgwick, a masterful utilitarian, in the end doesn't even try to do that. He sees clearly that we can't.) Mill had a much more complex conception of human nature and

of pleasure and pain than did Bentham. And Sidgwick did not confuse things like psychological hedonism and ethical hedonism, but neither Mill nor Sidgwick could show, any more than Bentham could, how it is that a rational person must in the governance of her life be committed to acting in accordance with the greatest happiness principle. We seem at least to be just up for a radical *choice* here.

The utilitarians were trying to develop a rational justification of morality to replace what they took to be the myth-ridden teleology of the classical tradition with its talk of a human *telos* as well as the subjectivism of a Hume. But they failed at this vital task. (61-64) Without having shown how a rational person must be committed to the greater happiness principles, the naturalistic teleology of Benthamism, even if it were established on its own, has little point.

I will try to expand and explain that last dark saying a bit. Utilitarian naturalistic teleology, if that is the right phrase for it, is not an adequate successor to the classical teleology, the sort of thing that Aristotle and ancient and medieval philosophers engaged in. Even if somehow the teleological derivation could be effected, the realization that neither pleasure nor happiness are unitary concepts but instead are radically polymorphous concepts makes them useless for determining what, if anything, are the true ends of action or that there even are true ends of human action or that the notion of true ends even makes sense. Pleasure is a very different thing ranging from having one's back scratched to having some conversations. Some of these pleasures are incommensurable and even conflicting. But most of all they are very different, as Gilbert Ryle has shown us. Different life plans give rise to very different pleasures and very different weightings of these diverse pleasures. There is no way of even remotely assessing what will even tend to give rise to the greatest pleasure or happiness *tout court* for the greatest number. So even if we find nothing conceptually or morally untoward about the utilitarian claim that a rational person must pursue the greatest happiness for the greatest number, we still have to face the fact that that formula is so amorphous that we have no determinate idea of what it would be like for that condition to obtain.

Utilitarianism in one or another of its varieties continues to be defended in our time, but its failure as an ethical theory was clearly seen by Sidgwick, perhaps its greatest proponent, at the end of his monumental *Methods of Ethics.* MacIntyre puts Sidgwick's predicament thus:

> It was a mark of the moral seriousness and strenuousness of the great nineteenth century utilitarians that they felt a continuing obligation to scrutinize and re-scrutinize their own positions so that they might, if at all possible, not be deceived. The culminating achievement of that scrutiny was the moral philosophy of Sidgwick. And it is with Sidgwick that the failure to restore a teleological framework for ethics finally comes to be accepted. He recognized both that the moral injunctions of utilitarianism could not be derived from any psychological foundations and that the precepts which enjoin us to pursue the general happiness are logically independent of and cannot be derived from any precepts enjoining the pursuit of our own happiness. Our basic moral beliefs have two characteristics, Sidgwick found himself forced to conclude not entirely happily: they do not form any kind of unity, they are irreducibly heterogeneous; and their acceptance is and must be unargued. At the foundation of moral thinking list beliefs in statements for the truth of which no further reason can be given. To such statements Sidgwick, borrowing the word from Whewell, gives the name *intuitions*. Sidgwick's disappointment with the oncome of his own enquiry is evident in his announcement that where he had looked for Cosmos, he had in fact found only Chaos. (62-63)

Unlike Bentham and Mill, Sidgwick, and after him G. E. Moore, appealed to intuitions (perhaps best called, as Rawls does, 'considered judgments') at crucial points in moral argumentation. The fundamental principles of morality, according to them, had to be accepted, if accepted at all, on such an intuitive ground. But, as Charles Stevenson, Bertrand Russell and Patrick Nowell-Smith were quite to note, talk of intuitions here was merely a misleading and disguised way of talking about what deeply embedded pro-and-con attitudes we have. In speaking of what convictions we have and of what they are for us, at least for a time, rock bottom we are speaking of our most deeply embedded attitudes. An appeal to intuition is a misleading way of saying, as in a blank appeal to considered judgments where, at least for a time, justification comes to an end and where we must, our spades being turned, appeal to convictions or considered judgments. Our deepest attitudes come to the fore,

though, to give historicism its credit, we may well come later to have different, or at least somewhat different, intuitions, considered judgments, commitments—call them what you will. There is no escaping the flow of history and the changes it makes. Social scientists can happily accept that; most philosophers cannot.

We can see, with the development of utilitarianism just sketched, how, as MacIntyre puts it, the "history of utilitarianism thus links historically the eighteenth century project of justifying morality and the twentieth century's decline to emotivism." (63)

V

Ethical rationalists (such as Kant and, later, Kantians), by contrast, had another way of seeking to replace the classical teleology with a new conception of an alleged rational foundation for morality. We have already seen a bit of how Kant proceeded. Let us now see through MacIntyre's spectacles the fate of the contemporary "Kantian project of demonstrating that the authority and objectivity of moral rules is precisely that authority and objectivity which belongs to the exercise of reason." (63-64) The idea of such an ethical rationalism is to show that rational agents are committed to the rules of morality in virtue of their very intrinsic rationality. And this, if it is not to be empty, involves some reasonability determinate substantive morality.

Let us in elucidating this assume that rational agents will come to recognize that to engage in successful action they must regard freedom and wellbeing as necessary goods. These goods are required to do almost anything else they may want to do. But it is a mistake to conclude from this, as some ethical rationalists do, that therefore we must have rights to freedom and wellbeing. It does not follow from that fact that some measure of freedom and wellbeing is necessary for an individual's exercising rational agency that an individual or a collectivity therefore has a right to these goods. The concept of right and the concept of having rights are concepts of a distinct kind from the concept of good (even that of a necessary good) or the concept of having an end or even a 'true end', if such a

notion makes sense. That I want something, that I need something, that it is in my rational interest to have something, does not *entail* that I have a right to it. It is not something just clear to the light of reason (where 'reason' is construed non-normatively) that because I need something or that it is in my interest to have something that I have a right to it, that somehow morality requires it.

Such an ethical rationalism—and it is typical of a genre—has not shown us that even morality, let alone a certain determinate morality, is simply required by rationality. Even 'pure practical rationality', if there is such a thing. We cannot take such Kantian shortcuts to showing a rational basis for morality.

MacIntyre sums up where he believes he has taken us as follows:

> I take it then that both the utilitarianism of the middle and late
> nineteenth century and the analytical moral philosophy of the middle
> and late twentieth century are alike unsuccessful attempts to rescue
> the autonomous moral agent from the predicament in which the
> failure of the Enlightenment project of providing him with a secular,
> rational justification for his moral allegiances had left him. I have
> already characterised that predicament as one in which the price paid
> for liberation from what appeared to be the external authority of
> traditional morality was the loss of any authoritative content from the
> would-be moral utterances of the newly autonomous agent. Each
> moral agent now spoke unconstrained by the externalities of divine
> law, natural teleology or hierarchical authority; but why should
> anyone else now listen to him? It was and is to this question that both
> utilitarianism and analytical moral philosophy must be understood as
> attempting to give cogent answers; and if my argument is correct, it is
> precisely this question which both fail to answer cogently. (65-66)

VI

Finally, as part of his naysaying task, MacIntyre briefly considers attempts to construct a rights-based ethics on a natural rights basis. That is, on the basis of rights, either negative or perhaps even positive as well, that all people have simply in virtue of being human. (Sticking exclusively to negative rights is more Spartan and perhaps conceptually cleaner, but MacIntyre's critique is designed to apply to either kind of rights-based ethic.) These natural rights are things which are

supposed rationally to ground our holding, for example, where they are not harming others, "that people ought not to be interfered with in their pursuit of life, liberty and happiness." (66)

MacIntyre, like Bentham, thinks, or at least thought at that stage of his philosophical voyaging, that thinking there are natural rights is a further ethical fiction. MacIntyre first points out that "the concept lacks any means of expression in Hebrew, Greek, Latin or Arabic, classical or medieval, before about 1400, let alone in Old English or in Japanese even as late as the mid-nineteenth century." (67) He is quick to point out, what surely should be evident, that it does not following from this that there are no natural or human rights, but what does follow is that people in those cultures before any conception of natural or human rights can on stream could not have known that there are natural rights, if indeed there are. And this in turn renders implausible, MacIntyre believes, the claim that there are natural rights clear to the light of reason since whether or not human beings can even understand such claims depends on where and when they are living and what language they happen to speak. There is no good reason to think the existence of such rights is somehow self-evident. That has to be argued for, but how?

However, MacIntyre also makes a much stronger and flatter assertion, to wit: "there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns." (67) He thinks the best reason—the justification—for so bluntly asserting that there are no natural rights is precisely of the same type as "the best reason which we possess for asserting there are no witches. . . ." (67) That reason is that every attempt to give good reasons for believing in such realities, i.e., in witches, unicorns and natural rights, has failed. To call them self-evident truths is simply arm waving. Only when we get something that is an analytical truth do we get something that is self-evident. And even there, as Quine has shown us, we have no criterion or criteria for analyticity. And to say that we can intuit that there are such natural rights is no better. MacIntyre takes a hard line here about intuitionism.

> Twentieth century moral philosophers have sometimes appeal to
> their and our intuitions; but one of the things that we ought to have
> learned from the history of moral philosophy is that the introduction
> of the word 'intuition' by a moral philosopher is always a signal that
> something has gone badly wrong with an argument. (67)

Is the same thing true for appealing to considered judgments? Indeed, I have taken them to be rock

bottom. And can we get them into a reflective equilibrium that is not historically relative?

MacIntyre concludes that, like utility and a distinctive form of ethical rationality, natural

rights and human rights are fictions. (67) Utility is a fiction because the "objects of natural and

educated human desire are irreducibly heterogeneous and the notion of summing them either for

individuals or for some population has no clear sense." (68) And that there are natural rights, as

something which all people can validly lay claim to or are entitled to simply in virtue of being human,

is something we have no idea at all what it would be like to show that to be true or probably true.

Suppose, for example, someone denies that you have a natural right to liberty. How are you going to

show that you really do? We have no idea of how to go about providing or giving evidence or grounds

for that claim or any other natural rights or natural law claim. Again, we have to appeal to intuition—

that is, to our convictions here: our considered convictions, our considered judgments, which turn

out to be diverse and sometimes at least seemingly incommensurable. They may come to just having

certain attitudes.

Because of such defects such claims—appealing to natural rights or natural law and to

utility—should be regarded as ethical fictions. They "purport to provide us with an objective and

impersonal criterion, but they do not." (68) Moreover, they are not just, MacIntyre claims, moral

fictions but incommensurable fictions as well. And this goes some way to explaining why moral

dispute in our society is so intractable. Why we are caught, as he puts it, in a culture of emotivism.

Deprived of any genuinely teleological framework in virtue of which we can soundly set out 'true

ends' of human beings we can have no alternatives in our 'emotivist culture' but to deal in one way

or another with the many available and sometimes incommensurable moral fictions which serve us

as our various conflicting *deux ex machina*. They are the various comforting just-so stories we tell ourselves.

In our culture, MacIntyre claims, with the various moral and non-moral beliefs and conceptions available to us, morality can hardly help being a theater of illusions. (74) But it is important to remember that such claims and such a recognition go with, and require, "a rejection of all those Aristotelian and quasi-Aristotelian views of the world in which a teleological perspective provided in a context in which evaluative claims functioned as a particular kind of factual claim." (74) Given what seems at least to follow from this rejection, i.e. the acknowledgement that our moral universe is a chaos, it is the better part of wisdom to make sure that the rejection of Aristotelianism and Thomism is indeed well founded and that no suitable de-mytholization can replace, or rather correct or supplement, these traditional Aristotelian views. Later in his life, MacIntyre has a go at such a task. Indeed, to my astonishment, given his historicist sensibilities, he becomes a sturdy Thomist. In a later essay, beating back my astonishment, I shall try to establish the error of his ways.