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CRITIQUE OF PURE VIRTUE:
ANIMADVERSIONS ON A VIRTUE-BASED ETHIC

I

Goal-based ethical theories, duty-based ethical theories and rights-based ethical theories have all been well represented and well canvassed during the modern era. But it has also become evident, particularly since the extensive examination of Rawls', Dworkin's and Nozick's views, that none of these accounts are without very fundamental difficulties — difficulties which are not just difficulties in detail but difficulties in the basic structure and the programmatic intent of such theories. Just as with the deadlock in ethical theory of some twenty years ago there were scattered voices telling us to go back to Kant, so in our present circumstances it is understandable that some should try to return to a virtue-based ethics.

Virtue-based ethical theories in a way go back to Aristotle. We have with them a turning away from an ethics of principles, including an attempt to find the supreme principle of morality such as we find in Kantian or utilitarian theories. Kantian and utilitarian theories take the central task of moral theory to be the formulating and justifying of fundamental moral principles or principles of human conduct which would guide both individual and collective choice. A virtue-based ethics, by contrast, seeks to delineate the ends of human life (the good life for man) and to characterize what it is to be a good person. On such an account we find out what it is to be a good person and what are the ends of life by finding out what the distinctive human virtues are. This is the key, we are told, to discovering what human flourishing is. It is because of this that such an ethics of ends is called a virtue-based ethics. Where, in a goal-based theory or a duty-based theory, we have an ethics of principle, virtue is an ancillary concept. Virtue, on such an account, is characterized in terms of the disposition to act on principles of right conduct. Virtue-based theorists, following Aristotle, are distrustful of such gestures in the direction of precision. What we need instead is a theory of the virtues explaining the good for man and what it is to be a good person. We, in turn, will, in many circumstances at least, come to understand right action in terms of what a good person would do.

There has of late been a sprinkling of newly minted virtue-based theories:

James Wallace's careful and insightful *Virtues and Vices*, Philippa Foot's lead essay in her collection of essays with the same title, and Peter Geach's *The Virtues*. But to my mind, the most significant and the most challenging of them all is Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. It is a historicized Aristotelianism jettisoning Aristotle's metaphysical biology and his conception of the function of man. Employing a distinctive moral methodology, it uses, much more than traditional moral philosophy, historical analysis, a narrative method and the human sciences to first critique the dominant goal-based, duty-based and rights-based traditions in ethical theory and then to present his own positive alternative account – his historicized Aristotelianism.

It is with this positive account that I shall be concerned here. Since I am not inclined myself to take a virtue-based turn, though I am not disinclined to use some elements of it, I turn to a critical examination of MacIntyre's account as constituting what I take to be the most significant attempt, with which I am acquainted, to develop such a theory.

II

Before I turn to critique let me set out the bare bones of his account with the warning that this can hardly begin to convey the nuance and the subtlety of MacIntyre's view.

MacIntyre believes that not only moral philosophy but morality itself in our time is in disarray. Indeed, the disarray of morality and moral philosophy go hand in hand, for MacIntyre would have us believe, we cannot properly understand a moral philosophy without understanding its social embodiment in a culture. Morality, for the Greeks, for the Icelanders represented in the Sagas, and for the Medievals was, MacIntyre believes, whole, but in our culture it is no longer whole and our moral philosophers in their attempts to understand morality are, like philosophers trying to understand science after, because of some great catastrophe, a scientific culture has disappeared for several centuries. Such philosophers, living after its disappearance, would be trying to piece some understanding of it together from the fragmentary accounts still available to them of what it was like. Our moral philosophers, MacIntyre believes, are people with analogous disabilities; they have available to them no more than fragments of a conceptual scheme which has lost its context – a context which once made that conceptual scheme intelligible but which we now have lost.

To try to make it intelligible our philosophers invent moral fictions like

natural rights or utility. In such fragmented conceptual schemes, we come, naturally enough, to use moral utterances to express our emotions and the very idea of moral knowledge becomes a Holmesless Watson. MacIntyre claims that with this employment of moral discourse, we show, and indeed further instantiate, how we have lost our grip on the distinction between treating people as ends and manipulating them. And these conceptualizations in turn have their social embodiment in the bureaucratic manager and the therapist, both elitist paternalists, dedicated, though in different ways, to manipulation to achieve certain ends which themselves are never, and never can be, rationality defended.

MacIntyre thinks that there is but a slight chance for us to escape this cultural condition, but to the extent that there is a way, it is, he believes, through recapturing something of the Aristotelian notion of the virtues. We have lost our firm sense, a sense that came naturally to the Greeks and the Medievals, of what the virtues are. MacIntyre develops the notion of a practice — a cooperative activity in pursuit of goods internal to that activity — to explicate the virtues and their role in the moral life. Our various social roles, when they actually are engaged in, are practices such as being a parent, a teacher, a partner or ombudsman.

We not only have practices which, with their internal goods, define virtues, but we need as well some conception of a human life as a whole which like a narrative would have some unity. The making sense of our life as a whole comes to seeing its *telos* as it is revealed when we come to see the narrative unity in our lives. And this means that we need, as well, to recapture an understanding of tradition in which we see that we are what we are in large part because of our history, though this does not mean that we cannot be critical about the traditions which mold us, though we must also recognize that the very direction our criticality can take us is in turn determined by these traditions.

The virtues are necessary in the sustaining of traditions, traditions that in turn make possible a life in which the good for man is realized. But what is this good for man? It is a life with the unity of a narrative quest, a life, which, as MacIntyre puts it himself, is “spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more the good life for man is” ([3], p. 201). To make sense of our lives, to make sense of morality, we must, in a way that is almost impossible for people caught in the culture of liberal modernity, see our lives as a unity, see our individual lives as a whole. To do this we need to have a full-fledged narrative understanding of our lives; with such an understanding,

it is possible, though for us extremely difficult, to come to an understanding of the good of a human life as a whole viewed as a narrative unity.

III

In the preceding section I gave you the core of MacIntyre's historicized Aristotelianism. I now want to turn to reflective commentary and critique. I am inclined to believe, where it is really crucial, where MacIntyre really needs to deliver, he doesn't deliver the goods, that his account is as empty or at least nearly as empty as the liberalism he despises. It may be, however, that I am asking too much, expecting something which is too determinate where that expectation is unreasonable.

The above remarks without any elucidation are a cluster of dark sayings. I will try to make them clear as I go along. In querying MacIntyre, as I am about to proceed to do, I want to make one thing perfectly clear at the outset. I think he asks the right questions or, to put it both more guardedly and more adequately, I think he, where for years we have neglected these questions, forces us to ask some very old and some very important questions that contemporary moral philosophy has been the poorer for not asking.

MacIntyre maintains that what we need to articulate and persuasively defend is some reasonable account of an "overriding conception of the *telos* of a whole human life" ([3], p. 188). We need to start with a recognition of how practices define the virtues, but to gain an adequate understanding of morality and the place of the virtues in morality we need to go beyond a careful attention to practices and even to traditions to an understanding of the ends of life. We need, if we can get it, some reasonably determinate conception of the good of a human life conceived as a unity. Without this being the case, MacIntyre contends, both "a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life" and it will also be the case "that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately" ([3], p. 188). Moreover, he further contends, we shall not have provided any viable alternative to the typically goal-based but sometimes duty-based or rights-based Enlightenment tradition and to liberalism, traditions he has argued are bankrupt.

It may well be, MacIntyre to the contrary notwithstanding, that not everything is lost if we cannot articulate some common conception of the good, for it may be that ethics in the form of a system of coordinative guidelines will still be of a not inconsiderable import in enabling us to forge forms of cooperation that will give some coherence to our lives together

even though we do not have much in the way of any common conception of the good. But still a lot would be lost if we are incapable of specifying, and making a social reality, both a reasonably determinate and a rationally vindicable conception of the good of a human life conceived as a unity. To achieve this, MacIntyre argues, we must understand human action. And to do this – to render human action intelligible – we must provide an alternative, more holistic understanding than the reigning atomistic conception which tries to analyze actions in terms of some conception of ‘basic action’. To make actions intelligible we need to see them as a part of an ordered narrative sequence at least in part understood by the agent. In understanding this narrative sequence, it is important (a) to recognize the agents will have some primary intentions and (b) for us, the spectators, to understand what those intentions are. It is principally these primary intentions which give both the narrative and the actions which are part of it a teleological cast. We need, to make sense of our actions and our lives, to see them as having a narrative unity, including some image of the future in terms of which our actions tend to be ordered. It is important for each of us to know the stories of which we find ourselves a part. Our personal identity is a social identity in which we find ourselves in some enacted narrative of which we are a part.

MacIntyre thinks, or at least seems to think, that if we come to accept his view of what intelligible actions are (with its rejection of atomism), come to accept his view of personal identity, his views on how our lives are enacted narratives and his views on the importance and role of tradition in morality and in life more generally, we will come to believe that he has explained to us in what the unity of human life consists and how it is that there is a distinctive human *telos*. I am inclined to accept *something* like his account of the above matters but I do not see how they are sufficient to give us a sense of what the unity of human life consists in or of what our human *telos* consists in, if indeed we even have that sort of thing. What I am suggesting is that we can agree with him about his characterization of human action and personal identity and still be very skeptical about whether that will do much to solve his problem about giving an objective characterization of what the good for man is or even help make plausible that there is such a thing. We might even agree with him about his very general conception of what the unity of a human life consists in and still doubt that he has given us any determinate theory or even a conception of what the good for man consists in or what our human *telos* is.

The unity of a person’s life, according to MacIntyre, would consist in

“the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life” ([3], p. 203). What is good for that person is how she could best live out that unity and bring it to a completion. To ask, “What is the good for man?” “is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common” ([3], p. 203). To see what the human good consists in (what the end of human life is) would come to giving the correct answers to this question. (We must not forget, in examining this question, that there will be a not inconsiderable number of people who will either deny that there is something called ‘the human good’ or be skeptical about its reality.)

However, even with MacIntyre’s appreciation of the import of tradition, even with his holistic understanding of what an intelligible action is and his understanding of personal identity, how are we to specify in any reasonably determinate way what this human good is? How can we, or can we, even specify what the good of a human life is?

Suppose I try for myself. After all, I should know myself better than anyone else. I view my life as a narrative, I ask myself what have I been doing and with what intentions, how have I been relating to others and what is the point of these various activities and the various relations into which I enter, what were my primary underlying intentions in engaging in such activities, what kind of unity do they have? How am I to sum them up and bring them to a completion to give unity and point to my life?

Suppose I do put something like this quite personally and non-evasively to myself as I, or anyone else, would have to to make the question at all real, to make, that is, the question have any real thrust or point. But what am I to say? There are a number of primitive certainties with which I could start. There are a number of people around me who regularly in one way or another enter into relations with me. Do I respond to these people or relate to them in a decent way and with kindness, understanding, and with a genuine caring for them as persons or am I largely indifferent to them or do I manipulate them or treat them with callousness or arrogance? (What I just called ‘primitive certainties’ could just as well have been called, à la Rawls, ‘very deeply embedded considered convictions’.) A lot of evaluative terms are coming into play here and *sometimes* their meanings are *somewhat* troublesome and certainly we would have a lot of trouble, in every case, with their definition. But remember that useful definitions are about the last thing we can give after we have fully mastered not only operating *with* the terms expressive of these concepts but after having mastered operating *upon* them as well. It is a Platonic fallacy to think we do not understand a concept until we can define it. So I use in the above remarks terms like ‘decency’, ‘kindness’, ‘integrity’,

'caring', 'indifference', 'manipulation', 'callousness', and 'arrogance'. In some contexts these concepts can be tricky but I think in the context in which I used them I could in most instances in most situations perfectly well know whether I had acted in any of these ways. There is, of course, room for self-deception but that is also corrigible. It is one of the primitive certainties (*our* primitive certainties, if you will) that callousness, arrogance, manipulation, and even indifference should be out and that kindness, decency, caring, and understanding are required of a human being.

If I really do these things, if, that is, I act in the way I described above, I have given a certain unity and purpose to my life. But only a certain unity, for I could do those things and still be a lost human being utterly astray in Eliot's *Wasteland*. I could be a drunk or even a person thoroughly hating myself and convinced, and perhaps rightly so, that my life was a loss and still so relate. Moreover, it is not true that everyone whose life has had the unity of an enacted narrative, not everyone who has lived such a unity and who has brought to a completion with integrity and purpose her life, has lived something that can be correctly called a good life. Some pretty unsavory characters here had such a unity to their lives. Think here of Hitler, Franco, or Stalin. They have lived lives that have had the unity of a narrative quest. They have violated some of these primitive certainties but then, in evaluating these lives, it is these primitive certainties that are carrying the day in our moral evaluation and not the fact one's life has the unity of a narrative quest. One's life could be through and through evil and still have such a unity and it could, in certain respects, be a good life and lack that unity.

It could be countered, the 'in certain respects' gives the game away. Suppose I look at my life again and convince myself that I treat those around me with decency, kindness, and integrity. But I know full well that I could, that notwithstanding, still be 'a lost soul'. My life, for all of that, could still lack anything like the unity of a narrative quest. So I ask myself, as you might ask yourselves, how best am I to live my life to give it such a narrative unity and to bring it to an appropriate completion? But there are so many ways I can go here. I have, in a society like ours, with a history like ours, so many role-models. I have nothing like the certainty of the people portrayed in the Icelandic Sagas or even that of the turn of the century Quebec farmers around Lac St. Jean portrayed in *Marie Chapadaine*. I have been a university professor for the greater part of my adult life and that concrete particularity gives me a few additional primitive certainties. I know I must try to teach my classes with integrity. That is, I know, I must try accurately to understand and comprehensively master the subject matter I am trying to teach and then

try to convey it in comprehensible and truthful ways. These virtues are goods internal to the practice of teaching. And I also know I must treat my students fairly and, it should go without saying, that the earlier mentioned primitive certainties about kindness, decency, and integrity must obtain in my relations here as well.

Is this enough, if I can really carry it out, to give my life the requisite narrative unity? Some would say so if the other primitive certainties continue to obtain in my family life and the like. Many university professors have so seen themselves, have so picked out such a unity of the narrative quest. Others, and I am one of them, have also seen themselves as intellectuals, as members of the intelligentsia, and have seen this as a central part of their vocation and as determining certain roles – determining certain ways to act and how to relate to others. But not all university professors so view themselves. Some see themselves merely as professionals, members of a certain profession with a certain expertise such as an engineer, an M.D., or a lawyer would view herself.

If the particularity of your life is being a university professor, and, let us say, a philosophy professor at that, how in that area of your life should you view yourself to fill out the narrative of your life? Which way should you fill it out for it to have the narrative unity of a good life? In this domain I have no doubts, subjectively speaking, how I should try to fill it out. But I know that there are others, at least as well educated as I, who see themselves simply as professionals. Which way do we have to go to best live out the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life if we are philosophy professors working in a university in the second half of the twentieth century in North America? I opt for trying to be an intellectual and not merely being a professional with a certain expertise. I think this is essential for an adequate self-definition for a person placed as I am placed, but what reasons could I give for this and how objective would they be?

Let us run with that a bit. I would say I was teaching and trying to understand philosophy and to develop some philosophical notions and I would further contend that the attaining of these things does not merely come to the having of a certain expertise – I am not just around to make distinctions – but very centrally involves the attempt to see steadily and as a whole how things of some human importance and social significance hang together, what sense we could make of our lives together and what it would be like to have more adequate societies and ways of relating to each other such that our lives together would be better lives. Beyond that, I would want to know, if I could, what steps we need to take to achieve such a truly human society. These

hedgehoggy questions are not technical questions, though it may be that the answering of some technical questions are not irrelevant to the answering of those questions. These questions go beyond anyone's domain of competence and technical expertise. There is no expert we can turn to go grind out an answer here. It is not at all like asking what conceptions of necessity are essential for understanding modal logic or how material implication is related to our ordinary notions of if then or how is entailment to be understood. These are technical questions and technically trained professionals can come up with the proper answers to them. Yet it is these non-technical questions (the questions about life and society) I raised above that are at the nerve of my own impulse to do philosophy.

Even if, in facing such questions, the last word we could with clarity and honesty give is that such 'questions' do not admit of any kind of genuine answer and that we are only mystifying ourselves and others if we give to understand that, at the end of some long inquiry or some long quest, perhaps carried out over many generations, we would, or at least could, attain answers to them like someday we might find a cure for cancer. But even if we on reflection judge that to be the proper response, we still take it as the response of a certain kind of intellectual and we also recognize, if we know anything, that it is but one of many responses and not, by any means, the only response we could give and that, at any rate, what is the proper response here could not be determined by any profession or even be a matter of some professional expertise.

Since it is intimately a matter of my own self-definition to try to face such perplexities felt as questions, this is an intimate part of my search for a narrative unity in my life. But what if someone says resolutely to me, 'Nothing like this is built into the role of being a philosophy professor. Philosophy is not the name of a natural kind. Look about at your colleagues. They have, to put it mildly, not an inconsiderable variety of rather different conceptions of their role. Why should your conception of your way of living out and completing the narrative unity of your life be the right one? To think that it is is both foolishness and *hubris*.'

If I reply, 'Because it is my life with my enacted narrative so I should be the one to decide how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion', I have embraced just that individualism and liberalism MacIntyre so detests and thinks, not without reason, is so intellectually and morally bankrupt [4]. Moreover, it also seems to be a false claim, for it does not seem very probable that we are *always* the best judges here of what would be the best for ourselves. It is not very likely that we always best understand what

would be the best life for ourselves. We are not always even the best judges of what is in our own interests even on a particular occasion. No matter how anti-paternalist we are resolved to be we need to recognize that. Why should it be the case, or indeed is it the case, that we are always, or perhaps even usually, the best judges of how best to live out our lives so that we, severally, could give our lives a unity and, like a narrative, bring it best to completion? That is a much more complex question than even the rather complex question of judging what in some determinate but fairly complex situation is in our own interests. That each of us, no matter who we are, and how we are situated, could best judge what would give our lives as a whole unity and integrity is, to put it mildly, highly improbable. (What morally we should do in the light of this is another question.)

If, in turn, it is responded 'Oh no, it is not, for there is nothing to be known here or warrantably believed or reflectively assessed, for such matters are really matters of just *deciding* how we are to live and what sort of persons we are to try to become', we have now fully embraced the non-cognitivism of the tail end of the enlightenment project, a non-cognitivism and decisionalism that MacIntyre was concerned to reject as the confused end product of a fragmented morality [4]. He does not want to say that the unity of my life is whatever I decide to make the unity of my life. He does not want to say that however I forge the unity of my life and bring this unity to completion, then, if that is done with integrity, that is the best life for me. He does not want to have anything to do with such rampant individualism, liberalism, and non-cognitivism.

Still, MacIntyre tells us that "the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest" ([3], p. 203). But what are the criteria of success here? I am not just a university professor and a philosopher but I am a husband, a father, a Canadian, a socialist, an atheist, an owner of a dog, a writer, and a lot of other things besides. What are the criteria of success of my human life? In answering this I would have to put these various activities into some unity and see them as being woven together in some narrative which would have some appropriate unity and ending. Perhaps I can put this together in a way that I find satisfactory or at least in a way that does not seem to me wildly wrong or alienating. But when I reflect on it in a non-evasive manner I can also see that I could have gone in other directions here, have taken other paths in a yellow wood. I might even have a sense of sorrow that I could not travel them both and be one traveller. But, as I reflect, I would also be aware of a myriad of paths that could be taken, of the many different ways of

ordering and completing a narrative. Would I not have further to ask myself 'What reason do I think we have for believing that we have anything even close to an objective criterion for success or adequacy here?' MacIntyre talks of criteria for success or failure of a narrated or to be narrated quest. But he never gives us any sense of what these criteria are or could be. I have taken just one segment of my life, namely, my being a professor of philosophy, in thinking about how it fits into the narrative quest of my life. But even with this one tolerably determinate sequence there seems at least to be no tolerably objective criteria about how I should fulfill that role. Moreover, surely somewhat earlier in my life there were other things I could have been. Perhaps there are other things that I still could be. Besides being a university professor, I am also a Marxist committed to a socialist transformation of society. I care very much about what I am doing in doing philosophy but I not infrequently wonder if I should have done political economy instead (notwithstanding that it bores me) or whether I should have become an M.D. or an engineer and have gone off to some place like Angola and built bridges or spent my time doctoring in the backcountry. If I had it to do over, I am not so sure that I shouldn't have done these other things rather than what I am doing now. (Again, let me ask, as an aside, is it at all plausible to believe that each person, no matter who that person is, can best answer such a question for himself?)

Even with the particulars of my life reasonably well stamped in, I sometimes wonder whether, in my situation, I should abandon or cut down on doing the academic Marxist work I do and become a more directly political creature spending more time involved in actual concrete political struggles in my immediate environment or whether, when I was younger, I should have chucked up academic life altogether and tried to organize workers or to have become a soldier in some liberation army? Some of these, given who I am and what I can do, may be far-fetched but at least some of these are possible ways of narrating out my life. Which of these various possible activities would narrate out, or would have narrated out, my life best and give it (would have given it) the best unity, integrity, and completion?

It is possible to doubt that there are any objective answers here while very much wanting something with some objectivity, if it is to be had. But what would it be like to obtain anything making even a reasonable approximation to objectivity here? MacIntyre does not give us even a hint as to how such an answer is to be found. Here I have been talking about one person, namely, me. When I reflect on what is as obvious as obvious can be, namely, that my life is but one token of a type of thousands of types of ways a human life could be narrated out and given unity, it is possible to get very nervous

indeed about 'true narratives' here or about the 'truth of narratives' or about the having of any even remotely adequate criteria for objectivity here.

IV

MacIntyre is not insensitive to such problems of contextuality (to call them problems of relativity begs some questions and exploits some ambiguities). He writes: "What it is to live the good life concretely varies from circumstance to circumstance even when it is one and the same set of virtues which are being embodied in a human life. What the good life is for a fifth century Athenian general will not be the same as what it was for a medieval nun or a seventeenth century farmer" ([3], p. 204). That is all well and good, but if we are to have some determinate conception of a *final telos* for human beings, something MacIntyre agrees with the medievals in thinking we need, we must also be able to ask and answer such questions as these: will a society and an assemblage of human lives which has the role of a fifth century Athenian general, a medieval nun, a seventeenth century English farmer be a better society than one without these roles or with altered roles or quite different roles? Being a nun or a general or a slave or a serf or a proletarian or a lumpen-proletarian or a capitalist – having that possible cultural space – goes with a certain kind of society with a certain set of practices and, as MacIntyre stresses himself, carries with it certain internal and external goods and rather different conceptions of the good life for humans. Would a world without nuns and/or without capitalists be, in conditions of productive abundance, a better world than a world with them? I think, and MacIntyre at one time thought, and perhaps still thinks, that, at least in circumstances of productive abundance, a world without them would be a better world. But, if our judgments are to be nonarbitrary here, we need criteria for such judgments (or so, at least, it would seem), but it is just this that MacIntyre does not provide us with or even make a gesture at how we might discover or construct. But surely answers here are necessary if we are to give an answer to what is the good life for man.

Am I quite right in saying he gives us no hints? Let us examine some very key paragraphs on page 204 of *After Virtue*. We have to be able, he remarks there, to in some reasonably determinate way answer the question, 'Quest for what?' if we are to make any sense out of the notion of the good life having the unity of a narrative quest. And this means MacIntyre avers, that the medieval Aristotelians were right in believing that we must have "some at least partly determinate conception of the final *telos*" ([3], pp. 203–4). MacIntyre believes that this conception of the good for human

beings is to be drawn from the questions we ask and what we learn from our “attempt to transcend that limited conception of the virtues which is available in and through practices” ([3], p. 204). When we examine practices, we learn, MacIntyre argues, that they all require trustworthiness, courage, and justice and also, knowing we very much need practices, we rightly conclude that a good life for human beings must contain these characteristics as virtues. It also becomes apparent to us – that is apparent in the history of development of ethics and of moral philosophy – that we are “looking for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to order other goods” ([3], p. 204). But we are also looking for “a conception of *the* good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues . . .” ([3], p. 204). Thirdly, and lastly, we are looking for “a conception of *the* good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life” ([3], p. 204). Plainly and understandably, as his discussion of Jane Austen makes plain, MacIntyre wants, in addition to trustworthiness, courage and justice, to add integrity and constancy to the list of virtues which must be a fixed part of a good life. Some might say that constancy overstates the value of a certain unity of the person. Why not give greater weight to the having of intrinsically valuable experiences at a given time and perhaps to the maximizing of such experiences and less to constancy? But even if we do give such weight to constancy and integrity (our considered judgments are likely to pull us along here), it can come to very different things in different contexts. The Inquisition sometimes showed considerable constancy and integrity and so did the Conquistadors even when they brutalized in almost unimaginable ways the Andean and Mexican populations. And similar things have been said about the Black Angel of Auschwitz and a similar case might even be attempted for Hitler or Stalin. Even the virtues of trustworthiness, courage, and, by their own lights, justice could be exemplified in the lives of Inquisitors and Conquistadors, even in those Conquistadors who slaughtered Indians all over the place, melted down their silver and gold religious objects, and drowned while crossing a body of water literally under the weight of the plundered silver and gold with which they were laden. They had a conception of the good and they had these central virtues. Admittedly, these are extreme cases and MacIntyre, no doubt, as much as any other morally reflective person living in our time, or perhaps any time, would reject these things as gross immoralities which could not be a part of the good life for human beings. But, putting him on the side of the angels does not gainsay the fact that the various virtues he has been able to show a rationale for are all capable of being exemplified in such behavior. They all can be seen as

being a part of such narrative histories and as being a part of such narrative quests. Recall that for him justice is nothing more than the getting of what you deserve. He rejects Nozick's account, Rawls' account, and more radically egalitarian accounts of justice. Justice, as he characterizes it, could come to many different things in many different contexts. It is, on his understanding at least, a very indeterminate essentially contested concept. Moreover, these extreme cases aside, there are, over cultural space and historical time, and even in our own moral cultures, plenty of exemplifications of situations in which we could have these virtues in place and still have radically divergent and often deeply conflicting conceptions of the good for humans. Moreover, we can and do have very different orderings of the various goods and schedulings of the different virtues.

We indeed would reflectively want to be able to extend "our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues" ([3], p. 204). We would indeed want to do this in order to have a conception of the good life and of what a critical morality could come to. MacIntyre does give us *something* of that here, though it has a certain daunting vagueness about it. But what he does not do is give us a sufficiently clear understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues so as to give us a reasonably determinate conception of the end for man (man's distinctively human good) even when we bring in the concept of a moral tradition.

MacIntyre might respond that his concept of a quest for the good is not something that should be thought to be adequately characterizable all at once. It is something like a *Bildung* which would emerge, as a kind of moral education, that occurs in the course of the quest in the face of all the "particular harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions" that we will encounter along the way. It is a kind of pilgrim's progress or a Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship. It is in this way that we gain our moral education and through such an apprenticeship, as our self-knowledge grows, the goal of the quest finally is understood.

Should not the response be this: Such moral education has been going on for a long time and, except where we have had very sheltered and homogeneous societies, e.g., in our reconstruction of the Heroic Age and in certain, but no means all, primitive communities, we have not attained a consensus about the good for man, we have not obtained a consensus, let alone anything close to what we could characterize as a rational consensus, about what, if anything, our final *telos* is where that notion is given a reasonably determinate content. And the various *consensi* of limited communities have just been such limited and varied *consensi*, local affairs both temporally and spatially.

The virtues, it is surely at least plausible to maintain, are “those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve 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 and distractions we encounter . . .” ([3], p. 204). Though this may be how to characterize virtue, still MacIntyre’s virtue-based moral theory has not told us what the good is. The increasing self-knowledge we gain from our increasing understanding of the virtues is supposed to give us a better understanding of the good and it indeed does give us an understanding of some elements (the virtues I have been adverting to) of the good, but, as we have also seen, it is still far from taking us to a knowledge of the good that is also a knowledge of our final *telos* or of just our *telos sans phrase*. We still do not know what that is or what it would be like to attain a knowledge of such a *telos*. Indeed we cannot even be confident that such a conception makes sense. So when MacIntyre remarks that we “have arrived at a provisional conclusion about the good life for man: the good life for man is the life spent in seeking the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is,” he has not told us very much ([3], p. 204). It may even be a mistake to place such a weight on the *seeking* instead of the *having*. A good life for humans might very possibly be one in which there was not much to be done on the questing side for what was taken to be the good life was (sociologically speaking) fairly secure. Given that security, a person could turn her creative powers to other things. But that plainly contentious point aside, without a better idea of what successful seeking would come to here than MacIntyre has been able to give us, we are looking at best for the holy grail and at worst for the color of heat. MacIntyre understandably wants something more determinate by way of the knowledge of the good than what the reigning liberalism and individualism has been able to give us. But here at least he has not been able to deliver on that.

v

In arguing as I have, I have not rejected MacIntyre’s insightful understanding of the role of tradition in morality and in our social-political life and his claims about the need to start from the particularities set in part by our varied traditions. (The particularities in question will, to a not inconsiderable extent, vary with what tradition we are in and with where we stand in that tradition and with other contextual features distinctive of our cultural and historical situation.) Nothing I have said in the previous sections commits me

to a search for a *purely* universal conception of the good life for human beings that would try massively to set aside distinctive historical identities in determining the good for human beings. But I have maintained that, along with these contextually variable elements, there must, for such an appeal to be viable, be a sufficiently universally determinate conception of the good for humans so as not to mire us in a historicism such that we are deprived of any critical vantage point in accordance with which we can assess societies or whole moral traditions ([3], pp. 205–6).

Also, nothing I have said would commit me to siding with J. L. Austin against MacIntyre over the following central consideration:

It has often been suggested – by J. L. Austin, for example – that *either* we can admit the existence of rival and contingently incompatible goods which make incompatible claims to our practical allegiance *or* we can believe in some determinate conception of *the* good life for man, but that these are mutually exclusive alternatives. No one can consistently hold both these views. What this contention is blind to is that there may be better or worse ways for individuals to live through the tragic confrontation of good with good. And that to know what the good life for man is may require knowing what are the better and what are the worse ways of living in and through such situations. Nothing *a priori* rules out this possibility; and this suggests that within a view such as Austin's there is concealed an unacknowledged empirical premise about the character of tragic situations ([3], p. 208).

I do think there are tragic confrontations between goods and there are also tragic situations in which our best moral choice is the lesser evil. But, as MacIntyre concedes, there are better and worse ways to respond in such situations. We are not left here with utter incommensurabilities. In saying this I do not mean to disagree with MacIntyre that there are tragic situations where we must just choose between evils. My complaint is that he has not given us a sufficiently determinate conception of the good for humans to give us much of a basis for any beliefs we might come to have about what those better and worse ways are when we have to choose between evils. We do not know, from what he tells us, how they are even remotely to be determined here. Sometimes the choice of the lesser evil also involves the choice of what in that situation is the greater good. We indeed should recognize in such situations that “both of the alternative courses of action which confront the individual have to be recognized as leading to some authentic and substantial good,” but we do not have a sufficiently determinate conception of a core concept of the good for humans for us to use it to determine in such a circumstance which of several responses that we characteristically make is the more appropriate.

VI

In spite of what I have argued is a central failure of MacIntyre's Aristotelianism, I would not want to maintain that it is as centrally and as irretrievably flawed as is traditional Aristotelianism with its metaphysical biology and its conception of the function of man. Perhaps someone working out of that tradition, demythologized in something like the direction in which MacIntyre has demythologized it, perhaps supplementing it with a theory of needs, could articulate and rationally defend a more determinate conception of the human good that was neither ethnocentric nor as empty as MacIntyre's conception. I do not see any *a priori* objections against it, though it is also reasonable to entertain considerable skepticism about the likelihood that such a research program will pan out. However, I think anyone trying to work it out or anyone setting himself to do moral philosophy period would do well to accept the following core claims of MacIntyre:

... if [as it does for MacIntyre] the conception of a good has to be expounded in terms of such actions as those of a practice, of the narrative unity of a human life and of a moral tradition, then goods, and with them the only grounds for the authority of laws and virtues, can only be discovered by entering into those relationships which constitute communities whose central bond is a shared vision of and an understanding of goods. To cut oneself off from shared activity in which one has initially to learn obediently, as an apprentice learns, to isolate oneself from the communities which find their point and purpose in such activities, will be to debar oneself from finding any good outside of oneself ([3], p. 240).

I think this is right. Anything else would hardly lead to or leave us with any moral understanding at all. Indeed it would not even allow us to have what MacIntyre calls a powerful Nietzschean moral solipsism. But while what MacIntyre characterized above is essential for moral understanding and moral culture, it will not give us, as I have argued, anything even remotely like an objective conception of the good for man. But, that notwithstanding, it will provide us with a good starting point.

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