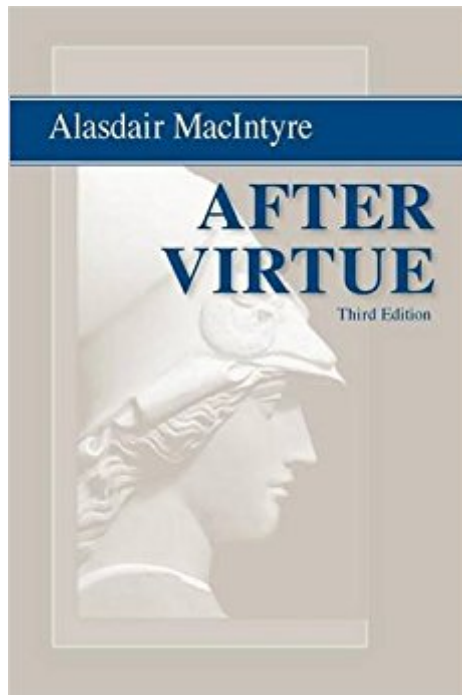


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After Virtue: A Study In Moral Theory, Third Edition



Synopsis

When *After Virtue* first appeared in 1981, it was recognized as a significant and potentially controversial critique of contemporary moral philosophy. *Newsweek* called it “a stunning new study of ethics by one of the foremost moral philosophers in the English-speaking world.” Since that time, the book has been translated into more than fifteen foreign languages and has sold over one hundred thousand copies. Now, twenty-five years later, the University of Notre Dame Press is pleased to release the third edition of *After Virtue*, which includes a new prologue “*After Virtue after a Quarter of a Century*.” In this classic work, Alasdair MacIntyre examines the historical and conceptual roots of the idea of virtue, diagnoses the reasons for its absence in personal and public life, and offers a tentative proposal for its recovery. While the individual chapters are wide-ranging, once pieced together they comprise a penetrating and focused argument about the price of modernity. In the Third Edition prologue, MacIntyre revisits the central theses of the book and concludes that although he has learned a great deal and has supplemented and refined his theses and arguments in other works, he has “as yet found no reason for abandoning the major contentions of this book. While he recognizes that his conception of human beings as virtuous or vicious needed not only a metaphysical but also a biological grounding, ultimately he remains committed to the thesis that it is only from the standpoint of a very different tradition, one whose beliefs and presuppositions were articulated in their classical form by Aristotle, that we can understand both the genesis and the predicament of moral modernity.”

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Customer Reviews

“After Virtue is a striking work. It is clearly written and readable. The nonprofessional will find MacIntyre perspicuous and lively. He stands within the best modern traditions of writing on such matters.” • New York Review of Books “MacIntyre’s arguments deserve to be taken seriously by anybody who thinks that the mere acceptance of pluralism is not the same thing as democracy, who worries about politicians wishing to give opinions about everything under the sun, and who stops to think of how important Aristotelian ethics have been for centuries.” • The Economist “After Virtue is a rigorous, ambitious, and original book. It is a reinterpretation of the entire history of Western moral philosophy, as decline, fall, and possibly rebirth.” • The Village Voice

Alasdair MacIntyre is research professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of numerous books, including *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame Press, 1988) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame Press, 1990).

After Virtue is one of those works which will stand the test of time as a initiator of a discourse long forgotten in the western world. The discourse concerns the nature of morality which "sustains" or fails to sustain the inner lives of the western man after the cruel shattering of all possible illusions of any kind of moral order in the universe, a world most devastatingly described by Nietzsche. Alasdair MacIntyre begins the work raising some fundamental questions about the incompatibility of perspectives which frequently meet our eye in popular culture, in media debates, in popular legislations in supreme court battles, and even in ordinary life, views which are characterized by shrill and often very violent rhetoric between individuals committed to one or other of the myriad positions available for adoption in our post modern marketplace of ideas. The feature of such confrontations is not the lack of so called justifications, which are many, but in their fundamental incommensurability. Understood philosophically, MacIntyre shows the underlying lack of any real basis to these arguments. Its not a surprise that they never end. The book charts an impressive history of this discourse, its origins in the Enlightenment traditions of Kant and Hume, succeeded by Locke, Mill and Bentham, to the final death knell struck by Nietzsche. Its Nietzsche who could see the absolute destruction of the moral sphere that surrounded him and pulled no punches in decrying it. But this history is too short sighted, says MacIntyre. The medieval world view which the Enlightenment repudiated, was the last remaining tradition, one inherited from the ancient Greeks,

and more specifically, Aristotle, which gave the world a telos, a final goal for the life of man, and thus provided a framework which could synthesize seemingly disparate points of view and philosophical positions. One could question certain premises of that framework, but not the structural foundations of it. By dismantling the whole structure, he might have gained freedom from the oppressive weight of tradition, but his freedom had no goal to which he could aspire to. He was now free in a world where he didn't know what to do. It is at this juncture of history where the enlightenment philosophers came forward to provide the free man, a telos, a morality which could justify itself on its own terms without depending on theology or tradition. Reason itself would disclose to man, his goal. The great heights of such attempts is preserved in the works of Kant and Hume. But all these attempts failed. None could create a self-sustaining world of morality that could be justified by reason alone. Each had its glaring flaws and it was left to the powers that be to impose its own version of morality, also justified by reason. As time went by, the new oppression came from reason itself as it was twisted and turned to suit various ends, a world Nietzsche describes with horrifying precision in his *Genealogy of Morals*. So the author asks, was Nietzsche justified in decrying the Aristotelian world? Was that too an example of power masking itself through a system of morals? The answer as shown in the book is no. The Greek view of morality was fundamentally different from the present system of externally defining certain acts as moral. To begin with, there was no word called morality in the Greek society. There were certain unacceptable behaviour but the larger conception of modern day morality was missing. The life of ancient man was structured around a community which provided a coherent frame of action and path which he was trained to walk for his whole life ending with death, the character of which would give the narrative closure to his life. His life was a unity, a self-contained block of time with its peculiar struggles and victories which made sense in the larger unity of the society which was the ground for his own existence. Thus it came to be that brotherhood was the greatest ideal of the past, an ideal which gave a kind of solidity to society we have no inkling of. Selfishness was a vice and so was acquisition. A modern liberal educated in ideas of individual success and freedom would recoil in horror at the implication of such a premise. After the fall of the Greeks, Christianity incorporated much of it in its own moral frameworks, although modified by uniquely Christian additions like charity or benevolence. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* provided the most famous synthesis of such a marriage of Aristotle and Christianity. In many ways, the telos or end goal of life remained the same in essence, though the outer character of it changed. It was around the 15th century when the corruptions of the Church and its institutional oppressiveness, forced a backlash from the society, ending its reign as the supreme moral preacher and ushering in the Enlightenment. So why

is this history so important ? As the book shows in excellent detail, our problems can be understood as something not unique to our time, but only a later stage in a process which began hundreds of years ago. By understanding this process, we moderns can come to a enlightened understanding of why our debates never end, why we remain confused over life changing issues and what this entails for our fragmented inner lives. The world has been through its flirtations with easy glorification of despair in philosophies like Existentialism, and the great danger today is that the despair itself has stopped being a concern anymore. Art and popular culture has taken over the stage of comforting every searching soul with easy customized and feel good solutions which destroy more than they heal. Its the great accomplishment of this book which is already thirty five years old, that it came out with a hard hitting attack at the post modern celebration of fragmented morality and gave a much needed push to historical understanding of moral structures. MacIntyre would go on to write two more books, *Whose Justice which Rationality ?* and *Three versions of Moral Enquiry*, completing a trilogy of moral philosophy that remains one of the great "philosophical performances" of our time as another reviewer has pointed out.

I read the second edition of *After Virtue* more than twelve years before I decided to teach the third edition in a college philosophy class. I returned to the book (whose main contents had not changed) with some hesitation: how might a book which I read in my early twenties hold up now that I've got a couple kids, several extra pounds, and a decade of experience that I didn't have back then? The answer, I'm pleased to say, is that MacIntyre, like most really good philosophers and poets, improves as one deepens intellectually. This book is accessible enough that I'm going to teach it without fear, yet its central theses, concerning tradition and the shape of modern moral thought, continue to challenge me. MacIntyre's central call is for moral philosophy to remember the historical and the social. For help with the latter he enlists Aristotle, whose conception of arete is always couched in the inescapably social nature of human existence. But he does not merely parrot Aristotle but marshals resources from medieval thinkers to introduce a sense of history to the Aristotelian project, insisting that being a proper Aristotelian means developing the historical sense that Aristotle himself lacked. Returning to this book has been nothing short of joyful, and I recommend without reservation a journey with MacIntyre to anyone interested in thinking about the social, historical, ethical complexity of human life.

After Virtue is an interesting treatise on the history of moral and virtues, ranging from the Homeric poems down to contemporary discussions on moral. MacIntyre spends the first 30% of the book to

elaborate on how the Enlightenment laid the foundation for philosophical schools on moralism that evolved into the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche. MacIntyre leaves few of the major names within philosophy untouched and provides plentiful of elaborate criticism. MacIntyre is sharp in his criticism and the more I read the more I longed to be presented a definition of virtues that could survive the criticism in the early chapters of the book. MacIntyre did not disappoint me on that point. MacIntyre begins the synthesis of a definition of virtues in chapter 10. The three-part virtue definition (or rather virtue criterion) is complex and not easy to grasp at once - the first part relates to practices and how virtue can be seen as being able to excel in a practice. The second part relates to a narrative unity of a person. Here MacIntyre elaborates on actions and how these need be related to intent, history and context to be intelligible. The third part relates to tradition, viewing individuals as part of communities the members of which shares a common history and values. I have yet to internalize and successfully employ this virtue definition in analyzing common-day events and actions. The word-rich style of MacIntyre, where he builds up extensive and complex sentences was a challenge to start with, where I was forced to read certain sentences numerous times to grasp the underlying ideas and claims. On several occasions I felt MacIntyre, should he wanted to convey his message to readers as efficiently as possible, he could have split a few of the highly complex sentences in smaller and more easily digested pieces. Despite being a bit of a struggle to grasp, the book was a slow but highly enjoyable read. I am interested in tracing how MacIntyre's view on virtues has evolved in his later books been and will download and read these to this end (e.g., he confessed that he in his later works became supportive of Aristoteles theory on biology, which he at first rejected). This is a challenging but highly rewarding read. A book I will return to and re-read.

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