

THE ETHICAL DANCE— A REVIEW OF ALASDAIR MacINTYRE'S AFTER VIRTUE

Peter Sedgwick

The appearance of this book* during 1981 marked the resumption of a public position by a figure who, after making a particularly striking impression in the British New Left in the ten years up to 1968, withdrew both his energies and his person from the nexus of causes and comradeships to which he had contributed a mercurial and generous vitality. Emerging from a Christian (and then Christian-Marxist) background into the turbulent debates of the post-1956 far left, an analytic philosopher with a gift for passionate, resonant expression in both the written and spoken word, a militant owing successive loyalties to Trotskyist, syndicalist or semi-Leninist groups and parties but at the same time respected by and responsive to a wider and less affiliated left: MacIntyre was one of the outstanding socialist intellectuals of that fertile period in British intellectual and political life which saw the rise of CND and its civil-disobedience wing, the expansion of working-class direct action through the shop stewards' movement, the thriving of early vanguard forms of theatre and rock protest, and the beginnings of those long, large waves of popular dissensus (or, in Ralph Miliband's useful term 'de-subordination') which have proven, in the seventies and early eighties, signally resistant to any organised channel of political activity.

I write of Alasdair MacIntyre **as** an intellectual rather than solely as an academic: and would justify this characterisation partly by observing that, while his style of argument draws much of its force from a particular professional training (analytic philosophy in the British tradition of enquiry), its strengths are hard to locate as proceeding **from** any one academic area. There are elements of sociological theory here, and some attention to historical or anthropological enquiry (the latter having at an earlier phase come rather unstuck in the fierce debate between him and another philosopher on the significance of the cattle-rearing practices of the Azande, an exchange which continued with unperturbed momentum even when it was pointed out that the Azande had **never** possessed cattle). There are also many references to the social organisation of literature (the saga and epic **as** well as the novel) as well as of other arts, musical

**After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*, by Alasdair MacIntyre (Duckworth, London).

and visual, which are often seen as less social. While **MacIntyre's** philosophical identity is securely anchored in his long, often polemical involvement with the great ethical works of the past (and with modern systematic writers on moral questions), the power of his writings derives largely from his enviable capacity to take selected themes from the technical, professionalised debates among philosophers and social scientists and re-fashion them as material for the urgent attention of a non-specialised public, often using dramatic, poetic and prophetic devices in the casting of his arguments. From the earlier articles for the New Left and **further-left** press in Britain down to the ringing, compelling pages of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre writes in a voice and a vein appropriate to the composure of a most experienced director, producer and stockist of moral silhouettes: shadow-figures from the ethical and political dramas of past centuries, each with a limited circle of possible postures and movements (which may be displayed, for a paragraph or two, upon the lit screen of **MacIntyre's** elucidatory text) each shortly doomed to pass from a constricted slow-motion to a strangled no-motion, on account of the seizure in their strings and the inefficiency of their logical joints and sockets, all proceeding ~~from~~ some crucial inner vice of their construction that MacIntyre, as shadow-master, collector and doctor to these effigies, will shortly point out after he has given them a turn or so to display their paces and poses for us the readers.

One by one they step out, from the master's vast and compendious travelling-trunk of moral concepts where they sit, filed in well-ordered rows, between public appearances. Out come the sophists, fencing again against **Socrates** before falling flat on their backs before his witty shafts. Then comes Aristotle, pacing away in a high soliloquy of mime that sorts and re-sorts the basic terms of right action: a tremendous sequence this, such that the maestro cannot bear to put the figure back, or to let his script of logical moves rest unrevised. Out come the flaccid, comfortable agonists, making their measured and obviously limited points: David Hume, Adam Smith, the modern linguistic formalists of morals. The scene then revolves to the display of the well and truly agonised: Soren Kierkegaard's tormented solo, Nietzsche's defiant rejection of moral claims, the Sartrean existentialist's bleak formulation of ineluctable yet impossible choice. As we watch their exercises in unconditioned moral free-wheeling, a sudden blaze of light is cast across the screen in a few well-chosen words from MacIntyre: at once we see that these apparently individualist mavericks have been operated by well-concealed strings linked with quite conservative and staid ethical routines. They are replaced in the trunk, and for our special delectation MacIntyre gives us the triumphal ballet of the epic or tragic Greek heroes, whose noble and courageous gestures are in no whit lessened in effect—on the contrary, their significance is heightened—by the visibility of the ligaments that

attach their awesome limbs to the codes and conventions of their tribe or *polis*.

A recurrent feature of the MacIntyre vivarium of shadows is a trope of presentation whereby, often with exceptional clarity and force, a pair of radically opposed, fiercely locked moral antagonists are shown to be engaging in common procedures and presuppositions. Thus, in the various sections of *After Virtue*, we find the role-playing self of Erving Goffman's theorising uncannily related to the self of early Sartre, even though role-playing is anathema for the latter; or the bureaucratic apologists for the managerial ethic are credited with essentially the same theoretical agenda as the anti-bureaucratic critical theorists deriving from the Frankfurt School; or the social-democratic, redistributionist case developed by John Rawls is shown to be consorting, in matters regarded as vital by MacIntyre, with the anti-distributionist, private-property liberalism of Robert Nozick. Even Marxism is adjudged now to be the ethical bed-fellow of the radical individualism offered by bourgeois thinkers, either on the Kantian model of unargued abstract principle or in the utilitarian mould of effects and consequences we owe to Bentham and Mill. Most importantly, the whole of modern philosophical theory about the basis of moral choice is ranked by MacIntyre as one or other expression, overt or indirect, of 'emotivism': the doctrine that all assertions of ethical principle, all statements about what is good or right, all sentences with an 'ought', 'should', or 'should not' in them, are no more than arbitrary expressions of personal preference lacking any possible rational justification. And the rivalry that exists among present-day moral outlooks and principles is not simply the outcome of the ordinary disagreement about what is right or wrong that can be expected even among people with some common set of values. In our age, moral disagreement is a chaos: it is the contest of incommensurables, of different bedrock personal commitments which cannot be argued or adjudicated. The divergence among fundamental ethical positions only reinforces for MacIntyre their cardinal convergence and even identity as exemplars of an emotivist 'Here I stand: I can no other'.

MacIntyre's persuasive sense of a contemporary moral fragmentation is conveyed in all his phases of theoretical writing since 1958. The obverse of a fragmented, dislocated moral discourse would of course be an integrated and ordered one: and the theme of a possible recentring of morals, around one or other focus of shared human community, has been an uninterrupted concern of Alasdair MacIntyre ever since his New Left writings. In his cry 'From the Moral Wilderness' (written for the *New Reasoner* of John Saville and E.P. Thompson in 1959) the sundering of moral purposes in contemporary society is seen as arising because of a long-standing separation between the language of moral choice and the language of desires and wants. To close the gap between unconditioned,

purposeless choice and anarchic, individualised desire, a **Marxian** conception of social human nature is offered, along with the first of MacIntyre's historico-anthropological compendiums of morality in relation to given cultural contexts and idioms. The stock of silhouettes is being prepared: those who witnessed their first performances, in such mesmerising tableaux as that of the Immoral Stalinist and the Moral Anti-Stalinist (whom, by a quick shift in the lighting and an inspired swivel of the stage, MacIntyre showed to be complementary partners rather than antagonists), were in at the beginning of that encyclopaedic montage of morals given us in *After Virtue*.

A Short History of Ethics, published in 1967, develops MacIntyre's critique of the sovereignty of individual choice, whether as the grounding of particular good and right decisions, or as the prime element in philosophers' more general accounting of what it means to decide well and rightly. References to the fatal split between morality and desire appear in the *Short History*: but the main organising frame for what is now a full and heterogeneous survey of past moralising appears to lie in some elusive but attractive musing about certain epochs of history which offered a genuine moral community and a unified language of choice and wish. When this fortunate culture actually existed and when it expired are both fleetingly dated in the *Short History's* genealogy. There were, it seems, certain peaks of moral integration and commonalty, one in pre-classical Greece before moral aims and social roles become separated in a growing complexity of labour-division, and another in medieval society before capitalism and Protestantism have done their worst in individualising human destinies. MacIntyre is less interested in these ethical Edens than in the philosophical consequences of man's self-expulsion from moral community: the *Short History* is a review of the successive impasses and gyrations of trapped and alienated thinkers, each spinning and then sticking in a mess of incoherently individual intentions or inexplicably benign intuitions.

With MacIntyre's latest projection of the evolving matter of moral thought, the panorama becomes even richer: and much more ordered. What structures *After Virtue* is no longer the chronological constraint of recounting and reinterpreting the major ethical strands in literature and philosophy since Homer: here the central point is the attempt to persuade us that a loss of moral community typical of the distinctly modern ages is both a real event and a real catastrophe. The communitarian MacIntyre is no longer a communist: no hope is posed for a future re-integrated society. The bludgeon to beat down moral individualism is no longer to be found in Marx but—and this will surprise many of his old readers—Aristotle. The devotees of *A Short History of Ethics* will recall the devastating put-down of Aristotle contained in that work: the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a priggish, parochial, complacent book, and its author a

class-bound conservative. In *After Virtue* the same book and the same author are dealt with much more patiently, indeed eulogistically, as the source of the major integrative concepts that will restore moral reasoning to its proper coherence and stature.

As with MacIntyre's previous analyses, confusion over moral criteria is held to originate in an inability by modern thinkers to work with a particular conception of goal-directed human nature. But the missing master-code for all the fragmented sub-codes of moral choice is no longer an agreed view of human wants or desires. Why, indeed, should any concept of what we desire or want assist us in clarifying ethical questions? As MacIntyre puts it in *After Virtue* (p. 46): '... the question of precisely which of our desires are to be acknowledged as legitimate guides to action. . . cannot be answered by trying to use our desires themselves as some kind of criterion.' With the exit of desire as an ordering focus for morality, MacIntyre now appeals to an Aristotelian concept of virtue (or rather, of The Virtues) to help us to order our ethical preferences in the light of certain high-level individual and group goals. In our barbarised, managerial modern epoch the tradition of the virtues has been lost, and we can never hope again to discover the agreed-on forms of community, citizenship and civically-inspired **friendship** which were the necessary contextual embedding for the construction of a virtuous life. All the same, there are some local loyalties to certain institutions of communal purpose—one's family, perhaps, or one's profession—and in these a morality of virtue can still be encouraged as a healthy alternative to the manipulative, utilitarian ethos of our dreadful age.

So crude a summary does no justice at all to the nuances, or wen to the main lines, of MacIntyre's argument. One of the central merits of *After Virtue* is that it faces key objections to its own main themes in a fair-minded and sensitive manner and accepts them on board as **fellow-passengers** rather than shoving them away in a glib polemical response. It is clear, for instance, from MacIntyre's account of medieval moralising (Chapter 13) that the middle ages, despite the Aristotelian heritage transmitted through theologians, were a conflict-ridden epoch lacking in a consensual position **about** what constituted the referent community for the validation of moral choices. This qualification of his earlier claim that medievaldom was an ethically consensual period of course renders MacIntyre's periodisation of moral crisis all that much more problematic. Just when—as several reviewers have already asked—was the point of collapse, from secure values in 'the predecessor culture' to the present endless doubt about the very basis of right and wrong?

Other than in fairly simple societies too poor to maintain a class of intellectuals to scrutinise the direction of their progress, history is likely to offer few if any examples of the simplistic predecessor-ethic whose passing MacIntyre notes and mourns even as he generates doubt whether

it has ever lived. Nor does the argument convince where it suggests that an Aristotelian table of the virtues, suitably arranged within a purposive account of social and civil life, makes it easier for those who accept it to find an unproblematic set of moral criteria. The very listing of what is to count as an important virtue is problematic and even contentious: MacIntyre himself has to revise Aristotle's own canon of what is virtuous (adding, for example, some intellectual virtues like a sense of history, downgrading the virtues of the Athenian gentlemen such as magnificence of character); and in regard to MacIntyre's own attempt to convey the logical specialness of virtue—which replaces Aristotle's appeal to a metaphysical 'human nature' by an intricate and absorbing account of the socially-grounded practices which are said to summon forth virtue—it becomes immediately clear that we are, once again, landed in a disputatious moral terrain where competing practices, and their associated benefits or costs, make apparently final and total claims upon the individual conscience. MacIntyre eventually offers the language of the virtues as a more faithful medium for the statement of moral dilemmas rather than as a means of reducing the arbitrariness of basic moral decisions. His **rejigged** figure of Aristotle thus emerges as a thoroughly modern muppet, contorted in an existentialist or Kantian croak of unconditioned and unreasoning choice.

It is clear, nevertheless, that our impresario of the ethical dance has done a superb job in oiling and repairing that classical figurine which once gave us the *Nicomachean Ethics* and which, with some sandpapering at old and awkward edges and some new choreography for a **sociologically**-inclined audience, performs with such poise and brilliance in *After Virtue*. And yet the very wizardry of Alasdair MacIntyre's art, when applied with such creative, committed zeal to the re-furnishing of crusty old Aristotle, raises certain doubts as to the limitations which he has always so assiduously revealed in those other moral manikins from his larger repertoire. He has brought out the best in the Aristotelian structure, tending and extending its dialectical powers and respectfully replacing what was outmoded or insupportable for contemporary discussion. Has he not sometimes been a little over-quick in sweeping other philosophical characters off the stage and back into storage once he has caught them out in some elementary pratfall? If he can make Aristotle dance so well, could not he **flick** Kant, or Hare, or John Stuart Mill, through some rather more flexible and advanced routines than he has hitherto allowed them? One is left wondering whether all those snarled-up, rigid figures from MacIntyre's past moral confrontations had to be shown as quite so static and incapable: and whether his famous display of the Identity of Antagonists did not perhaps occasionally depend on his own very personal selection of an angle of the lighting and a moment when the participants' action is frozen out of later sequence and development. Only in a certain light, and at a

certain halting-point in the argument, can the pro-managerial theoriser be rendered similar to the opponent of bureaucratic rationality, the solitary Sartrean choice to the universal Kantian duty, the liberal anti-Stalinist to the Stalinoid authoritarian, and the Marxist revolutionary to the bourgeois moralist.

MacIntyre's life has been a long polemical itinerary, battling against massive and deliberately-chosen odds with the weapons of a ruthless honesty and an intellect of diamond acuity and toughness. His stance remains, in relation to the dominant power-structures of both West and East, irreconcilably oppositional, anti-managerial and hostile to the claims of private property. But the very intensity and **rigour** of his adversary role has, over the long series of battles in and outside the political left, tended to isolate him from any base in a collective endeavour. His chain of fraternisations while in Britain seems to have followed a common pattern of serious and warm comradeship followed by recoil and disengagement. In a metaphor of personal distance written during his Trotskyist years, MacIntyre commented: 'All of us will pass through phases in which both rightly and wrongly we sharpen the line between ourselves and others. This self-imposed isolation is a feature of every normal adolescence. It is **also** a normal experience in political **organisations** in which the first experience of membership and friendship may give way dialectically to a consciousness of distance between oneself and others' ('Freedom and Revolution', *Labour Review*, February–March 1960). These sentences even then conveyed a powerful psychological truth which accorded somewhat oddly with MacIntyre's insistence, then as now, on the necessity for a common disciplinary and collegial structure in which individual **selfhood** could be **realised**.

To the personal toll wrought by successive recoil there has now been added the more literal distance of Alasdair MacIntyre's move to live and work in the United States. Not for him the customary options of a displaced left in search of a supportive militant structure. He rejected the possibility of a renewed socialism in the Labour Party—an eloquent critique of Labour's inner collapse, broadcast by MacIntyre in 1968 in his own valediction to the British arena, is reprinted in David Widgery's Penguin collection *The Left in Britain*. Marxism is now no longer a vital core within the fragile, discarded shells of Leninist or Trotskyist group membership, but itself a shell, splintered and devoid of any real ethical nucleus. That radical tendency in ideas which in a number of related lines approximates to MacIntyre's present position—the school of European 'critical theory' with its complex involvement in the critical heritage of the ancients, the modern world of manipulated mass opinion, the methodology of social knowledge and the nature of artistic **production**—is never referred to in *After Virtue*, except in the surly amalgam we have noted between the Frankfurt School and managerial conformity. The

prophet of allegiance and community, MacIntyre has argued himself into a corner where he can find no allies to realise a common project of criticism and change. Rejecting existent and past traditions of common socialist work—though he constantly evokes the imagery of socialist individual lives, of **Trotsky** or the Marx family, to fortify us in the exercise of virtue—he has taken on the task of singlehandedly constructing the basis for a critical morality and, in the long run, a re-shaped political order through nothing other than the re-centring of his long-running and marvellous marionette-show of **ideators** around the one sage-figure of antiquity who lived and wrote as a slob, a snob, a prick, an utter fink. Can MacIntyre really accept the Aristotelian view that friendship is a blessing not because we are enabled through it to meet warm, sensitive and funny people but because it helps to cement the social ties of our less attractive fellow-citizens? Can he take so seriously the dictum that it is the function of good government to help make its citizens **virtuous**—or would he not react as angrily as any bourgeois-liberal or **individualist-Marxist** to an attempt by government to implant virtues by legislation? Could he actually tolerate a governmental initiative to allocate resources according to the 'just deserts' of individual claimants, particularly when the fluid social teleology he has devised to replace Aristotle's fixed human nature gives no clue to what a just desert might be; nor is it imaginable that a consensual programme of unequal treatment according to desert would go unchallenged (particularly by so rigorous and restless a critic as MacIntyre)? More fundamentally: the virtues, as MacIntyre clearly shows, are a *within*-system ordering of our actions. They need not glorify the actual social and political system that we have, but they can be used to criticise it only from within another system of recognised and established practices. They cannot help us in getting along from one system to another whose practices have yet to be defined. This is why political activism is not a virtue either in Aristotle's or, apparently, in MacIntyre's scheme, and perhaps why activists are so seldom virtuous though they may be useful.

I am tempted, in pondering on Alasdair **MacIntyre's** journey through polemic, to recall the words of an old American socialist ballad:

**Bill Bailey belonged to every radical party
That ever came to be
Till one day he decided
To start his own party
So he wouldn't disagree.**

In his permanent search for a communitarian focus of moral consensus and allegiance MacIntyre has moved past the narrow terms of the party or sect. He poses rather the construction of larger, even perhaps total forms of social organisation within which practical, moral and political purposes may at last make sense. In the closing paragraphs of *After Virtue*

we are bidden to consider that, in the darkness of the present era, the only possible way forward in the immediate future may be in the foundation of 'local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained'. This seems a remarkably good proposal, even though **MacIntyre's** insistence on a shared basis for moral evaluation will exclude from the membership of these communes a great many utilitarians, existentialists, Marxists, Kantians, Platonists, and plain agnostics or sceptics. Whether after all these bans and proscriptions civility will reign within the walls of such foundations is a matter for conjecture. None but Aristotelians need apply, and even they had better be careful, lest the founder of their virtuous order slopes off at some point of agonised intellectual dissatisfaction.

The reviewer warmly thanks Justin **Grossman** for his enlivening discussion on certain key points.