

The Science & Human Dimension Project & Prospect Lecture

Alasdair MacIntyre and the “Irrelevance of Ethics”

by John Cornwell

*On 3 June 2010 Professor Alasdair MacIntyre, author of *After Virtue* and some thirty books on ethics, gave a lecture sponsored by the Jesus College, Cambridge Science & Human Dimension Project and *Prospect* magazine. This is the text of the article John Cornwell wrote for *Prospect* magazine's October 2010 issue on the lecture and its background.*



Alasdair MacIntyre

The philosopher in modest dark suit and grey shirt could be mistaken, save for the presence of his wife of thirty-three years, for an off-duty Benedictine abbot. We're dining in the elegant ambiance of the Cambridge Catholic university chaplaincy; the conversation is animated, but the philosopher contents himself with a glass of water, leaving the dishes and vintage claret untouched. Self-effacing, a trifle austere, he nevertheless exudes a benign humanity from the top of his monkish hair-cut to his scuffed toe-caps.

Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the world's most influential living moral philosophers. He has written thirty books on ethics and held a variety of distinguished professorial chairs over the past four decades in North America. Blending ideas from Ancient Greece and Medieval Christendom (with a tentative admixture of Marxism), MacIntyre routinely writes and lectures on the failings and discontents of "advanced modernity." This summer he accepted an invitation from Prospect Magazine and Jesus College to talk to a group of Cambridge academics on the economic disaster that capitalism has inflicted on itself and the world.

MacIntyre has often given the impression of a lone robe-ripping Savonarola. He has lambasted the heirs to the principal Western ethical schools: Locke's theory of human rights, Kant's categorical imperatives, Jeremy Bentham's "the greatest good for the greatest number." He has seen off A.J. Ayer's logical positivism, and Sartre's existentialism. Aged 81, he is not, however, entirely a lone voice in the wilderness. He can claim connections with a trio of twentieth century intellectual heavy-weights: the late Elizabeth Anscombe, her surviving husband, Peter Geach, and the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (recent winner of the million-pound Templeton Prize). What all four shared and share in common is their Catholicism, their enthusiasm for Aristotle's *telos* (life goals), and their promotion of the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (Thomism) who in the 13th century adapted Aristotle to Christian philosophy to assert the necessary being of God as the sustaining creator of a contingent world. All four have been influenced by Leo XIII (pontiff from 1878 to 1903), who revived Thomistic studies in the late 19th century, while condemning Communism and unrestrained capitalism with equal energy. Another crucial figure is Pius XI (pontiff from 1922 to 1939), who championed subsidiarity (Aquinas again); meaning: don't run things from higher up when they can be run successfully and piecemeal from lower down. The key moral and political ideas are these: to be human is to be an Aristotelian, goal-driven, communitarian; to be virtuous is to serve the common good (the *polis*); and the good society is composed of multifarious, independent, self-reliant groups. There are strong, albeit derivative, echoes of these ideas in the policies of David Cameron's "Red Tory" guru, Phillip Blond, and the excoriating holy-terrorism of the literary theorist Terry Eagleton. In Washington DC the Demos policy wonk, Tom Daly, pays tribute to MacIntyre and papal social teaching as he advises Barak Obama on how to create a national health service without State

domination. With the exception of Eagleton, MacIntyre differs from all these past and present influences and alliances, from Leo XII onwards, in his respect for Marx's critique of the "appropriation of surplus value."

MacIntyre begins his Cambridge talk by asserting that the 2008 economic crisis had nothing to do with a failure to paid heed to business ethics. The opener is not an entire red herring. Ever since he published his key text *After Virtue* in 1981 MacIntyre has taught that moral behavior begins with good practice of a profession, trade, or art --- playing the violin, cutting hair, brick-laying, teaching philosophy. Through these everyday social practices, he maintains, people develop virtues appropriate for their practices. This enables them to grow as individuals in the exercise of communitarian virtue. Being good, according to Aristotle and Aquinas, means a commitment to the flourishing of others: "the common good." In contrast, MacIntyre maintains, modern ethics, such as consequentialism and Kantianism, fail, since they are not about *being* good so much as arguing inconclusively and at odds with each other about what might or might not be good in any particular case. Take the contradictory moral principles adopted by the Allies in the Second World War, says MacIntyre: Britain invoked a classic Kantian reason for declaring war on Germany; but the fire bombing of Dresden and Tokyo (which, for a Kantian, involved acts that should never be countenanced) appealed to purely consequentialist arguments --- to bring the war to a speedier end.

Yet there are practices demanding skill and discipline, he goes on, like being a good burglar, that are obviously inimical to virtue in any shape or form. And here's the point of the business school assertion: those engaged in finance --- the practice of money "trading" in particular --- are, in MacIntyre's view, like good burglars --- incorrigibly bad. Teaching ethics to traders is as pointless as reading Aristotle to your dog. The better the trader, the more morally despicable. MacIntyre appeals at this point to the Classical golden mean: "The courageous human being," he cites Aristotle as saying, "strikes a mean between rashness and cowardice. .. and if things go wrong she or he will be among those who lose out." But skillful money-men, MacIntyre asserts, want to "transfer as much risk as possible to others" while declining to "explain to others the nature and extent of the risk that they are taking on." This leads to a failure to "distinguish adequately between rashness, cowardice and courage." "Successful" money men, moreover, fail "to take into account the fate of the victims of collateral damage resulting from market crises." Hence only by ignoring the human costs of transactions in the financial markets can traders function according to their version of cost-benefit analysis. To cap it all, the focus of traders "is almost exclusively on the present and the short term." So business ethics "is not just irrelevant, it's probably an insuperable disadvantage." And the degeneracy embraces all financial activity. "Investors, analysts, managers of different kinds, can only function as they do insofar as traders function as they

do.” Hence the financial sector is an environment of “bad character” despite the fact that it appears to many a “benevolent engine of growth in a globalised and globalizing economy.”

This rifts between economics and ethics, according to MacIntyre, stems from the failure of our culture “to think coherently about money”: in other words, to think like Aristotle and Aquinas. “They saw the value of money to be no more and no less than the value of the goods which can be exchanged, so there’s no reason for anyone to want money other than for the goods they buy.” Money affords indefinitely more choices and choice is itself a good, but what happens when we find our choices imposed by others “whose interest is primarily in getting us to spend money...so that what are presented to them as goods are designed to elicit predictable consumer responses”?

Money then becomes the sole measure of human flourishing. “Goods are to be made and supplied, just insofar as they can be turned into money...ultimately, money becomes the measure of all things, including itself.” Money is now made not just from the exchange of goods “but also from the exchange of money for money...and trading in derivatives and in derivatives of derivatives.” Hence those who work in the financial sector become increasingly dislocated from the uses of money in everyday life. “How individuals fare in the world increasingly depends upon a complex set of relationships to money, to the money that they have, that they owe, that they save or fail to save, that they are owed.” Money, moreover, procures deference by the simple fact of having it. “Money has become the measure of a human being.” A symptom of this state of affairs, he contends, is gross inequality. Even the rich have become dwarfed into ordinariness by the super-rich. In 2009, he observes, the average top executive in the UK was paid eighty-one times more than the average worker. “Money generates a hierarchy of patent absurdities, especially when the money rich are treated with great solemnity.”

MacIntyre’s diagnosis of, and remedy for, the woes of “advanced modernity” invokes the history of his philosophical and theological journey through six decades. Alasdair Chalmers MacIntyre was born in 1929 in Glasgow the only child of two practicing doctors. “They left Scotland three weeks after I was born and went to work in the East End of London.” But his father died when he was still a boy, and his mother went to live in South Belfast --- where he would spend holidays from Epsom College, an independent secondary school mostly for sons of physicians. At 16 he enrolled at Queen Mary College, University of London, in the Mile End Road, to specialize in Classics ---- reading Plato and Aristotle in the original. At twenty one, he went on to Manchester University as graduate student, and after three years was appointed to a lectureship in philosophy, followed by teaching and research stints at Leeds and Oxford. He was drawn early to Karl Marx and wrote his first book in Marxism’s defense, although he had drastically altered his opinion of the Soviet Union after the suppression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956.

Through his twenties he was probing the authenticity of prevailing mainstream philosophical influences in search of a life view: to find “something that he wanted to say.” He rejected utilitarianism because it appeared to “provide no place for genuinely unconditional commitments”, and Kantianism, because while “recognizing that some type of action is morally required or prohibited,” it offers no motivation based on our desires. “The hard work of morality,” MacIntyre insists, “consists in the transformation of desires, so that we aim at the good and respect the precepts of the natural law.” He was interested for a time in the “emotivism” of A.J. Ayer, the view that morality was based on emotions not beliefs. Hence to say that a lie is wrong is akin to saying “Boo to lying” and “Hurrah to truth.” But he would eventually reject emotivism because moral judgements “make an appeal to impersonal authority in a way that pure expressions of merit do not.” Although baptized a Presbyterian (his mother was Scottish), he had studied Thomism during his teenage years through acquaintances in the English Dominican order, whose scholars had edited and published commentaries on Aquinas’s works down the generations. He did not enter the Catholic Church at this stage and appears to have shared the fashionable rejection of metaphysics, which Ayer claimed to have demolished in the first chapter of his *Language Truth and Logic*. According to Ayer, only those propositions that can be empirically or scientifically verified have significance: hence the claims of metaphysics are thrown into the dustbin of the history of philosophy.

MacIntyre says that while he had been vaguely Christian during his youth, he abandoned religion altogether for a quarter of a century in his early twenties. His return to Christianity, and specifically Catholicism, he tells me, occurred as a result of being convinced of Thomism while actually attempting to disabuse his students of its authenticity. An Aristotelian-Thomistic view of society and the world, as set out in *After Virtue*, offered the best philosophical underpinning for human flourishing, and the only alternative to the fragmentation of moral philosophy in the modern period. The Aristotelian notion, rejected in the modern period, that human life has a goal, *telos*, set by human nature, is crucial. That goal, or *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as “happiness”, “well being,” or “human flourishing” is what shapes moral judgements and what constitutes virtue. For Aquinas, this *telos*, established a basis for “natural law”, which individuals should follow in order to contribute to the common good.

“What are those of us, committed to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of the common good, to do?” asks MacIntyre. “We have to begin again.” Beginning again, in MacIntyre’s terms involves what he calls “capturing the double aspect of the globalizing economy and its financial sector, so that we understand it both as an engine of growth and as such a source of benefits, but equally as a perpetrator of great harms and continuing injustices.” Apologists for globalization, he argues, too

often treat it as essentially a source of benefits, and only accidentally and incidentally a source of harms, harms that could be prevented by vigilant regulatory agencies. Hence, the view prevails that “to be for or against globalization is in some ways like being for or against the weather.”

MacIntyre maintains, however, that the system must be understood in terms of its vices of injustice and intemperateness in order to resist it. “A principal expression of such vices in the economic life of the past thirty years has been the unjust infliction of debt.” Citing Marx, MacIntyre says, “Surplus value is the difference between what the labor of productive workers earns in wages and what capitalists receive for the products of that labor. It is only because capitalists are able to appropriate that difference – their profits – and to invest it in their business that capitalism is a growth economy.” Hence successful capitalists maximize their profit-taking and to do so they must keep their costs as low as possible. The owners of capital and those who manage their enterprises always therefore have a reason to keep wages as low as possible. “But, insofar as they succeed, they create a recurrent problem for themselves. For workers are also consumers and capitalism requires consumers with the purchasing power to buy the products that are brought to market. So there is tension between the need to keep wages low and the need to keep consumption high.” Capitalism has solved this dilemma, MacIntyre maintains, by the extension of credit and the infliction of debt. The strategy has been to bring future consumption, future prosperity into the present by dramatic extensions of credit, including credit to those hitherto judged not creditworthy. Hence a dramatic increase in purchasing power --- “so for the moment, for a very considerable moment, the problems arising from the appropriation of surplus value were resolved.”

MacIntyre catalogues the different forms credit, influencing how consumers think about money and themselves, including : “ gold, platinum, and platinum plus credit cards, cards that earn airline points, free nights in hotels: mortgages that promised to transform improvident renters into prudent homebuyers, building equity in their homes over ten, twenty, thirty years; student loans from banks or government, not repayable until you graduate; multifarious services provided by governments that borrow money in order to provide them and win elections because they provide them.” So the message, MacIntyre says, is this: “You may not as yet have enough money to make yourselves and others happy, by getting an education, by providing your family with a home, by taking a vacation from your treadmill of a job, but you do have enough money for us to make you a loan and for you somehow another to repay it.”

The expansion of credit, he goes on, has been accompanied by a distribution of risk “that exposed to ruin millions of people who were quite unaware that they had been thus exposed.” So when capitalism once again fatally overextended itself, massive credit was transformed into even more massive debt, “into loss of jobs and loss of wages, into bankruptcies of firms and foreclosures of

homes, into one sort of ruin for Ireland, another for Iceland, and a third for California and Illinois, into savage cuts in welfare, laid off teachers, children, already educationally deprived, deprived still further.” It is not just that capitalism imposes the costs of growth and of lack of growth on those least able to bear them, he concludes, it is that much of this debt is unjust.

MacIntyre’s list of injustices include the predicament of those who are paying and will pay in the distant future the costs of money “having been borrowed which they never borrowed.” Then a large number of those who did borrow but were misinformed about the nature and extent of the risk to which they were being exposed. Then the fact that the “engineers of this debt”, who had already benefited disproportionately from the extension of credit, “have been to an extraordinary degree allowed to exempt themselves from the consequences of their delinquent actions.” These injustices,” he goes on, “are no accident”. The imposition of unjust debt is a symptom of the “moral condition of the economic system of advanced modernity, and is in its most basic forms an expression of the vices of intemperateness, and injustice, and imprudence, and until it is described in these terms it has been underdescribed and misdescribed.”

The clincher to MacIntyre’s argument is that one cannot understand economic relationships divorced from moral relationships. We need, he goes on, to understand those relationships as did Marx, according to his views on surplus value, and as did Aquinas, who condemned usury. “We need to bring Aquinas and Marx together, in characterizing the economy and in laying down the principles that should inform our attitude to unjust debt.” His principles involve “issues of deserving”, “responsible risk-taking,” and “setting limits to the burdens of debt.” Deserving is an issue, he argues, when the consequences of debt are inflicted on those who played no part in incurring that debt. “Among those who, both today and in the past, undeservedly suffer from those consequences are large numbers of children. And our first political and economic responsibility in every situation is to the children of our society.” Those who expose others to risk in the financial markets must spell out in public in advance the risks that they are distributing, in terms that are intelligible. And when there are bad consequences of risk-taking the consequences for those who made the relevant decisions must be made as bad as they are for the worst off amongst their victims. Finally, he advocates that limits should be set to the burdens imposed by debt on individual and family lives, so that those burdens are not disproportionate. And this will involve in many situations a required forgiveness of debt.

MacIntyre denies that regulation can resolve the problems of the finance sector, since regulations merely “have as their aim the prevention of further large-scale crises.” When asked, then, whether his perspective is a counsel of despair, he responds that there are evils in the world that one “simply has to live with for the time being.” It does not appear that he means by this an acceptance

of human fallenness, original sin, so much as a prelude to major change or revolution. But to what?

The Prospect-Cambridge talk appears to show that MacIntyre has entered a kind of end-game position involving a hybrid of Marx and Aquinas --- with Marx as the prime influence. His version of Aquinas, however, is strangely materialist, as if to accommodate Marx rather than the other way around. Professor John Milbank, founder of the Cambridge group known as Radical Orthodoxy, which had a profound influence on Phillip Blond's Red Toryism, complains: "We are given an Aquinas that no *historical* scholar any longer believes in, an Aquinas without the theology. Where is Aquinas's emphasis on the supernatural light of charity? MacIntyre says little about charity even though for Aquinas there is no full justice without it, just as there is no genuinely good State without the Church." Which is only strange when one considers that MacIntyre is a Catholic thinker. Phillip Blond echoes Milbank's objections: "It looks as if Aristotle and Aquinas have been made to conform to a Marxist materialism and collectivism. The Aristotelian virtues are simply posited as a kind of natural law, rather than being rooted in a non-materialist metaphysics." Nevertheless, since the formation of the Conservative-Lib-Dem coalition, Blond has been seeking, and finding, connections between MacIntyre, Aquinas's subsidiarity, G.K. Chesterton's "distributism" of the 1920s, and the Joe Grimond's plea of "civic groups" in the 1950s. Are these not the antecedents, he is asking, of David Cameron's "Big Society"? The link between Aquinas and the twentieth century is "distributism", which repudiated usury, communism, and capitalism, in equal measure, for an economy based on guilds, specialist associations, self-sufficiency and barter. MacIntyre had made wistful reference in his Prospect talk to one of distributism's principal architects --- Father Vincent McNabb. Distributism as a political party collapsed in the 1930s, and Father McNabb was last heard from his soap box at Hyde Park Corner complaining of apartment blocks (which of course lack sufficient land to graze a cow) and advocating the use of one's natural skin oils as a substitute for boot polish. Distributist and subsidiarist ideas, encouraging guilds and associations, flourished for a time in 1920's Italy in the form of Mussolini's early corporatism. Its Achilles heel, however, was its preference for representation based on selection rather than election, with a predilection for elitism ---- the prelude to full-blown fascism. As it happens, Alasdair MacIntyre's peer group ethicists have constantly objected that his model of the Aristotelian *polis*, and its Scottish Enlightenment counterpart, could only work on the basis of an aristocracy or a privileged elite in ultimate charge.

If MacIntyre's ethics of global finance raise more questions than they settles, he nevertheless beguiles with his illustrations from micro-history. For example, he entertained his listeners to a lengthy description of the founding of a diesel engine factory in which an investor and engineer brought their assets together to create an ideal small-scale business for their mutual benefit and that

of the local community. Charming as the story was, it had no bearing on the macro problems he outlined. Later, demonstrating the ways in which globalised “bad character” can be resisted by “virtuous risk taking”, he cited four intriguing narratives: the seventeenth century Guarani Indians (described in the movie *The Mission*) who chose a collectivized future under “proto-Leninist” Jesuits rather than slavery; the early founders of the kibbutzim at odds with influential competing visions of collectivisation; the local leadership of the Marxist Communist Party of India in Kerala in 1957 which placated land owners and government helping the poor; the small farmers of Donegal in the 1960s who chose to establish a cooperative that sustained their Irish speaking community rather than emigrate.

Such stories contributed little or nothing to the larger general woes he had described in the body of his talk, the solutions to which, as he acknowledges, involve “social structures of an economy... very different from those of either a wholly free market economy or the state-and-market economies of present day Europe.” He does not expand further on the system he would substitute other than telling us that “it would be an economy in which, among other things, deference to wealth would be recognized as a vice.” His micro-models of a “proto-Leninist” theocracy, a kibbutz, a Marxist Indian state, and an Irish farming cooperative, hardly encourage one to believe that his replacement for Western style democracy and the global economy would be realistic let alone desirable. At the end of *After Virtue* he argued that we have already entered a new age of “darkness and barbarism” similar to the decline of the Roman Empire. “This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament.” The survival of virtuous civilization, then, may depend, he implies, not on a world revolution but on the persistence of isolated communities similar to the monasteries that withstood the depredations of the Dark Ages. “We are waiting not for a Godot,” he concludes in that remarkable book, “but for another --- doubtless very different --- St. Benedict.” But who or what would another St. Benedict look like? He does not say.

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