

After MacIntyre:
Tradition, Virtue, and Where We Go From Here

Thank you, Peter. Thank you for the kind introduction. Thank you for asking me to speak in the first place. And most especially – despite the opposition you faced from many fronts, even including a personal discouragement from the very man whom I will be holding up today as worthy of our attention and emulation – thank you for having the courage to found *Fare Forward*. Without your initiative and that of your coeditors, none of us would be gathered here today. So sincerely, thank you.

In addition to those prayers of thanksgiving, like any good Catholic, I should probably also begin with a little confession here, and ask for your forgiveness. First, I apologize in advance for pushing the envelope on my time limit. I've told Peter I would speed talk this as much as I can, and insofar as that won't be destructive to my communicatory goals, I will. But as I hope to show, a too brief account of my subject matter would be at odds with its very substance, which will propose that it is only by immersion in a tradition and in a larger conversation and context that ideas become intelligible in the first place. Additionally, I should apologize for the fact that I'll be reading the majority of this straight from the page, unlike most of our other speakers who have spoken beautifully off the cuff, as it were. I had played with the idea of tossing these written remarks and speaking less formally to you, but after I tried that in the cocktail conversation setting last night to very little success – sorry Andrew – I had to admit to myself that I am not sufficiently schooled in the virtues of teaching to do that efficaciously with this particular topic. But do bear with me, and hopefully we can springboard from here to an interesting conversation to follow.

In his “Meditation in a Toolshed,” examining a single ray of sunlight shining into his backyard shack, CS Lewis pondered the distinction between looking at something and looking along it. The former, he said, is to inspect the

thing itself from without; the latter is to enter into the thing and, using it as a lens, to observe realities outside it.

In the course of these remarks, I'd like to look both at and along the thought of another twentieth-century Christian thinker: the Scottish moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Born in Glasgow in 1929, MacIntyre was educated at Queen Mary College, London; the University of Manchester, and Oxford University. He began his teaching career in Great Britain, but he immigrated to our side of the Atlantic in the late 1960s. MacIntyre has held posts at Brandeis, Boston University, Wellesley, Vanderbilt, Yale, and Duke. He is currently a professor emeritus at Notre Dame, from which post he continues to write and speak from time to time. His curriculum vitae is enormous, but the four books for which he is best known, those that have come to be called collectively the "MacIntyrean Quartet," are *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, and *Dependent Rational Animals*.

The title of my remarks today is "After MacIntyre: Tradition, Virtue, and Where We Go From Here." I'm going to break that down into four different sections. In the first, I'll set the stage for our analysis by looking at MacIntyre's understanding of the competing forms of moral enquiry prevalent in the landscape of contemporary ethical discourse. In the remaining three sections, I'll look to MacIntyre's assessment of the past, present, and future of morality respectively.

I. Tradition and Its Discontents:
Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry

In 1988, MacIntyre was asked to return to Scotland to give the annual Gifford Lectures, a series later published as the third book of his quartet: *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. The invitation was of course a great honor, but it was nevertheless an ironic one, since as we will see, MacIntyre's metaethical philosophy put him decidedly at odds with the programme of this prestigious lectures series. "'I wish,' wrote Adam Gifford in his will, 'the lecturers to treat their subject[– that is, natural theology understood as comprehending within itself enquiry into the foundations of ethics –]as a strictly natural science... I wish it to be considered just as astronomy or chemistry is.'"¹

In recording this wish, Gifford comes to embody for MacIntyre the first version of moral enquiry to be considered. MacIntyre equates this quintessentially late Victorian conception of moral enquiry with the standpoint of the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which was published during the same period, an equation which earns Gifford and his colleagues the moniker "encyclopaedists" for the remainder of these lectures. MacIntyre characterizes them and their particular version of moral enquiry as follows:

They assumed the assent of all educated persons to a single substantive conception of rationality... They understood the outcome of allegiance to the standards and methods of such a rationality to be the elaboration of a comprehensive, rationally incontestable scientific understanding of the whole, in which the architectonic of the sciences matched that of the cosmos... And finally they saw their whole mode of life, including their conceptions of rationality and of science, as part of a history of inevitable

¹ *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, p. 9

progress, judged by a standard of progress which had itself emerged from that history.²

As we will come to understand more fully in Section II, this encyclopaedist perspective has not weathered the test of time well, though it has left its mark on our culture in many pernicious ways, as we will see in Section III. But the key question for MacIntyre is, given the collapse of encyclopaedia, what version of moral enquiry should come to replace it. He notes two contenders: genealogy and tradition. And where Gifford had the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*,

each of these two contending parties has its own foundation document [as well]. For the [genealogist] it is *Zur Genealogie der Moral* published by Nietzsche in 1887, the year of Adam Gifford's death. What *Zur Genealogie der Moral* provided was not only an argument in favor of, but a paradigm for, the construction of a type of subversive narrative designed to undermine the central assumptions of the Encyclopaedia, both in content and in genre. Where the encyclopaedist aspired to displace the Bible as a canonical book, the genealogist intended to discredit the whole notion of a canon. For the other rival party[– that of tradition –]its charter document is the encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris* published by Pope Leo XIII in 1879, four years after the Ninth Edition commenced publication. *Aeterni Patris* summoned its readers to a renewal of an understanding of intellectual enquiry as the continuation of a specific type of tradition, that which achieved definitive expression in the writings of Aquinas, one the appropriation of which could not only provide the resources for radical criticism of the conception of rationality dominant in nineteenth-century modernity and in the Ninth Edition, but also preserve and justify the

² *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, p. 25

canonical status of the Bible as distinct from, yet hegemonic over, all secular enquiry.³

Encyclopaedia had claimed an absolutist and perspective-less authority for itself. Genealogy might seem at first glance to occupy an opposite extreme, for as MacIntyre sees, “Nietzsche did not advance a new theory against older theories; he proposed an abandonment of theory.”⁴ But there is more to the story, and encyclopaedia and genealogy share more in common than we might have initially suspected:

Descartes symbolized for the nineteenth-century encyclopaedist a declaration of independence by reason from the particular bonds of any particular moral and religious community. It is on this view of the essence of rationality that its objectivity is inseparable from its freedom from the partialities of all such communities. It is to allegiance to reason as such, impersonal, impartial, disinterested, uniting, and universal, that the encyclopaedist summons his or her readers and hearers. And it is of course this very same conception of reason as universal and disinterested that the genealogist rejects, so that genealogist and encyclopaedist agree in framing what they take to be both exclusive and exhaustive alternatives: *Either* reason is thus impersonal, universal, and disinterested *or* it is the unwitting representative of particular interests, masking their drive to power by its false pretensions to neutrality and disinterestedness.

What this alternative conceals from view is a third possibility, [that of tradition,] the possibility that reason can only move towards being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded, is a condition for

³ *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, p. 25

⁴ *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, p. 49

genuinely rational enquiry and more especially for moral and theological enquiry.⁵

In what does such tradition, this radical alternative to the commonalities of encyclopaedia and genealogy, consist? In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defines this his own version of moral enquiry thusly:

A living tradition... is [a] historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part[.]⁶

This Socratic-Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding is strikingly different from the projects of both Gifford and Nietzsche. Says MacIntyre,

Such conceptions are of course deeply at odds both with the ethos of encyclopaedia and with that of genealogy. The encyclopaedists had learned from Kant that to be rational is to think for oneself, to emancipate oneself from the tutelage of authority. Any notion that I can only think adequately by and for myself insofar as I do so in the company of others, to some of whom authority must be accorded, is quite alien to the encyclopaedist, as it is indeed also to the genealogist, who cannot but see in such authority the exercise of a subjugating power which has to be resisted. Moreover, the exercise of authority is related to temporality in a way that is at odds with both the encyclopaedist's and the genealogist's modes.⁷

⁵ *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, p. 60

⁶ *After Virtue*, p. 222

⁷ *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, p. 64

If the traditionalist is correct, as indeed MacIntyre believes him to be, then it follows that, in ethics,

what we have to aspire to is not a perfect theory, one necessarily to be assented to by any rational being, because invulnerable or almost invulnerable to objections, [as the encyclopaedist mistakenly believes,] but rather the best theory to emerge so far in the history of this class of theories. So we ought to aspire to provide the best theory so far as to what type of theory the best theory so far must be: no more, but no less.⁸

One final comment on the nature of tradition, by way of clarification, and we will move on:

We are apt to be misled here by the ideological uses to which the concept of a tradition has been put by conservative political theorists.

Characteristically such theorists have followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. Both contrasts obfuscate. For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic. Moreover when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose.⁹

With the scene thus set, with this admittedly cursory but hopefully sufficient treatment of the competing versions of moral enquiry – encyclopaedia, genealogy, and tradition – in mind, let us move on to MacIntyre's historical

⁸ *After Virtue*, p. 270

⁹ *After Virtue*, p. 222

criticism, situating ourselves in relation to the moral dramas enacted long before we set foot on the world-stage.

II. After Virtue:

The Repudiation of Tradition and the Crisis of Moral Thought

MacIntyre begins the first book of the quartet, *After Virtue*, with the following hypothetical:

Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on the scientists. Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all that they possess are fragments: a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance; parts of theories unrelated either to the other bits and pieces of theory which they possess or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half-chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred. Nonetheless all these fragments are reembodyed in a set of practices which go around under the revived name of physics, chemistry, and biology. Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary theory, and phlogiston theory, although they possess only a very partial knowledge of each. Children learn by heart the surviving portions of the periodic table and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid. Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all. For everything that they do and say conforms to certain canons of consistency and coherence and those contexts which would be needed to make sense of what they are doing have been lost, perhaps irretrievably.

In such a culture men would use expressions such as 'neutrino', 'mass', 'specific gravity', 'atomic weight' in systematic and often interrelated ways which would resemble in lesser or greater degrees the ways in which such expressions had been used in earlier times before scientific knowledge had been so largely lost. But many of the beliefs presupposed by the use of these expressions would have been lost and there would appear to be an element of arbitrariness and even of choice in their application which would appear very surprising to us. What would appear to be rival and competing premises for which no further argument could be given would abound. Subjectivist theories of science would appear and would be criticized by those who held that the notion of truth embodied in what they took to be science was incompatible with subjectivism.

This imaginary possible world is very like one that some science fiction writers have constructed. We may describe it as a world in which the language of natural science, or parts of it at least, continues to be used but is in a grave state of disorder. We may notice that if in this imaginary world analytical philosophy were to flourish, it would never reveal the fact of this disorder. For the techniques of analytical philosophy are essentially descriptive and descriptive of the language of the present at that. The analytical philosopher would be able to elucidate the conceptual structures of what was taken to be scientific thinking and discourse in the imaginary world in precisely the way that he elucidates the conceptual structures of natural science as it is.

Nor again would phenomenology or existentialism be able to discern anything wrong. All the structures of intentionality would be what they are now. The task of supplying an epistemological basis for these false simulacra of natural science would not differ in phenomenological terms from the task as it is presently envisaged. A

Husserl or a Merleau-Ponty would be as deceived as a Strawson or a Quine.

What is the point of constructing this imaginary world inhabited by fictitious pseudo-scientists and real, genuine philosophy? The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.¹⁰

MacIntyre spends the remainder of *After Virtue* vindicating this central claim, namely that

the precepts that are thus uttered [in contemporary moral discourse] were once at home in, and intelligible in terms of, a context of practical beliefs and of supporting habits of thought, feeling, and action, a context that has since been lost, a context in which moral judgments were understood as governed by impersonal standards justified by a shared conception of the human good.¹¹

In other words, looking back to the Gifford Lectures, what we find ourselves confronted with is an unsuccessful attempt – or, more accurately, a number of incommensurable unsuccessful attempts – at encyclopaedic moral enquiry, a questing after an absolute justification of ethics that will necessarily be assented to by all rational agents, and this from the ranks of utilitarians, contractarians, Humeans, Kantians, neonomists, and the list goes on. Having

¹⁰ *After Virtue*, p. 1-2

¹¹ *After Virtue*, p. ix

repudiated tradition-dependence as a necessary epistemological starting point and the content of the specific tradition that preceded them in particular, the moral thinkers of the past half-millennium or so have assigned themselves an impossible task, and by framing their enquiry without reference to that tradition against which their encyclopaedic programme is a reaction, they have simultaneously blinded themselves to its impossibility:

[Hume, Kant, Diderot, Smith, Kierkegaard] – all reject any teleological view of human nature, any view of man as having an essence which defines his true end. But to understand this is to understand why their project of finding a basis for morality had to fail. The moral scheme which forms the historical background to their thought had... a structure which required three elements: untutored human nature, man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*, and the moral precepts which enable him to pass from one state to the other[, the virtues]. But the joint effect of the secular rejection of both Protestant and Catholic theology and the scientific and philosophical rejection of Aristotelianism was to eliminate any notion of man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*. Since the whole point of ethics – both as a theoretical and a practical discipline – is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true end, the elimination of any notion of essential human nature and with it the abandonment of any notion of a *telos* leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two remaining elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear. There is on the one hand a certain content for morality: a set of injunctions deprived of their teleological context. There is on the other hand a certain view of untutored-human-nature-as-it-is. Since the moral injunctions were originally at home in a scheme in which their purpose was to correct, improve, and educate that human nature, they are clearly not going to be such as could be deduced from true statements about human nature or justified in some other way by appealing to its characteristics. The injunctions of morality, thus understood, are likely to be ones that human

nature, thus understood, has strong tendencies to disobey. Hence the eighteenth-century moral philosophers engaged in what was an inevitably unsuccessful project; for they did indeed attempt to find a rational basis for their moral beliefs in a particular understanding of human nature, while inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a conception of human nature on the other which had been expressly designed to be discrepant with each other. This discrepancy was not removed by their revised beliefs about human nature. They inherited incoherent fragments of a once coherent scheme of thought and action and, since they did not recognize their own peculiar historical and cultural situation, they could not recognize the impossible and quixotic character of their self-appointed task.¹²

In the wake of the failure of the Enlightenment project – and by this late date its failure should be patently obvious to anyone keeping score –, what ethical options are open to us? As in the competing versions of moral enquiry, so also in their moral conclusions, remaining for ethicists is a stark choice between Aristotle on the one hand and Nietzsche on the other:

What then the conjunction of philosophical and historical argument reveals is that *either* one must follow through the aspirations and the collapse of the different versions of the Enlightenment project until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic *or* one must hold that the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken, but should never have been commended in the first place. There is no third alternative and more particularly there is no alternative provided by those thinkers at the heart of the contemporary conventional curriculum in moral philosophy, Hume, Kant, and Mill. It is no wonder that the

¹² *After Virtue*, p. 54-55

teaching of ethics is so often destructive and skeptical in its effects upon the minds of those taught.¹³

It is that cheerful note which will take us from MacIntyre's assessment of the past to his tradition-based criticism of the present.

¹³ *After Virtue*, p. 118

III. Liberalism Contra Virtue:

What the Enlightenment Failure Has Bequeathed to Us

John Courtney Murray famously identified four American political types: the traditionalist, who puts his faith in the church but not in the modern state; the conservative, who puts his faith in both; the liberal, who puts his faith in the state but not the church; and the radical who puts his faith in neither. On this grid, MacIntyre falls decidedly in the traditionalist box.

“Patriotism cannot be what it was,” MacIntyre comments in *After Virtue*, “because we lack in the fullest sense a *patria*.”¹⁴ What could he mean? Recall that, for MacIntyre, all moral reasoning, both theoretical and practical, necessarily takes place within the context of tradition.

Theories of justice and practical rationality confront us as aspects of traditions, allegiance to which requires the living out of some more or less systematically embodied form of human life, each with its own specific modes of social relationship, each with its own canons of interpretation and explanation in respect of the behavior of others, each with its own evaluative practices.¹⁵

Thus as he argues in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, while we may be able to appreciate generally the correctness of Aristotle’s moral philosophy from our peculiar post-Enlightenment position,

it is only insofar as those features of the *polis* which provide an essential context for the exercise of Aristotelian justice and for the action-guiding and interpretative uses of the Aristotelian schema of practical reasoning can be reembodyed in one’s own life and that of one’s time and place that one can [actually *be*] an Aristotelian.¹⁶

¹⁴ *After Virtue*, p. 254

¹⁵ *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 391

¹⁶ *Id.*

What then of our present-day social and political structures? Here MacIntyre parses no words: “What liberalism promotes is a kind of institutional order that is inimical to the construction and sustaining of the types of communal relationship required for the best kind of human life.”¹⁷ And contra the familiar narrative spun by the contemporary right in their attempt to claim for themselves the moral high ground, MacIntyre believes that both sides of our political aisle share in this depravity. More than that, they share in it in almost exactly the same manner.

What is crucial is that on which the contending parties agree, namely that there are only two alternative modes of social life open to us, one in which the free and arbitrary choices of individuals are sovereign and one in which the bureaucracy is sovereign, precisely so that it may limit the free and arbitrary choices of individuals.¹⁸

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre looks in particular to the rival and incommensurable political philosophies of John Rawls and Robert Nozick, heroes of many on the contemporary left and right respectively, and again to their common errors:

It is, from both [their] standpoints, as though we had been shipwrecked on an uninhabited island with a group of other individuals, each of whom is a stranger to me and to all the others. What have to be worked out are rules which will safeguard each one of us maximally in such a situation... Thus Rawls and Nozick articulate with great power a shared view which envisages entry into social life as – at least ideally – the voluntary act of at least potentially rational individuals with prior interests who have to ask the question “What kind of social contract with others is it reasonable for me to enter into?” Not surprisingly it is a consequence of this that their views exclude any account of human community in which the notion of

¹⁷ *After Virtue*, xv

¹⁸ *After Virtue*, 35

desert in relation to contributions to the common tasks of that community in pursuing shared goods could provide the basis for judgments about virtue and injustice.¹⁹

MacIntyre characterizes the classical alternative to the modern nation-state as follows:

On [the] medieval view, as on the ancient, there is no room for the modern liberal distinction between law and morality, and there is no room for this because of what the medieval kingdom shares with the *polis*, as Aristotle conceived it. Both are conceived as communities in which men in company pursue *the* human good and not merely as – what the modern liberal state takes itself to be – providing the arena in which each individual seeks his or her own private good.²⁰

In *Dependent Rational Animals*, the capstone to the quartet and its shortest installment, MacIntyre has this to say about the blind spot in contemporary political theory and practice:

Adam Smith's contrast between self-interested market behavior on the one hand and altruistic, benevolent behavior on the other, obscures from view just those types of activity in which the goods to be achieved are neither mine-rather-than-others' nor others'-rather-than-mine, but instead are goods that can only be mine insofar as they are also those of others, that are genuinely common goods, as the goods of networks of giving and receiving are.²¹

¹⁹ *After Virtue*, p. 251

²⁰ *After Virtue*, p. 172

²¹ *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 119

Elsewhere in *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre evokes the central theme of Robert Nisbet's *Quest for Community*, a work to which he makes no explicit reference but with which surely he was familiar, when he writes,

If at this point we turn for assistance [in searching after the common good] to recent social and political philosophy, we will be for the most part disappointed, since with rare exceptions work in that area ignores questions about the common goods of associations and relationships that are intermediate between on the one hand the nation-state and on the other the individual and the nuclear family. Yet it is with just this intermediate area that we shall need to be concerned, since those whose relationships embody both a recognition of the independence of practical reasoners and an acknowledgement of the facts of human dependence, and for whom therefore the virtue of just generosity is a key virtue, presuppose in their activities, explicitly, or more usually implicitly, the sharing of a common good that is constitutive of a type of association that can be realized neither in the forms of the modern state nor in those of the contemporary family.²²

"What's that?" perhaps you're saying. "He means to accuse the family as well, when we've always been assured that strengthening marriage and the family is the cure for all that ails us politically?" Far be it for me to suggest that we should overlook the importance of the family to a flourishing society. But as MacIntyre observes,

Families at their best are forms of association in which children are first nurtured, and then educated for and initiated into the activities of an adult world in which their parents' participatory activities provide them both with resources and models. It follows that the quality of a family is in key part a function of the quality of the relationships of the individual

²² *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 130-131

members of the family to and in a variety of other institutions and associations: workplaces, schools, parishes, sports clubs, trade union branches, adult education classes, and the like. And it is insofar as children learn to recognize and to pursue as their own, and parents and other adult members of the family continue to recognize and to pursue, the goods internal to the practices of which such associations and institutions are the milieu that the goods of family life are realized. The family flourishes only if its social environment also flourishes.²³

Thus family is necessary, but it is also radically insufficient, critically dependent upon the networks in which it is, or at least ought to be, situated:

Generally and characteristically the goods of family life are achieved in and with the goods of various types of local community. And generally and characteristically the common good of a family can only be achieved in the course of achieving the common goods of the local community of which it is a part. It is because of the family's lack of self-sufficiency that the type of common good recognition of which is required by the virtues of acknowledged dependence cannot be achieved within the family, at least insofar as the family is conceived of as a distinct and separate social unit.²⁴

Many have been scandalized by MacIntyre's radical social and political criticism. Having made their peace with at least the overall structure of modern society, even if they join his criticisms as to some of its peripheral failings, such critics have often accused MacIntyre of falling for an unrealistic Utopianism. To this he retorts—and with this quote we shall leave this Section behind, so we might as well go out with a bang—,

²³ *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 133-134

²⁴ *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 134-135

Trying to live by Utopian standards is not Utopian, although it does involve a rejection of the economic goals of advanced capitalism. For the institutional forms through which such a [virtuous] way of life is realized, although economically various, have this in common: they do not promote economic growth and they require some significant degree of insulation from and protection from the forces generated by outside markets. Most importantly, such a society will be inimical to and in conflict with the goals of a consumer society.²⁵

²⁵ *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 145

IV. Another St. Benedict: **Where We Go From Here**

At the beginning of this talk, I promised to look both at and along the moral thought of Alasdair MacIntyre. Thus far we have focused almost exclusively on the former, and necessarily so, because one cannot expect advancement to be fruitful unless we are first clear on our starting point. But in this last section, I would like to try to look along MacIntyre a bit as well, asking what comes next for those who have walked with him thus far, and beginning to grapple with what an answer to that future-oriented question would have to look like.

Recall that for MacIntyre, all flourishing moral discourse and moral living must be grounded in a particular tradition of enquiry, an argument extended across times and places, a drama into which we have been cast and with which we must engage critically if we are to thrive as the essentially moral, tradition-embedded, mutually interdependent, rational animals that we are. But if the argument so far has been correct, then it has been quite some time since such a moral tradition was in proper working order in Western culture at large. Indeed, says MacIntyre, "If [my assessment] is true, we are all already in a state so disastrous that there are no large remedies for it."²⁶ Given this dire state of affairs, and the severe dependence of man upon the state of affairs in which he finds himself, what is a MacIntyrian to do?

In perhaps the most famous passage he ever penned, the last paragraph of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre offers a hopeful prophecy of what comes next:

It is always dangerous to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another; and among the most misleading of such parallels are those which have been drawn between our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark

²⁶ *After Virtue*, p. 5

Ages. Nonetheless certain parallels there are. A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of the *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead – often not recognizing fully what they were doing – was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. 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 the predicament. We are waiting not for Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.²⁷

Commenting on this Benedictine prophecy a quarter of a century later, MacIntyre expanded it thusly:

Benedict's greatness lay in making possible a quite new kind of institution, that of the monastery of prayer, learning, and labor, in which and around which communities could not only survive, but flourish in a period of social and cultural distress... Ours too is a time of waiting for new and unpredictable possibilities of renewal. It is also a time for

²⁷ *After Virtue*, p. 263

resisting as prudently and courageously and justly and temperately as possible the dominant social, economic, and political order of advanced modernity.²⁸

Thus, while no large-scale solutions may be possible at this stage of the game, nevertheless there is reason to hope. “[For when] recurrently the tradition of the virtues is regenerated, it is always in everyday life, it is always through the engagement by plain persons in a variety of practices, including those of making and sustaining families and households, schools, clinics, and local forms of political community.”²⁹

I plead ignorance as to what our next St. Benedict will look like, and perhaps Ross was right this morning to say that too dramatic a withdrawal is neither realistic nor virtuous in our present situation. Perhaps *Fare Forward* — the journal and the community that has formed around it — can be an important step in the right direction. Still we should be humble, if hopeful, in our expectations of the difference we can make.

The one thing I will say is this: despite the fact that it well may take a new Benedict to save us from our age’s present depravity and impending destruction, that is no reason to give up on the St. Benedict we have already. Perhaps the best we can do in awaiting the next Benedict is to enter into the safe havens of the one who came before him.

I know that not all those here are Catholic. But since I’ve just spent probably longer than I should have — sorry again, Peter — harping on the necessarily tradition-embedded nature of moral enquiry, I hope I can speak frankly from within my own tradition of Catholicism to all present, knowing full well that this will be received and judged variously from various vantage points.

There is no way of life more perfect than that of the religious according to the model of St. Benedict, humbly bound to his or her particular religious

²⁸ *After Virtue*, p. xvi

²⁹ *After Virtue*, p. xv

community and to the Church writ-large by vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. There is no vocation more desperately needed today than that of the religious canon, or monk, or nun. Don Colacho in one of his aphorisms says, "In the dismal and suffocating building of the world, the cloister is the space open to the sun and to the air."³⁰ This is as true today as ever before, and more so probably, by contrast to the wailing and grinding of teeth taking place outside its gates.

With all respect for the diverse gifts of the Holy Spirit and for the many different ways of life that God has in store for his children, I urge you in closing, if you have no serious impediment to the pursuit of religious life, do so. I spent the better part of the last half-decade selfishly running from the monastery. If you find yourself in a similar boat, for God's sake, allow grace to prevail. Put off the old man and take up your cross. As MacIntyre's hero Charles Peguy reminds us, there is only one tragedy in life: not to have been a saint. And the saintliest way of life we have open to us is that of the vowed religious.

As an added bonus, I've now managed to find myself an abbey which I hope to one day call home that has a thoroughly MacIntyrian motto: Looking ahead from the vantage point of tradition. Yes, let's.

Thank you.

³⁰ Aphorism #429