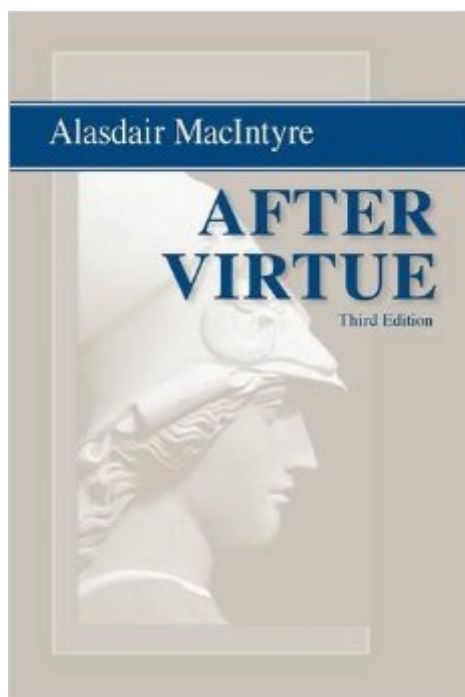


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After Virtue: A Study In Moral Theory, Third Edition



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

I am rather flabbergasted that the only review on this page thus far is one comparing Alisdair MacIntyre to radical islamists. That is rather disconcerting as the author's roots, as others have already noted, come from the 1960-70's British Labour movement and from a very deep, very thought-out Marxism in the context Marxism demands to be judged on, namely, not only as a socio-economic theory, but as a robust and encompassing worldview. When MacIntyre finally decided to officially leave the Communist party, he noticed that his moral critique of Marxism seemed to lack any force, as the only two seemingly possible moral outlooks were that of a rather brass individualism (an odd modern mixture of Kantian and Sartrean thought where each person chooses the moral law for himself) and the tradition he was leaving, i.e. Marxism, which seemed incapable of serious self-critique. (See The MacIntyre Reader). The shrillness of his own protest sent him on a philosophical journey which he continues to go on to this day but we are lucky enough to have collection of his thoughts along the way. After *Virtue* was a tour de force when it hit the shelves roughly 20 years ago. It laid bare the utter incoherence of the use of moral language in societies of "advanced modernity", i.e., modern Europe, the former USSR, and the US. His critique of the various descendents of the Enlightenment, from utilitarians and Nietzscheans, blasted moral philosophy out of its slumber into a field that continues to grow to this day.

MacIntyre's book is a sustained critique of "the modern project." The modern project came about in the 17th and 18th centuries. Thinkers tried to rework ethics and philosophy but in a new way: abandoning the Aristotelian and judeo-Christian ethic, they ended with a schizophrenic autonomy. Man is now seen as an autonomous agent who should further his autonomy but must live in the contradiction with other autonomous agents who also want to protect their autonomy. The modern project is a violent one at its core. The strength of MacIntyre's work is his sustained critique of modernity and the "natural rights" tradition. He reintroduces the concept of "narrative" as an ethical tool. I will highlight the main ideas: The Ghost of "Human Rights" Rights have a highly specific character and are resistant to the idea of universality. The language of rights talk differs from century to century and place to place, at each moment reflecting more the demands of the community rather than the story of humanity. And when rights are attempted to be universal in scope, they reflect, not the needs of humanity, but the agenda of the powered elite. Rights talk can be rehabilitated, but only in terms of local community's narrative. Deconstructing Aristotle Contrary to his critics, MacIntyre is not arguing for a naive return to Aristotle. Rather, he points out the resilience of the Aristotelian tradition and then critiques its shortcomings. He uses Aristotle as a foil against Nietzsche. The importance of virtue at this point is not simply to demonstrate that Aristotle is the last

word in ethics, but to show that it is impossible for consistent moderns to be virtuous. A virtue can only be understood in light of its telos (184). "The" good orders "our" goods.

After Virtue is a landmark. Although some parts can be rather dry, MacIntyre is always carefully building towards his persuasive and often devastating conclusions (for example, that belief in human rights "is one with belief in witches and in unicorns" (69)). Although by no means an easy read, he writes in a personable, sometimes even conversational, way. He also often has a funny grumpy-old-man tone, grumpy about social scientists, managers, therapists and liberals. He writes with seeming mastery of the western tradition. However, he rarely makes citations. For example, in his discussions of Kant he usually does not even mention a text by name, let alone provide citations. When discussing other writers he will sometimes mention a particular book but then supply no or very few citations. Rather, he tends to discuss thinkers in general: the problems they were trying to address, how they failed and how they are historically situated. In outline, his argument is that in the period between 1630 and 1850, morality came to signify a distinct cultural space of rules of conduct which are neither theological nor legal nor aesthetic. Once that understanding of morality became a received doctrine, Northern European Enlightenment thinkers attempted to provide a rational justification for morality (39). However, by freeing morality from teleology (whether Aristotelian or Christian), theism and hierarchy, they in effect undermined any rational foundation or criterion for morality.

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