After "Morality": Alasdair MacIntyre and the Teaching of Ethics

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The University of Notre Dame's recently revised core curriculum does not require that students take a course in ethics. This might be thought ironic. After all, Notre Dame was the home, for the first decade of this century, of one of the most distinguished moral philosophers of our time, Alasdair MacIntyre.[1] But consider this passage from a recent paper of his:

> Ethics has of course been in vogue for quite some time: medical ethics, legal ethics, journalistic ethics, the ethics of this and of that. Whenever there is serious malpractice, the cry goes up: Bring on the teachers of ethics! So courses, programmes, academic appointments, centres, have multiplied. There is now money to be made in ethics, even if not all that much.[2]

The title of the paper from which that quotation is drawn is "The Irrelevance of Ethics." MacIntyre's focus there is business ethics, but he expresses as well his skepticism of "the academic teaching of ethics in general," which he claims "has little or nothing to do with the formation of moral character and is ineffective as an instrument of moral formation."[3] (He contrasts in this regard boarding schools for juvenile offenders and basic training camps for the U.S. Marine Corps.) From his perspective, business ethics has the further strike against it that "its teaching is a dangerous distraction from enquiry into the nature and causes of what *is* morally flawed in our economic institutions and activities."[4]

On second thought, then, Notre Dame's decision not to require students to take a course in ethics might be considered, not ironic, but consistent with MacIntyre's thinking. Away with the ethicists! They are only corruptors of youth, etc.[5] But the story is messier. A closer reading of the last quotation above suggests that MacIntyre's skepticism about teaching ethics is targeted rather than global. For apparently there is an important ethical enquiry to be done, namely, "into the nature and causes of what *is* morally flawed in our economic institutions and activities." MacIntyre's complaint is that this is not done in business ethics courses as they are typically conceived and conducted. The upshot is that it is perhaps fitting that the Notre Dame committee

charged with examining ethics in the curriculum, though it did not argue for a required course, concluded by indicating ambivalence.[6]

This iteration of the forum "Ethics in Focus" takes as its subject the relevance of MacIntyre's work to the teaching of ethics to college students (and, in one instance, medical students). The contributors have been asked to focus in particular on the most recent of MacIntyre's books, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*, published in 2016, a year after "The Irrelevance of Ethics." One of MacIntyre's theses in that book is that "academic philosophy at some point in its past history took a wrong turning, marched off in the wrong direction, set itself the task, if I may borrow a metaphor, of climbing the wrong mountain."[7] The metaphor is borrowed from Derek Parfit, who does not appear by name in the book.[8] Parfit's gigantic, two-volume *On What Matters* argues for the claim that "Kantian Contractualism implies Rule Consequentialism."[9] Against what he characterizes as the widely-held belief that there are "deep disagreements between Kantians, Contractualists, and Consequentialists," Parfit submits that in fact "[t]hese people are climbing the same mountain on different sides."[10] Interestingly, MacIntyre does not appear in the index of either volume of *On What Matters*—evidence that, while Parfit and MacIntyre belong to the same discipline, they understand and practice it very differently.

The opening chapter of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* constructs an argument between expressivism and what MacIntyre terms NeoAristotelianism over evaluative judgments and the nature of practical reason. Toward the end of the chapter, MacIntyre acknowledges that, "from the standpoint of most […] academic practitioners of contemporary moral philosophy," this argument must seem "not just mistaken but absurd."[11] For it neglects "the work of the most influential contributors" to the discipline—contributors like Parfit—and does not address "most of what they take to be its central problems."[12] (Peruse the table of contents of *On What Matters*.) But MacIntyre has an answer to readers puzzled by the idiosyncrasy of his project:

> The largest single difference between [most academic practitioners of contemporary moral philosophy] and me is perhaps this, that they find what they identify as the subject matter of their enquiry as unproblematic, while I do not. That subject matter they take to be Morality, a set of rules, ideals, and judgments concerning duties and obligations that are to be distinguished from religious, legal, political, and aesthetic rules, ideals, and judgments.[13]

MacIntyre explains that he capitalizes Morality in order to distinguish it from the moralities—the sets of rules, ideals, and judgments—studied by anthropologists. But he goes on to claim that Morality is in fact "the morality of advanced modernity," rather than what most academic practitioners of contemporary moral philosophy take it to be, namely, "a set of impersonal rules, entitled to the assent of any rational agent whatsoever," which for MacIntyre is only the most basic of its "pretensions."[14] And this is not all. According to MacIntyre, contemporary philosophical theorizing about Morality, "instead of illuminating the realities with which we have to deal as rational agents," not only "misleads and distorts," but even "has the social function of misleading and distorting."[15]

The puzzle MacIntyre asks us to consider is why the norms of Morality—more or less a strict Kantianism with allowance for reasonable consequentialist excuses—enjoy a generally recognized authority when its "most acute theorists, utilitarian, Kantian, and contractarian, remain in permanent disagreement" about the basis of that authority.[16] In other words, there is or at least appears to be a general consensus about the norms of Morality, a consensus that makes a synthesizing project like Parfit's project conceivable.[17] But how can this consensus be when even projects like Parfit's multiply rather than resolve disagreements about what reason there is "for adopting the impersonal standpoint of Morality or […] according an overriding importance to its claims"?[18] MacIntyre's answer is that the norms of Morality, which Parfit takes for granted in the elaborate and even fantastical thought experiments he uses to develop his synthesis,[19] are embedded within and integral to the economic and political systems of late modernity. *On What Matters*, to use the same example, is quasi-otherworldly in its abstraction from economic, political, and cultural realities. The cover photographs of St. Petersburg without any people are telling in this regard. The conflicts and complexities of late modernity are out of the picture, literally and figuratively. Against this background, recall MacIntyre's criticism of business ethics as "a dangerous distraction from enquiry into the nature and causes of what *is* morally flawed in our economic institutions and activities."[20] On MacIntyre's account, philosophical theorizing like Parfit's is no better. It has the social function of misleading and distorting by abstracting and thereby distracting from the social and political order that is its home.

Readers should go to *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* to decide for themselves whether they find persuasive MacIntyre's account of the "structuring of desires" by what he terms the ethics-of-

the-state, the ethics-of-the-market (both "parodies of ethics"), and Morality.[21] Suffice it to say here that MacIntyre himself finds expressivism "convincing" about Morality: "each contending party's Moral judgments give expression to underlying prerational commitments, to attitudes and sentiments that find expression in the unargued premises of [the parties'] arguments."[22] NeoAristotelianism, he recognizes, has problems and challenges of its own—new for MacIntyre, Bernard Williams figures as a formidable critic as well as an ally[23]—but MacIntyre counts as among its advantages that it is grounded in the study of moralities,[24] or otherwise put the *practices* of "plain persons," who appear so often in the book that they should have had an entry in the index. Attention to practice, MacIntyre proposes, has "as one of its outcomes a conception of the practical life as a life of enquiry whose evaluative conclusions at each stage of that life accord with or fail to accord with the facts concerning human flourishing, that is, are true or false," over and against both expressivism and the quasi-realism that has succeeded it.[25] As MacIntyre elsewhere puts the same point more simply, "it is only at the level of practice that we can become Aristotelians" who recognize both standards of goodness independent of our feelings, attitudes, and choices and our need for the virtues in order to flourish as human beings in the particular situations of our lives.[26]

MacIntyre presents Thomas Aquinas as a teacher of teachers. According to MacIntyre, the first and second parts of the second part of the *Summa theologiae* "provide […] instruction as to how to educate in practical reasoning."[27] MacIntyre himself may be considered a teacher of teachers. As a review of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* remarks, "The methodology of contemporary moral philosophy is almost as important an issue for MacIntyre as the substantive ethical theory he defends. He thinks that much of what we produce in the academy, in the field of moral and political philosophy, is sterile and insignificant."[28] And he means for us to do better, both in print and in the classroom.

Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity is studded with asides about moral education. For example, MacIntyre is emphatic about the need for what he calls sociological self-knowledge: knowledge and understanding of one's roles and relationships and "what in those roles and relationships is consonant with the exercise of rational agency and what through the contingencies of an imposed set of structures inhibits or distorts that exercise."[29] He notes that "[e]ducation into the virtues consists in key part in making those so educated aware in detail of the possibilities of error and of the errors to which each of them will be particularly inclined," at which point he discusses the recent work of several social psychologists.[30] He comments that "[a]n education focused too

exclusively on skills, on means, leaves [students] without an adequate sense of the ends that should be theirs as contrasted with the ends that others for their own purposes impose on them,"[31] and he laments that "[t]he education of [students'] preferences is taken to be no part of their schooling."[32] Finally, he states, parenthetically, that "[o]ne test of whether a particular academic course in ethics is or is not being taught in a morally serious way is whether or not its students are taught that a close reading of certain novels is indispensable to their learning […]."[33]

Those reflections seem to permit the conclusion that the academic teaching of ethics, decried in "The Irrelevance of Ethics," is not purposeless or hopeless—that even a general education ethics course in a core curriculum might do some good for its students in the hands of a studied practitioner, in any event one who has learned from MacIntyre. But what such a course would look like and involve, other than perhaps the reading of certain novels or at least the injunction to read certain novels, is by no means clear from MacIntyre's book. To be more specific, after Morality, what would a business ethics course or a bioethics course look like and involve? A more fundamental question is of course whether a teacher of ethics has reason to reform her or his courses in light of MacIntyre's criticisms of Morality, which is also to ask whether that criticism, and MacIntyre's own NeoAristotelianism, are persuasive.

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Notes

1. MacIntyre remains, in his nineties, a research fellow at the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Irrelevance of Ethics," in *Virtue and the Economy: Essays on Morality and Markets*, eds. Andrius Bielskis and Kelvin Knight (New York: Routledge, 2015), 7–21, at 8.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Compare Elizabeth Anscombe, "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt Youth?" in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, eds. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2005), 161–167. Anscombe answers no, Oxford moral philosophy does not corrupt youth, but her reason is that youth are already corrupted by the times, with which "Oxford moral philosophy is perfectly in tune" so that it "might be called the philosophy of the flattery of [the] spirit" of the times (163, 167).

6. See "Report of the Catholic Mission Focus Group," October 11, 2015, 20, recommending "incentives to increase courses in ethics" and requesting "the oversight of the core to include a review of the extent to which we are succeeding in educating students in ethics," available at

http://curriculumreview.nd.edu/assets/183213/nd_core_curriculum_review_committee_catholic_mission_focus_group_final_report.pdf.

7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 34–35.

8. But see also the allusion on 66.

9. Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, ed. Samuel Scheffler, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 417.

10. Ibid., 419.

11. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 64.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 64–65.

14. Ibid., 65, 68. See also 77, where he characterizes "'Morality'" (here in scare quotes) as "the presently dominant moral system in advanced societies, which [contemporary philosophical theorizing] presents as morality as such," and 114–115, where "the name 'Morality'" is given to "the moral system peculiar to and characteristic of early and late capitalist modernity."

15. Ibid., 78. See the following discussion of Hume's moral philosophy, 79–85.

16. Ibid., 119.

17. See Ibid., 136.

18. Ibid. See also 138.

19. MacIntyre comments, "Technicolor examples […] are by now stock cases in many moral philosophy classes." See ibid., 116.

20. MacIntyre, "The Irrelevance of Ethics," 8.

21. See MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 124–136. See 128 for the characterization of the ethics-of-the-state and the ethics-of-the-market as "parodies of ethics."

22. Ibid., 140–141. Consider in this regard the app for ethical decision making developed by the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University. See https://legacy.scu.edu/ethics/ethical-decision/. The app asks its user to evaluate a possible course of action in terms of its utility, its bearing on others' rights, its justice (that is, whether it gives each person her or his due), its effects on the community as a whole, and the character traits it exhibits or is likely to develop. After the user has "weigh[ed] each perspective," the app gives the proposed action a score on a scale of 0–100 and judges it as "probably ethical," "questionable," or "not liv[ing] up to your values and criteria."

23. Williams figures as a critic for his questions posed to Aristotle's ethics; see ibid., 158–165 and 220–231. He figures as an ally for his criticism of what he called, peculiarly, "the peculiar institution" of morality. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), chapter 10, 174–196.

24. See *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 117–118 for the contrast between NeoAristotelianism and Morality.

25. Ibid., 40.

26. See Alasdair MacIntyre, "On Having Survived the Academic Moral Philosophy of the Twentieth Century," in *What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Fran O'Rourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 17–34, at 27.

27. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 89.

28. Richard Kraut, review of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, January 17, 2018, available at https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/ethics-in-the-conflicts-of-modernity-an-essay-on-desire-practical-reasoning-and-narrative/.

29. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 211. Compare his paper "Social Structures and Their Threats to Moral Agency," *Philosophy* 74 (1999): 311–329.

30. Ibid., 191.

31. Ibid., 173.

32. Ibid., 174.

33. Ibid., 219. The paragraph that this sentence concludes references Jane Austen, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Iris Murdoch, and D.H. Lawrence.