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Desire, Conflict, and Tradition in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*

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1. Introduction

In the Myth of Er at the end of Plato's *Republic*, we are permitted to pick from many forms of life for our return to the world. The order in which we are permitted to choose is given to us by lot (necessity), but our judgment is displayed by our choice of reincarnated form (virtue, or the lack thereof).[1]

Plato uses a narrative within a narrative to show the limitations of polities governed by substantial knowledge of the good. The person blessed with the first choice of lives in the netherworld was similarly blessed on earth by citizenship in the best of regimes. Both blessings were conferred on him by chance and not merit. Er recounts that even given the fortune of a good education and happiness on earth due to participation in the best regime, and the opportunity to choose first among all souls, this person makes the worst choice. He "immediately chose the greatest tyranny, and due to folly and gluttony, chose without having considered everything adequately; and it escaped his own notice that eating his own children and other evils were fated to be a part of that life."[2] Even though he was "one of those who had come from heaven, having lived in an orderly regime," he participated in virtue only through "habit" and not by understanding. In fact, "not the least number of those" who chose tyranny came from such regimes, "because they were unpracticed in labors."

Alasdair MacIntyre departs from other critics of modernity—including Adrian Vermeule, Patrick Deneen, and to a lesser extent, Pierre Manent—because, in his attempt to retrieve the resources of pre-modernity, he prioritizes the importance of learning from the "labors" of its less than perfect account of the human good in order to choose wisely in the post-modern present. Like those interlocutors, MacIntyre rejects the idea that there is any value neutrality inherent in liberalism, a suggestion MacIntyre has found misguided from his Marxist days onward.[3] However, unlike other critics of modernity, he affirms the separation of the state from visions of the good life: "For the contemporary state could not adopt a point of view on the human good as its own without to a significant degree distorting, degrading, and discrediting that point of view. It would put those values to the service of its own political and economic power and so degrade and discredit

them." As examples, MacIntyre points to two regimes whose hegemony rested on the power of the Roman Catholic Church: Franco's Spain and de Valera's Ireland.[4]

In this essay, I argue that MacIntyre's thinking rescues us from reactionary, anti-liberal strains of contemporary political thought and contemporary politics that do not know how to accommodate viewpoint diversity in the ethical life. In order to establish this claim, first, I briefly review what I call the "After Virtue Project," in which I present what is distinctive about MacIntyre's critique of liberalism. Then, I turn to the role of conflict in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. MacIntyre draws attention in this work to what many contemporary critics of modernity do not want to admit. Conflicts about the final human good are "interminable," or as he says elsewhere in this work "philosophical theories are only rarely, if ever, refutable by knock-down arguments."[5]

MacIntyre's decision to make his latest, and perhaps last, major contribution to philosophy an explanation of the role that conflict plays in the ethical life provides his most complete answer to what the St. Benedict he urged us to wait for in *After Virtue* looks like. For MacIntyre, Benedict does not escape the world or withdraw from modernity in the face of conflict, but takes it in and responds to it. Conflict appears on at least three levels in MacIntyre's thought. There is the familiar conflict within us, namely, the conflict that our (sometimes warring) desires might cause. There is conflict that we encounter in the form of obstacles presented by events, society, or other persons. Finally, there is the conflict among traditions that currently manifests in the apparently interminable disagreements of modernity. The flourishing of the Aristotelian/Thomistic tradition itself is indebted to conflict, whether it be the kind of productive conflict evidenced by Thomas's synthesis of Aristotle, his Islamic interpreters, St. Paul, and Augustine,[6] or the uncoupling of many of Aristotle's benighted prejudices from the structure of his thought.[7]

2. The "After Virtue Project" as a Unique Critique of Modernity

Recently, Patrick Deneen has provocatively argued that liberalism fails precisely through the achievement of its goals. In *Why Liberalism Failed,* Deneen claims that, "[a]s liberalism has 'become more fully itself' […], it has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims yet realizations of liberal ideology."[8]

Deneen explicitly acknowledges that any anti-liberal political program must admit liberalism's accomplishments and refrain from proposing any simple return to the past.[9] In this way, he

resembles MacIntyre. However, as an example of the political arrangement he envisions, Deneen endorses the kinds of small communities detailed in Rod Dreher's *Benedict Option,* a book named after MacIntyre's invocation of St. Benedict at the end of *After Virtue*.[10] By contrast, MacIntyre has distanced himself from the *Benedict Option* as an interpretation of his political project.[11] Further, whatever regime MacIntyre envisions as fitting, he emphasizes, as we have seen, the importance of some amount of state neutrality when it comes to the question of the good life:

> So by a very different route we have arrived at very much the same conclusion as that reached both by classical liberals and by modern liberals: the state must not be allowed to impose any one particular conception of the human good or identify one such conception with its own interests and causes. It must afford tolerance to a diversity of standpoints. But liberals generally have arrived at these conclusions because they believe either that the state ought to be neutral between different rival conceptions of the good or that states ought actively to promote the liberty and autonomy of individuals in making their own choices. I have argued by contrast first that the contemporary state is not and cannot be evaluatively neutral, and secondly that it is just because of the ways in which the state is not evaluatively neutral that it cannot generally be trusted to promote any worthwhile set of values, including those of autonomy and liberty.[12]

For MacIntyre, it seems, learning from modernity involves cultivating a modicum of the institutional neutrality that Deneen sees as fundamentally disruptive of good politics.

Like Deneen, Adrian Vermeule shares with MacIntyre a concern for the ravages of the market on society, yet unlike Deneen he also shares with MacIntyre an interest in conflict. More radical than Deneen, Vermeule claims that all conflict is ultimately "theological." Consequently, liberalism's most primary problem is "that its anti-authoritarian ethos of belief, its compulsion to celebrate the overcoming of political rule, is ultimately inconsistent with its own claim to rule." Liberalism cannot recognize that it is itself "sacramental,"[13] requiring a faith in its authority that its privileging of intellectual skepticism conceals.

Unlike Deneen, Vermeule envisions a politics much more imperial in its scope, welcoming the "providential" fact that liberalism, despite itself, has prepared a state capable of great tasks, as a

legacy to bequeath to a new and doubtless very different future. According to Vermeule, "The vast bureaucracy created by liberalism in pursuit of a mirage of depoliticized governance may, by the invisible hand of Providence, be turned to new ends, becoming the great instrument with which to restore a substantive politics of the good."[14] Such a politics turns to the *ragion di stato* tradition studied by Carl Schmitt, a tradition the aim of which "was to elaborate natural principles by which a ruler could secure the threefold hallmarks of common good, 'abundance, peace, and justice,' and thereby secure his own 'firm rule over people'—Giovanni Botero's famous definition of the 'state.'"[15]

With the most nuance of the alternative critics of modernity we are considering, Pierre Manent characterizes the modern experiment as lacking the ability to satisfy the deepest human longings, in part because it privileges equality too greatly. According to Manent, the political needs glory to thrive[16]—the kind of glory that is incompatible with the humility privileged by MacIntyre in his account of Aquinas.[17] Notably, Manent accuses MacIntyre of being insufficiently political,[18] which reflects a difference between the men on the role of humility in politics—a difference that is evident in MacIntyre's critique of the *megalopsychos,* the magnanimous man.[19] Modernity, according to Manent, suffers from the fact that it suppresses the two greatest human inclinations: the desire for the transcendent, embodied most perfectly by the church as an empire, and the desire for the "common thing," or the political, particularly as represented by the ancient Greek polis.[20] The suppression of these impulses is a symptom of one of modernity's primary aims: the triumph of the many over the few.[21]

Like other critics of liberalism, MacIntyre views modern morality as frustrating many of human being's most fundamental longings. However, unlike other critics, he recognizes the extent to which practices that form virtues are instantiations of times and places, and that it is difficult to disentangle pre-modern political enterprises from their prejudices.[22] It turns out that the conflict that occurs when rival conceptions of the good, in theory or in practice, clash is part of what enables the separation of prudence from prejudice. This ability to balance the universal and the particular makes MacIntyre more subtle than other critics of modernity.

Moved by the question of the apparently interminable philosophical conflict of the contemporary world, MacIntyre undertook a fuller description of what the *After Virtue* thesis entails, defending and modifying his work.[23] Through this inquiry, he embraced Thomistic Aristotelianism. Yet once he recognized the answers to the questions posed in *After Virtue* in

Aquinas's work, he was confronted with a difficulty: How does one persuade a hostile world, what he calls "the culture of advanced modernity," to accept a moral philosophy toward which it bears nothing but animosity? And how does one make a philosophy that is situated in a particular historical and cultural context translatable to a different time? For answers, he turned to the process of his own philosophical inquiry.

Consequently, MacIntyre's work since 1981 may be divided into a diagnostic phase, where he examines contemporary moral philosophy as undergoing an epistemological crisis, and a prescriptive phase, where he responds to this epistemological crisis using the resources of his own philosophical journey, traditional Thomism, and the most salient points of the Nietzschean critique. The subsequent "After Virtue Project" attempts to rescue not just moral philosophy, but the world of "plain persons," from the disaster MacIntyre perceives in the culture of advanced modernity.

In *After Virtue,* MacIntyre argues that "in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in [… a] state of grave disorder."[24] The reader famously comes to a crossroads. Nietzsche correctly questions the obligatory nature of a morality of rules, rather than a morality of fulfillment. Yet, if the Aristotelian conception of reason and telos is recoverable, Nietzsche is not right to suppose morality is dead along with God. One must concede either that the Enlightenment era's rejection of Aristotelianism was misguided, or that morality is just a matter of perspective. MacIntyre decidedly opts for the former. *After Virtue* famously concludes with the invocation of "another St. Benedict" and a call to readers, both plain and learned, to launch a "stubborn, persevering, and hopeful but realistic effort to re-create in adverse social and political circumstances the perennial conditions for the good life."[25]

MacIntyre's adherence to Aristotelian Thomism is earliest dated at 1985, but the seeds of his contemporary theoretical position are present from his youth. His concern for incommensurability grew out of his early experience of the world as a reflective young man caught between warring traditions. A capacity for belief as well as a capacity for negative critique is evident within his account of his intellectual life. He spent his youth immersed in a strong Gaelic oral tradition that emphasized the importance of roles, loyalty, and narrative. In contrast, he simultaneously experienced a culture of "bourgeois" values, competitive learning, and worldly success.[26] Plato's philosophy persuaded him to abhor contradiction, but at the same time his undergraduate studies increased his inability to think within one coherent tradition. Though he had formerly embraced

Christianity on some level, he could no longer sustain belief in God. Once incapable of thinking within the confines of a unified tradition, the dictates of faith appeared arbitrary and purposeless.[27]

At first lights, the constraints of a particular mode of thought as lived and experienced by particular groups can appear destructive to independent thinking, yet MacIntyre's personal experience of confusion and incommensurability led him to embrace traditions of inquiry later on in his career. It is also very possible that the appeal of a unified tradition drew him to his first meta-narrative, Marxism. His struggle with Marxism exposed for him the weaknesses of closed systems of thought and emphasized the importance of listening and responding to critics.[28]

3. Productive Conflict and the Role of Desire

I have noted that MacIntyre considers productive conflict an important catalyst for right human judgment, in contrast to other critics of liberalism. Like the soul in Plato's myth of Er who chooses the life of the tyrant because his desire was never transformed through "labors," critics of modernity whose inquiry stops at depicting it as a destroyer of virtue or greatness overlook the importance of embedding themselves in practices of enquiry that can disentangle what is perennial about human desire from what is only conventional and even from what is "masked" by human desire as truth.[29]

Doing so requires asking deeper questions about what desires for the good modernity seeks to satisfy, how our particular contexts condition those desires, and how the desires influence our ability to think about what is good. It also requires asking how pre-modern phases of Western development failed to account for, or even possibly distorted, human desires. An important part of that process of inquiry is beginning to ask in what ways systems of thought are responses to human desire, even while they create and condition human desire. On this view Marxism, liberalism, and what MacIntyre refers to as "Morality" are all attempts to answer human desire that end up disfiguring or repressing it.[30]

How does engaging in the conflict of traditions of inquiry lead to the transformation of desire that enable to us to move toward wisdom in understanding the good life? MacIntyre identifies three phases: the rehearsal of objections from other traditions, the reply to objections from other traditions (and if necessary the synthesis of what is useful in those traditions to one's own), and the presentation of how one's tradition better satisfies the concerns expressed by the original objection.[31] According to MacIntyre, an important part of the ethics of politics is to create the

conditions for the practices and enquiries that shape and educate desire and help us to pose our questions in wise ways. These conditions are necessarily open to conflict if they are to remain healthy. On this account, conflict is constitutive of truth in inquiry and practice. If there is such a thing as the primary precepts of natural law, explaining why it is the case that the discovery and practice of these precepts is so difficult in modernity is essential. Aquinas himself considered such failure "rare and exceptional," but it is clear that moral disagreement is extensive and characteristic of modernity.[32]

The dynamic nature of inquiry about the good comports with MacIntyre's characterization of tradition as "an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental arguments are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict," internal conflict between adherents of the same tradition and external conflict with critics.[33] Traditions of inquiry are not merely theoretical, because every articulation of the human good (even the ones that suggest there is no human good) requires imagining "what allegiance to it amounts to or would amount to in practice."[34] It is often in questions of practice that members of disparate traditions bump up against one another, because their disagreements about practice may reflect deeper disagreements about the good.

How communities respond to such conflict is essential not just to social stability but to the health of traditions themselves. Communities that experience disagreement must conduct their conflict in such a way that they avoid two pitfalls: (1) the "evil of suppression, of thinking that one has avoided conflict by somehow depriving one party to it of the means for expressing its attitudes, concerns and arguments"; and (2) the "evil of disruption," such that any possibility for shared deliberation is precluded. "Sometimes," MacIntyre comments, "one of these evils is produced by those who are attempting to avoid the other."[35] Pointedly, the upshot is that even for adherents of a given tradition there is no philosophical "last word," so to speak.[36] Even the Aristotelian Thomist convinced of modern philosophy's paucity must anticipate and be open to further challenges.

4. Conclusion

For MacIntyre, critics of liberalism must "act against modernity within modernity."[37] An empathetic anti-liberal, learning from Aquinas's approach to conflict between traditions, will seek to understand her interlocutors in their own terms. Accordingly, the critic of liberalism who has learned to engage with rival traditions will see in modernity's attempt to sever the good from the

political a claim about the failure of authorities (political, religious, or otherwise) to practice the good.

Let us close by considering an example. Recently, MacIntyre discussed in a conference presentation what the anti-liberal has to learn from the political and social changes in the Republic of Ireland, as symbolized by its 2018 legalization of abortion. As he remarks, "The most prominent advocates for retaining the ban on abortion were of course the Catholic bishops and other representatives of the Church, but the greatest and most scandalous failures of the Catholic Church in Ireland—and of course not only in Ireland—have been its failures to care for children."[38]

In Ireland, those failures included not only sexual abuse, but also physical abuse and neglect in orphanages and homes for unwed mothers. While the Church claimed to care for children, and to oppose abortion out of such care, MacIntyre suggests not only that the Church's failures made legal abortion possible, but that they also contributed decisively to Ireland's relatively late secularization. The religious authorities' failure to practice the good they taught made the moral claims of the Church "unintelligible" to the plain person, who now had "an excellent reason for regarding the culture of the Church with deep suspicion." Instead of subordinating some forms of desire to the authority of the Church in the hope that the desire would be "formed," the majority of Irish people rejected the authority of the Church to form their desire.

Here is the point. Instead of viewing Ireland's embrace of abortion as strictly an outgrowth of modernity's "mythic" assertion of neutrality, or as evidence of the need to unite Church and state to control human desire, MacIntyre casts it as a problem of authority behaving badly and thus losing its legitimacy. The Church in Ireland failed to attend to its *internal* problems. Internal conflict should not have been suppressed; it would have been so very much healthier.

Notes

1. See Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 297–303.
2. Ibid., 302.
3. Alasdair MacIntyre, "An Interview with Giovanna Borradori," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 255–266, at 258.

4. MacIntyre, “Toleration and the Goods of Conflict,” in *Ethics and Politics*, vol. 2 of his *Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 205–223, at 213–214.
5. Ibid., 210.
6. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), chapter 10, “Overcoming a Conflict of Traditions.”
7. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 87.
8. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 3.
9. Ibid., 182.
10. Ibid., 191.
11. MacIntyre, “Common Goods, Frequent Evils,” presented at the conference “The Common Good as Common Project,” University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, March 27, 2017.
12. MacIntyre, “Toleration and the Goods of Conflict,” in *Ethics and Politics*, 205–223, at 213–214.
13. Adrian Vermeule, “All Human Conflict Is Ultimately Theological,” *Church Life Journal* July 26, 2019, https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/all-human-conflict-is-ultimately-theological/.
14. Vermeule, “Integration from Within,” *American Affairs* 2.1 (Spring 2018), https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/02/integration-from-within/.
15. Vermeule, “All Human Conflict Is Ultimately Theological.”
16. Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic*, trans. Marc LePain (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 257, 261.
17. For more on the relationship between humility and virtue in MacIntyre’s interpretation of Aquinas, see Mary M. Keys, “Aquinas and the Challenge of Aristotelian Magnanimity,” *History of Political Thought* 24.1 (2003): 37–65.
18. See further Nathan J. Pinkoski, “Manent and Perreau-Saussine on MacIntyre’s Aristotelianism,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 48.2 (2019): 125–135.
19. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 126–127.
20. Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City*, 217.

21. Manent and Daniel J. Mahoney, *Seeing Things Politically: Interviews with Bénédicte Delorme-Montini*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2015), 105.
22. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity,* 85–87.
23. See John Horton and Susan Mendus, "Alasdair MacIntyre: After Virtue and After," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 1–15, at 2; and Thomas D. D'Andrea, ed., *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot, UK: Routledge, 2006), xiv.
24. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 2.
25. Ibid*.,* 287.
26. MacIntyre, "An Interview with Giovanna Borradori," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, 254.
27. Ibid., 256–257.
28. Ibid, 258. In *Ethics in the Conflict of Modernity,* MacIntyre returns to confront Marx and reveals more fully what he takes to be Marx's final role in his own theorizing. For an important interpretation of MacIntyre as a thinker more in need of Marx for sustained inquiry about justice than he knows, see Jeffery Nicholas, "Alasdair MacIntyre and Utopia: An Introduction," *International Critical Thought* 9.3 (2019): 411–419.
29. MacIntyre, "Aquinas and the Extent of Moral Disagreement," in *Ethics and Politics*, 64–82, at 81.
30. Nicholas, "Alasdair MacIntyre and Utopia," 413.
31. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 88.
32. MacIntyre, "Aquinas and the Extent of Moral Disagreement," in *Ethics and Politics*, 64–82, at 67.
33. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* 12.
34. MacIntyre, "Toleration and the Goods of Conflict," in *Ethics and Politics*, 220. In this way, objections to a tradition that focus on evils committed by members of that tradition are not sufficient to discredit the tradition. However, it must become clear that such evils are "distortions or imperfections […] only related *per accidens* to that conception."
35. Ibid., 205–206.

36. MacIntyre, “Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against Some Modern Aristotelians,” in *Ethics and Politics*, 22–40, at 40.
37. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity,* xi.
38. MacIntyre, “Absences from Aquinas, Silences in Ireland,” presented at the conference “Higher Powers,” University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, November 2, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSbFvquogmc. All subsequent quotations in the body of the text come from this presentation.