

Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry

By Alasdair MacIntyre.

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This book is based on the author's Gifford lectures delivered at Edinburgh in 1988. It deserves notice, first of all, as a bold attempt to 'comprehend in thought' the present state of the humanities in the West. And it is striking also as a typical contemporary artefact in its own right—typical at any rate in its historical eclecticism and in its uneasy self-consciousness with respect to genre.

The genre to which Alasdair MacIntyre is, *ex officio*, contributing is that of the magisterial lecture on natural theology and the foundations of ethics, these enquiries being understood in terms of the distinctive epistemological assumptions embodied in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (edited in Edinburgh from 1873 onwards). Thus in order to keep strict faith with the intentions of his patron Adam Gifford, MacIntyre would have to offer a discourse on ethics conceived as the Edinburgh 'Encyclopaedists' conceived it, namely as a positive science based on universally accessible first principles and progressing towards ever greater systematicity.

To this conception, however—the first of MacIntyre's three 'rivals'—there stand opposed today two philosophical positions informed by contrasting reactions to the scientism of the Enlightenment. On the one hand there is Nietzsche's critique of truth and of the self-identical subject, a development which calls into question the very possibility of a future for the rationalist project. On the other hand there is the neo-Thomist insistence that philosophical enquiry, and *a fortiori* moral enquiry, should be seen as a 'virtue-guided craft' (p. 63) into which individuals can be initiated only through apprenticeship to already expert thinkers whose authority they recognize. This latter position is the one with which MacIntyre associates himself; and the task he undertakes is to show, in defiance of the dominant *laissez-faire* pluralism, how genuine debate can take place between philosophical systems whose relation to each other is one of 'significant incommensurability and untranslatability'. ('Genuine' here means such as to yield evidence of the superiority of one of the competing systems.) His conclusion—supported by the precedent of Aquinas' achievement in synthesizing Aristotelianism and Augustinian Christianity—is that where no common standard of correctness exists in advance of a given theoretical encounter, the appropriate procedure is to try to show that one's own system provides means of remedying the self-confessed, or discursively discoverable, shortcomings of the other: i.e. that one understands the opposition better than it understands itself. (Chapter IX speculates intriguingly that Nietzschean genealogy may prove vulnerable to this treatment as a result of its incomplete emancipation from belief in a temporally unified self.) MacIntyre, in short, is an advocate of the dialectical method (in so far as this is a matter of confronting one's adversaries with the internal contradictoriness of their own cognitive state; cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 482b). It would have been a service to the reader to declare this more explicitly and to find a place in the overall scheme of the book for the philosophy of Hegel, who is mentioned just once (p. 166) as a 'non-Thomistic [or] anti-Thomistic thinker'.

New Books

MacIntyre's hope is for the advent of a 'postliberal university of constrained disagreements' (p. 234), i.e. one in which fundamental debate about substantive ethical questions would be a mandatory part of scholarly activity (along with the advancement of enquiry from within one's own ethically committed frame of reference). This proposal is dubious from the standpoint of academic power-relations. If the term '*postliberal*' is to bear any weight, the constraint in question here will presumably have to consist in something more than the kind of diffuse peer pressure to which academics currently respond in selecting certain publications rather than others for attention and criticism. Are we, then, to envisage the revival of some high-priestly directional function, 'constraining' the wilder (or indeed the more peace-loving) elements to contend publicly against whatever doctrines are deemed to stand in a suitably antagonistic relation to their own? And if so, how is access to this role to be regulated, granted the diagnosis of our present cultural predicament as one of failure to communicate on fundamental questions of value? This phase of MacIntyre's argument might reasonably, if inadvertently, prompt a renewal of affection for the slovenly old *status quo* under which we each find our own level of moral seriousness and choose our interlocutors at least in part with a view to our own pleasure. '*Looking away shall be my only negation*', wrote Nietzsche (*The Gay Science*, §276), and anyone susceptible to boredom will perhaps feel some sympathy with this as a response to MacIntyre's programme of 'imposed participation in conflict' (p. 231).

Also disconcerting is the arbitrariness of presenting Thomism as if it enjoyed a monopoly of the idea of 'tradition-informed thought', when in fact the historicist insights about knowledge which MacIntyre champions against liberal rationalism are available today from a wide variety of philosophical sources. Prominent among these, as no one knows better than MacIntyre himself, is the literature of Marxism and critical theory—traditions which have long understood the falsity of picturing ourselves as isolated cognitive units owing nothing to a shared past, but which have placed this lesson at the service of a less naïve Enlightenment project by showing that reflection on the contingent, historical basis of our subjectivity can bring us new possibilities of intelligent choice, and so of freedom. This repression of what might have made a fourth term in MacIntyre's scheme is particularly noticeable in connection with his remarks on the fragmented condition of the modern academic world and on the emergence within it of inherently oppositional tendencies. It is surely one-sided to discuss these (admittedly important) phenomena solely in terms of Nietzscheanism and without commenting on that other internal challenge which expresses the still unspent energy of Enlightenment modernism—the challenge posed by women's studies, black studies and the like.

In its scope and in its rapid transitions, this book retains something of the brash vitality of the lecturing mode, and it succeeds well in conveying the interest of some relatively recondite topics such as the academic politics of thirteenth-century Paris. A more austere writer, though, would have cut the published text to as little as half of its actual length by cracking down on repetition, on distracting superfluities of empirical detail, and above all on the at times hilarious prolixity of its diction.

Sabina Lovibond