After Virtue and Conservatism

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Is *After Virtue* a conservative book? MacIntyre is sometimes *charged* with being a conservative (as if that were obviously a bad thing), or even with being a reactionary.[1] For his part, MacIntyre has been concerned to disclaim affiliation with conservatism. Nevertheless, despite his protestations, one can find strong conservative elements in his work, though these exist alongside unconservative, even radical elements. In this essay I will identify and assess both the conservative and unconservative elements of *After Virtue*. In the first section I will offer an account of conservatism as I think it is best understood. In the second section I will use this account to identify conservative elements of *After Virtue*, focusing on MacIntyre's critique of what he calls 'the Enlightenment project'. In the third section I will discuss MacIntyre's anti-conservatism. While in some cases I will argue that he is more conservative than he allows, nevertheless, there is one matter in which he is especially unconservative: namely, in the predominant emphasis he gives to a repudiation of the present state of things. I will argue that this is in fact the most problematic aspect of his thought.

What Is Conservatism?

Conservatism is typically understood as a political philosophy or outlook. However, it can also be understood in broader terms as a *life-orientation*, that is, as a way one orients and lives out one's life in relation to the world. Indeed, I think we cannot properly understand a conservative political outlook without understanding this broader life-orientation.

Conservatism, as a life-orientation, can be characterised as a disposition to conserve what is seen as good in the given world, and connected with this, it involves a cautiousness or hesitancy regarding change, and, in some cases, a resistance to change, especially radical change. This does not mean that the conservative is opposed to change as such, or merely affirms the status quo. Indeed, the work of conservation will often require some change or reform; as Edmund Burke says about the political realm: 'A State without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation' (Burke 1999 [1790]: 108). But the conservative typically prefers gradual, piecemeal change when change is needed. When we talk about change here, it should be noted, we are concerned not with trivial change (such as a change of clothes), but rather with change in matters important to human well-being.

We can gain a better understanding of conservatism as a life-orientation by exploring the reasons why conservatives are cautious or hesitant regarding change, and in some cases resistant to change. I will discuss three main reasons.

Recognising Human Limits

Perhaps the most common reason that conservatives cite for being cautious or hesitant regarding change, particularly in complex human affairs, has to do with a recognition of epistemic and character limitations in human life. Otherwise put, conservatives often embrace a scepticism

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[1] See, e.g., Nussbaum 1989; Freytag 1994; Lilla 2016: 74–5; Blakely 2017.

about the reach of human reason and a pessimism about the perfectibility of human nature (see Tosi and Warmke 2022: 580–1).

Human life involves good and bad things. In light of this, people are motivated to seek change because they hope to improve their condition; that is, they hope to enhance the good things and reduce the bad things. The conservative will often take up this endeavour, but he or she does so cautiously, especially when the endeavour concerns complex human affairs (such as is the case with politics, economics and culture). The worry motivating this cautiousness is that in our efforts to improve our condition we may in fact make things worse: we may unnecessarily lose important good things in the effort to reduce what is bad. The conservative life-orientation thus expresses a certain risk-aversion.[2] The conservative acknowledges that the best-laid schemes of human beings regarding complex human affairs often go awry because of our limited knowledge about the workings of these complex affairs and how they should be arranged. They also often go awry because of the character limitations inherent in human life, which are related to the fact that human beings are a mixed bag, with good and bad tendencies.[3] This means we should not expect human beings to become perfect in virtue.

What are the implications of recognising epistemic and character limitations? To begin with, conservatives will embrace a *politics of imperfection* rather than a politics of perfection (see Quinton 1978).[4] While a politics of perfection puts forward a utopian ideal that exists nowhere except in the imagination ('utopia' literally means 'no place'), a politics of imperfection acknowledges that perfection in politics is not feasible, and it embraces somewhere in particular with all its imperfections: it seeks improvement where needed, but it recognises that we also need to find a way to be at home in the world amidst imperfection. A politics of imperfection therefore seeks a *good enough* condition and is especially concerned to avoid the worst evils. As an example of this politics of imperfection, consider Alexander Hamilton's defence of the US Constitution in *The Federalist* (Hamilton, Jay and Madison 2001 [1787–8]). In *Federalist* No. 6 he says that we should reject those 'Utopian speculations' and 'idle theories' that promise us 'an exemption from the imperfections, the weaknesses, and the evils incident to society in every shape', and instead we should 'adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct, that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue'. In *Federalist* No. 9 Hamilton identifies the 'regular distribution of power into distinct departments; the introduction of legislative balances and checks; the institution of courts composed of judges, holding their offices during good behaviour; the representation of the people in the legislature, by deputies of their own election', as the 'means, and powerful means, by which the excellencies of republican government may be retained, and its imperfections lessened or avoided'.

Another implication of the conservative recognition of human limits, particularly epistemic limits, is an opposition to rationalistic or abstract theoretical approaches to human affairs and an affirmation of a *prudent traditionalism*. Speaking about the conservatism of the English (in contrast with the revolutionaries in France), Burke writes:

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[2] When people speak colloquially about taking a 'conservative' approach, they often mean taking a less risky approach compared to some more risky alternative.

[3] As David Hume puts it, while we may have a 'particle of the dove' within us, this exists alongside 'elements of the wolf and serpent' (Hume 1975 [1751]: 271).

[4] In this paragraph I draw from McPherson 2022: 109–10, 121–2.

> We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, (and they seldom fail) they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved. (Burke 1999 [1790]: 182)[5]

Burke's appeal to 'prejudice' here is an appeal to inherited wisdom about how best to live that has been built up and handed down over the generations. Such inherited wisdom proves itself in the way that it has been shown to be reliable over the ages for navigating complex human affairs; in other words, it has shown itself to be 'tried-and-true'. As John Kekes puts it, conservatism 'values and aims to protect the tried and true; both together, because the tried alone may have little in its favor and much against it and because the true needs to be tried, and tried again, to be shown to be true' (Kekes 1998: 5). The appeal to inherited wisdom (the tried-and-true) shows a commitment to traditionalism. A *prudent* traditionalism is needed because it takes prudence to know how to apply inherited wisdom to present circumstance.[6]

In the realm of ethics, conservatives embrace 'traditional morality', which places emphasis on the importance of (1) character (i.e. the virtues) and responsibility, (2) associative duties (i.e. duties of loyalty to family, friends and fellow citizens, and duties of neighbourliness, including to strangers we come upon, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan), and (3) absolute prohibitions rooted in a recognition of the sanctity of human life.[7] Traditional morality is often taken as the contrast case to supposedly 'enlightened' forms of morality that are said to have superseded it, such as utilitarianism and liberal Kantianism (i.e. autonomy-centred ethics).[8] In the terms of contemporary moral philosophy, traditional morality can be understood as an expression of an *anti-theory* approach to ethics, which builds up ethical understanding from concrete ethical experience rather than simply applying abstract principles.[9] Traditional morality seeks to attend to the common human fund of moral experience and conserve whatever is good in this experience, in line with Aristotle's method of beginning with common beliefs (*endoxa*) and seeking to preserve what is true in them (see Nussbaum 2001 [1986]: ch. 8). Philosophy has a role to play, but its role consists primarily in overcoming inconsistencies, clarifying and articulating our inchoate sense of things, and offering justification. The sort of 'theory' that traditional morality is against is that which seeks to offer a decision procedure (e.g. the principle of utility, the universalisation requirement, etc.) that prescinds from concrete moral experience and any particular tradition-informed moral community.[10]

A particularly problematic feature of such moral theories is their reductionism: they reduce the complexity of our ordinary moral experience, especially regarding substantive moral judgments about the various good and bad things that help to define for us the good life. They do so by offering a basic principle or decision-procedure that is supposed to take precedence in the

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[5] Similarly, Quinton writes: 'political wisdom … is not to be found in the theoretical speculations of isolated thinkers but in the historically accumulated social experience of the community as a whole. It is embodied, above all, in … traditional customs and institutions [and in people with] extensive practical experience of politics' (Quinton 1978: 16–17). See also Michael Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics', in Oakeshott 1991 (1962).

[6] For more on the role of prudence in conservative political thought, see Hörcher 2020.

[7] See McPherson 2017, which I have drawn from some in this discussion of traditional morality.

[8] See, e.g., Singer 1995; Dworkin 1994.

[9] On anti-theory in ethics, see Williams 1985: esp. chs. 1, 5, 6, 10; Clarke and Simpson (eds.) 1989.

[10] This leaves room for saying that traditional morality can count as a 'theory' in a non-offending sense; indeed, it is often developed as such in what is known as 'natural law theory' (see Angier 2021).

moral life. However, they do not prescind entirely from substantive moral judgments, since accepting the precedence of their basic principle or decision-procedure requires a substantive moral judgment about, for example, the goodness of universal benevolence (in the case of utilitarianism) or the importance of autonomy (in the case of liberal Kantianism).

Granting these are good things, why think they are the only good things or that they should take precedence? According to traditional morality, benevolence (or compassion) is a virtue but not the only one. There are other virtues such as loyalty and justice with which it must be made consistent. Likewise, in certain respects autonomy is indeed a good, though it should be constrained by other goods, such as virtue and the sanctity of human life, and the value of autonomy is itself derivative from the goodness of freely choosing for the good. Thus defenders of traditional morality see supposedly more enlightened forms of morality as mere 'fragments' torn from the larger whole of traditional morality. As C. S. Lewis puts it in his defence of traditional morality (or the Tao, as he calls it):

> What purport to be new systems [of value] … all consist of fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and to it alone such validity as they possess. … The rebellion of new ideologies against the Tao is a rebellion of the branches against the tree: if the rebels could succeed they would find that they have destroyed themselves. (Lewis 1944: 43–4)[11]

I will return to this 'fragments thesis' when discussing *After Virtue*.

For now, having briefly discussed conservative approaches to politics and ethics, I want to mention a point that is relevant to conservative economics, which is also connected with the conservative recognition of epistemic limits: namely, there is a general preference for decentralised, self-correcting spontaneous (i.e. organic) order over centralised planned order in complex human affairs (such as in economics, politics and culture), and this means that conservatives have a general preference for free market economies over command economies (see Scruton 2006). Indeed, free market economies have proven themselves to be tried-and-true in their ability to create prosperity and reduce poverty, while the same cannot be said for command economies, which lack the efficiency provided by the price signals of free market economies.

At the same time, conservatives will often feel ambivalence about free market economies because their 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter 2008 [1942]) can undermine traditional ways of life and forms of belonging when left unconstrained by considerations of the human good (not to mention that large corporations overall have hardly proven themselves to be friendly to traditional values; see Deneen 2018). Indeed, conservatives will sympathise with Marx's essentially conservative lament about the effects of capitalism: 'All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned' (Marx and Engels 2000 [1848]: 248). Surely 'all' is too strong here, but the basic sentiment is readily appreciated by conservatives (see Kolozi 2017). Free market economies encourage us to be what Wendell Berry calls 'boomers' rather than 'stickers': 'boomers' are 'those who pillage and run', who want 'to make a killing and end up on Easy Street', and they are 'motivated by greed, the desire for money, property, and therefore power';

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[11] Cf. Burke: 'We know that *we* have made no discoveries, and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality' (Burke 1999 [1790]: 181).

by contrast, 'stickers' are 'those who settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in', and they are 'motivated by affection, by such love for a place and its life that they want to preserve and remain in it' (Berry 2012: 10–11). 'Conservative' is another name for a 'sticker'. Conservatives will therefore endorse constrained forms of free market economies with the aim of promoting the common good and their way of life within a particular place.

This discussion of being a 'sticker' brings us to the second reason conservatives can be hesitant and, in some cases, resistant with regard to change.

Love and Attachment

The conservative is often hesitant and, in some cases, resistant with regard to change for reasons of love and attachment: we want to hold onto that which we love (or value) and to which we are attached. As Roger Scruton puts it: 'Conservatism is the philosophy of attachment. We are attached to the things we love, and wish to protect them against decay' (Scruton 2014: 29). And we should add: we wish to protect them from destruction. Also consider Michael Oakeshott:

> The general characteristics of [the conservative] disposition … centre upon a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be. Reflection may bring to light an appropriate gratefulness to what is available, and consequently the acknowledgement of a gift or an inheritance from the past; but there is no mere idolizing what is past and gone. What is esteemed is the present … on account of its familiarity: … [Here one is disposed to say:] *Stay with me because I am attached to you.* … In short, it is a disposition appropriate to a man who is acutely aware of having something to lose which he has learned to care for. (Oakeshott 1991 [1962]: 408)

John Kekes makes a similar point when he notes that in seeking to be understood conservatives can make appeal to a natural conservatism that all human beings share: 'If there were beings who did not enjoy having what they valued and were not afraid of losing it, they would not be recognizably human. The [conservative] attitude then is basic to human psychology, but it need not be conscious or articulate'. However, it is when we become aware of a threat to the good things to which we are attached that such natural conservatism 'must be transformed into a reflective one that can meet it' (Kekes 1998: 5–6).

But the question arises: why prefer a present good thing to which we are attached if it could be replaced with some other good thing that might be better in certain ways? Consider G. A. Cohen's defence of the conservative attitude that is concerned with conserving 'existing value'. This attitude, he says, 'exhibits a bias in favor of retaining what is of value, even in the face of replacing it by something of greater value' (Cohen 2013: 149).[12] He distinguishes between three aspects of this conservative attitude: (1) valuing and seeking to preserve that which is intrinsically valuable (i.e. 'particular valuing'); (2) valuing and seeking to preserve that which is personally valued (i.e. 'personal valuing'); and (3) 'accepting the given'. I focus on (1) and (2) here, though I will discuss (3) in my own terms in the next subsection.

In the case of 'particular valuing', Cohen says: 'a person values something as the particular valuable thing that it is, and not merely for the value that resides in it' (148). The key point is that 'we devalue the valuable things we have if we keep them only so long as nothing even slightly more valuable comes along': 'Valuable things command a certain loyalty' (153).

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[12] In this paragraph and the next, when page numbers alone are provided in-text they are for Cohen 2013.

Although Cohen speaks of valuing *something* here (which can include valuing *somewhere*, that is, 'a place and its life', as Berry puts it), his point applies just as much to valuing *someone*. Furthermore, once we experience such loyalty we are then in the realm of 'personal valuing', where 'a person values something [or someone] because of the special relation … to that person' (148), namely, because of his or her attachment. Cohen goes on to say: 'We are attached to particular things [or persons] because we need to belong to something [or someone], and we therefore need some things [or persons] to belong to us' (168). Indeed, a conservative will acknowledge identity-constituting forms of belonging and attachment, which we cannot forgo without ceasing to be ourselves. In other words, conservatives embrace what Michael Sandel calls an 'encumbered' conception of the self (see Sandel 1984).

The human need for belonging also takes an existential form as a need to be at home in the world, and this brings us to the third reason for the conservative attitude toward change.

Becoming at Home in the World

The first two reasons for being hesitant or cautious regarding change – and in some cases resistant to it – are commonly voiced by conservative thinkers though not always brought together. However, the third reason for the conservative attitude toward change has often not been properly recognised, but I believe it is the most important and fundamental. It concerns our orientation toward the given, which we can call an 'existential stance'. The given here is of two general kinds: the cultural-political given and the natural given. The cultural-political given is that which human beings have built up and handed on over the generations, and it includes political institutions and moral precepts along with achievements of art, literature, philosophy and religion as well as the forms of belonging (families, neighbourhoods, nations, etc.) we find ourselves in. The natural given includes the wider natural world as well as our human nature and our own natural talents and abilities.

As I have argued elsewhere,[13] a conservative life-orientation should seek to discover, appreciate, affirm and conserve what is good in the world *as it is* or *as given*, and one should do so in order to be *at home* in the given world as far as possible. The aim here is to overcome the alienation or not-at-home-ness that is fundamental to the human condition due to its connection with the emergence of rational self-consciousness. Unlike non-rational animals who cannot be alienated from their environment, we are tasked with finding our place in the world and thereby overcoming alienation. This means discovering a meaningful life-orientation. A key issue that must be addressed here is the problem of cosmodicy, which is the problem of justifying life in the world as meaningful and worthwhile in the face of evil and suffering.

Given this concern with overcoming alienation, the conservative will therefore be resistant to efforts to change things that arise out of existential stances that emphasise repudiation of the given world and so exacerbate the experience of alienation or not-at-home-ness. One such stance is that of the radical progressive who repudiates the given world in light of some imagined ideal future world. Another such stance is that of the person who repudiates the given world in light of some supposed 'golden age' of the past. By contrast, for the conservative there is an emphasis on affirming and inhabiting the present. We saw this in Oakeshott's description of the conservative disposition as centring on 'a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be', though he acknowledges that reflection 'may bring to light an appropriate

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[13] See McPherson 2019, which I draw on in this subsection.

gratefulness to what is available, and consequently the acknowledgement of a gift or an inheritance from the past; but there is no mere idolizing what is past and gone'.

The radical progressive and the golden ageist agree in finding the given world to be a disappointment, which raises the problem of cosmodicy. For the radical progressive this can be answered positively only insofar as we see ourselves as moving toward realising some ideal future. Likewise, for the golden ageist we must see ourselves as recovering some ideal past. But the danger in both cases is that we will despair over attaining or even approximating the ideal given that the world as it is will often fall drastically short of the ideal. The conservative, by contrast, aims to address the problem of cosmodicy not by attempting to realise some ideal future or to recover some ideal past, but rather by seeking to discover, appreciate, affirm and conserve what is good in the given world, which enables one to find one's way to an affirmation that life in the world is good and worthwhile and to feel at home within it.

The conservative can and should acknowledge that there is a great deal of evil in the world that should not be affirmed and indeed should be fought against precisely because of the good that is affirmed. For instance, affirming that human life is a 'gift' to be cherished, promoted and protected means that one must stand opposed to what threatens it. Thus the conservative will undertake actions aimed at removing such threats, which are done precisely in order to conserve what is good. However, the conservative also believes that evil will never be fully eradicated from our finite, earthly condition and yet the given world is worth affirming.

The crucial point is about our orientation toward the given world. We can state what is at issue here in terms of the following question: is our basic outlook on the world-as-it-is centred on affirmation or repudiation, yes-saying or no-saying? These are not mutually exclusive options, but the question concerns the emphasis of a particular outlook. The conservative, in contrast to the radical progressive and the golden ageist, is fundamentally affirmative: there is an emphasis that the world, as it is and in spite of its evils and imperfections, is meaningful and worth affirming; that is, the given world as a whole is good and is a source of joy and fulfilment, even if not everything about it is good and even if there are ways, whether minor or major, that it should be made better. Radical progressivism and golden ageism are of course not without affirmation, but the focus of affirmation is on an ideal future or an ideal past by which one critiques and seeks a thoroughgoing change of the present. Their attitude toward the given world emphasises repudiation and a sense of indignation. The conservative, by contrast, first seeks to count his or her blessings, to take stock of what is good about the given world, before figuring out how to make it better. There is an emphasis on gratitude or appreciation, which enables one to become at home in the world.

In the foregoing I have identified three reasons for why conservatives are cautious and sometimes resistant with regard to change, which have to do with (1) recognising human limits, (2) love and attachment and (3) becoming at home in the world. It is possible that one could affirm any one of these three reasons and be considered a conservative, but conservatism in the fullest sense, in my view, affirms all three. I will now turn to discuss the conservative elements of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, and then after that I will discuss the unconservative elements.

MacIntyre's Conservatism

MacIntyre begins *After Virtue* with the 'disquieting suggestion' that the language of morality in the modern world is in a state of 'grave disorder' such that what we possess 'are the fragments of

a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived', and so 'we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, [of] morality' (MacIntyre 2007 [1981/1984]: 2; see also 54–5, 59–60).[14] Here MacIntyre endorses a 'fragments thesis' about our contemporary moral predicament that is akin to what C. S. Lewis endorses when he says (as cited earlier): 'What purport to be new systems [of value] … all consist of fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation'. MacIntyre does not acknowledge the influence of Lewis here, though perhaps it is second hand, since he does acknowledge the influence of Elizabeth Anscombe (53), who puts forward a similar fragments thesis, describing modern secular conceptions of obligation as 'survivals' from an earlier theistic conception of ethics.[15] She too does not acknowledge the influence of Lewis, but it is plausible to think there might have been an influence, since both were at Oxford at the same time, and they also had a famous debate (see Lipscomb 2022: 145–8).

     Like Lewis, MacIntyre is also concerned with defending a form of traditional morality, which he calls 'the tradition of the virtues', against supposedly enlightened forms of morality that are said to supersede it. Indeed, central to MacIntyre's overarching argument in *After Virtue* is a critique of 'the Enlightenment project', which sought to provide a rational vindication for morality apart from any teleological conception of the human good and any divine authority, and which brought us moral theories such as the various versions of utilitarianism and Kantianism that seek to offer a decision procedure that prescinds from concrete moral experience and any particular tradition-informed moral community. The Enlightenment project is precisely the sort of rationalistic or abstract theoretical approach to human affairs that we have seen that conservatives oppose. MacIntyre argues convincingly that it failed because of its inability to secure rational agreement (evidenced by the interminable debate between a great variety of conflicting moral viewpoints). The result of this failure, he contends, is the rise of an 'emotivist' culture where the appearance of rational argument masks what are in fact attempts to manipulate others in service of one's arbitrary preferences. This emotivist culture is what MacIntyre had in mind when he spoke of the grave disorder of our contemporary moral situation.

     The emotivist culture encourages a certain understanding of the self, which MacIntyre calls 'the emotivist self'. This is what Sandel calls 'the unencumbered self', which prizes individual autonomy such that what matters most is not the ends we choose but the capacity for choice itself, and where the self is understood as independent of any binding loves and loyalties, rather than as constituted by them, as with 'the encumbered self', which I said the conservative affirms. MacIntyre writes of the emotivist (unencumbered) self that it 'cannot be simply or unconditionally identified with *any* particular moral attitude or point of view … just because of the fact that its judgments are in end criterionless' (31). To be a moral agent on this view, MacIntyre says, is 'to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic one may possess, and to pass judgment on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity' (31–2). The self, so understood, 'has no necessary social content and no necessary social identity', and so it can 'be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it *is* in and for itself nothing' (32). MacIntyre later writes: 'the price paid for liberation from what appeared to be the external authority of traditional morality was the loss of any authoritative content from the would-be moral utterances of the newly autonomous agent. Each moral agent

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[14] In what follows when page numbers alone are provided in-text they are for MacIntyre 2007 (1981/1984).

[15] See G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy' (1958), in Anscombe 1981: 26, 30–1, 33.

now spoke unconstrained by the externalities of divine law, natural teleology, or hierarchical authority; but why should anyone else now listen to him?' (68).

So MacIntyre identifies the symptom of a problem, namely, the grave disorder of our contemporary moral situation (the emotivist culture), and he also diagnoses the problem as resulting from the failure of the Enlightenment project. What remedy then does he propose? The answer is: a recovery of the tradition of the virtues. MacIntyre offers a 'socially teleological account' of the virtues where they are understood in terms of their role in practices, traditions and the narrative order of a human life. According to this account, the virtues are first of all needed in order to achieve goods internal to practices (e.g. productive crafts, artistic activity, intellectual activity, games and the making and sustaining of family life and political life) through which our 'human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended' (187). Secondly, the virtues are also needed to sustain our 'narrative quests' in which we seek, along with those others with whom we share in community, an answer to the question: what is the good for our lives as a whole? Thirdly, because the starting points for our enquiry are always provided by our communities and their particular histories, which constitute the larger narratives wherein we live out our individual narratives, the virtues are needed to sustain a tradition, that is, 'an historically extended, socially embodied argument' about the nature of the good life for human beings (219–23).[16]

Here we see MacIntyre adopt an 'anti-theory' approach to ethics, which I said conservatives adopt and which builds up ethical understanding from concrete ethical experience rather than simply applying abstract principles. We see this in MacIntyre's emphasis on the importance of cultivating the virtues within the context of practices for understanding and realizing goods internal to practices. We also see here that MacIntyre accepts a prudent traditionalism, which relies on the 'tried-and-true'. He writes:

> A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice. Practices … have a history … Thus the standards are not themselves immune from criticism, but nonetheless we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far. (190)

In other words, practices are situated within traditions, which, MacIntyre notes, 'never exist in isolation [from] larger social traditions' (221). An important point here is that against the Enlightenment project MacIntyre affirms the necessary situatedness of ethical enquiry, and against the unencumbered conception of the self he affirms a narrative conception of the self that is constituted by social and historical situatedness. He writes:

> I am never able to seek the good or exercise the virtues only *qua* individual … [We] all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, … I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles. As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the

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[16] See McPherson 2020: 14–17 for further discussion of MacIntyre's 'socially teleological account' of the virtues.

> given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity. (220)

MacIntyre notes that this sort of perspective is likely to appear alien to someone who inhabits the standpoint of modern individualism (exemplified in the emotivist, unencumbered self): 'From the standpoint of [that] individualism I am what I myself choose to be. I can always, if I wish to, put in question what are taken to be the merely contingent social features of my existence' (220). By contrast, from the standpoint of the narrative (encumbered) self, MacIntyre says: '[The] story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships' (221). Indeed, it is also to deform oneself.

All of this sounds very much in line with my account of conservatism in the first section. So why not regard MacIntyre as a conservative full stop? To understand why, we need to consider MacIntyre's own professed anti-conservatism.

MacIntyre's Anti-Conservatism

We see MacIntyre's concern to disclaim affiliation with conservatism (lest he be charged with it) in the way in which he contrasts his appeal to tradition with what he regards as a 'Burkean' conception of tradition. He writes:

> 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 places 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 … 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. … Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition become Burkean, it is always dying or dead. (221–2)

Since MacIntyre does not cite any specific 'conservative political theorists' besides Burke, one might suspect that what we are dealing with here is a caricature of conservatism. I think this is indeed the case. MacIntyre gives us a picture of Burkean conservatism as being anti-reason, homogeneous (not allowing conflict) and simply seeking to preserve the status quo. However, none of these characterisations are true with respect to Burke. He does not oppose tradition to reason, though, as we saw earlier, he thinks our 'private stock of reason' is small, and so rather than depend on this private stock alone, we do better to avail ourselves of 'the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages', that is, we should avail ourselves of the wisdom of tradition, which is found in what Burke calls 'prejudice'. When we come to understand this wisdom, Burke says, we should 'continue the prejudice, with the reason involved'. Burke also endorses a role for conflict and debate in determining how best to live; for instance, he was in fact one of the early defenders of contending political parties (see Burke 1999 [1770]). Furthermore, Burke does not simply seek to preserve the status quo and so promote a static social order; as we saw earlier, he says: 'A State without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation'. Indeed, on my account of conservatism, the conservative will often seek

improvement, promoting the good and avoiding the bad as best as one can. However, he or she will do so *cautiously*, especially when the endeavour concerns complex human affairs such as politics, economics and culture, since without this cautiousness we may in fact make things worse.

When MacIntyre speaks of conservatism he seems to have in mind the sort of 'conservatism' that was in fashion in the 1980s, namely, what might be called Reagan-Thatcher 'conservatism', which is really a kind of liberalism that endorses unfettered capitalism, though with a few nods to traditional values. We can see this when MacIntyre writes: 'modern conservatives are for the most part engaged in conserving only older rather than later versions of liberal individualism. Their own core doctrine is as liberal and as individualist as that of self-avowed liberals' (222). We also see this view of conservatism expressed in MacIntyre's primary political conclusion in *After Virtue*, which is that we should reject the modern liberal order due to its individualism and acquisitiveness, along with its inability to secure agreement on the nature of justice and the common good. MacIntyre writes:

> This does not mean that there are not many tasks only to be performed in and through government which still require performing: the rule of law, so far as it is possible in a modern state, has to be vindicated, injustice and unwarranted suffering have to be dealt with, generosity has to be exercised, and liberty has to be defended, in ways that are sometimes only possible through the use of governmental institutions. But each particular task, each particular responsibility has to be evaluated on its own merits. Modern systematic politics, whether liberal, conservative, radical or socialist, simply has to be rejected from a standpoint that owes genuine allegiance to the tradition of the virtues; for modern politics itself expresses in its institutional forms a systematic rejection of that tradition. (255)

What MacIntyre encourages then is a politics of local community that is also a politics of resistance to the corrosive influences of the liberal order. 'What matters at this stage', he writes, '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 … We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict' (263).

Now, the endeavour to construct and sustain communities of virtue in the face of threats to such a way of life is a quintessentially conservative endeavour, and it is certainly much more recognisably conservative than the Reagan-Thatcher 'conservatism' that MacIntyre identifies as being in fact a form of 'liberal individualism', albeit with a few nods to traditional values. But this suggests that MacIntyre recognises that this is not really conservatism properly understood. As I have said, conservatives will often feel ambivalence about free market economies. On the one hand, they will certainly prefer free market economies to command economies because of their general preference for decentralised, self-correcting spontaneous order over centralised planned order and given that free market economies have been proven to create prosperity and reduce poverty. On the other hand, conservatives will also worry about the way in which free market economies can undermine traditional ways of life and forms of belonging, and so will want constraints on the free market. Notably, this conservative form of modern politics does not express a systematic rejection of the tradition of the virtues.

If conservatism is understood in this way, as it should be, then MacIntyre is much closer to being a full-blown conservative. He is in fact in good company as a Marxist who ended up moving in a conservative direction; other instances include G. A. Cohen (cited earlier), Christopher Lasch, Eugene Genovese, Leszek Kołakowski, James Burnham and George Orwell.

Sometimes this is explained in terms of being 'mugged by reality', given feasibility problems for Marxism, and given the atrocities of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, while there are important differences between Marxism and conservatism, there are also affinities between them, such as opposition to liberal individualism and an ambivalence about the changes unleashed by modernity. Thus it is not altogether surprising to see such movements toward conservatism, especially when one becomes disillusioned with Marxism as a concrete political programme.[17]

So MacIntyre is much closer to being a full-blown conservative than he allows. However, there is an important way in which he is decidedly unconservative: namely, in his golden ageism, which is expressed in the title *After Virtue*, suggesting that there was a golden age of virtue, but which is now behind us. A conservative will find this posture just as problematic as utopianism, since, as stated earlier, both emphasise repudiation rather than affirmation of the present state of things and so exacerbate the experience of alienation or not-at-home-ness.

One of the main criticisms of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* is in fact that it expresses a problematic nostalgia for a bygone age that never existed, since there has always been moral disagreement, virtue and vice, and inarticulacy about the ethical life (see, e.g., Nussbaum 1989). MacIntyre responds to this nostalgia charge in the prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue*:

> Because I understand the tradition of the virtues to have arisen within and to have been first adequately articulated in the Greek, especially the Athenian *polis*, and because I have stressed the ways in which that tradition flourished in the European middle ages, I have been accused of nostalgia and of idealizing the past. But there is, I think, not a trace of this in the text. What there is is an insistence on our need to learn from some aspects of the past, by understanding our contemporary selves and our contemporary moral relationships in the light afforded by a tradition that enables us to overcome the constraints on such self-knowledge that modernity, especially advanced modernity, imposes. We are all of us inescapably inhabitants of advanced modernity, bearing its social and cultural marks. (xi)

It is surely incorrect to say that there is 'not a trace' of nostalgia in the text. However, it is true that MacIntyre is not suggesting that we simply seek a return to some golden age that is thought to have existed in the past, which he rightly sees as impossible. Nonetheless, the impossibility of return can in fact be part of the appeal of golden ageism, just as the unrealisability of utopia can be part of the appeal of utopianism, since both provide a vantagepoint (even if only in the imagination) from which to critique and repudiate the present state of things (including our political, economic and cultural conditions).[18] This appeals to those who would like to see themselves as prophets of their age and want to pronounce critical judgement upon it by, for instance, starkly declaring it to be a 'new dark age' that can be resisted only through constructing and sustaining small neo-Benedictine communities of virtue.

As I have said, the endeavour to construct and sustain communities of virtue in the face of threats to such a way of life is a quintessentially conservative endeavour, and I think this should be endorsed. However, what is problematic from a conservative viewpoint is the background framing in terms of declinist narrative where we have moved from a golden age of virtue to a dark age of moral confusion and vice. To begin with, all those who affirm what C. S. Lewis calls 'the Tao' – which he also calls traditional morality or the natural moral law – should agree with Charles Taylor in his response to MacIntyre when he says that we should not take

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[17] I am indebted to discussions on social media for helping me to clarify my thoughts on this matter. For a helpful discussion of MacIntyre's disillusionment with Marxism, see Knight 2019: esp. at 82, 94.

[18] A point along these lines about the unrealisability of utopia is made in Scruton 2010: 69–70.

modern rejections of the tradition of the virtues at face value and regard our age as being 'after virtue'; rather, we should recognise that these rejectors 'will always be in truth more "Aristotelian" than they believe, surreptitiously relying on notions like "virtue" and "the good life", even while they repudiate them on the level of theory' (Taylor 1994: 22). What we need, then, is to bring out these rival visions of the good life and make a case for which is best.

The conservative will be sceptical of both declinist and progressivist narratives that offer us a Manichaean contrast between an age of darkness and an age of light, which seem to have the ideological function of reinforcing political power and/or a self-serving function in puffing up one's self-image as being on the side of light against the darkness. The conservative will instead see every age, like human nature itself, as a mixed bag, containing both good and bad. We can see much good that has come about in the modern world, but which often also comes with problematic aspects: for instance, modern democracy allows for people to have a voice in their government but it also allows for greater disagreement; modern freedom counters oppressive government action but it can also encourage a problematic ideal of autonomy that is opposed to the life of virtue; and modern capitalism has reduced poverty around the globe while at the same time it has increased economic inequality and created environmental problems. For the conservative, the task in this age, as in every age, is to discover, appreciate, affirm, conserve and promote the good in the given world and to reduce the bad as best as we can, while acknowledging that there is no utopia to be realized or golden age to which we can return. What matters most is the orientation we bring to this task: to recall what I said earlier, the conservative first seeks to count his or her blessings, to take stock of what is good about the given world, before figuring out how to make it better, and it is this emphasis on gratitude or appreciation that enables one to become at home in the world amidst its imperfections.[19]

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[19] I thank Tom Angier and Ian James Kidd for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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