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# MacIntyre's *After Virtue* at 40

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*Edited by*

Tom Angier

University of Cape Town



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## 4 *After Virtue's* Critique of Liberalism

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*David Rondel*

My ... critique of liberalism derives from a judgment that the best type of human life ... is lived by those engaged in constructing and sustaining forms of community directed towards the shared achievement of those common goods without which the ultimate human good cannot be achieved. Liberal political societies are characteristically committed to denying any place for a determinate conception of the human good in their public discourse ... On the dominant liberal view, government is to be neutral as between rival conceptions of the human good, yet in fact what liberalism promotes is a kind of institutional order that is inimical to the construction and sustaining of the types of communal relationship required for the best kind of human life.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

*After Virtue* is most centrally a book about the loss of our moral culture, about how, in its author's words, 'morality is not what it once was' (MacIntyre 1981: 22). Morality is in a bad way because what we have access to now are only 'fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived'. We have no trouble deploying moral concepts or using moral language. Yet morality today is in a state of 'grave disorder' because these practices have been severed from the sources that originally gave them meaning. What we possess nowadays are only shards of past moral traditions, fragments of past frameworks. But we lack any comprehensive, let alone coherent, moral picture (MacIntyre 1981: 2, 256). And the result is that our whole moral sense – our capacity to reflect on the nature of the good, to wisely resolve moral conflict, to evaluate the 'rival and heterogeneous moral schemes which compete for our allegiance' – has been badly diminished (MacIntyre 1981: xviii).

I am grateful to Galen Gorelangton, my former student, whose superb 2019 MA thesis on MacIntyre's critique of liberalism – 'MacIntyre in the Wasteland' – I had the great pleasure to supervise at the University of Nevada, Reno. Thanks are also due to the students who participated in a 2019 graduate seminar I taught on 'Liberalism and Its Critics' in which MacIntyre's work figured prominently. I'm also grateful for various discussions with James Bondarchuck, Simone Gubler, Carlos Mariscal and Chris Williams.

*After Virtue* tells the story of a fall from grace, a story of deterioration and impoverishment. Stephen Holmes colourfully (albeit with a tinge of sarcasm) summarises the narrative and tone of MacIntyre's book:

Past societies were orderly and healthy, while ours is dishevelled and sick ... Things used to be good; now they are bad. Once whole, the vase of culture now lies shattered ... People who were once firmly implanted in harmonious communities are now rootless. Vital social relations have been desiccated by arid individualism. A warm, solidary, and emotionally satisfying communal order has yielded to a chilly, egoistical, and morally hollow one. The social faculties of prelapsarian souls have been grievously damaged by Western rationalism. Generosity, friendship, and joy have nearly vanished. Niggardliness and misery are all-pervasive. Idyllic normative consensus has been supplanted by sickeningly endless disagreement. Thick preindustrial forms of social identity have been displaced by thinner and more universal ones. As a result, mankind is clueless about how to live, what to do. (Holmes 1993: 89–90)

How did things get so bad? And what is fundamentally to blame for this steep moral-cultural decline? The main culprit, MacIntyre tells us, is something called 'modernity' or 'individualism' or 'liberalism' (or sometimes co-extensive groupings of these like 'liberal individualism' or 'modern liberal individualism'). Even though the word 'liberalism' itself appears somewhat infrequently in *After Virtue*, the rise of a certain liberal individualist picture is at the very root of what MacIntyre is lamenting in that book. The main business of this chapter is to try to piece that argument together.

Section 4.1 provides a broad-stroked overview of MacIntyre's critique of liberal individualism. Special attention is given to liberalism's obsession with procedure over moral substance, its notorious claim to neutrality, and to the conception of the human self on which, according to MacIntyre's diagnosis, the intelligibility of the liberal tradition depends. I also try to show how these different elements of the liberal worldview hang together in a mutually reinforcing whole. In Section 4.2, I consider the ideal of liberal neutrality in more detail. The repudiation of neutrality is the piece of MacIntyre's critique of liberalism that has probably received the most scholarly attention, from defenders and critics alike. That is not accidental in my view. For if I am right, neutrality is the decisive ground on which MacIntyre's case against liberalism ultimately succeeds or fails. If liberalism *can* justifiably claim some sort of neutrality, then this gives liberal government a special prerogative to legitimate authority. It suggests that, given the intractable fact of pluralism in modern societies, liberal government has a unique right to rule. But if liberalism's claim to neutrality is untenable – if, its own protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, liberalism really is its own unique

comprehensive tradition – then, in the words of John Rawls, ‘liberalism becomes but another sectarian doctrine’ in a sea of sectarian doctrines (Rawls 1999: 409). Without neutrality, in short, liberalism is on a par with all the other traditions and doctrines that compete for our allegiance. And liberal government as a result cannot claim any special right to rule. Finally, in Section 4.3, I offer some scattered thoughts about how MacIntyre’s critique of liberalism connects with other anti-liberal arguments (both older and more contemporary; both from the left and the right), and I assess how well the arguments in *After Virtue* hold up, as it were, forty years after the publication of MacIntyre’s remarkable book.

#### 4.1 MacIntyre’s Critique of Liberalism Summarised

Four interrelated theses together represent the core of MacIntyre’s critique of liberalism in *After Virtue* and subsequent writings.

(1) Liberalism relies on a deflationary, preference-based conception of the human self. This diagnosis of the liberal self comes out early in *After Virtue*, as part of MacIntyre’s observation that ‘people now think, talk and act *as if* emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical stand-point may be’ (MacIntyre 1981: 22, emphasis in original). The emotivist or modern self is thought to have the ability and the right to do and choose as it pleases. Nothing is off-limits. Opportunities for self-creation are boundless. Moral judgement is ‘criterionless’. There is nothing external to the emotivist self that can be appealed to for moral guidance, unless of course the emotivist self *itself* happens to prefer some such appeal (Bernstein 1984). As MacIntyre writes:

The specifically modern self, the self that I have called emotivist, finds no limits set to that on which it may pass judgment for such limits could only derive from rational criteria for evaluation and, as we have seen, the emotivist self lacks any such criteria. Everything may be criticized from whatever standpoint the self has adopted, including the self’s choice of standpoint to adopt. (MacIntyre 1981: 31)

In a world where everyone behaves as if emotivism were true, moral agency becomes thoroughly democratised. ‘Anyone and everyone can ... be a moral agent since it is in the self and not in social roles or practices that moral agency has to be located’ (MacIntyre 1981: 32). To be a moral agent on this kind of view, MacIntyre has it, is ‘precisely to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that 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’. This specifically modern self has the ability and the right ‘to evade any necessary identification

with any particular contingent state of affairs'. Such a self 'can ... be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it *is* in and for itself nothing' (MacIntyre 1981: 31–2, emphasis in original).

This modern conception of self is at the very centre of the liberal individualist picture that *After Virtue* sets itself against. The self that MacIntyre opposes is depicted as little more than the owner of contingent desires and preferences, as having 'no history', as lacking all the thick 'particularity' that real human beings in the real world cannot function without (MacIntyre 1981: 221). The ability to make choices is the liberal self's defining feature, and, as such, this self owes fidelity to no relationship or association that it did not voluntarily select for itself. From the standpoint of the liberal self, then,

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. I may biologically be my father's son; but I cannot be held responsible for what he did unless I choose implicitly or explicitly to assume such responsibility. I may legally be a citizen of a certain country; but I cannot be held responsible for what my country does or has done unless I choose implicitly or explicitly to assume such responsibility. Such individualism is expressed by those modern Americans who deny responsibility for the effects of slavery upon black Americans, saying 'I never owned any slaves'. (MacIntyre 1981: 220)

In *Why Liberalism Failed*, a book whose indebtedness to MacIntyre's thought is obvious, Patrick Deneen claims that liberalism's master idea involves the imperative to ground politics in the idea of 'voluntarism' – the idea that only those features of a person's situation that have been voluntarily opted for are morally binding and legitimate. Deneen writes, 'Liberalism begins a project by which the legitimacy of all human relationships – beginning with, but not limited to, political bonds – becomes increasingly dependent on whether those relationships have been chosen, and chosen on the basis of their service to rational self-interest' (Deneen 2018a: 31–2). If we are all emotivists now – if we all behave *as if* emotivism were true – what legitimates our various relationships and associations is merely the fact that they were voluntarily opted into. And the inverted version of the same argument is that any unchosen relationship or association is, on that same basis, illegitimate.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the animating principle in liberal or 'luck' egalitarianism is that, as I once described it, 'justice requires compensating people for the inequalities that derive from the arbitrariness of the natural lottery, whereas inequalities that can be traced back to the choices that people have made (about how best to live their lives, or about what sorts of endeavors to pursue or avoid) need not be corrected by justice. The only permissible inequalities, from the point of view of justice, are those that originate from the choices that individuals have voluntarily made' (Rondel 2007: 117).

In *After Virtue* and elsewhere MacIntyre famously argues against the attractiveness and coherence of this liberal conception of the self. For MacIntyre, healthy human selfhood requires that one be in possession of a story – a narrative – about who one is, where one comes from, what one cares about. Human beings are invariably born and grow up somewhere. They are formed by the people, language, culture and traditions around them, and these facts constitute the 'given' or 'moral starting point' against which any attempt at self-creation must take place. As MacIntyre explains, in a beautiful passage from *After Virtue*:

I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle. I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession. I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be 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 given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity. (MacIntyre 1981: 220)<sup>2</sup>

What healthy human selfhood requires, then, liberalism deems out of bounds. Instead of understanding human beings as essentially social creatures who derive direction and meaning from their membership in enduring communities, from the social roles they inhabit, liberalism insists that the human self is, at bottom, an 'unencumbered' chooser of ends, a mere satisfier of preferences.<sup>3</sup> From the point of view of modern liberal individualism, 'a community is simply an arena in which individuals each pursue their own self-chosen conception of the good life, and political institutions exist to provide that degree of order which makes such self-determined activity possible' (MacIntyre 1981: 195). Incorrect and unattractive though it may be, MacIntyre is confident that this modern, liberal conception of the self has become culturally and politically the dominant one.

(2) The ascendancy of a liberal conception of self goes hand in hand with a commitment to neutrality. If human beings are understood as essentially the bearers of preferences and desires, and if there is no objective or non-arbitrary way to parse or rank these various preferences and desires, it follows, as MacIntyre puts it, that '[e]very individual is to

<sup>2</sup> A similar view about the nature of the self can be found in Taylor 1989: 3–38.

<sup>3</sup> The complaint that the liberal self is erroneously celebrated as 'unencumbered' is at the centre of the 'communitarian' critique of liberalism. See most notably Sandel 1982. MacIntyre is frequently lumped in among the so-called communitarian critics of liberalism, although he has consistently rejected that characterisation. As he makes plain in *After Virtue's* prologue: 'a communitarian ... [is] ... something that I have never been' (MacIntyre 1981: xiv). See Murphy 2003b for an illuminating discussion of MacIntyre's rejection of the communitarian label.

be equally free to propose and live by whatever conception of the good he or she may adhere to, unless that conception ... involves reshaping the life of the rest of the community in accordance with it' (MacIntyre 1988: 336). Liberals (*qua* liberals) are expected to refrain from endorsing or disparaging the content of anyone's desires and preferences. The existence of desires and preferences is supposed to be taken as brutally given from a moral or evaluative point of view. From the point of view of modern liberal individualism, MacIntyre explains, 'there are no facts about what is valuable. "Fact" becomes value-free, "is" becomes a stranger to "ought" and explanation, as well as evaluation, changes its character as a result of this divorce between "is" and "ought"' (MacIntyre 1981: 84).

It cannot be the task of government on this kind of view to promote one specific conception of the good life at the expense of others. It is up to individual men and women, one by one, to determine for themselves the kinds of lives that are most worth living. 'Government and law are, or ought to be, neutral between rival conceptions of the good life for man, and hence, although it is the task of government to promote law-abidingness, it is on the liberal view no part of the legitimate function of government to inculcate any one moral outlook' (MacIntyre 1981: 195).

This is ultimately what makes markets so beloved on the liberal way of thinking. Markets are thought to be *neutrality preserving* insofar as they simply report *that* certain preferences exist, while simultaneously abstaining from judgement about the goodness or badness of their content. For MacIntyre, then, liberalism envisions a social world in which preference satisfaction is the *summum bonum*, a world in which customer service is more important than virtue. And the upshot, as can be observed all around us, is a politics that shrinks away from discussion of the human good, a politics that relies on anonymous polling and focus group-tested talking points rather than moral argument. Another consequence is that political life begins to look increasingly like a kind of etiquette or manners – individualistic to the core, everything boiling down to the actions and decisions of discrete individual actors. This is a politics whose parameters are defined by what Marx dubbed 'bourgeois morality'.

Provided no one else is being directly harmed by an individual's desires and preferences – provided no formal rights are being violated – liberalism abstains from judgements about the merits or demerits of different conceptions of the good life. It stays quiet, as it were, about questions concerning what is conducive to human flourishing and what is not so conducive. As Loren Lomasky writes, in approval of this liberal picture:

Liberalism ... holds out no comprehensive catalog of the virtues, refrains from endorsing any specific conception of the good life, supplies no depiction of the

delights of intimate association or communal solidarity. Its range of prescriptions can be summarized as: Respect the rights of others. Beyond that, liberalism does not tell people what to do. (Lomasky 2002: 50)

The injunction to 'not tell people what to do' will sometimes be celebrated by its defenders as evidence of liberalism's commitment to tolerance and healthy open-mindedness. Critics will read it as an expression of liberalism's relativism or nihilism, proof positive of Robert Frost's quip that 'a liberal is a man too broadminded to take his own side in a quarrel'. For his part, MacIntyre thinks that liberalism *really does* tell people what to do. However, since liberalism never advertises (or even concedes) its own prescriptivity and coerciveness, this tends to happen in more covert ways. On MacIntyre's analysis, as we will see, liberalism is a comprehensive tradition that has trouble speaking its own name. Despite its avowed commitment to neutrality, liberalism 'does indeed have its own broad conception of the good', MacIntyre writes, 'which it is engaged in imposing politically, legally, socially and culturally wherever it has the power to do so, but also in so doing its toleration of rival conceptions of the good in the public arena is severely limited' (MacIntyre 1988: 336). Liberalism's conception of the good turns out to be nothing other than liberalism itself – 'the continued sustenance of the liberal social and political order' (MacIntyre 1988: 345). The implication is that, in the best of all possible worlds, a liberal social and political order would remain permanently, enduringly in place.

(3) A major consequence of its avowed commitment to neutrality is that liberalism places much more emphasis on rules and procedures than it does on questions of moral substance. Liberals are enamoured of the Rawlsian slogan according to which the 'right is prior to the good'. They generally believe that procedures for determining how debate should proceed enjoy a certain theoretical priority over debate about the substantive ends to be pursued. As MacIntyre claims, for the liberal, 'rules become the primary concept of the moral life', so that to accept some moral stance is at least to some strong degree to accept the rules or procedures that permit it, the rules or procedures from which the stance is a consequence (MacIntyre 1981: 119). Liberalism shuns first-order discussion about the good in favour of second-order procedural negotiation about the right. As MacIntyre writes, in a stunning sentence from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 'The lawyers, not the philosophers, are the clergy of liberalism' (MacIntyre 1988: 344).

In his 1950 volume *The Liberal Imagination*, Lionel Trilling famously complained about liberal literature's lack of romance. 'The sense of largeness, of cogency, of the transcendence which largeness and cogency

can give, the sense of being reached in our secret and primitive minds – this we virtually never get from the writers of the liberal democratic tradition at the present time' (Trilling 1978: 301). Trilling's complaint makes a lot of sense in the light of liberalism's lawyerly prioritisation of rules and its flight from moral substance. After all, a well-functioning bureaucracy does not reach us in our 'secret and primitive minds'. There is no poetry in proceduralism. *Robert's Rules of Order* rarely makes the human heart leap up.

(4) Liberal individualism gives rise to a series of new 'characters'. Most central here are the aesthete, the therapist and the bureaucratic manager. The bureaucratic manager in particular is the 'central character of the modern social drama', and their prominence is intimately associated with the rise of the liberal individualist picture (MacIntyre 1981: 76–7).

The bureaucratic manager is the chief representative of a new ruling elite that flourishes under liberalism. If we all behave as if emotivism were true – if there are only people's various *yays* and *boos* but no objective moral truths, no facts about what a human life well lived consists in – this carves out space for a new kind of 'morally neutral' expertise that bureaucratic managers are thought to be in possession of. Managers claim justified authority in virtue of their expertise in 'systematic effectiveness', and there are two central elements to this claim (MacIntyre 1981: 74). 'One concerns the existence of a domain of morally neutral fact about which the manager is to be expert. The other concerns the law-like generalizations about their applications to particular cases derived from the study of this domain' (MacIntyre 1981: 77). In this sense, the manager's expertise is alleged to 'mirror' claims made by the natural sciences. Like scientific knowledge, the manager's expertise is supposed to be morally neutral, disinterested, impersonal, merely descriptive. So, to take one kind of example, economic 'experts' will debate about whether some policy or initiative will be 'good for the economy'. And such experts will claim to know what will happen if taxes are raised to such and such a degree, or if interest rates are lowered by such and such a percentage, and so on. But there is no public debate about what an economy is ultimately for – about the moral ends in the service of which it should be regulated, about the human habits, institutions and virtues it should seek to cultivate and strengthen. On the contrary, the bureaucratic manager arises as a prominent figure at the very moment that these deeper questions of value begin to appear quaint or unanswerable. Once everyone becomes convinced that there are no final, non-question-begging answers to these sorts of questions (as the emotivist centrally insists), then turning things over to bureaucratic managers who have

expertise in morally neutral 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' seems like the logical next step. Bluntly put, if there are no objective moral truths around which to structure our lives and institutions, why not let the normatively neutral technocrats be in charge? Why not trust the only real 'experts' left? Much more insidiously, however, it is very much in the interest of the elite bureaucratic managerial class that ordinary people do not spend too much time pondering fundamental questions about the human good. As we have just seen, the manager's claim to authority rests precisely on the assumption that there are no answers to these sorts of fundamental questions.<sup>4</sup>

It is easy to see how the four large theses outlined above hang together in a mutually reinforcing web. If we human beings are really just bundles of desires and preferences, and if it is not possible to rank or order these various desires and preferences in any non-controversially final way, it follows that the state cannot advocate for the superiority of some ways of life over others. The state should be neutral among competing conceptions of the good life. As a direct result of its stated commitment to neutrality, liberalism shuns first-order debate about the nature of the good and retreats to a bland bureaucratic proceduralism. So, for instance, instead of reflecting on whether legalised prostitution or recreational drugs, say, are detrimental to the flourishing of its citizens, a liberal government will obsess about the rules and procedures by which restriction and permission can or may function. Such rules and procedures constitute the vocabulary in which the liberal bureaucratic manager is fluent. And such fluency is thought to justify the manager's influence and power, in turn.

So much for the package of views that, more or less, constitute MacIntyre's critique of liberal individualism in *After Virtue*. As always, there is much more to be said and many details to consider. Some of that will occur in Section 4.3. Before that, in Section 4.2, I want to consider the debate about the ideal of liberal neutrality in more detail. I suggested earlier that liberalism's claim to justified authority rests on a more abstract claim that a liberal regime is (uniquely among the available alternatives) able to achieve neutrality among competing conceptions of the good life. If that more abstract claim is untenable, as MacIntyre argues, the consequences for liberalism would be momentous to say the least.

<sup>4</sup> As MacIntyre writes, in a later essay, '[L]iberalism is the politics of a set of elites, whose members through their control of party machines and the media, predetermine for the most part the range of political choices open to the vast mass of ordinary voters. Of those voters, apart from the making of electoral choices, passivity is required. Politics and its cultural ambience have become areas of professional life, and among the most important of the relevant professionals are the professional manipulators of mass opinion' (MacIntyre 1995b: 153).

## 4.2 Liberal Neutrality and Its Discontents

The ideal of a neutral state looms large in liberal theory. Such an ideal is and can be defended in various ways, but most often the argument that a state has an obligation to be neutral is understood to be the direct consequence of what Rawls (1993) has famously dubbed 'the fact of pluralism' – the fact that modern, democratic societies have within them many rival comprehensive conceptions of the good life. As Charles Larmore summarises this common line of argument:

In modern times we have come to recognize a multiplicity of ways in which a fulfilled life can be lived, without any perceptible hierarchy among them. And we have also been forced to acknowledge that even where we do believe that we have discerned the superiority of some ways of life to others, reasonable people may not share our view. Pluralism and reasonable disagreement have become for modern thought ineliminable features of the idea of the good life. Political liberalism has been the doctrine that consequently the state should be neutral. (Larmore 1987: 43)

But how could a state possibly be neutral? Every law it upholds or fails to uphold, every policy it enacts or refrains from enacting, every incentive or disincentive it confers or withholds represents an affirmative stance of some kind. Every action or omission on the part of the state furthers some kind of agenda. Try though it might, there is simply no way for a state to avoid having a point of view. As Cheryl Misak writes:

A state has no choice but to make choices and it thus promotes a particular culture in countless ways. The law often takes a controversial position on what is good. In our regime it recognises monogamous marriages and punishes bigamous ones ... prohibits digging up corpses, defecating in public, and so on. Statutory holiday schedules, national anthems, oaths, and the like also reflect certain values. In my society these are Christian values, despite the fact that not all citizens are Christian. My state advertises on television and on the subway against the drug culture; encourages 'high' culture by subsidising the arts, but not tag-team wrestling; offers tax credits for contributions to 'recognized charities', but doesn't recognize white supremacist groups who want to set up a charitable foundation for 'victims' of affirmative action; regulates against pornography and against using the F-word, as my seven-year-old says, during prime time television, and so on. Neutrality, that is, is a myth. (Misak 2000: 113)

There is no way for a state to avoid taking sides, no way to avoid advancing some conception of the good. The question cannot be about *whether* to permit the state to have an effect on individuals and culture. Rather, since the individuality- and culture-shaping power of the state is inescapable, the question becomes how such shaping should be undertaken. In light of what? To what ends and to what extent? With what

kinds of ideals in mind? MacIntyre might have also emphasised that doing nothing is a form of social engineering too. A politics of *laissez-faire* will shape people and culture no less assuredly than any other way of making decisions. It can no more claim 'neutrality' than any other manner of proceeding. 'Even the purest libertarianism is just one more brand of technocracy' (Rondel 2018: 99–100).

Does it follow then that the ideal of an ethically neutral state is a chimera? Liberals have usually responded to these kinds of arguments by distinguishing between various sorts and degrees of neutrality. So, for instance, Larmore clarifies that, on his preferred conception, 'The state should not seek to promote any particular conception of the good life because of its presumed *intrinsic* superiority – that is, because it is supposedly a *truer* conception' (emphasis in original). (A liberal state may naturally restrict certain ideals for *extrinsic* reasons because, for example, they threaten the lives of others. See Larmore 1987: 43.) A natural rejoinder to Larmore's clarification is to insist that the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction he draws rarely makes a difference in the real world. No one ever says: 'Well, at first I was angry that the state was non-neutrally taking sides against my values and way of life. But now I see that my anger was misplaced. Now I understand that the state never affirmed the *intrinsic* inferiority of my values. It merely set itself against my values for *extrinsic* reasons.'

Be that as it may, Larmore's clarification represents an example of a frequently invoked distinction within the literature on liberal neutrality. Instead of endorsing *neutrality of effect* or *neutrality of outcome*, liberal theorists now more commonly claim that the kind of neutrality that matters is a *neutrality of justification*, the kind of view, as Richard Arneson glosses it, 'which requires that any policies pursued by the state should be justified independently of any appeal to the supposed superiority of any way of life or conception of the good over others' (Arneson 2003: 193). *Neutrality of justification* is a thesis about the kinds of reasons a liberal society can properly appeal to in the justification of political decisions.

It is easy to see how the turn from *neutrality of outcome* towards *neutrality of justification* demonstrates, yet again, liberalism's proclivity for rules and procedure over moral substance. Instead of promoting neutrality as a first-order moral position in its own right, increasingly neutrality becomes a second-order package of considerations about the rules that should govern political justification and discourse. But there is another point here that brings into focus one of the central elements of MacIntyre's critique of liberalism in *After Virtue* and elsewhere. On MacIntyre's view, the introduction and proliferation of just the sorts of

distinctions of which the turn to *neutrality of justification* is a prime example are precisely what make liberalism an authentic tradition in its own right. This expansion of the discursive terrain is the quintessentially liberal move. The interminability of the dispute about what justice requires in a world where there are many different conceptions of the good *is itself* the conception of the good that liberalism seeks to promote. This is one of MacIntyre's most important insights. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* he puts it this way:

[L]iberalism, which began as an appeal to alleged principles of shared rationality against what was felt to be the tyranny of tradition, has itself been transformed into a tradition whose continuities are partly defined by the interminability of the debate over such principles. An interminability which was from the standpoint of an earlier liberalism a grave defect to be remedied as soon as possible has become ... a kind of virtue.

And again, several pages later:

[L]iberalism requires for its social embodiment continuous philosophical and quasi-philosophical debate about the principles of justice, debate which ... is perpetually inconclusive but nonetheless socially effective in suggesting that if the relevant set of principles has not yet been discovered, nonetheless their discovery remains a central goal of the social order ... What has become clear ... is that gradually less and less importance has been attached to arriving at substantive conclusions and more and more to continuing the debate for its own sake. For the nature of the debate itself and not its outcome provides underpinnings ... of the rules and procedures of the formal legal system. (MacIntyre 1988: 335, 343–4)

Because liberalism's conception of the good requires open-ended yet inconclusive deliberation about how to justly mitigate disagreement about the good, we end up getting endless debate, the perpetual refinement of principles, the proliferation of ever-more subtle distinctions, ever-more granular formulations of 'public reason', and so on.<sup>5</sup> Again, the point of these exercises is not the discovery of the morally correct answers. The goal is to keep the conversation going for its own sake.

<sup>5</sup> On the liberal proclivity to proliferate ever more distinctions and refinements, consider Gerald Gaus's rundown of some of the different ways that the ideal of liberal neutrality has been understood: '(1) *Justificatory neutrality* (that is, neutrality as a constraint on the kinds of reasons and arguments that may be advanced to justify coercive state action). (2) *Consequential neutrality*: the effects of state action must somehow be neutral. (3) A doctrine about the aims of or the intent of legislators. (4) A doctrine about the proper functions of the state. (5) A prohibition on the state "weighing in" or "taking a stand" on some controversial moral issue. (6) The prohibition of the state in enforcing moral character; it being forbidden to engage in the "care of souls". (7) That the state simply be "impartial" (as Brian Barry famously argued). (8) Or, neutrality may be a requirement of a theory of justice, not a theory of state action' (Gaus 2003: 138).

As Christopher Stephen Lutz nicely puts the point, liberalism 'ends up locked in controversy over the definition of the universal rational principles whose existence it dogmatically asserts' (Lutz 2004: 54).

The whole project of justificatory liberalism – the retreat from *neutrality of outcome* to *neutrality of justification* – is one more piece of evidence for liberalism living out its very own conception of the good. Indeed, this is what fundamentally transforms liberalism into a tradition of its own, on MacIntyre's analysis:

The starting points of liberal theorizing are never neutral as between conceptions of the human good; they are always liberal starting points. And the inconclusiveness of the debates within liberalism as to the fundamental principles of liberal justice ... reinforces the view that liberal theory is best understood, not at all as an attempt to find a rationality independent of tradition, but as itself the articulation of an historically developed and developing set of social institutions and forms of activity, that is, as the voice of a tradition. (MacIntyre 1988: 345)

The ultimate conclusion is that liberalism can no more achieve neutrality among competing conceptions of the good than any other tradition can. The contemporary state 'is not and cannot be evaluatively neutral' (MacIntyre 1999b: 213).

Despite the obvious power of MacIntyre's critique, there is an ideal of neutrality (or, if not neutrality *per se*, an ideal in the same conceptual neighbourhood) that seems to many of us something very much worth preserving. Richard Rorty gives a sketch of the sort of ideal I have in mind when he writes:

We do not really want doctors to differentiate between the values of the lives they are saving, any more than we want defense lawyers to worry too much about the innocence of their clients, or teachers to worry about which students will make the best use of the education they are offering. A society built around procedural justice needs agents who do not look too closely at such matters. (Rorty 1991: 205)

What Rorty is describing here is something like the virtue of fairness or even-handedness, something like a personal virtue of neutrality that should prevail in a liberal 'society built around procedural justice'. This virtue emphasises the importance that people – agents of the state in many instances – discharge their duties in a spirit of consistency and fair-mindedness, without prejudice or unjustified partiality. All of us should recognise the value in this ideal, even if we agree that the state is not and cannot be neutral. MacIntyre himself comes extremely close to agreeing with Rorty on this issue. A neutral state may be a fiction, but 'it is very much to be desired', he writes in a later essay, that the 'agencies of the state'

... should provide for the equal protection of the state's subjects from a wide variety of harms, and that this protection should be characterized so that it preserves an ostensible neutrality on the part of the state. Even although that neutrality is never real, it is an important fiction, and those of us who recognize its importance as well as its fictional character will agree with liberals in upholding a certain range of civil liberties. (MacIntyre 1999b: 214)

### 4.3 *After Virtue* in the Tradition of Anti-liberalism

One of the most striking things about MacIntyre's critique of liberalism in *After Virtue* is how it cuts across arguments from both left and right. Unsurprisingly, MacIntyre's book frequently has an unapologetically Catholic feel, drawing from Aristotelian and Thomistic arguments about the human *telos*, about 'the hierarchy of goods which provide the ends of human action', about the richness of the ancient and mediaeval virtue traditions (MacIntyre 1981: 84). At other times, one gets the sense that MacIntyre is channelling a young Karl Marx. (It has been plausibly suggested, incidentally, that MacIntyre's real genius consists in having shown that Marx was fundamentally a 'revolutionary' Aristotelian, someone who conceives of human life in properly teleological terms and shows how capitalism damages and inhibits the human *telos* – what Marx would sometimes call our 'species being').<sup>6</sup> Still, the greatness of *After Virtue* is captured in large part by the fact that it cannot plausibly be pigeonholed.

But even after conceding its great originality and power, it sometimes remains unclear what, precisely, the target of MacIntyre's critique really is and what register the critique is supposed to be operating in. Is the 'liberal individualism' that MacIntyre rejects a philosophical or political doctrine at bottom? Is it an ideology or a theory? A kind of *Weltanschauung*? Or does it more centrally involve something like an ethos or a sensibility – what Wendy Brown (2015), in her illuminating discussion of neoliberalism, calls a 'governing rationality'? It is not easy to say. Sometimes MacIntyre writes as though he is contributing to a standard political-philosophical debate, as if engaging directly with the ideas of John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin or Robert Nozick. At other times, MacIntyre's critique feels more nebulously cultural. And indeed, this distinctively cultural register has a long and important history in the tradition of anti-liberalism.<sup>7</sup> Critics of liberalism – from de Maistre to

<sup>6</sup> See the essays collected in Blackledge and Knight 2011a.

<sup>7</sup> Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule, himself a fierce critic of liberalism, provides a good example of the sort of thing I have in mind. In an essay about what he claims to be the essentially 'sacramental' character of liberalism, Vermeule is clear that he does not mean to criticise liberalism as a political theory, 'let alone the recondite academic versions

Strauss, from Schmitt to MacIntyre himself – virtually always engage in *Kulturkritik*. Their criticisms of modern culture follow a fairly standardised format according to which the repudiation of liberalism goes hand in hand with a more general lamentation over the ‘moral and spiritual degeneration of modern society’ (Holmes 1993: 5). For better or for worse, this is the genre to which *After Virtue*'s critique of liberalism undeniably belongs.

Yet it is sometimes unclear just how much of the moral and spiritual degeneration of the present age it is appropriate to lay at the feet of liberalism as such. No one can really gaze out on the world and pinpoint exactly where the contributions of something called ‘liberalism’ are located – as distinct from myriad other ideas, forces and contingent historical events. Can anyone ever really show that certain forms of degeneration in contemporary societies are the direct upshot of a few key philosophical ideas from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? As if there was a straight line from John Locke's *Two Treatises* to the prevalence of Tinder. As if the moment we agree with J. S. Mill that the only ‘freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way’, we are inexorably on the road to a culture in which there is no self-control, no cultivation of the virtues, a culture in which pornography and selfishness and gluttony rule the day (Mill 1989: 16). We can trace the lines of those connections if we squint. And it can be exhilarating to argue in this way. But it is also difficult to seriously substantiate causal claims at this level of abstraction, over such long periods of time. In the real world, the story about how we got here is almost certainly much more complex, circuitous and contingent than liberalism's critics, MacIntyre among them, sometimes make it out to be. It seems right to say that, in a good number of instances, *After Virtue*'s critique of liberalism is most convincing when it is most broad-brushed and impressionistic. As soon as more definitional and causal precision is

of that theory, worked out to the nth decimal, with distinctions among perfectionist and anti-perfectionist liberalism and so forth. The latter is definitely not my topic and I will be impatient with complaints that I have not spoken to the latest minor paper on Rawlsianism or the latest argument for transhumanism.’ Rather, Vermeule means to criticise liberalism ‘in a sociological vein’ and to conceive of it ‘as a lived and very concrete type of political-theological order’ (Vermeule 2019). All the great contributions to the tradition of anti-liberalism – from the French revolution to the present day – make use of a distinction in this general vicinity, between conceiving of liberalism as a political theory, on the one hand, and as a lived order of some kind, on the other. I think it is correct to say that critics of liberalism are not always as careful as they should be in keeping these different registers of analysis separate. As Holmes claims, ‘the unwillingness to examine liberal theories and liberal societies separately is a trademark of antiliberal thought’ (Holmes 1993: xiv).

demanded, some of its critical and rhetorical sting is diminished. Or so I would contend.

Asking about whether something as big and amorphous as liberalism might be right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, conducive to human flourishing or wholly non-conducive is not particularly helpful in my view. Liberalism is too variegated for anyone to be sensibly 'for' or 'against' it. Too many things can plausibly be counted as 'liberal'.

And yet, the story MacIntyre tells in *After Virtue* about how we have lost our way rings true. Loudly so. And the ringing is even louder, it seems to me, when one makes liberal *society* rather than liberal *theory* the main character in that story. Amazingly, the ringing is also louder today than it was four decades ago, in 1981, when *After Virtue* was first published. For to the extent that liberalism these days is in deep trouble all over the world (and nobody can deny that liberalism is in deep trouble), this is because we have watched a number of MacIntyre's key claims (about the increasingly powerful role that elite bureaucratic managers play in our lives, about liberalism's compulsive proceduralism and its flight from moral substance, about how liberal individualism weakens close-knit communities) play out in real time, as it were. Forty years on, *After Virtue* remains a vital touchstone in moral and political philosophy. Anyone curious about both the rise of liberal individualism and its future prospects cannot afford to ignore it.