Can We Be Both Modern and Virtuous?

James Laidlaw
Professor of Social Anthropology
University of Cambridge
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During the last couple of decades, there has been within anthropology a major new focus on ethics. In one sense, the mere fact of an interest in morality is not new – anthropologists have always tried to describe how moral rules and values differ between societies. But they have tended to see these aspects of social life as a function of something else: such as politics, economics, or 'culture', and often assumed that the moral rules and ethical values of a society are adequately accounted for, if they can be shown to be a function of politics, economics, 'culture', or whatever. What's new has been a focus on the ethical dimension or aspect of human life *as such*, an attempt to get a handle theoretically on the place of ethics in social life, and on its composition. How do we understand what makes moral life possible, or sets its limits? Of what kinds of elements is ethical life composed?

In addressing these questions, anthropologists have of course had cause to look to moral philosophy, for concepts and for analyses of moral life. And they have begun to ask: how might these for-the-most-part resolutely Euro-American-focused views need to be amended, in order to take account of the full variety of forms that human social life has taken, across the globe and throughout our history? That challenge, addressed as it were from social anthropology in the direction of moral philosophy, in turn calls forth one in roughly the opposite direction: how might anthropological approaches – and the assumptions implicit in social theory more generally – need to be amended, in order to take ethics

seriously, when much social theory has proceeded on the assumption that talk of moral values and ideals is at best an insubstantial mask or alibi, the reality of human life being always, it is assumed, driven by hard material realities and the pursuit of sectional interests or power? Can social theory be reformed so as to escape those reductionist assumptions, and to take the pervasiveness and force of ethics in human life seriously?

In addressing these questions, among the available approaches to ethics on offer in Anglophone moral philosophy, anthropologists have turned almost exclusively to the general approach known as virtue ethics, rather than its two main rivals (respectively Kantian and Utilitarian theory). The reasons anthropologists have found virtue ethics appealing are first of all that it does not take the form of a reductive or universalising theory. It is not motivated by an ambition to arrive if possible at a few clear principles or rules that may be applied, ideally, in any situation or context. The emphasis instead is on the understanding of character, which is recognised as itself the product of complex social processes. So the central concern of virtue ethics is acknowledged from the outset to be subject to historical change and cultural difference. That's why, equally, many virtue ethicists have seen what they are trying to do as an intrinsically historical and/or ethnographic enterprise, and some have looked to anthropology for models of how to give rounded descriptions of the complexities of social life.

This still rather new mutual engagement between virtue ethics and anthropology is I think potentially very productive, but so far it has been marked by one distinctly odd feature, because in their reading of virtue ethics anthropologists have concentrated their attention to an overwhelmingly preponderant degree – such that one can almost say they have done so exclusively – on one single author, namely Alasdair MacIntyre.

In this lecture I want to say something about why, how, and to what effect this has been the case, and why it would be a good thing if it were to change. The overall point I want to make is that while there is much in MacIntyre that's brilliant and valuable, his thought is constricted and distorted by an aversion and hostility to Modernity – to everything he routinely refers to as secular, liberal, and/or modern. This hostility is so pronounced that it overpowers MacIntyre's commitment to his own best ideas and concepts, so that he abandons them when it comes to describing modern liberal and democratic societies. As he presents it, his theory seems to imply that virtue is not just difficult but categorically impossible within these societies. As I hope to persuade you, this melancholy conclusion need not follow from MacIntyre's best and most interesting ideas, and it is therefore worth disentangling those ideas from MacIntyre's particular formulation of them. This work of disentangling will be necessary, I think, if the whole enterprise of the anthropology of ethics is to have anything substantive and useful to say to people who inhabit that condition which, for better or worse, we refer to as Modernity.

The philosophical movement known as virtue ethics is a broad and internally complex one, with a range of accomplished and original authors setting out distinctive positions within it. One feature shared by many, although not all, of these authors is a revival of interest in the ethical thought of the classical world, and in particular a revived interest in Aristotle. And indeed MacIntyre is often thought of and represented as a champion of Aristotle. As we shall see, this idea, while not without foundation, is rather misleading, and has indeed misled at least some of his anthropological readers. But before I get to all that, I need to describe what MacIntyre's theory is. This is not straightforward to do, as MacIntyre is something of a mercurial figure, whose tone of prophetic certainty and impassioned moral urgency tends to disguise from many readers that his positions have changed quite markedly over time: a professed Marxist who moved out of and then back firmly into the Roman Catholic Church. On re-joining the Church, in his fifties, he declared that this required that he could no longer count himself a Marxist, which might seem a clear enough position, except that he added that this distancing was also so that he could remain, as he put it, 'faithful to Marxism'.

But behind confusing signals such as this, MacIntyre's major published works actually constitute a remarkably sustained project. The major books through which this is developed are: *A Short History of Ethics* (1966), *After Virtue* (1981); *Whose Justice, Which Rationality* (1988); *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990); and *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999). Each book represents a development on the position set out in the previous one. Some of the changes involved, I'll highlight a little later on. But all in all they set out a remarkably consistent moral vision, in which revulsion at what he calls variously 'modernity', 'liberal modernity', or 'secular liberal modernity' provides much of the motivating force.

That motivating hostility is clear from first move in MacIntyre's most influential exposition of his 'moral theory'. *After Virtue*, the single most ambitious and wide-ranging of his works, begins with a kind of Just-So Story, which MacIntyre proposes as a way of understanding the condition of moral thought and debate in contemporary western societies. Imagine, he says, how things would look after a successful mass movement demanding the destruction of science had swept the world: the labs and libraries have all been destroyed, scientific education eradicated, remaining scientists themselves confined or killed. Some time later, in the aftermath of all this and when the passions that motivated the destruction had been all but forgotten, people might be intrigued to try to piece together what had been lost. From the odd unburned journal and the odd surviving piece of lab equipment they might retrieve some key concepts - 'force field' and 'molecule' perhaps – and reintroduce their use. But no one would have been educated in or able to use these concepts properly, or understand how they are related to each other. They would be empty tokens, reminding us of the former existence of a comprehensive and coherent way of making sense of the world, but giving no access to it as a mode of thought or explanation.

This condition of post-apocalyptic confusion and blight is, says MacIntyre, just what our use of moral language today is like. We use some words that we fondly imagine give us a purchase on the moral, words such as 'good', 'right', 'duty', and so on, and these words do retain a certain grave aura of authority. But this is in fact completely empty, because no one any longer has any idea why these words matter or how they relate to each other. The conceptual scheme in which they made sense has been completely lost. As a result, our moral/political debates are incoherent shouting matches, in which these tokens from a vanished moral vocabulary are used as a rag-bag set of emotive buzz-words, hurled at each other in a competitive display of emotional outrage: in contests such as that between the 'sanctity of life' on one side and the 'right to choose' on the other, contests that are quite irresolvable by means of rational argument and which are therefore just thinly disguised attempts to use the force of law or the weight of numbers to silence and defeat the other side.

This sorry state of affairs in moral and political debate is reflected in the most generally accepted 'theory' of morality current in contemporary society, namely Emotivism. By this MacIntyre means to refer both to the influential position in academic philosophy that goes by that name, but also to the most widely-disseminated view of what morality is among the public at large. Emotivism, MacIntyre explains, is the view that moral language just is a way of expressing our feelings. On this view 'X is morally good' means exactly 'I like or approve or feel positively about X'. Emotivism then is the view that the use of moral language implies no objective or factual claim about X itself. It reports only on the speaker's feelings in relation to it. This view, MacIntyre says, is completely false as a theory about the real meaning of moral language, but sadly accurate as a description of how we have come to use it. That the view is so widespread and taken for granted – summed up in the idea that morality is 'a subjective matter' – is a symptom our 'Emotivist Culture': a culture of shallow consumerism and emotional manipulation. The widespread belief that morality is no more than a set of emotional states has led to the situation MacIntyre sees us as being in, in which moral reasoning has been replaced by the cynical use of emotions to *manipulate* others into agreeing to what we want. So degraded has our understanding become that we can no longer see why this kind of emotional manipulation is wrong, and we elevate into respected professions those who claim to be able to practise it most effectively, such as therapists, HR managers, and advertisers.

How did this sorry state of affairs come to be? What plays the role *in real history* of the hysterical witch-hunting of science and scientists in MacIntyre's Just-So Story? What was it that destroyed rational moral discourse?

MacIntyre's answer to this is at first sight surprising. You might expect (especially in light of his avowals of Marxism) that a narrative about the development of capitalism would be central, but MacIntyre's explanation operates instead at the

level of philosophical and religious change. The reason we are where we are, he says, is because of what he calls, 'the failure of the Enlightenment project'. A good deal of *After Virtue* is taken up with showing that a range of otherwise very different post-Enlightenment philosophers fail in their attempts to provide a rational grounding and justification for morality, and the reason they fail is that they all attempt to do so directly in terms of what they claim to be human nature: a secular conception of the facts of the matter of what human beings are like. All these efforts, MacIntyre asserts, were bound to fail, and to explain why he contrasts the basic overall structure of their arguments, different in many respects but all he claims identical at this general level, with that of Aristotle.

The Enlightenment philosophers all operate, MacIntyre claims, with two fundamental terms in their analysis: human nature and 'morality' (the content of the latter – value of life, respect for property, the institution of marriage, and so on – is inherited from pre-Enlightenment, Christian morals). And all attempt to justify the latter (morality) in terms of the former (human nature). Because human nature is thus and so, their arguments all go, it follows that we should not kill, steal, covet our neighbour's wife, and so on. And these arguments all fail, according to MacIntyre, because unlike for Aristotle, and unlike for the whole Christian philosophical tradition that derived from Aristotle and continued right through the Middle Ages, they lack a crucial third term – man not just as he is in fact (secular 'human nature'), but a teleological conception of man as he *would* be if he realised his true purpose. For Aristotle, and for the philosophical tradition running from him all the way to the Enlightenment, the point about 'morality' was that it was the way you get *from* 'man as he empirically is' *to* 'man as he essentially is'; or slightly differently put, from 'man as he is' to 'man as he ought to be'. Without that crucial third term, a teleological conception of man's true nature or purpose, there is simply no intelligible relation between the otherwise rag-bag collection of rules and values we call 'morality', on the one hand, and, on the other, the facts about what mankind happens to be like in the here and now.

In Aristotle, the teleological conception of man, *man-as-he-essentially-is-and-ought-to-be* was, of course, the adult male citizen in the Greek *polis*. And the virtues, therefore, were those qualities a man needed to have in order to be a good citizen. Because it is man's inescapable nature to live in a political community, and because the *polis* was the highest form of such a community, the role of the citizen was essential to all human flourishing, even to the flourishing of those – such as women, slaves, or children – who either are not yet or never will themselves come to occupy the status of citizen. And although, therefore, slaves and women are not called upon to manifest the virtues, those qualities are nonetheless, as a matter of fact, the virtues for *man as such*. The crucial point here for MacIntyre is that because and insofar as they relate to Aristotle's functional concept of man, evaluative judgements in relation to the virtues are statements of fact. It just is the case that a citizen should display courage, generosity, and justice, in exactly the same sense that a slave should be obedient or a carpenter good at working with wood. The modern idea of an

unbridgeable gulf between fact and value is a consequence of the replacement of the teleological conception of man with the empty vessel of the abstract, asocial 'individual' – the isolated abstract entity imagined in Emotivism, and the imagined bearer of equally abstract 'human' rights, belief in which MacIntyre tartly ranks alongside belief in witches and unicorns. So, for MacIntyre, the failure of 'the Enlightenment project', evident in the failures of thinkers as various as Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard, became inevitable as soon as they rejected the functional conception of man, in the form in which that had come down to them, which was, of course, as embodied in the teachings of the Church: not any longer as it was for Aristotle man the citizen of the polis, but man according to the purposes of God.

So the reason MacIntyre assigns responsibility for the destruction of morality and its replacement in the modern world by the shrill, empty culture of Emotivism, not directly to capitalism, or indeed to any complex narrative about socio-economic or political change, but to the *Enlightenment*, is that the crucial error from which all else flows is the *secularisation* of the concept of man and the invention of that of the supposedly natural 'individual'.

In his 1990 book, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre sets out three possible responses to 'the failure of the Enlightenment Project'. The first response he refers to as Encyclopaedia (after 9th Britannica). By this he means any and all attempts to carry on as if the 'Enlightenment Project' still made sense or had some prospect of success. He intends this to encompass all secular liberal thought, and any attempt to achieve an objective grounding of values, wherever these attempts might lie, for instance, a on spectrum between rationalism and empiricism. So this includes both Kantian and Utilitarian moral philosophy but also almost all academic psychology, economics, and political science.

The second possible response MacIntyre calls 'Genealogy', in deference to Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. But here he intends to encompass an equally wide range of positions including relativism, post-modernism, deconstruction, and critical theory. He specifically includes Foucault as a notable and singularly persuasive exemplar. He characterises this general response as the abandonment of all commitment to moral language and all claims to disinterested truth. All such claims have been revealed, or so this group of theorists all maintain according to MacIntyre, to be the self-interested mask of claims to power, with no validity or meaning outside the dominant social order in which they happen to be made. 'Genealogy', for MacIntyre, although he repudiates it very decidedly, is an eminently reasonable reaction, in its own terms, to the failure of the 'Enlightenment Project' and the mulishly persistent pursuit of that project by what he calls Encyclopaedia. It is its bitter, disappointed mirror image, because it seems to be the only alternative for anyone convinced that truth and morality, to be valid at all, must take the form envisaged by the Enlightenment Project. So the continuing status of that Project as, as it were, the official thought

of modern societies, continues to feed this nihilistic set of reactions and their flattering self-image as supposedly 'radical' alternatives.

MacIntyre points out that all versions of Genealogy have in common that they are self-confuting. It is difficult to see why anyone genuinely convinced of such a view – that all claims to truth are just disguised claims to power – would think it worthwhile systematically to promote it, except indeed as a self-interested bid for power and influence. If this is the radical alternative to the Enlightenment Project, then, the prospect is decidedly bleak.

But, says MacIntyre, there is a third possible form of moral inquiry. This form of enquiry, which he calls 'Tradition', is neither to press on stubbornly with the failed Enlightenment project, nor to abandon rational enquiry entirely in despair, but to put right the central error that caused all the trouble in the first place, which requires that we *reconstruct* a teleological conception of morality, structurally like those which existed before the Enlightenment abandoned teleology for naturalism.

Now what might be involved in this? And where should we look for the intellectual resources we would need to carry out this reconstruction? From this point in *After Virtue*, on through his next two books, MacIntyre unfolds and works out a progressively developing but also subtly shifting answer to these questions; the shift being that increasingly, as it is worked out in detail, his position becomes ever more overtly theocratic and authoritarian. He begins from the position that our new reconstructed teleological account of morality will have to be structurally similar but different in content from anything that has existed before. But in succeeding publications it turns out that more and more of what we need is already there in the inherited teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. I shall say more in a moment about how MacIntyre's thought develops in this direction, but let's begin with the ideas that have made him such a prominent and distinctive figure in virtue ethics, which is his extended analysis of the concept of virtue. This analysis is developed through its three linked constituent elements, namely practice, narrative, and tradition.

A 'practice', in MacIntyre's usage, is a complex, socially established co-operative human activity, such as scientific research, politics, farming, medicine, architecture, or a game such as chess or football. Social practices of this kind have what MacIntyre calls 'internal goods'. So whereas one might play chess in pursuit of wealth or fame, wealth and fame are goods one could pursue in other ways, and learning to play chess is not in any way guaranteed to make you either rich or famous. So, as goods, they are extrinsic to chess. By contrast, what MacIntyre has in mind as an *internal* good of chess, would be the kind of strategic intelligence that enables one to excel at the game: a quality then that is both developed through playing it, and what enables you to play it well. It is not, claims MacIntyre, a matter merely of anyone's opinion or feeling, but a matter of fact, that a chess player should have this quality and that playing chess

intrinsically *aims* at acquiring it. Like the ability to work wood in a carpenter, or courage and justice in a citizen of the *polis*, it is *objectively true* that this quality is a virtue in a chess player.

Practices of this kind have a history: football is not just kicking a ball around and architecture is not just bricklaying. They are socio-historical products, and therefore the fact of the matter of what are their internal goods and excellences is not an unchanging fact of nature, but a product of history too. But they are not on that account any less objective facts about the world; they are not 'relative' in the Genealogists' nihilistic sense. They are not matters of subjective feeling. And to acquire these qualities, to pursue these internal goods, requires acceptance of ultimately arbitrary perhaps but historically derived and agreed and accepted standards and criteria, and therefore it requires submission to the authority of those who speak for those standards and criteria.

But further to this, in order that the claims of the different practices you might participate in should not be in conflict with each other, the virtues thus acquired must cohere, in a life *conceived as an integrated whole*. This is why the second element of MacIntyre's analysis of virtue is 'narrative'. Human life, according to MacIntyre, has a 'narrative structure'. 'Man', he says, 'is a story-telling animal'. We can only ever answer a question 'What am I to do?' insofar as we have an answer to the prior question, 'Where do I think I'm going?', 'Of what story do I find myself part?'. Human action is intelligible only in light of the intentions and purposes that animate it. And these intentions and purposes are in turn intelligible only as *aiming* at possible futures. It is only insofar as the agent asks, 'what kind of person am I to become?', that he or she has a rational basis for deciding between goods to pursue and courses of action to adopt. So practical reason is impossible without narrative understanding, linking the present to the past and the future.

But further again, it is possible, according to MacIntyre, to live a life that may be coherently 'conceived as a whole', only if the practices you are involved in (with their 'intrinsic goods') and the narratives you tell yourself that give shape to your life, are in turn integrated by being part of what he calls a 'tradition'. And what is a 'tradition'? Well, it's this aspect of MacIntyre's account of virtue that shifts most visibly over the years, as it develops. In *After Virtue*, he uses the term in a sense quite close to a somewhat old-fashioned anthropological notion of a 'culture', for an organised way of life, including institutions, social roles, and practices, each of which has its own distinctive conceptions of truth, justice, and the good life. The main difference is that MacItyre's 'tradition' includes a sense of internally generated change as it persists through time, because it's characterised, among other things, by internal debate.

So MacIntyre defines a tradition as consisting of a (a) set of practices (complex, co-operative social activities, aiming at internal goods), plus (b) the established *modes of understanding* those practices and this takes place, as he puts it, by

means of, 'an historically extended, socially embodied argument' about those practices and the goods they aim at, plus (c) the ways those practices are transmitted (so the way they're learned in each generation, through pedagogic conventions, relationships, and techniques). So in comparison with classic anthropological understandings of cultures, which often stress how much is implicit, taken-for-granted, or unconscious, here MacIntyre's depiction of 'traditions' places considerable stress on internal reflection and debate. This aspect is crucial, because it's what enables MacIntyre to make his case that he can explain why the different ways of life that have existed through human history have had their own distinctive forms of virtue, justice, *and* also their own distinctive forms of rational enquiry as to the nature of virtue and justice – they enable him to claim all this *without* thereby endorsing cultural relativism or any of the nihilistic conclusions he attributes to Nietzsche, Foucault, and other purveyors of what he calls 'Genealogy'.

Because they are made up in part of socially and historically embodied *debates* about the good life, as well as practices and relationships through which people seek to live, 'traditions' in MacIntyre's sense need not be conceived as sealed off from each other. The idea therefore that it's necessarily illegitimate to apply the standards of one to another, as people so readily say of different 'cultures', doesn't apply. Indeed, in his exposition of what he means by a 'tradition' MacIntyre describes at some length a massively important case in which just this happened: in which standards and values from one tradition were incorporated into another. There can come to be occasions, says MacIntyre, when people from within one tradition, considering problems or disagreements that have arisen within it, can come to see concepts, ideas, values or whatever from another tradition as providing better answers to the problems they have than anything available from within their own. Ideas can be borrowed. Formerly rival traditions can be brought together, and become fused into something that combines the two. This is what happened, MacIntyre argues, among rival conceptions of justice in post-Homeric Greece, and with the fusion of Calvinism and existing legal traditions in Reformation Scotland. But his cardinal example is the fusion of Aristotelianism and Augustinian Christianity achieved by St Thomas Aquinas: two formerly separate and indeed rival projects of rational enquiry and forms of moral life were brought together in a new synthesis.

What happens in MacIntyre's writings over time is that Aquinas's achievement in bringing this about, which in the first telling is illustrative of the general formal possibilities of interactions between 'traditions', and one instance among many that somehow must have happened throughout human history all over the world, this single instance gets elevated into a unique and superlative event – resulting in what MacIntyre at one point refers to as the best and most complete account of the virtues there has ever been. So while Aristotle is the hero of *After Virtue*, from *Whose Justice* onwards that place is occupied firmly by Aquinas, although in *Three Rival Versions* even he has to share the honour with Pope Leo XIII. And the balance between tradition, conceived as a setting for on-going debate on the

one hand, and tradition on the other hand as requiring submission to authority and to internal criteria of truth and excellence, shifts decisively in favour of the latter. The result is that a conception of 'traditions' gives way to a singular conception of *the correct form* of moral enquiry: 'Tradition' with a capital 'T'. And that true form of rational enquiry is the one created by Aquinas.

So while *After Virtue* ends with a tentative suggestion that we might repair the damage done by the Enlightenment by experimentally rebuilding coherent forms of moral life in small voluntary communities, each of which might need their own St Benedict to work out its own code of conduct, his later publications find a blueprint for the rebuilding of moral life already embodied in Thomist orthodoxy. In particular, MacIntyre becomes explicit that such debate as can be allowed to happen within 'Tradition' must be strictly limited. Rational enquiry can only take place within a moral community – I quote – '*from which dissent has been excluded*'. For instance, when liberal historians and commentators have criticised the fact that David Hume was excluded from a university professorship because of his religious heterodoxy, they simply show they have not understood that prior commitment to accepted standards, criteria, and principles is a *precondition* for the very possibility of reason.

This drift can be seen in the imagery MacIntyre uses to describe virtue, which shifts from being imagined as a feature of debate within or between philosophical schools, to being something that's acquired through apprenticeship within a craft guild, with the emphasis on the need for 'obedient trust' as a precondition for being able to learn from a craft master. While still using examples familiar from Aristotle, MacIntyre increasingly gives them a different gloss. So in Aristotle, virtue resembles craft just insofar as both require critical reflection on what you are doing in order to learn them, and they differ in that virtue is *chosen*, and chosen for its own sake, in a sense that makes it different from mere training. But MacIntyre increasingly describes virtue as something that comes to be automatic. So in a striking image, he likens fully acquired virtue to the skill and disposition a hockey player comes to have so that if, in the closing moments of a game, he gets the opportunity either to take a shot at goal or to pass to a team member who will have a better shot, he will do the latter automatically and without thinking, before he has even realised that he might have done otherwise, so thoroughly is he habituated to a form of life in which his role and the goals his action is oriented towards are perfectly integrated and aligned. He will have acted in a way that is far too automatic to be described as anything so vulgar as a 'choice'. The experience MacIntyre claims for the virtuous hockey player here – of perfect coherence and harmony with the rest of the team, based on deeply shared purposes having been thoroughly internalised, is a glimpse of what life was much more comprehensively like before the dislocations caused by the Enlightenment, and of what life would be like again if we reconstructed and what he comes to call 'Tradition'.

As I said earlier, MacIntyre's writings, including his reading of Aristotle, have been widely influential in anthropology, and nowhere more so than in the anthropology of ethics. And it is easy to see why. Especially in his earlier works, where 'traditions' were still in the plural and interactions and integrations between them were an important theme, he provides a promising model for recognising the plurality of forms of ethical reasoning and moral life, while avoiding the dead ends of ethical relativism. And his account of the relation between social roles and the varying forms of excellence appropriate to those roles makes eminent anthropological sense. Above all, in my view, the basic idea of virtue as excellence internal to social practice is a brilliant and extremely productive one, among other reasons because the supposed fact-value dichotomy doesn't even arise if you proceed from that starting point. But I want to sound a cautionary note, because it seems to me that in taking up rather uncritically MacIntyre's notions especially of tradition, and of virtue as *habituated* practice, anthropologists may also have taken on more of the theocratic and authoritarian bent of MacIntyre's later writings than they have necessarily been aware of or intended, and more than is altogether desirable.

For example, consider the very influential project by Talal Asad and others to develop an anthropology of Islam. There is a problem that presents itself to anthropologists studying Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and other widespread or 'world' religions of whether to try to identify the core or essential teachings of the religion, and compare and relate the various things people believe and do in the diverse places they study to *that*, or on the other hand to say, for instance, that Islam just is what Muslims do, and therefore that 'it', Islam, is actually different in different times and places. Neither of these options is at all satisfactory, and Asad proposed to cut through the problem by arguing that Islam is a tradition in MacIntyre's sense. This solution undoubtedly has advantages, but we do need to ask: which version of MacIntyre's views have Asad and those influenced by him adopted? To what extent have they adopted his early pluralist model, and to what extent the later singular 'Tradition' (with a capital 'T')?

That it is to a considerable degree the latter, is suggested by the fact that Asad, like MacIntyre, emphasises what he sees as the profound rupture caused by the European Enlightenment. So much so that he sees a strong continuity between medieval Christendom and modern-day Islam, which are alike in Asad's view, and both instances therefore of MacIntyre's Tradition, in asserting a holistic and comprehensive authority in relation to those within them, prescribing and legislating on what is right conduct in all facets of life. What the advent of secular modernity did to Christianity was to effect a radical diminution in that authority, through the exclusion of what became the modern category of 'religion' from public and political life and its sequestering into a privatised domain of merely individual experience and personal 'belief'. The key to understanding Islam, for Asad and his followers, is that for the most part it has not suffered this diminution, although many 'secular' states and rulers in the Muslim world have followed their colonial predecessors in trying to bring it about. We can see how limited their

success has been in movements for Islamic revival, which aim to restore and reassert the authority of Islamic tradition to occupy and shape both the public realm and personal conduct, conceived, as the medieval Church conceived it and as MacIntyre wishes us to do again, as an indissoluble whole. Reformist Islam, on this account, becomes exactly the kind of movement to roll back the Enlightenment and to re-establish a coherently teleological and comprehensive form of moral life, which MacIntyre's third form of moral enquiry, his capitalized Tradition, calls for.

The most complete and persuasive ethnographic accounts along these lines, and also the most influential, are the twin studies by Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood of the piety movement in Egypt as it flourished in the years before the fall of Hosni Mubarak. In both these studies – excellent in very many ways – the quality of piety that participants aim to acquire is described as virtue in MacIntyre's sense. These authors also invoke Aristotle, pointing out how influential Aristotle's philosophy was in classical Islam, but the understanding of virtue they attribute to Aristotle, and find in their ethnographic material on piety Islam, is much closer in fact to that of the later MacIntyre and his virtuously unthinking hockey player. So Mahmood, in her account of women's study and prayer groups attached to reformist mosques, describes how the ethical formation practised there aims at the inculcation of pious dispositions – veiling and modest deportment in the presence of men, regular prayer, weeping in response to sermons, and so on – to the point where they become 'a nondeliberative aspect of one's disposition'. And both she and Hirschkind, in his discussion of similar processes of virtue acquisition among men, make clear that this inculcation of piety proceeds very largely by way of the training of affective responses – especially the inculcation of fear at the prospect of displeasing God – to the point where the subject's conformity with the norms of piety comes automatic and involuntary.

Following McIntyre, Mahmood presents this process as the acquisition of virtue, as described by Aristotle, but for Aristotle, virtue results from the *education* of one's desires, so that their *reflective* exercise leads one to choose the good, and to do so for its own sake and because it is the good, and there is a clear difference between this and the acquisition of unthinking dispositions through a process of training and habituation that progressively *excludes* the exercise of reason. It may be that involuntary habituation is indeed what this movement aims at, but if so, the suggestion that it represents what Aristotle meant by *virtue* is highly misleading. It may be instead that what these women seek to achieve is really more like Aristotelian virtue than it is like the training into the unquestioning obedience to authority that MacIntyre recommends. I am not in a position to say which is nearer the truth. But either way, the ethnographer's uncritical acceptance of MacIntyre's vision, including his re-reading of Aristotle through the prism of high-medieval theocracy, has obscured as much and more than it has clarified.

To see where MacIntyre goes wrong in the working out of the theory first outlined in *After Virtue*, and which, as there presented, undoubtedly did have many attractive and intriguing features, we need I think to look again at where he starts his exposition. Because although he claims repeatedly that philosophy is or should be at one with history and anthropology, his own theory does not begin from an empirical enquiry into how moral life proceeds in modern societies, but in a Just-So Story: his parable about the destruction of science. That Just-So Story is not even an abbreviated version of an historical account of Modernity. There is no real-life parallel for those anti-science pogroms. The parable functions in MacIntyre's text, instead, as a kind of mystical vision. It's an invitation to the reader to see the world anew, in a different light: to transform his or her perceptions of everyday life.

MacIntyre claims to have seen through the appearance of things. We seem to be making moral judgements and conducting moral arguments, but he is here to tell you they are just shadow without substance. And his parable is an invitation to us to elevate ourselves above the ignorant and unthinking crowd and to see, with him, that the humdrum give and take and back and forth of our debates and disagreements, is not the messy but humane necessity by which people with varied points of view and interests, negotiate their coexistence in a slightly unruly democracy. No, says MacIntyre, it is 'a new dark ages'.

One feature of this transforming vision is that it positions its author outside the world it describes. It is, as a theory, self-excepting. If the theory were true, it would be impossible to explain, and MacIntyre does not try to explain, how it could be that he alone has escaped the impoverishing effects of the 'Culture of Emotivism' and seen through the appearance of moral debate to the reality beneath. A second, related feature, is that it disables him from telling us anything very substantive, or recommending anything very concrete, in relation to that world, in which we actually live. It is striking that much of what he says about our supposedly 'emotivist culture' is plainly inaccurate. Contrary to what MacIntyre claims, we *do* still think there's an important moral difference between persuasion and manipulation, and this is indeed what MacIntyre appeals to when he suggests that those who specialise in the latter are emblematic figures in our culture. He knows we will find the idea that we live in a culture of manipulation disquieting and repellent. If what he said about emotivism were true, his readers would scarcely be able to understand the point he is trying to make here. But he knows that in fact he can appeal to a very clear moral preference on our part.

And similarly, he could scarcely explicate any of his theory for us, if we weren't in possession of a whole range of moral intuitions and knowledge that he claims are absent from 'emotivist culture'. What it is for goods to be internal to practices, the importance of narrative in our self-understanding, and the centrality of reflective debate to intellectual/moral traditions: he explains all of this through appeal to what we know about how we currently live our everyday lives. So the very fact that MacIntyre is able to make the substance of his analysis of moral life

comprehensible to his readers shows that we are not the products only of a disastrous empty moral charade, as he claims.

It is striking that MacIntyre rests content with his Just-So Story about Modernity, and his thin and internally contradictory idea of an 'emotivist culture' that defines it, because in doing this he is pointedly not using the sophisticated set of concepts he develops in the main constructive passages in his theory for analysing historically variable forms of moral life. Why not apply his notions of practices, narrative, and tradition to understand moral thought and conduct in conditions of Modernity? Why substitute the shallow idea of 'emotivist culture' for the substantive analysis which elsewhere he insists should always be the means by which of moral philosophy proceeds?

The reason why MacIntyre flouts his own methodological prescriptions, and leaves unused his own best ideas and concepts, emerges from his contradictory remarks on whether liberalism may be regarded as a tradition. Occasionally he says it is, but one that is incapable of knowing itself as such. Since it thinks its own principles are universal, it is incapable of reckoning with its own historicity. But this is not a condition he places on other traditions, which have all contained thinkers who saw themselves as reasoning to some extent from first principles, and others who were more conscious of, and comfortable with, their inheritance from others and place in a tradition of thought. More often he denies that liberalism is a tradition in any sense, on no very carefully reasoned grounds, but rather merely on the basis that it is so fundamentally at odds with Thomism, and guilty of having supplanted it as the dominant ideology of what used to be Christendom.

But there is actually no reason in principle not to conceive of liberalism as a tradition, in MacIntyre's earlier pluralist conception, with internal debates and divergences, and with some aspects that are easier to bring into relation with other traditions of thought, and others that would be more intractable. There are, for sure, liberal thinkers of a rationalist and foundationalist bent who would find the idea rebarbative, but for every Kant there is a Hume or Adam Smith, for every Rousseau a Constant or a Tocqueville, for every Mill a Green, for every Rawls or Nozick a Berlin, and for every Friedman, a Hayek. I can see no reason why liberalism should be less capable of understanding itself as a historically-located tradition in MacIntyre's sense than any of those he holds up for our approbation.

In any case, if MacIntyre could only have brought himself to consider liberalism on a par with the other traditions of moral life and thought he describes and analyses, and apply to it the sophisticated concepts of practice, narrative, and tradition he works out so brilliantly, he might have been able to deliver on one of their more exciting promises: to abolish and overcome one of the worst habits of thought of modern social theory, the ever-sprouting weed that is the opposition between tradition and modernity, and the idea of a single great watershed in history between them.

MacIntyre is not the only great exponent of virtue ethics who has argued recently that moral philosophy ought to be an historical and anthropological enterprise. Two others have been Charles Taylor and Bernard Williams. There is a passage where Williams reflects on the fact that he was the odd one out in this trio, because the other two were practising Roman Catholics. Williams commented,

> 'I used to find this a disquieting fact but no longer do. All three of us, I could say, accept the significant role of Christianity in understanding modern moral consciousness, and adopt the three possible views about how to move in relation to that: backward in it, forward in it, and out of it'.

By 'forward in it', Williams refers to Taylor, and his view that much in what we nowadays think of as *secular* values are directly descended from Christianity, including the value we place on sincerity, the individual, and the sanctity of everyday life. And Taylor thinks that our modern moral imaginaries will be deepened and enriched if we more fully reflect on and acknowledge that Christian inheritance. By 'out of it', Williams refers to his own contrary (but not strictly contradictory) view that persistent Christian ideas are among the more disabling features of modern morality: the idea that morality should be opposed to self-interest, the idea of the moral will, and an overemphasis on intention in our thinking about responsibility. Williams saw much of merit in Nietzsche's injunction to accept that God is dead, and undertake the almost unbearably hard work of rethinking our values in light of that fact.

MacIntyre's preference for trying to move 'back in it', to try to re-wind history and undo the Enlightenment, along with the Reformation, is undoubtedly the
least sociologically and politically realistic of the three possibilities Williams refers to. But none seems wholly possible on its own, and we probably need elements of them all.