

TIMES OF THE COLLAPSE OF UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS OR ABOUT META-ETHICS AFTER MACINTYRE

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Living through the decades before and after the last turn of the century means we face both political and philosophical moral challenges. In fact, ethics as such are under question in our world. Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has helped to bring a paradigm-shift in philosophical thinking, providing a new perspective on virtue ethics looking at virtue, practice, narrative and tradition as a holistic complex. Christian ethicists have re-confirmed their virtue-ethical argument relying on their own historical tradition, that of the Christian community.

I. Before MacIntyre: Noah's Ark or Titanic?

The 20th century after Christ is quite unique. For the first time in human history an agreement was signed that humankind should follow a kind of universal human codex of ideology-free and tradition-free understandings of *ought* and *ought not* principles, “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”¹

Obviously such a common understanding just could not be born overnight on December 10, 1948 when the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The idea of a universally bound moral law of all known rights and wrongs was born out of the long-lasting pains of wars of both a political and a philosophical nature. Stephen Toulmin has described this process in his terms of “*Cosmopolis: the Hidden Agenda of Modernity*.”² Modern human rights may be seen as a symbolic declaration celebrating the “Enlightenment Project” between 17th-20th centuries.

¹ **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights**. Article 2.
<<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>>.

² **Stephen Toulmin**. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Another question is whether “the Project” ended up with a universally safe Noah's Ark against all the moral waters and storms of different ideologies and traditions or just with another baneful Titanic?

The first warning sounds, questioning attempts to universalize a moral law, were heard quite soon after launching the ship of modern human rights. In 1958 the academic journal *Philosophy* published an article about *Modern Moral Philosophy* by the young British philosopher Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, one of the most promising students of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Until 21st century actively well-known “Miss Anscombe” wrote:

To have a *law* conception of ethics is to hold that what is needed for conformity with the virtues failure in which is the mark of being bad *qua* man (and not merely, say, *qua* craftsman or logician) –that what is needed for *this*, is required by divine law. Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver; like Jews, Stoics, and Christians. But if such a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of “obligation,” of being bound or required as by a law, should remain though they had lost their root; and if the word “ought” has become invested in certain contexts with the sense of “obligation,” it too will remain to be spoken with a special emphasis and special feeling in these contexts.³

Anscombe argued that moral concepts like duty, obligation, and the like cannot be meaningfully applied in the absence of a divine lawgiver. Still, modernists were deriving their moral logic from their historically retained understanding of moral law. At the same time it would have been much more fruitful to talk about ethics in terms of personal virtues of character and moral communities according to Aristotelian understanding of virtuous life.

Later on there were several quests to re-discover virtue as such, as well as the virtue ethics, as a relevant school of ethical thought. It was only in 1981 that Alasdair MacIntyre published his breaking work of *After Virtue*⁴. The book – which quickly sold, was widely commented upon, and soon re-published⁵ – stated the modern “Enlightenment Project” to be burned out because of its disintegration and depersonalisation of ethics. Along with his

³ **Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe.** *Modern Moral Philosophy.* – *Philosophy*, 33/1958, p. 6.

⁴ **Alasdair MacIntyre.** *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory.* Norte Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

⁵ **Alasdair MacIntyre.** *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory.* Second edition. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

later works⁶, MacIntyre argued that all the rival modern theories of universal ethics discarded both their opponents as well as themselves, since all of them claimed to be universal, at the same time rationally contradicting each other. For example, emotivism “is the doctrine that all evaluative judgements and more specifically moral judgements are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling.”⁷ At the same time, emotivism itself should be also be considered just as an “attitude”, a normative “feeling” only for those who’s “preference” it is to take it. As a result, modern moral discourse, using terms like good, and justice, and duty, has become detached from any real life context, applying ultimately instead of to real people now and here but to nobody, nowhere and in nothingness. So, different schools of modern philosophical thought have just borrowed some attractive ethical concepts from different traditions for “taxiderming” a monster for a museum of ethics rather than for a socially embodied moral life.

But MacIntyre's aim was not just a critical one, but a meta-ethical one – exploring further into the historical conditions of human moral life and ethical thought. Since every tradition has derived its moral convictions and ethical logic from their own traditional concept of *telos* – the ultimate aim of life, then any kind of abstract approach to morality leads into *telos-free* society, like the modern one with all the questions about universalised principles, rules and regulations. So, according to MacIntyre, the contemporary world has created a moral vacuum in which there is no moral objectivity. People are left with only two real options: Nietzsche or Aristotle? The choice is between the Nietzschean will-to-power ethics and the Aristotelian virtue ethics. “There is no third alternative,” says MacIntyre.⁸

2. MacIntyre: extending ethics of virtue with practice, narrative, and tradition of *telos*

The ethics of Aristotle, followed by Augustine and Aquinas, were *telos*-oriented ethics, the ethics of an aimed character, virtue, and being, whereas modern ethics has been just an ethics of action. But without an ethics of be-

⁶ **Alasdair MacIntyre**. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988; **Alasdair MacIntyre**. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990; **Alasdair MacIntyre**. *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues*. The Annual Aquinas Lecture. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1990.

⁷ **MacIntyre** 1984, pp. 11–12.

⁸ **MacIntyre** 1984, p. 118.

ing, modern ethicists were left only to comment on isolated actions. In summoning ethicists to look at persons and not just their actions, MacIntyre has suggested that ethics should address the question: What type of people ought we to become? Instead of asking whether an action is right, MacIntyre has re-personalized ethics proposing that we start discussing not only what we are doing now, but more importantly, who we are now becoming? According to Aristotle, human beings are *teleological* beings, which is to say, human living aims at an end, or *telos*. The Aristotelian *telos* of human life was always linked with a special kind of social relationship connected to the *eudaimonia* – “the state of being well and doing well in being well, of man’s being well-favored himself and in relation to the divine.”⁹ Such a kind of *telos* is, at the same time, forming a moral vision for social life in the context of virtues, practices, narratives, and traditions. All those concepts – *virtue*, *practice*, *narrative*, and *tradition* – can be defined only in terms of the other concepts.

2.1. Practice

MacIntyre defines the concept of practice:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.¹⁰

The typical MacIntyrean abstruse definition is probably best explained by Brad J. Kallenberg in his article *The Master Argument of MacIntyre’s After Virtue*.¹¹ He provides four short characteristics for defining the MacIntyrean practice.

First, practices are socially established and cooperative human activities. For practicing a practice there is a requirement for not just isolated individuals, but like-minded people challenged together by participating in a quite

⁹ MacIntyre 1984, p. 148.

¹⁰ MacIntyre 1984, p. 187.

¹¹ Brad Kallenberg. *The Master Argument of MacIntyre’s After Virtue*. – *Virtues & practices in the Christian tradition. Christian ethics after MacIntyre*. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, Mark Nation (eds.). Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997, pp. 21–22.

complex and coherent activity aiming at some goal in a unified fashion. For instance, practices like medicine or soccer or music.

Second, practices have goods that are internal to the activity, for example, the game of chess, bringing joy of chess only to and being rewarding, recognized and appreciated only by the participants themselves.

Third, practices have standards of excellence without which goods cannot be fully achieved. Like the joy of chess is in having played well. At the same time the excellence of playing well is defined by the historical community of practitioners.

Fourth, practices are systematically extended. The standards are growing in time. No one today would go to a dentist who is practicing “well” on a “well-working” technique used by the dentists in the 19th century.

Several practices may become an entire tradition in themselves, like contemporary medicine or science or warcraft which have developed their own epistemology, authoritative texts, structured communities and institutions, and even their own history. Virtues are connected to the practices as qualities cultivated by striving for excellence in those practices. Regarding practices, MacIntyre is defining virtue as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”¹²

2.2. Narrative

Another key term for understanding the MacIntyrean concept of virtue is narrative. Human behavior derives its meaning from the contextual stories in which the behavior is embedded. Kallenberg explains:

MacIntyre reasons that if human actions are intelligible only with respect to stories that contextualize intentions, then that which unifies actions into sequences and sequences into a continuous whole is the story of one’s life. My life as a whole makes sense when my story is told.¹³

For MacIntyre, the narrative provides the unity of human life in his or her identity. The self has continuity in the course of time because it has played the single and central character in a particular story – the narrative of a person’s life. At the same time one’s identity and story is always connected to

¹² **MacIntyre** 1984, p. 191.

¹³ **Kallenberg** 1997, p. 23.

the narrative of the community with which he or she is identifying himself or herself. MacIntyre says:

For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity.¹⁴

Hence, MacIntyrean virtues are those qualities that assist one in the extension of his or her story, and by extrapolation, the extension of the story of his or her community or communities, leading directly to the concept of tradition.

2.3. Tradition

MacIntyre has defined the word *tradition* as “a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute the tradition.”¹⁵ It means that, firstly, tradition in MacIntyrean sense is a logical extension of the concept of narrative. As persons are narratively extended throughout their life-span, communities are “historically extended” as traditions in the course of human history. Secondly, traditions are “socially embodied” because they can be lived out only in communities of people who are bound to the same authoritative voice or text.¹⁶ Communal life embodies the particular tradition’s *persona* in a particular time and space by a particular generation of the same particular tradition. Thirdly, traditions are necessarily long-standing “arguments” for a wider, narratively extended *telos*-oriented historical communal life. In his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre defines his understanding of a tradition as:

an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.¹⁷

So, MacIntyre also overcomes a kind of tension between the Aristotelian *polis* and *telos*. In the course of history the virtue tradition has critically

¹⁴ MacIntyre 1984, p. 221.

¹⁵ MacIntyre 1984, p. 222.

¹⁶ MacIntyre 1988, chapter 18.

¹⁷ MacIntyre 1988, p. 12.

overcome its narrow sense of *polis* as the context for the *telos* of human life. In medieval times the Christian tradition crossing the Ancient tradition of a virtuous life extended both the meaning of *polis* and *telos* of human life. As “every particular view of the virtues is linked to some particular notion of the narrative structure or structures of human life,”¹⁸ the Good, at which human life aims, was considered by Aristotelian thought to be a corporate good that could not be possessed by isolated individuals but only jointly in an earthly community. “This is why the notion of a final redemption of an almost entirely unregenerate life has no place in Aristotle’s scheme; the story of the thief on the cross is unintelligible in Aristotelian terms,” indicates MacIntyre.¹⁹ But the Ancient *telos* of life was extended in the medieval age beyond one’s life itself. In turn it allowed for the possibility of positive evil, if the achievement of the human *telos* may counterbalance all evil, even evils of the tragic sort.

The narrative therefore in which human life is embodied has a form in which the subject – which may be one or more individual persons, or, for example, the people of Israel, or the citizens of Rome – is set a task in the completion of which lies their peculiar appropriation of the human good; the way towards the completion of that task is barred by a variety of inward and outward evils. The virtues are those qualities which enable the evils to be overcome, the task to be accomplished, the journey to be completed.²⁰

As MacIntyre shows, “the virtues are then on this kind of medieval view those qualities which enable men to survive evils on their historical journey.”²¹ But if no evil whatsoever that could happen to medieval Christians need exclude them from reaching their Christian *eudaimonia*, and medieval thinkers took the basic historical scheme of the Bible to be one within which they could rest assured, then it is right with MacIntyrean historical approach to conclude:

To move towards the good is to move in time and that movement may itself involve new understandings of what it is to move towards the good.²²

The *telos* of human life, as MacIntyre allows us to discover, is found to be interconnected with all the key social concepts of practices and narratives and the tradition, all of them providing a networked context for reflecting and embodying the virtuous human life:

¹⁸ MacIntyre 1984, p. 174.

¹⁹ MacIntyre 1984, p. 175.

²⁰ MacIntyre 1984, p. 175.

²¹ MacIntyre 1984, p. 176.

²² MacIntyre 1984, p. 176.

The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical enquiry about the character of the good. We have then arrived at a provisional conclusion about the good life for man: the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.²³

So, Alasdair MacIntyre has revived the tradition of virtue ethics in a renewed perspective of philosophical and ethical logic. At the same time MacIntyre has allowed virtue ethics to be extended even after MacIntyre himself. *We may be After Virtue even After MacIntyre!*

3. After MacIntyre: quo vadis Christian ethics?

A Roman Catholic moral theologian James F. Keenan writes:

MacIntyre offered an insightful agenda. (...) Christian ethicists are discovering, then, that virtue ethics can offer more resources than we ever imagined.²⁴

Interestingly enough, MacIntyre himself – because of his philosophical discoveries – returned to the Christian Church of Roman Catholic tradition, it is true, whilst remaining still more as a philosopher and a meta-ethicist than a proclaimer of his Christian convictions.²⁵ But there are numerous other

²³ **MacIntyre** 1984, p. 219.

²⁴ **Daniel Harrington, James Keenan.** *Jesus and Virtue Ethics. Building Bridges Between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology.* Lanham, Maryland & Chicago, Illinois: Sheed & Ward, 2002, p. 23.

²⁵ **Alasdair MacIntyre.** *An Interview with Giovanna Borradori.* – *The MacIntyre Reader.* Kelvin Knight (ed.). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, pp. 255–266.

Christian ethicists for whom “MacIntyre’s work proved to be particularly useful as it provided the vocabulary for getting a handle on the family resemblance shared by the ethicists.”²⁶

A group of Baptist ethicists have confessed:

Influenced by our teacher James Wm. McClendon, Jr., we each taught ethics persuaded that Christian convictions make a difference: Christians do ethics in a Christian way. In the process of sorting out just what this Christianly way was we stumbled upon the conceptual resources that Alasdair MacIntyre provided in his book *After Virtue*. We were initially attracted to MacIntyre’s work not primarily because of his role in the renaissance of virtue ethics but, more significantly, for his nuanced exegesis of our post-critical philosophical situation. We admit rather sheepishly that our enthusiasm for MacIntyre’s thinking originally bewitched us to see a *theory* of Christian ethics lurking in his writings – as if Christian ethics needed yet another philosophical theory! Simply put (and therein lay the danger), MacIntyre seemed to be saying that moral oughts can be deduced in a straightforward manner from the answer(s) historical traditions give to the question: “What is human life for?” However, this way of putting it overlooked MacIntyre’s deeper insight, namely, that each member of any (and all) traditions required lifelong training in order to see rightly just what the given tradition maintained to be the *telos* of human life.²⁷

Professor Nancy Murphy is identifying herself among the “unabashed fans of Alasdair MacIntyre,”²⁸ explaining his contribution to contemporary Christian ethics and its future:

He has accomplished three things of great value to Christian ethics. First, he has revived the *virtue* tradition of moral inquiry, thus, offering to contemporary thinkers a fresh version of a venerable moral language. This is a welcome addition to the resources of modernity, where the focus has been on rights, consequences, and the autonomy of the individual. We believe that this new vocabulary, along with MacIntyre’s account of the structure of moral reasoning, is especially

²⁶ **Nancy C. Murphy, Brad Kallenberg, Mark Thiessen Nation.** Preface and Acknowledgments. – *Virtues & practices in the Christian tradition: Christian ethics after MacIntyre*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997, pp. xi–xii.

²⁷ **Murphy, Kallenberg, Nation** 1997, p. xi.

²⁸ **Nancy Murphy.** Introduction. – *Virtues & practices in the Christian tradition. Christian ethics after MacIntyre*. Nancy Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, Mark Nation (eds.). Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997, p. 1.

helpful for Christian ethicists. It allows us to say the things we need to say about the shape of the Christian moral life, and in a way more intelligible to ourselves and to outsiders that the language of modern philosophical ethics allows.

Second, there has recently been a sea change in Christian ethics, due largely but not exclusively to the prolific Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas tends to talk about Christian morality in terms of *narratives* and *community*, *virtue* and *character*. Although Hauerwas is not a disciple of MacIntyre, we perceive that MacIntyre's contribution to the understanding of moral discourse *in general* – his revival of the virtue tradition, his critique of Enlightenment theories of ethics – will serve to order and interpret this new movement in Christian ethics (...) by a variety of thinkers here: James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, John Howard Yoder, Craig Dykstra, Rodney Clapp, Richard Hays, Luke Timothy Johnson, Grady Scott Davis, Stanley Hauerwas, Tammy Williams, Mark Thiessen Nation, Michael Goldberg, William F. May, and D. Stephen Long. This list includes Protestants from a variety of traditions and Catholics; some identifiable as liberal, some conservative, and one Conservative Jew. What all have in common is that their works illustrate and apply MacIntyrean patterns of moral reasoning. Thus we claim that MacIntyre's theory helps make clear the structure and rationale of each essay.

Third, a major controversy in meta-ethics, that is, in thinking about *how* to think about morality, involves the issue of particularity. It was an assumption of modern philosophy that moral prescriptions or judgments needed to be *universal*. So the very notion of Christian ethics – ethics especially for Christians – became oxymoronic. Modern “Christian ethicists” (if we may use the term) tended to accept this assumption and made it their task to show Christian moral teaching to be merely an instance of a universal moral code, or to show that Christian moral claims could be justified by means of patterns of moral justification universally accepted, whether this be utilitarian or Kantian or social.

Against the universalists, MacIntyre argues that all ethical thought is indebted to some *particular* moral tradition – even the Enlightenment tradition of “traditionless reason”! The danger inherent in such a recognition, however, is moral relativism, that is, that there will be no way to justify any community's or tradition's moral reasoning in the (alleged) public forum. MacIntyre has complex and ingenious arguments to show that, despite the tradition-dependence of all specific moral arguments, it is nonetheless possible to make respectable public claims, showing one tradition of moral reasoning to be superior to its rivals. So here is one case where it is possible to have one's cake

(one's particularity as a Christian) and eat it too (justify one's claims in public).²⁹

So, in contemporary virtue ethics, at least in the Christian tradition after MacIntyre, we are challenged by a radical question: whose moral reasoning is superior to its rivals concerning what we ought to become in our social life? Modern attempts to universalize a moral law have collapsed, although there are still humanists convincing: "Come on, for God's sake, let us all go back to the universal human rights!" Radical Moslems, instead, claim their tradition's superiority by their powerful acts of religious terrorism. Radical Jews of Israel argue for their right to pay back a genocide with another genocide. Traditional Eastern meditative practices invite the superior ones radically away from the illusion of this suffering world. What have the radical Christians to add? Postmodern secular sceptics may ask if there really are such people who might live for a communal *polis*, instead of one's individual life-story, extending historically the common Christian argument embodied in the radical story of Jesus? If yes, then their "authoritative text" – in the name of Jesus! – should sound not only in oral voice but also in physical actions as radical as it was stated in the life and teachings of Jesus: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."³⁰ Could the former U.S. President Carter, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 for his efforts to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development, in his world-wide peace-making initiatives extend the story of Christian reconciliation in contemporary tensional political realm? Would at least John Howard Yoder see it as an attempt for "*Politics of Jesus*"³¹? Professor Glen Stassen, the key note speaker at the next international conference on *Politics and Religion* in Tartu, Estonia, in September 2006, has popularised many "*transforming initiatives for justice and peace*" in his *Just Peacemaking*³² as the very Christian way of life in the world of tensions. Would it be a *telos* for human life in the perspective of Christian virtue ethics? Not yet. The last book by Stassen was titled *Kingdom Ethics. Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*.³³

²⁹ Murphy 1997, pp. 1–2.

³⁰ **Gospel of Matthew**, 5:9. NIV translation.

³¹ **John Howard Yoder**. *Politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972.

³² **Glen Stassen**. *Just Peacemaking. Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace*. Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1992.

³³ **Glen Harold Stassen, David P. Gushee**. *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

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