

2017

## Does Liberalism Lack Virtue? A Critique of Alasdair MacIntyre's Reactionary Politics

Jason Blakely

*Pepperdine University*, [jason.blakely@pepperdine.edu](mailto:jason.blakely@pepperdine.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/faculty\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/faculty_pubs)



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Blakely, J. W. (2017). Does liberalism lackvirtue? A critique of Alasdair MacIntyre's reactionary politics. *Interpretation (United States)*, 44(1), 1-20.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Open Access Scholarship at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Open Access Publications by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu](mailto:bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu).

# Does Liberalism Lack Virtue? A Critique of Alasdair MacIntyre's Reactionary Politics

Jason W. Blakely  
Pepperdine University  
*jason.blakely@pepperdine.edu*

## Recommend Citation:

Blakely, J. W. (2017). Does liberalism lack virtue? A critique of Alasdair MacIntyre's reactionary politics. *Interpretation (United States)*, 44(1), 1-20.

Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most creative and influential Aristotelian ethicists of the last fifty years. Yet a number of scholars have argued that his philosophy is the source of antiliberal and radically reactionary politics.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, Mark Lilla argued that MacIntyre is a sophisticated intellectual source for the wider rise of a reactionary politics that rejects modern liberalism for having fallen away from an earlier “happy, well-ordered state.”<sup>2</sup> This reactionary politics, Lilla claims, is not the same as conservatism, because it advocates a radical negation of the liberal status quo.

Such a radical rejection of liberal orders is evident in the final pages of MacIntyre's most famous book, *After Virtue*, where he shockingly concludes that from the vantage point of a certain brand of Aristotelian philosophy, the central political, economic, and social institutions of liberal capitalism constitute a new “dark ages.”<sup>3</sup> Nothing can be done to save liberal orders from themselves. Rather, they must be outlived by imitating the sixth-century founder of monasticism, Saint Benedict, in developing “local forms of community within which...moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 88–121; Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2016), 74–75.

<sup>2</sup> Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind*, xii; see also 74–75.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, “Prologue: *After Virtue* after a Quarter of a Century,” in *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), x.

which are already upon us.”<sup>4</sup> However dubious the link to MacIntyre’s own philosophy, this has in turn inspired real-world writers and activists such as Rod Dreher to recommend traditionalists disengage from modern state and market institutions into small, virtue communities (what Dreher, using MacIntyre’s language, has dubbed “the Benedict Option”).<sup>5</sup>

But does MacIntyre’s appropriation of Aristotle really entail that the contemporary world of political liberalism is a moral disaster? It is precisely this crucial inference in MacIntyre’s shift from his ethics to his politics that I wish to question. In this paper I advance an immanent critique of MacIntyre’s Aristotle-inspired rebuke of liberalism. I want to assume for the sake of argument that MacIntyre’s adoption of Aristotle in *After Virtue* is valid, and then question whether the conclusion that liberalism is irredeemable really follows.

I believe MacIntyre has philosophically overstated the conflict between Aristotelian virtue and liberal modernity. If my argument is correct, those sympathetic to MacIntyre and his return to Aristotelian ethics have reason to be skeptical of his radical negation of liberalism. My paper proceeds in three parts. First, I show how MacIntyre has assumed that liberal orders are by their very nature unable to foster Aristotelian virtues and are hopelessly tied to “emotivism.” MacIntyre’s philosophical assumption is that liberal institutions are linked to emotivism and therefore inimical to Aristotelian virtue. By contrast, I argue that such a link is not inescapable. The example of Alexis de Tocqueville shows that liberalism and virtue can be philosophically combined. In the second part of the paper I argue that the intellectual source of MacIntyre’s revolutionary negation and reduction of liberal institutions is Marxist and not Aristotelian. Specifically, I trace MacIntyre’s radical rejection of liberalism to non-Aristotelian sources in the British New Left and its ethical strain of Marxism. Finally, I conclude by arguing that MacIntyre’s own account of epistemic justification necessitates a pluralism that poses a practical problem for his antiliberalism.

Before beginning, however, two clarifications are in order. First, my focus is on MacIntyre’s position as articulated in *After Virtue*. This is not only because it remains by far his most influential work, but also because it articulates a reactionary cultural pessimism about liberalism in the clearest terms. I am well aware of MacIntyre’s later criticism of *After Virtue* for not having

---

<sup>4</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 263.

<sup>5</sup>Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

been based on Aristotle's "metaphysical biology" and a eudaimonistic ethics.<sup>6</sup> I am also aware that MacIntyre softened his tone in works such as *Dependent Rational Animals* and later essays (though he has not to my knowledge ever renounced his strident antiliberalism).<sup>7</sup> But my goal is to quarrel with what remains by far the most influential MacIntyre—the culturally pessimistic, antiliberal Aristotelian we meet in the pages of *After Virtue*. Second, my treatment of Aristotle is intentionally shaped by how MacIntyre interpreted him in *After Virtue*—with a focus on the centrality of virtue ethics. This is because my intention is to conduct an immanent critique of MacIntyre's Aristotelianism and not a separate inquiry into Aristotle's ethics on its own terms.

### Virtue and Liberal Orders

In order to understand MacIntyre's rejection of liberal orders, we must first briefly grasp some key features of Aristotle's ethical thought that MacIntyre emphasized and innovated upon. One of the central features of Aristotle's ethics stressed by MacIntyre in *After Virtue* is his theory of virtues. Aristotle defines virtues as an embodied "disposition" or excellence in acting in certain ways.<sup>8</sup> Famously, virtues are what allow human beings to function properly and to flourish. Of course, most recent scholars believe Aristotle himself was an ethical naturalist, holding that eudaimonia, or human flourishing, was an objective good emerging from human biology.<sup>9</sup> But MacIntyre's focus in *After Virtue* is not this metaphysical biology but instead Aristotle's account of the virtues within human practical life. Aristotle's notion of the virtues in relation to practices thus needs analyzing.

For Aristotle, a person is truly virtuous only if he or she exhibits the given disposition excellently in many adverse and changing conditions. For this reason Aristotle believed that the virtues require education starting at a very young age.<sup>10</sup> Virtue in this respect is foremost a kind of practical, skilled

---

<sup>6</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), x.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 129–46; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Questions for Confucians," in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, ed. Kwong-Loi Shun and David Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 33.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Cherry, *Plato, Aristotle, and the Purpose of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Adriel Trott, *Aristotle on the Nature of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 26.

know-how akin to playing an instrument or sport. Theoretical knowledge of the virtues, such as that provided in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, derives from and perfects this practical ability. But as Aristotle puts it, philosophical ethics begins from things “known to us” already through practical life.<sup>11</sup>

Learning to be just, equitable, courageous, moderate, or any other virtue requires judgment within context. For instance, what is considered moderate eating for a marathon runner during training days might be considered too much food for a patient in a hospital. Being able to exercise the virtues excellently thus requires not only Aristotle’s famous *phronēsis* or prudence (which I return to below) but also a shaping of one’s own passions, pleasures, and desires towards acting in a virtuous manner.

From this account something very important follows. According to Aristotle a person with absolutely zero virtue cannot exist for very long. Without any virtue whatsoever Aristotle notes we would be so cowardly we would run away from flies; so unjust we would viciously betray everyone we know; so gluttonous or abstemious we would either eat or deprive ourselves to the point of sickness. Thus, Aristotle holds that everyone needs some share of “courage, moderation, justice, or prudence.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, human action without true excellence in such virtues is liable to become self-defeating in the pursuit of the more complex and extended goals of a human life. So being virtuous is essential to being goal directed. One needs to be virtuous—even if only partially—to get anything done whatsoever. Even thieves must be courageous, moderate, and just with each other to a point.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre stresses a version of Aristotle’s ethics that rests on the structure of human practical agency. So he argues that Aristotle’s ethics are necessary if one is to ever coherently pursue goals and a basic life story.<sup>13</sup> Although *After Virtue* arguably neglects eudaimonistic elements of Aristotle’s theory, it also rightly presents his ethics as emerging out of what humans live already in their daily, practical lives. Philosophical reflection performs a central role for Aristotle (and for MacIntyre) insofar as it helps humans fulfill their ethical potential by allowing them to understand more fully the nature of the human good. In this regard, philosophical reflection completes and perfects practical action.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Aristotle even held that

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 94.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 197.

<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204–25.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 116–18.

virtuous acts requiring the exercise of reasoned judgment (so-called pro-hairetic acts) were higher than those that did not (e.g., courageous acts based on reasoned judgment were higher than those based on an emotional spurt of anger).<sup>15</sup> But MacIntyre is also right to insist that this philosophical reflection begins from a set of claims about how human agency either succeeds or fails to achieve its goals.

This line of thought is tremendously important to Aristotle's notion of politics. Indeed, because the virtues are central to all human well-being, one of the central tasks of political communities should be securing these excellences. This would include not only individual virtues such as courage and moderation but also Aristotle's explicitly political virtues such as justness and equity (*epieikeia*).<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the modern view that sees just societies as securing the rights of citizens, Aristotelian political philosophy maintains that just societies foster excellence in the virtues. Or, as Aristotle puts it, "the political partnership must be regarded, therefore, as being for the sake of noble actions" and structured towards "political virtue."<sup>17</sup> This latter point becomes absolutely crucial to MacIntyre's critique of liberalism—for one of his claims is that liberalism massively fails at the task of fostering virtues in its citizens.

To see how this is the case we must engage one of MacIntyre's most innovative contributions to the Aristotelian tradition—what he dubs "practices." In chapter 14 of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defines a practice as "any...socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to a form of activity are realized" and are "systematically extended."<sup>18</sup> Some examples of practices are chess, water polo, farming, portrait painting, sailing, playing an instrument, and studying math. What distinguishes practices is that there is some internal good essential to that practice that "cannot be had in any way" but by participating in it.<sup>19</sup> Such an internal good might be the particular imagination and problem-solving strategy of the game of chess. This does not mean practices are unrelated to other external goods—such as honor, money, or power—but these external goods can be accomplished in any number of ways and are not in any necessary way attached to a given practice.

---

<sup>15</sup> Ryan Balot, *Courage in the Democratic Polis: Ideology and Critique in Classical Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 228–29.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 92, 112.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

For this reason MacIntyre distinguishes practices from institutions—the latter being organizations concerned with securing external goods needed to sustain a practice. For example, the institution of the University of California is the bearer of a bundle of different practices (including scientific laboratory research, music ensembles, artistic groups, and sports teams), which it is foremost concerned with sustaining through money and public support.

What is crucial to see is that practices—which MacIntyre takes as spontaneously forming at the grassroots level in human societies—follow the Aristotelian line of argument in requiring virtues to be maintained and not become increasingly self-defeating. This is because to become an able math student, sailor, track star, carpenter, painter, and so on, one needs to “recognize what is due to whom” (i.e., have the *justice* to recognize rational authority), “take...risks” (i.e., have the *courage* to risk failure), and “listen carefully to what we are told about our own inadequacies” (i.e., have the *prudence* to be teachable and learn from others).<sup>20</sup> Properly formed practices are thus schools for virtue in which coaches, teachers, carpenters, and chess players instruct and model the virtues necessary to flourish in attaining goods internal to a practice.

By contrast, practices are corrupted when external goods distort and override virtues and internal goods. This happens at the communal level when an institution’s desire for money, power, and prestige overrides the practices it is supposed to protect. But it also happens at the level of single individuals. MacIntyre gives the example of a young chess player who never learns to love the game of chess on its own terms, but sees it as a vehicle for external goods such as money and fame. Such a player has “no reason not to cheat.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than virtuous excellence at a practice, this player will have reason to cheat and win even at the expense of the good or integrity of the practice.

Thus, there is a strongly social and political dimension to virtues as sustainers of practices. As MacIntyre puts it, practices “might flourish in societies with very different codes; what they could not do is flourish in societies in which the virtues were not valued, although institutions and technical skills serving unified purposes might well continue to flourish.”<sup>22</sup> The way in which practices advance and progress is temporally through what MacIntyre calls

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.,

traditions. Practices develop, deepen, and change over time. This means the “goals themselves are transmuted by the history of the activity.”<sup>23</sup> Examples of this might be the development of new techniques in the tradition of Renaissance painting—for instance, Giotto’s portrayal of individual personality as opposed to Byzantine archetypes or Leonardo Da Vinci’s development of “perfect perspective.”<sup>24</sup> Advances in the practices of painting are communicated and extended through time by traditions. This means individuals never simply enter an ahistorical practice but always “a relationship” with a community of present and past practitioners.<sup>25</sup>

This brings us to a key feature of MacIntyre’s antiliberalism—namely, his belief that liberal societies are by their very nature unable to foster virtue, and even actively discourage it by systematically subverting goods internal to practices and traditions. According to MacIntyre this happens because liberal societies remain neutral on what constitutes a good life and instead hand over power to a technocratic managerial ideology that manipulates society as a means, treating practices and traditions as vehicles to external goods such as economic prosperity or political security.<sup>26</sup> The liberal state is therefore like an institution without any proper practice or good internal to it. Instead of virtuous practitioners it generates humans who have no unified sense of self.

Indeed, central to MacIntyre’s critique of liberalism is his claim that its citizenry are essentially formed into an “emotivist self.”<sup>27</sup> The emotivist self sees all the goods of his or her life as subjective expressions of a kind of market preference. Because there is no shared political conception of the good, each individual has autonomy as a goal. Relative to this autonomous individual all goods, practices, and traditions are subordinated to subjective-preference satisfaction. Everything comes to appear instrumentalized in reference to an exaggeratedly autonomous subject that decides what is good or bad. No longer do people engage practices as schools of virtue and goods internal to a tradition. Instead, they approach all social practices at a level of radical moral disengagement: the individual decides the meaning or purposes of practices and traditions.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 4th ed. (New York: Abrams, 1994), 76–95, 444.

<sup>25</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 194.

<sup>26</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority,” in *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 53–68.

<sup>27</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 18–35.

In liberal societies individuals are not coherently trained in a life of the virtues, but are instead continually offered a vision of autonomy and subjective-preference maximizing. By prizing ultra-autonomy liberalism perverts the life of the virtues. Human associations continually become corrupted by market pursuits of profit, manipulative public relations propaganda, or technocratic grabs for power. The emotivist self looms larger and larger as communities of virtue grow increasingly beleaguered. Thus, MacIntyre's critique of liberalism relies on the notion that liberal political orders are intrinsically emotive and emotivism is inimical to Aristotelian virtue.

This line of thought brings me to my first objection. Namely, MacIntyre overstates the link between liberalism and emotivism. What exactly is the nature of this link? Sometimes MacIntyre writes as if the claim is sociological. That is, sometimes he presents his case as if the bond between liberalism and emotivism has to do with the kinds of people that tend to occupy key institutional positions in a liberal order. So key institutional figures—managers, political representatives, bureaucrats, and therapists—are presented as principally emotivist. In this vein, MacIntyre has recently written that “individuals can only function as modernity requires them to function, if their desires are expressed, contained, and ordered in certain ways.”<sup>28</sup> That is, the only way modern states and markets function is if the individuals running them are emotivists. To participate in the institutions of modernity is to necessarily become some kind of emotivist or quasi emotivist.

However, this is a highly problematic reading of MacIntyre. This is primarily because the idea that occupying key institutional positions necessitates certain beliefs is philosophically incompatible with MacIntyre's critique of positivistic forms of causation in chapter 8 of *After Virtue*. In that chapter, MacIntyre persuasively argues that the human creative capacity to contingently modify beliefs makes it impossible to formulate necessary lawlike generalizations determining human beliefs and actions (akin to those found in the natural sciences). To argue that whenever agent X occupies institutional space Y his or her beliefs will be Z is to formulate just such a positivistic prediction. By contrast, MacIntyre's argument against a predictive science of human behavior entails that there is nothing barring a particular actor within a particular institutional setting from creatively adopting new beliefs or modifying existing beliefs. This line of argument draws on a much longer and highly important engagement of MacIntyre with the social sciences, in which he

---

<sup>28</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 129.

However, more often MacIntyre argues that the link between emotivism and liberalism is philosophical. Indeed, emotivism itself is a philosophical doctrine—“the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling.”<sup>30</sup> MacIntyre argues throughout *After Virtue* that although some people still think of themselves as natural rights theorists, utilitarians, and so forth, the failure of these projects entails emotivism. In other words, those who have not adopted Aristotle *ought* to be Nietzscheans even if they have not realized it yet. For this reason MacIntyre famously claims that the *philosophical* choice boils down to Aristotle versus Nietzsche:

it was because [the Enlightenment] project failed, because the views advanced by its most intellectually powerful protagonists, and more especially by Kant, could not be sustained in the face of rational criticism that Nietzsche and all his existentialist and emotivist successors were able to mount their apparently successful critique of all previous morality.<sup>31</sup>

Yet here another problem arises. For one could accept MacIntyre’s critique of the Enlightenment and adoption of Aristotle and still maintain that liberalism is able to foster virtue. One way of briefly illustrating this philosophical possibility is by drawing on Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.

For Tocqueville, the strength of nineteenth-century American democracy was precisely the way in which deliberating and debating within a liberal institutional context encouraged practices of self-government and awareness of a wider public good. Famously, Tocqueville believed that “Americans combat the effects of individualism by free institutions.”<sup>32</sup> This was possible because the “legislators of America” tried to “multiply to an infinite extent opportunities of acting in concert for all members of the community,” which allowed citizens to “constantly feel their mutual dependence on each other.”<sup>33</sup> Tocqueville believed that federalist liberal institutions, with their

---

<sup>29</sup> For a systematic exposition of MacIntyre’s views on this, see Jason Blakely, *Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and the Demise of Naturalism: Reunifying Political Theory and Social Science* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 11–12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>32</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Library of America, 2004), 84.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

open opportunities for participation at the local level, helped engender the civic virtues associated with self-rule and deliberation. So he wrote that “when the members of a community are forced to attend to public affairs, they are necessarily drawn from the circle of their own interests”; then the individual citizen “begins to perceive that he is not so independent of his fellow-men...that in order to obtain their support, he must often lend them his cooperation.”<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the institutions of liberal democracy do house practices—the practices of democratic self-rule and deliberation. These practices in turn can feed and sustain higher levels of representative, liberal government. As Tocqueville put it: “the free institutions which the inhabitants of the United States possess, the political rights of which they make so much use, remind every citizen, and in a thousand ways, that he lives in society.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, according to Tocqueville’s liberal theory, the virtues in American society are not just the result of extraliberal influences or features of civil society, but can at least in principle be helped and supported by the liberal order itself.

Tocqueville’s theory of liberalism as sustained by practices of self-rule and civic virtue has inspired liberal theorists on both the right (like Harvey Mansfield who sees it linked to “a manly political virtue”) and the left (like Robert Bellah who sees it tied to virtues of egalitarianism and social “solidarity”).<sup>36</sup> The point is not to adopt any one of these varieties of Tocquevillean liberalism. Rather, the point is to note that philosophically speaking, liberalism can be linked to virtue (if space were not an issue alternative examples, from Martha Nussbaum and Charles Taylor to liberal proponents of Leo Strauss, might also be developed). Yet enough has been said to suggest that liberalism need not, by its very nature, actively discourage virtue and can indeed be put into its philosophical and political service.

## Marxism’s Revolutionary Negation of Liberalism

I have suggested that liberalism is in principle combinable with a politics of cultivating the virtues. So what led MacIntyre to radically reject contemporary liberal institutions? I believe certain features of MacIntyre’s critique cannot be properly understood without situating him historically in a tradition very

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>36</sup> Harvey C. Mansfield, *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23; Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), xxx.

alien to that of Aristotle—namely, a particular strain of twentieth-century Marxism. As has now been extensively established by a number of scholars, MacIntyre spent a key period of his formative intellectual years as part of the British New Left.<sup>37</sup> This was a movement of scholar-activists hoping to mobilize an ethical form of Marxism that opposed both liberal capitalism and Stalin’s Soviet model. Throughout the 1950s MacIntyre published in New Left outlets, befriended New Left leaders such as E. P. Thompson, and helped run one of the movement’s journals, the *New Reasoner*.<sup>38</sup> What MacIntyre inherited from the New Left was a critique of liberalism as in a state of perpetual moral crisis. This Marxist inheritance—and its tension with Aristotle—needs to be examined in greater detail.

Although no one doubts that Marx called for a revolutionary negation of liberalism, there is much controversy as to what role ethics played in his theory.<sup>39</sup> What is clear is that Marx wrote as if liberalism were generating a moral crisis by destroying older religious and ethical sources of value. Famously, Marx claimed that in liberal societies “all that is holy is profaned” and traditional values “with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away.”<sup>40</sup> According to Marx, this occurs because the central institutions of liberal-capitalism (the market and the state) replace traditional ethical frameworks with those of rational, egoistic, self-interested actors. The instrumental ethics of contract negotiation replace traditional virtues.

The young MacIntyre adopted this ethical critique of capitalism from the first British New Left.<sup>41</sup> Thompson was a particularly crucial figure in these efforts. Rather than rely on a structuralist critique of liberal-capitalism, Thompson emphasized an ethical crisis plaguing both sides of the Cold War and requiring the development of a “socialist humanism.”<sup>42</sup> In a powerful essay from 1958, MacIntyre echoed Thompson’s ethical condemnation of twentieth-century liberalism, denouncing it as a “moral wilderness” and calling on readers to join a “moral vision that is being reborn today among

---

<sup>37</sup> Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, eds., *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism* (Boston: Brill, 2008); Thomas D. D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 87–122; Kelvin Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 104–24.

<sup>38</sup> Blackledge and Davidson, eds., *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement*, xiii–1.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 248.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (New York: International, 1940), 15, 30.

<sup>42</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,” *New Reasoner* 1 (1957): 105–43.

socialists.”<sup>43</sup> The young MacIntyre was thus committed to an ethical critique of capitalism that required a radical negation of present society.

It is not difficult to see this moralistic language of radical negation reproduced in the closing pages of *After Virtue*, where MacIntyre is waiting for a new Trotsky. Only now the revolutionary politics of New Left socialism is replaced by what Lilla has identified as a culturally pessimistic form.<sup>44</sup> The story in *After Virtue* is not about the creation of a future, unprecedented socialist society, but rather the reconstitution of long-lost virtue communities on a local scale. This is what makes the paradoxical Trotsky–Saint Benedict synthesis possible. Reactionary restoration of lost greatness and not socialist utopia is driving the negation of liberalism. In this vein, scholars such as Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight have been right to note that MacIntyre is not revolutionary in a straightforward way. Like Marx, MacIntyre’s negation of liberalism is almost total; but unlike Marx, he does not call for a violent overthrow of the current order but instead a pessimistic reversion to traditional communities.<sup>45</sup> As MacIntyre puts it, “not only have I never offered remedies for the condition of liberal modernity, it has been part of my case that there are no remedies. The problem is not to reform the dominant order, but to find ways for local communities to survive [it].”<sup>46</sup>

But how does the Marxist inheritance of a radical negation of liberalism differ from Aristotle? Politics, according to Aristotle, is centered on the skill of prudential judgment. Because it is “impossible for many to obtain the best” regime, “the best that circumstances allow” should not be “overlooked by the good legislator and the political ruler in the true sense.”<sup>47</sup> This follows from Aristotle’s account of ethical life as requiring a practical skill or excellence in deciphering what is called for within a particular context in order to properly manifest a virtue. As Aristotle puts it, virtuous action requires acting “when one ought and at the things one ought, in relation to those people whom one ought, for the sake of what and as one ought.”<sup>48</sup> This conception of human agency gives a central place to the virtue of practical judgment or *phronēsis*. As is well known, Aristotle’s *phronēsis* is the one virtue that all the

---

<sup>43</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, 49.

<sup>44</sup> Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind*, 74–75.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight, “Introduction: Towards a Virtuous Politics,” in *Virtue and Politics*, ed. Blackledge and Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Specter of Communitarianism,” *Radical Philosophy* 70 (1995): 35.

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 118.

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 34.

other virtues presuppose. Aristotle affirms that the virtue of *phronēsis* will often guide individuals to settle for what is the best attainable as opposed to the ideal best. Since hitting the ideal is extremely difficult individuals must choose “the least of the bad things.”<sup>49</sup>

This is also the reasoning behind Aristotle’s oft-misunderstood claim that the young are unsuitable for the study of politics since they are “inexperienced in the actions pertaining to life.”<sup>50</sup> What is in question for Aristotle is not so much some formal requirement of age as the experience needed to prudently exercise judgment: “it makes no difference whether he is young in age or immature in character: the deficiency is not related to time” but instead to a disposition “lacking self-restraint” in which “knowledge is without benefit.”<sup>51</sup> According to Aristotle, a particular pitfall for people who are immature in this way is that in politics they will become utterly fixated on the ideal best in such a way that hinders fair consideration of lesser options. Of course, Aristotle develops his own theoretical account of the best regime, which is necessary for guiding and evaluating practical political judgment. And he is clear that it belongs to the study of politics to theoretically ascertain “what the best regime is, and what quality it should have to be what one would pray for above all, with external things providing no impediment.”<sup>52</sup> But Aristotle is also very insistent that every craft—from medicine to shipbuilding to politics—considers not only the ideal best but also what is most attainable for a given person or community at a given time. This means recognizing “which regime is fitting for which cities.”<sup>53</sup> Because every political community differs according to class, number, wealth, geography, history, and so forth, a political practitioner must take into account the circumstances and exercise “prudence.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, for Aristotle the virtuous judge of political life cannot become so passionately committed to the ideal best that he or she neglects the political arrangements attainable within nonideal circumstances.<sup>55</sup>

MacIntyre, of course, would have no problem agreeing to the role of prudential judgment within politics. So, for example, he writes that “there are

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 118.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 118.

evils only to be resisted by *ad hoc* participation in some particular enterprises of some nation-state: in resisting Hitler and Stalin most notably” and in being “prudent” by paying one’s taxes incurred from state agencies.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, the prudential features of Aristotle’s political theory are seriously underplayed in *After Virtue*. Aristotle’s minute analyses of nonideal regimes (which involve nuanced discussions of democracy, oligarchy, and even tyranny) is simply nowhere to be found. The dialectics of a Marxist revolutionary negation largely displace an Aristotelian parsing through varieties of better and worse forms of every regime type.

Instead, liberalism it treated *tout court* as emotivistic and liberal institutions diagnosed as being in a state of irredeemable crisis. In MacIntyre’s reworking of Marx the problem is a moral one. Liberal institutions such as the state are essentially emotivistic: “modern states cannot advance any justifiable claim to the allegiance of their members” because they enshrine an emotivist self with its “ragbag of assorted values, from which it can select in an ad hoc way.”<sup>57</sup> Lacking a coherent virtue politics a liberal state is “too weak to provide adequate justification for the kind of allegiance that a political society must have.”<sup>58</sup> Of course, here we can ask again in what sense the liberal state is necessarily emotivistic. After all, sociologically speaking, liberal states can and do generate justifications of ultimate allegiance. Yet the claim seems to be that philosophically liberal polities cannot justify even the most basic forms of civic self-sacrifice. Indeed, self-sacrifice for liberal states (like all modern states) is equivalent to “being asked to die for the telephone company” or an institution solely concerned with securing external goods such as money and power.<sup>59</sup>

But if the argument of the prior section is correct, then the philosophical reduction of liberalism to emotivism is problematic. Tocqueville’s conception of liberal institutions is one way of suggesting how liberalism can be seen as fostering (and not hostile to) virtues. So Tocqueville writes (directly contrary to MacIntyre) that participation in liberal institutions can be used to habituate citizens to “real sacrifices to the public welfare.”<sup>60</sup> Of course, Tocqueville is aware that often times liberal institutions instead lead to rampant egoism

---

<sup>56</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to My Critics,” in *After MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 303.

<sup>57</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, 245.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>59</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to My Critics,” 303.

<sup>60</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 86.

and individualism (in fact this is arguably the central concern of his political theory) but his goal is to show how these same institutions can also be thought of instead as schools for democracy. Liberal institutions can function in non-emotivist terms that engender virtue. There is nothing logically or empirically barring this synthesis. Indeed, the view that there is an unavoidable opposition is Marxist and not Aristotelian in origin. Prudence is needed to judge among the varieties of liberalism that are emotivist and those that are not.<sup>61</sup>

## Pluralism and Knowledge

I have been arguing that MacIntyre's antiliberalism in *After Virtue* is in certain key ways un-Aristotelian. Because he believes the liberal state is "totally unfitted to act as moral educator of any community" potential philosophical links between liberalism and virtue disappear from his account.<sup>62</sup> Liberal politics becomes a nearly irredeemable fallen world.<sup>63</sup> This set of radical views, moreover, can be explained by locating MacIntyre within a particular tradition of Marxism (not Aristotelianism). However, I now want to shift my argument to a final area where I think MacIntyre's adoption of Aristotle cannot be successfully linked to his antiliberalism—namely, that of pluralism. Understanding the philosophical issues that arise here again requires briefly recapitulating certain features of Aristotle's philosophy adopted by MacIntyre.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously draws a distinction between the kind of knowledge appropriate to ethics and politics and the kind appropriate to more theoretically precise domains of inquiry such as mathematics and physics. The difference, according to Aristotle, is generated by the object of study: because ethics and politics study human actions researchers must be content to "demonstrate the truth roughly and in outline" and not with a false precision.<sup>64</sup> For "it belongs to an educated person to seek out precision in each genus to the extent that the nature of the matter allows."<sup>65</sup>

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre makes a similar distinction between the study of human actions and the objects of other fields of inquiry such as the natural

---

<sup>61</sup> There are nonetheless very important differences between MacIntyre and a traditional Marxist notion of revolution. See Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy*, 217–19; D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 393–97.

<sup>62</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 195.

<sup>63</sup> MacIntyre, "Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good," 248.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

sciences.<sup>66</sup> This is part of the basis for MacIntyre's philosophical antinaturalism and interpretive approach to the social sciences touched upon above.<sup>67</sup> What is important for our purposes now is to see how this relates to his views of objectivity in ethics and his critique of liberalism.

According to MacIntyre, ethical and political traditions gain objective status through a practical and not purely theoretical form of validation. Indeed, one of the gravest errors of the ethical and political schools generated by the Enlightenment was their belief that there would be a universal, rational convergence on ethics and politics among all inquirers of good will—a consensus akin to that found in scientific disciplines such as chemistry and biology. In this Enlightenment view, ethics and politics would become a universal normal science: all rational inquirers into these domains would eventually converge on, say, Kantianism, utilitarianism, or Marxism. Yet part of the crisis diagnosed by MacIntyre in the opening pages of *After Virtue* is that the Enlightenment did not achieve this initial goal. Instead, a diversity of rival and incompatible rationalist systems were constructed. At this point the search for a convergence akin to that in chemistry or physics takes a relativistic turn; according to MacIntyre “moral relativism is a response to the discovery of systematic and apparently ineliminable disagreement between the protagonists of rival moral points of view, each of whom claims rational justification for their own standpoint and none of whom seems able, except by their own standards, to rebut the claims of their rivals.”<sup>68</sup>

Rather than achieving convergence on a normal science based on certain widely accepted theoretical precepts, *After Virtue* instead advocates for a turn towards a practical and comparative form of objectivity in these domains. Specifically, objectivity is a function of comparing rival traditions to see which one has the best account on offer. The objective best is not a form of rationalist proof or foundationalist appeal to brute empirical reality. Instead, MacIntyre proposes that theories can be rationally compared and ranked according to several related criteria.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 88–108.

<sup>67</sup> See Blakely, *Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and the Demise of Naturalism*.

<sup>68</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth, and Justification,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, 202.

<sup>69</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” in *Selected Essays*, vol. 1, *The Tasks of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3–23. Cf. Jason Blakely, “The Forgotten MacIntyre: Beyond Value Neutrality in the Social Sciences,” *Polity* 45, no. 3 (2013):451–56.

How is this form of objectivity accomplished? MacIntyre argues that comparative objectivity can be established in terms of internal dilemmas, fruitfulness, and the ability to narrate rivals. One way to decide which of two rival theories is superior is to inhabit one of the theories in order to discern any dilemmas, problems, anomalies, or contradictions that are internal to it. Doing so requires the “exercise of philosophical and moral imagination,” learning “to think, feel, and act from the standpoint of some alternative or rival standpoint.”<sup>70</sup> When this is done it is possible “to put in question the conceptual framework of [a] particular standpoint from within the framework itself.”<sup>71</sup> If the rival theory or tradition is better able to resolve or overcome anomalies that remain insuperable for its rivals, this counts in its favor. Similarly, objectivity can be generated comparatively by seeing if a given theory is more fruitful than another one. An objectively superior theory or tradition makes progress and opens new avenues of understanding that its rivals are unable to advance. At the same time it continually responds to critics and makes “progress in solving or partially solving” problems posed by critics.<sup>72</sup> Finally, rival traditions can prove their comparative superiority by being better able to narrate how a mistaken view came to seem “intelligible...to the adherents” of rival standpoints; this involves accounting for the “historical, social, psychological, and intellectual circumstances” that gave rise to it.<sup>73</sup>

If a theory can resolve dilemmas, open new fruitful paths of research, and narrate the historical circumstances better than its rival, a point is reached which MacIntyre dubs “epistemological crisis.”<sup>74</sup> Such a crisis might be one in which a bested research program dramatically collapses, but it also might be a situation in which a tradition has insulated itself from all criticism, stopped making rational progress, and entered a kind of barren cul-de-sac: “At a certain point in the history of such attempts to deal with such problems it can become plain that they are not only persistent, but intractable, and irremediably so” (think astrology and psychics).<sup>75</sup> The rival tradition would at this point be able to claim objective, rational superiority. Those deliberating between rival theories are presented with an epistemic gain in shifting to a theoretical paradigm that has “not proved similarly sterile in relation to its

---

<sup>70</sup> MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth, and Justification,” 219.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>74</sup> MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 3–23.

<sup>75</sup> MacIntyre, “Moral Relativism, Truth, and Justification,” 218.

own difficulties and problems” such that “one standpoint may defeat another by providing the resources for understanding and explaining what is or was intractably problematic for that other.”<sup>76</sup>

Again, MacIntyre’s innovations on the Aristotelian tradition are deeply insightful. Indeed, his account of objectivity in terms of rival traditions is an important contribution to ethics—developing a way forward beyond the dichotomy of absolute, foundationalist certainty and complete skepticism concerning values. What I once again question, however, are the inferences drawn from MacIntyre’s Aristotle-inspired theory to his vehement antiliberalism.

What exactly is the problem in this case? In his published work since *After Virtue*, MacIntyre has affirmed that a continual exchange among a diversity of rival, incompatible views—Marxist, Nietzschean, Thomist, etc.—is necessary in order to rationally establish the philosophical superiority even of Aristotelianism itself. So he has written that “systematic debate” between these rival traditions should be a “central preoccupation of our shared cultural and social life.”<sup>77</sup> In addition, he has written generously about neo-Nietzscheans such as Raymond Geuss, and made appeals to discursive inclusiveness such as: “a dialogue about issues in moral philosophy in which Marxists were not participating would be a defective and inadequate conversation” as would one “from which contemporary Thomists were absent.”<sup>78</sup> In recent years he has also argued for engaging non-Western sources of philosophy such as Confucianism, writing: “American philosophy can only flourish as a conversation of diverse voices from conflicting standpoints, among which a range of Chinese voices have an important place.”<sup>79</sup>

This opens up an unresolved question in MacIntyre’s thought: if epistemological progress requires comparative work between sociologically embodied and extended traditions, then it might seem to follow that some kind of pluralism and multiculturalism would be normatively desirable for epistemic reasons within society. Indeed, MacIntyre has even written that “we now inhabit a world in which ethical inquiry without a comparative dimension is obviously

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 219–20.

<sup>77</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 235.

<sup>78</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epilogue: What Next?,” in *What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Fran O’Rourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 475.

<sup>79</sup> MacIntyre, “Questions for Confucians,” 203.

defective.”<sup>80</sup> And yet in *After Virtue* MacIntyre is often very critical of the incoherence of values and virtues created by pluralism. Liberal democracies often appear as a babble of tongues requiring the restoration of homogeneous traditional cultures.

The problem is that if we accept MacIntyre’s account of rational progress and objectivity, then this seems to imply a deep diversity of traditions in open and free debate with one another. For this reason Terry Pinkard has suggested that the kinds of justification that MacIntyre’s philosophy requires are still in a modern mode, in which individuals present arguments to each other as “equal citizen[s] of a modern, constitutionalist political order.”<sup>81</sup> As Pinkard points out, the very title of MacIntyre’s subsequent book to *After Virtue* was *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*—a title that implies liberal social space in which the reader (whether Kantian, utilitarian, Marxist, Thomist, Nietzschean, or whatever else) is being addressed within a wider framework of epistemic equality.<sup>82</sup> Other scholars believe this creates deep problems for MacIntyre’s rejection of the modern state and his conception of local communities as sufficiently politically autonomous.<sup>83</sup> In particular, it is unclear how his localized virtue communities do not simply conform to a political order in which liberalism remains the presiding legal framework under which the freedom of these communities is exercised.

But is there a basic philosophical inconsistency here? Does the fact that MacIntyre is committed to the necessity of different, deeply diverse traditions in dialogue mean he cannot be opposed to the sorts of pluralism that liberalism engenders? One possible response is that MacIntyre is committed to a nonliberal society that allows a diversity of views to flourish within it. What such a society would look like—and how it would be substantively different from the legal codes of tolerance, freedom of speech, and neutrality of the state espoused by liberalism—would be for MacIntyre to show readers. Still, it is at least possible in principle to allow that traditionalism might be made compatible with pluralism. MacIntyre himself seems to envision just

---

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Terry Pinkard, “MacIntyre’s Critique of Modernity,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 197; see also 189–95.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>83</sup> Keith Breen, “The State, Compartmentalization, and the Turn to Local Community: A Critique of the Political Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre,” *The European Legacy* 10, no. 5 (2005): 485–501; Ronald Beiner, “Community versus Citizenship: MacIntyre’s Revolt against the Modern State,” *Critical Review* 14, no. 4 (2000): 459–79.

such an ideal situation, in which a traditional society is respectful and engaging of those who “hold radically dissenting views on fundamental issues.”<sup>84</sup>

Nonetheless, MacIntyre has a problem here because he argues that for a tradition to genuinely flourish it must be embodied in a political order. So one of his criticisms of liberalism is that “decisions and policies emerge from a strange *mélange* of arguments” and what is lacking in liberal societies is a community formed around “a high degree of shared cultural inheritance... informed by a large measure of agreement not only on its common good, but on human goods in general.”<sup>85</sup> Thus commentators such as Pinkard have it slightly wrong. MacIntyre is not philosophically compelled towards liberalism. Rather, the problem is for practical and not theoretical reason. Namely, how does MacIntyre’s proposed ideal order form in a way that allows robust debate between rival intellectual traditions? After all, MacIntyre has argued that healthy traditions ultimately need to be instantiated in a political order—presumably this would hold for rival traditions as well. But this means that at some scale rival political orders need to be related to one another in practices of open dialogue and exchange (whether this implies a liberal cosmopolitan-ism or friendship among peoples at the international level is something that MacIntyre has not yet sufficiently answered).

No less important, the notion that the goal of politics is not simply the articulation of an ideal, theoretical best but must terminate in practical reason and action is one of the distinctive claims of Aristotle’s philosophy (and arguably one that contrasts with Plato). Here the problem with MacIntyre’s antiliberalism is practical and not theoretical. That is, he must do more to show how his envisioned ideal best political society would be better at embodying practices of dialogue and exchange among diverse traditions than a liberal order. Until then, one might be forgiven for insisting on at least some of the limited virtues of a liberal society.

---

<sup>84</sup> MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” 251.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 239, 251.