

After Virtue

A Study in Moral Theory

By

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Prologue

After Virtue after a Quarter of a Century

If there are good reasons to reject the central theses of *After Virtue*, by now I should certainly have learned what they are. Critical and constructive discussion in a wide range of languages – not only English, Danish, Polish, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, Italian, and Turkish, but also Chinese and Japanese – and from a wide range of standpoints has enabled me to reconsider and to extend the enquiries that I began in *After Virtue* (1981) and continued in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990), and *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), but I have as yet found no reason for abandoning the major contentions of *After Virtue* – ‘Unteachable obstinacy!’ some will say – although I have learned a great deal and supplemented and revised my theses and arguments accordingly.

Central to these was and is the claim that it is only possible to understand the dominant moral culture of advanced modernity adequately from a standpoint external to that culture. That culture has continued to be one of unresolved and apparently unresolvable moral and other disagreements in which the evaluative and normative utterances of the contending parties present a problem of interpretation. For on the one hand they seem to presuppose a reference to some shared impersonal standard in virtue of which at most one of those contending parties can be in the right, and yet on the other the poverty of the arguments adduced in support of their assertions and the characteristically shrill, and assertive and expressive mode in which they are uttered suggest strongly that there is no such standard. My explanation was and is that the precepts that are thus uttered were once at home in, and intelligible in terms of, a context of practical beliefs and of supporting habits of thought, feeling, and action, a context that has since been lost, a context in which moral judgments were understood as governed by impersonal standards justified by a shared conception of the human good. Deprived of that context and of that justification, as a result of disruptive and transformative social and moral changes in the late middle ages and the early modern world, moral rules and precepts had to be understood in a new way and assigned some new status, authority, and justification. It became the task of the moral

philosophers of the European Enlightenment from the eighteenth century onwards to provide just such an understanding. But what those philosophers in fact provided were several rival and incompatible accounts, utilitarians competing with Kantians and both with contractarians, so that moral judgments, as they had now come to be understood, became essentially contestable, expressive of the attitudes and feelings of those who uttered them, yet still uttered *as if* there was some impersonal standard by which moral disagreements might be rationally resolved. And from the outset such disagreements concerned not only the justification, but also the content of morality.

This salient characteristic of the moral culture of modernity has not changed. And I remain equally committed to the thesis that it is only from the standpoint of a very different tradition, one whose beliefs and presuppositions were articulated in their classical form by Aristotle, that we can understand both the genesis and the predicament of moral modernity. It is important to note that I am not claiming that Aristotelian moral theory is able to exhibit its rational superiority in terms that would be acceptable to the protagonists of the dominant post-Enlightenment moral philosophies, so that in theoretical contests in the arenas of modernity, Aristotelians might be able to defeat Kantians, utilitarians, and contractarians. Not only is this evidently not so, but in those same arenas Aristotelianism is bound to appear and does appear as just one more type of moral theory, one whose protagonists have as much and as little hope of defeating their rivals as do utilitarians, Kantians, or contractarians.

What then was I and am I claiming? That from the standpoint of an ongoing way of life informed by and expressed through Aristotelian concepts it is possible to understand what the predicament of moral modernity is and why the culture of moral modernity lacks the resources to proceed further with its own moral enquiries, so that sterility and frustration are bound to afflict those unable to extricate themselves from those predicaments. What I now understand much better than I did twenty-five years ago is the nature of the relevant Aristotelian commitments, and this in at least two ways.

When I wrote *After Virtue*, I was already an Aristotelian, but not yet a Thomist, something made plain in my account of Aquinas at the end of chapter 13. I became a Thomist after writing *After Virtue* in part because I became convinced that Aquinas was in some respects a better Aristotelian than Aristotle, that not only was he an excellent interpreter of Aristotle's texts, but that he had been able to extend and deepen both Aristotle's metaphysical and his moral enquiries. And this altered my standpoint in at least three ways. In *After Virtue* I had tried to present the case

for a broadly Aristotelian account of the virtues without making use of or appeal to what I called Aristotle's metaphysical biology. And I was of course right in rejecting most of that biology. But I had now learned from Aquinas that my attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding. It is only because human beings have an end towards which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do. So I discovered that I had, without realizing it, presupposed the truth of something very close to the account of the concept of good that Aquinas gives in question 5 in the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*.

What I also came to recognize was that my conception of human beings as virtuous or vicious needed not only a metaphysical, but also a biological grounding, although not an especially Aristotelian one. This I provided a good deal later in *Dependent Rational Animals*, where I argued that the moral significance of the animality of human beings, of rational animals, can only be understood if our kinship to some species of not yet rational animals, including dolphins, is recognized. And in the same book I was also able to give a better account of the content of the virtues by identifying what I called the virtues of acknowledged dependence. In so doing I drew on Aquinas's discussion of *miser cordia*, a discussion in which Aquinas is more at odds with Aristotle than he himself realized.

These developments in my thought were the outcome of reflection on Aquinas's texts and on commentary on those texts by contemporary Thomistic writers. A very different set of developments was due to the stimulus of criticisms of *After Virtue* by those who were in radical disagreement with it. Let me approach their criticisms by beginning from one that seems to result not from a misunderstanding, but from a careless misreading of the text. Because I understand the tradition of the virtues to have arisen within and to have been first adequately articulated in the Greek, especially the Athenian *polis*, and because I have stressed the ways in which that tradition flourished in the European middle ages, I have been accused of nostalgia and of idealizing the past. But there is, I think, not a trace of this in the text. What there is is an insistence on our need to learn from some aspects of the past, by understanding our contemporary selves and our contemporary moral relationships in the light afforded by a tradition that enables us to overcome the constraints on such self-knowledge that modernity, especially advanced modernity, imposes.

We are all of us inescapably inhabitants of advanced modernity, bearing its social and cultural marks. So my understanding of the tradition of the

virtues and of the consequences for modernity of its rejection of that tradition and of the possibility of restoring it is indeed a peculiarly modern understanding. It is only retrospectively from the standpoint of modernity and in response to its predicaments that we can identify the continuities and discontinuities of the tradition of the virtues, as it has been embodied in a variety of cultural forms. The kind of historical enquiry that I undertook in *After Virtue* only became possible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Vico was the prophetic originator of that kind of historical enquiry and my own greatest debt in this area was to R. G. Collingwood, although my understanding of the nature and complexity of traditions I owe most of all to J. H. Newman.

What historical enquiry discloses is the situatedness of all enquiry, the extent to which what are taken to be the standards of truth and of rational justification in the contexts of practice vary from one time and place to another. If one adds to that disclosure, as I have done, a denial that there are available to any rational agent whatsoever standards of truth and of rational justification such that appeal to them could be *sufficient* to resolve fundamental moral, scientific, or metaphysical disputes in a conclusive way, then it may seem that an accusation of relativism has been invited. (The word ‘accusation’ is perhaps out of place, since I have been congratulated on my alleged relativism by those who have tried to claim me as a postmodernist – see Peter Watson, *The Modern Mind: An Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, New York: Harpercollins, 2001, pp. 678–79). In the Postscript to the Second Edition of *After Virtue* I already sketched an answer to this charge, and I developed that answer further in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Yet the charge is still repeated, so let me once again identify what it is that enables, indeed requires me to reject relativism.

The Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition of the virtues is, like some, although not all other moral traditions, a tradition of enquiry. It is characteristic of traditions of enquiry that they claim *truth* for their central theses and *soundness* for their central arguments. Were it otherwise, they would find it difficult either to characterize the aim and object of their enquiries or to give reasons for their conclusions. But, since they are and have been at odds with one another in their standards of rational justification – indeed the question of what those standards should be is among the matters that principally divide them – and since each has its own standards internal to itself, disputes between them seem to be systematically unsettleable, even although the contending parties may share both respect for the requirements of logic and a core, but minimal conception of truth. Examples of such rival traditions that are palpably at odds in this way are

the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition, the kind of Buddhism whose greatest philosophical name is Nagarjuna, and modern European and North American utilitarianism.

How then, if at all, might the protagonists of one of these traditions hope to defeat the claims of any of its rivals? A necessary first step would be for them to come to understand what it is to think in the terms prescribed by that particular rival tradition, to learn how to think as if one were a convinced adherent of that rival tradition. To do this requires the exercise of a capacity for philosophical imagination that is often lacking. A second step is to identify, from the standpoint of the adherents of that rival tradition, its crucially important unresolved issues and unsolved problems – unresolved and unsolved by the standards of that tradition – which now confront those adherents and to enquire how progress might be made in moving towards their resolution and solution. It is when, in spite of systematic enquiry, issues and problems that are of crucial importance to some tradition remain unresolved and unsolved that a question arises about it, namely, just why it is that progress in this area is no longer being made. Is it perhaps because that tradition lacks the resources to address those issues and solve those problems and is unable to acquire them so long as it remains faithful to its own standard and presuppositions? Is it perhaps that constraints imposed by those standards and deriving from those presuppositions themselves prevent the formulation or reformulation of those issues and problems so that they can be adequately addressed and solved? And, if the answer to those two questions is ‘Yes’, is it perhaps the case that it is only from the standpoint of some rival tradition that this predicament can be understood and from the resources of that same rival tradition that the means of overcoming this predicament can be found?

When the adherents of a tradition are able through such acts of imagination and questioning to interrogate some particular rival tradition, it is always possible that they may be able to conclude, indeed that they may be compelled to conclude, that it is only from the standpoint of their own tradition that the difficulties of that rival tradition can be adequately understood and overcome. It is only if the central theses of their own tradition are true and its arguments sound, that this rival tradition can be expected to encounter just those difficulties that it has encountered and that its lack of conceptual, normative, and other resources to deal with these difficulties can be explained. So it is possible for one such tradition to defeat another in respect of the adequacy of its claims to truth and to rational justification, even though there are no neutral standards available by appeal to which *any* rational agent whatsoever could determine which tradition is superior to which.

Yet, just because there are no such neutral standards, the protagonists of a defeated tradition may not recognize, and may not be able to recognize, that such a defeat has occurred. They may well recognize that they confront problems of their own to which no fully satisfactory solution has as yet been advanced, but it may be that nothing compels them to go any further than this. They will still take themselves to have excellent reasons for rejecting any invitation to adopt the standpoint of any other rival and incompatible tradition, even in imagination, for if the basic principles that they now assert are true and rationally justified, as they take them to be, then those assertions advanced by adherents of rival traditions that are incompatible with their own must be false and must lack rational justification. So they will continue – perhaps indefinitely – to defend their own positions and to proceed with their own enquiries, unable to recognize that those enquiries are in fact condemned to sterility and frustration.

It is of course important that for very, very long periods of time rival traditions of moral enquiry may coexist, as Thomistic Aristotelianism, Madhyamaka Buddhism, and modern European and North American utilitarianism have coexisted, without any one of them having had occasion to take the claims of its rivals seriously, let alone having conducted the kind of enquiry that might issue in one of these traditions suffering rational defeat at the hands of another. And it is also true that such an enquiry may not in fact lead to any definitive outcome, so that the issues dividing those rival traditions may remain undecided. Yet what matters most is that such issues can on occasion be decided, and this in a way that makes it evident that the claims of such rival traditions from the outset presuppose the falsity of relativism. As do I and as must any serious enquirer.

Let me turn now to a very different criticism, that of those defenders of liberal and individualist modernity who frame their objections in terms of the liberalism versus communitarian debate, supposing me to be a communitarian, something that I have never been. I see no value in community as such – many types of community are nastily oppressive – and the values of community, as understood by the American spokespersons of contemporary communitarianism, such as Amitai Etzioni, are compatible with and supportive of the values of the liberalism that I reject. My own critique of liberalism derives from a judgment that the best type of human life, that in which the tradition of the virtues is most adequately embodied, is lived by those engaged in constructing and sustaining forms of community directed towards the shared achievement of those common goods without which the ultimate human good cannot be achieved. Liberal political societies are characteristically committed to denying any

place for a determinate conception of the human good in their public discourse, let alone allowing that their common life should be grounded in such a conception. On the dominant liberal view, government is to be neutral as between rival conceptions of the human good, yet in fact what liberalism promotes is a kind of institutional order that is inimical to the construction and sustaining of the types of communal relationship required for the best kind of human life.

This critique of liberalism should not be interpreted as a sign of any sympathy on my part for contemporary conservatism. That conservatism is in too many ways a mirror image of the liberalism that it professedly opposes. Its commitment to a way of life structured by a free market economy is a commitment to an individualism as corrosive as that of liberalism. And, where liberalism by permissive legal enactments has tried to use the power of the modern state to transform social relationships, conservatism by prohibitive legal enactments now tries to use that same power for its own coercive purposes. Such conservatism is as alien to the projects of *After Virtue* as liberalism is. And the figure cut by present-day conservative moralists, with their inflated and self-righteous unironic rhetoric, should be set alongside those figures whom I identified in chapter 3 of *After Virtue* as notable characters in the cultural dramas of modernity: that of the therapist, who has in the last twenty years become bemused by biochemical discoveries; that of the corporate manager, who is now mouthing formulas that she or he learned in a course in business ethics, while still trying to justify her or his pretensions to expertise; and that of the aesthete, who is presently emerging from a devotion to conceptual art. So the conservative moralist has become one more stock character in the scripted conversations of the ruling elites of advanced modernity. But those elites never have the last word.

When recurrently the tradition of the virtues is regenerated, it is always in everyday life, it is always through the engagement by plain persons in a variety of practices, including those of making and sustaining families and households, schools, clinics, and local forms of political community. And that regeneration enables such plain persons to put to the question the dominant modes of moral and social discourse and the institutions that find their expression in those modes. It was they who were the intended and, pleasingly often, the actual readers of *After Virtue*, able to recognize in its central theses articulations of thoughts that they themselves had already begun to formulate and expressions of feeling by which they themselves were already to some degree moved.

In my opening chapter I alluded to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, that extraordinary novel by Walter M. Miller, Jr., and in the closing sentences of my

final chapter I alluded to that fine poem by Constantine Kavafis, "Waiting for the Barbarians," over-optimistically expecting both those allusions to be widely recognized. Since they have all too often not been recognized, let me now acknowledge explicitly these and other debts of the imagination, debts as important in their own way as the intellectual debts acknowledged in the text. I should also make it clear that, although *After Virtue* was written in part out of a recognition of those moral inadequacies of Marxism which its twentieth-century history had disclosed, I was and remain deeply indebted to Marx's critique of the economic, social, and cultural order of capitalism and to the development of that critique by later Marxists.

In the last sentence of *After Virtue* I spoke of us as waiting for another St. Benedict. Benedict's greatness lay in making possible a quite new kind of institution, that of the monastery of prayer, learning, and labor, in which and around which communities could not only survive, but flourish in a period of social and cultural darkness. The effects of Benedict's founding insights and of their institutional embodiment by those who learned from them were from the standpoint of his own age quite unpredictable. And it was my intention to suggest, when I wrote that last sentence in 1980, that ours too is a time of waiting for new and unpredictable possibilities of renewal. It is also a time for resisting as prudently and courageously and justly and temperately as possible the dominant social, economic, and political order of advanced modernity. So it was twenty-six years ago, so it is still.