WHAT HAPPENED IN AND TO
MORAL PHILOSOPHY
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY?

Philosophical Essays in Honor of
ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

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Contents

Introduction
Fran O’Rourke

ONE
On Having Survived the Academic Moral Philosophy of the Twentieth Century
Alasdair MacIntyre

PART I. Reading Alasdair MacIntyre

TWO
Keeping Philosophy Relevant and Humanistic
John Haldane

THREE
Ethics at the Limits: A Reading of Dependent Rational Animals
Joseph Dunne

FOUR
Alasdair MacIntyre’s Revisionary Aristotelianism: Pragmatism Opposed, Marxism Outmoded, Thomism Transformed
Kelvin Knight

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Contents

FIVE  Alasdair MacIntyre: Reflections on a Philosophical Identity, Suggestions for a Philosophical Project
Arthur Madigan, S.J.

SIX  Against the Self-Images of the Age:
MacIntyre and Løgstrup
Hans Fink

PART II. Complementary and Competing Traditions

SEVEN  MacIntyre and the Emotivists
James Edwin Mahon

EIGHT  Naturalism, Nihilism, and Perfectionism: Stevenson, Williams, and Nietzsche in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy
Stephen Mulhall

NINE  Marxism and the Ethos of the Twentieth Century
Raymond Geuss

TEN  Parallel Projects: Alasdair MacIntyre’s Virtue Ethics, Thirteenth-Century Pastoral Theology (Leonard Boyle, O.P.), and Thomistic Moral Theology (Servais Pinckaers, O.P.)
James McEvoy

ELEVEN  The Perfect Storm: On the Loss of Nature as a Normative Theonomic Principle in Moral Philosophy
Steven A. Long

TWELVE  Forgiveness at the Limit: Impossible or Possible?
Richard Kearney

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## PART III. Thematic Analyses

### THIRTEEN
**Evolutionary Ethics: A Metaphysical Evaluation**  
*Fran O'Rourke*  
Page 323

### FOURTEEN
**The Social Epistemological Normalization of Contestable Narratives: Stories of Just Deserts**  
*Owen Flanagan*  
Page 358

### FIFTEEN
**History, Fetishism, and Moral Change**  
*Jonathan Rée*  
Page 376

### SIXTEEN
**Relativism, Coherence, and the Problems of Philosophy**  
*Elijah Millgram*  
Page 392

### SEVENTEEN
**Ethics and the Evil of Being**  
*William Desmond*  
Page 423

### EIGHTEEN
**The Inescapability of Ethics**  
*Gerard Casey*  
Page 460

**Epilogue: What Next?**  
*Alasdair MacIntyre*  
Page 474

List of Contributors  
Page 487

Index of Names  
Page 493

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In a celebrated phrase Dante praises Aristotle as “master of those who know.” Aristotle would be happier, I believe, described as “master of those who desire to know.” Aside from the fact that those who already know have no need of a master, Aristotle was convinced that as humans we can never master all there is to be known about ourselves and our place within the cosmos. As teacher and philosopher he was himself characterized by a perpetual spirit of investigation. In this, as in many other respects, Alasdair MacIntyre is a true follower of the Greek master: his philosophical work is imbued with the impetus for renewed exploration. There is no such thing as a MacIntyrean philosophy, only the MacIntyrean practice of seeking groundbreaking answers. Over decades he has struggled with real questions and, like Socrates, has relentlessly followed the questions wherever they have taken him.

MacIntyre’s inquiry has led him to visit various schools of thought, framing different periods of his career: analytic, Marxist, Christian, atheist, Aristotelian, Augustinian, and Thomist. John Haldane, in a lecture honoring Alasdair MacIntyre at the Royal Irish Academy, remarked that these stages are unified by a perennial honesty and deep humanism: “His fundamental sensibility to what is central and profound in human affairs is expressed first, by fascination with the products of human thought and action, especially as these reveal the characteristics of particular cultures and traditions; second, by sympathy and admiration for human achievement, be it intellectual, moral or, in the broad sense spiritual; and third,
by a desire to understand these achievements from the ‘inside’ as an engaged participant.”

MacIntyre’s interest has been first and foremost in moral philosophy, and his influence has been far-reaching. His most famous book, *After Virtue*, laid bare the inconsistencies inherent in the conflicting ethical systems that were born of the Enlightenment and that have for the most part shaped current social and political values. The common error, argued MacIntyre, was the failure to adequately ask the most basic of all questions: What is it to be a good human being? It is rare that a single work provokes such radical self-interrogation in equal measure across widely diverging theories of moral philosophy. For his own part, MacIntyre invited readers to rediscover with Aristotle the centrality of the virtues as concretely exemplifying the goals and practices of the good life.

As with Aristotle, MacIntyre’s interests and influence extend to the entire range of human activity. Without sacrificing the autonomy of philosophy, he can accommodate the truth implicit in Marx’s challenge that the point of philosophy is not only to variously interpret the world but also to change it. Philosophy must be true to itself—to its inquiring spirit—and never become subservient to a practical agenda; but it must also inspire human agents to be true to themselves in the search for concrete personal goods. MacIntyre has thus been concerned with questions fundamental to all human agents and the customs that form societies and communities. His influence has extended beyond academic philosophy to political theory, economics, business, and management. University College Dublin’s professor of banking has prescribed *After Virtue* as mandatory reading; he recommended attendance at a public lecture to his students with the words: “MacIntyre is one of the Greats—you will not see his like again.”

The contribution of Alasdair MacIntyre to contemporary philosophy is enormous. His academic scholarship has spanned more specializations and numbered more books and articles—over 250 in all—than many scholars could hope to match in eight lifetimes, let alone in eighty years. One thinks of the eleventh-century poem “Colmcille the Scribe,” in Seamus Heaney’s version: “Wisdom keeps welling in streams . . . / Through books through thick and thin / To enrich the scholar’s holdings.”

In his writings Alasdair MacIntyre has emphasized the importance of tradition. He himself grew up at the confluence of two traditions, inhabiting on the one hand the world of his Gaelic heritage and on the other the
world of modern liberal rationalism. His imagination fed upon the Gaelic oral culture of farmers and fishermen, poets and storytellers, whose values were embedded in the narratives of kinship and place. These were challenged by the claims of universal rational humanity, which relied upon the liberal ideas of Kant and Mill. This tension between opposing systems and versions of morality would characterize MacIntyre’s intellectual quest for a lifetime.

Visiting his relatives in Donegal, he saw no distinction between Irish and Scottish Gaelic. Ireland has always had a special place in Alasdair’s heart. He has an intimate and extensive knowledge of Irish literature, both in English and in Irish. He has lectured and published on Yeats and Burke. Among his favorite writers are Máirtín Ó Cadhain and Máirtín Ó Direáin; he sends Christmas cards to his Irish friends as Gaeilge. It was thus a pleasure for his Irish friends, in March 2009, to celebrate with colleagues from all over the world the eighty years of Alasdair MacIntyre’s life and philosophical achievement. Everyone experienced during those days his generosity, acuity of mind, humility, and great sense of humor. We remain deeply grateful for the way in which he enriched our philosophical endeavor.

The present volume contains most of the papers delivered at the conference held in honor of Alasdair MacIntyre at University College Dublin, March 6–8, 2009. For practical reasons it is not possible to include all papers delivered on that occasion. The volume also includes a number of contributions from friends and colleagues of Professor MacIntyre, which again for practical reasons could not be included in the original schedule. What marks the ensemble is the variety of approaches and perspectives—involving not only diverging but contradicting positions. This is symptomatic of the fact, already noted, that what characterizes MacIntyre’s thought is an ever fresh approach to timeless and significant questions—an attitude that serious philosophers of every shade and nuance cannot but find motivating.

The theme of the Dublin conference, suggested by Alasdair MacIntyre in response to the organizers’ invitation, was the question: “What happened in and to moral philosophy in the twentieth century?” Although he requested that his own work should not be the focus of proceedings, I am very pleased that many papers engaged with Professor MacIntyre’s approach to moral philosophy, either directly or in its historical setting.
In the opening paper, “Keeping Philosophy Relevant and Humanistic,” John Haldane develops themes from his lecture to the Royal Irish Academy on Alasdair MacIntyre’s philosophical contribution. Haldane examines MacIntyre’s conception of the character and purposes of philosophy in its application to understanding and guiding human action. In particular he assesses the implications of two aspects of moral philosophy’s embeddedness within human practices and institutions: one relating to the phenomenology of the personal, the other to the practical concerns (or lack of such) of professionalized academic philosophy. In the former connection he discusses MacIntyre’s exploration of the phenomenology of Edith Stein, and in the latter his treatment of “rival Aristotles” among Renaissance and modern Aristotelians and his reconsideration of some Enlightenment projects.

In “Ethics at the Limits: A Reading of Dependent Rational Animals,” Joseph Dunne focuses on the philosophical anthropology that emerges from MacIntyre’s analysis in that book of the primordial “facts” of human animality, vulnerability, and dependence, leading him to a striking reformulation of his key ethical and political claims. Having traced the main lines of that analysis, Dunne raises some critical questions about the emphasis on “local community” in MacIntyre’s elaboration of the “networks of giving and receiving” that are central to his reconceived politics. He goes on to argue that the ethical demands articulated in this book, different from and strikingly more exacting than those that had earlier been met in After Virtue, may overdraw the resources available to MacIntyre in what he presents as his still basically Aristotelian position. In particular, Dunne questions whether the extremity of these demands allows the ethics in which they arise to be presented as in any sense naturalistic. And he buttresses this critical interrogation by reference to other, earlier and later, works of MacIntyre himself and of two other contemporary philosophers, Raimond Gaita and Charles Taylor, whose substantive ethical positions are, as he argues, very close to those of Dependent Rational Animals—though holding these positions drives them toward a philosophical anthropology strikingly different from what is found in this book.

In “Alasdair MacIntyre’s Revisionary Aristotelianism: Pragmatism Opposed, Marxism Outmoded, Thomism Transformed,” Kelvin Knight argues that MacIntyre has revised and reenergized the Aristotelian tradition, partly by informing it with a social theory. After Virtue proposes that