

# Searching for Ancestors

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In Rome [in the fourth century AD] senatorial families sought out an *exemplum*, an exemplary character in the distant past, from whom to claim descent.

Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*<sup>1</sup>

With hindsight the transformation of Alasdair MacIntyre from gadfly into guru looks inevitable, though few members of his audience in the late 1960s could have predicted it. In 1965-66 MacIntyre delivered a lecture course at Oxford University entitled 'What was Morality?' to a packed room in the Examination Schools. My image is of a short, jowelled figure in a corduroy suit, the latest in radical chic. The style was at once magisterial and provocative, deadpan but destructive. His undergraduate hearers had been raised on the orthodoxy of late ordinary language moral philosophy, on the battles between the great -isms of the day (utilitarianism, emotivism, prescriptivism and the rest), fought out in a timeless vacuum. MacIntyre's subversive purpose was to debunk those debates by putting them into an unexpected historical context. Suddenly our teachers and their immediate predecessors – Moore, Stevenson, Hare and Foot – emerged as pygmy figures against a background of giants: Homer, the authors of the Icelandic Sagas, Jane Austen, Kierkegaard, D. H. Lawrence.

The lesson was that there is no single 'language of morals', as Hare would have it, but a plurality of different languages, each with its own semantics, perhaps its own 'logic'. Like Nietzsche and Sartre, MacIntyre saw 'the death of God' as a cataclysmic event in the history of moral systems which had, since the Enlightenment, become a series of failed attempts to attain the objectivity of theism without the embarrassment of theistic doctrines, an objective moral code without God as its author. In the heady 1960s MacIntyre was content to leave us with this deconstructed ruin of history. He viewed the situation with a cheerful irony and ended his lectures with a nod towards the Marxism then propounded by Sartre, which allowed us to seek the ephemeral community of the 'group in fusion', while keeping our distance from the supposed errors of historical materialism. If this was 'frivolous', said MacIntyre, perhaps that was not a vice. In any case, it was the most we could hope for.

MacIntyre transmitted some of this material into the books *A Short History of Ethics* (1966)<sup>2</sup> and *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (1971),<sup>3</sup> but much of the subversiveness seemed to disappear with publication. He left Oxford to become first Professor of Sociology at the new University of Essex.

In the following decades, in the United States, MacIntyre has been seeking to reconstruct moral objectivity. The spirit of the *Gay Science*, of ironic frivolity, has been replaced by one of stern seriousness. His *After Virtue* (1981)<sup>4</sup> ended on an apocalyptic note:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.

With tongue not wholly in cheek, MacIntyre bade us wait 'not for Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict'.<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre's 'new dark ages' are the product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which shattered all previous communities and objective moral systems. In their stead it introduced Reason as an abstract universal standard which would allow one to choose between those systems. But in the nineteenth century Reason itself was put in doubt by historicism and social theory, which identified different forms or traditions of argumentation and relativized them to different ages and societies. Confronted by this plurality of moralities and rationalities, the inhabitant of the post-Enlightenment world lacked both an objective moral community and an objective rational standard for choosing between the available moral codes. The result is anarchy. Since the 1960s MacIntyre has been telling and re-telling this story and as a narrator he is incomparable.

But MacIntyre is not satisfied with narrative. He seeks answers to the ultimate philosophical questions of truth, objectivity and authority. What can be their source in the post-Enlightenment age? Instead of the Enlightenment's abstract, universal goals, MacIntyre seeks to recover something more concrete, more specific: a social and intellectual 'tradition in good working order'.<sup>6</sup> With the idea of a shared tradition MacIntyre hopes to have laid the ghost of relativism without returning to the Enlightenment's 'impossible' standards of justification. Like Gadamer he argues, convincingly, that if one steps out of all intellectual traditions, one steps not into Reason, but into a void. The standards of justice and rationality of a given tradition develop internally, as its proponents engage with problems thrown up within it; and externally, as they encounter other traditions which challenge their own. There is nothing in this methodological story which should alarm the liberal. It can be accepted independently of the pessimistic rhetoric surrounding the alleged legacy of the Enlightenment. In his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*<sup>7</sup>

Habermas has dispatched the German and French representatives of that rhetoric.

Yet in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre harnesses the plausible methodology to the implausible rhetoric in recovering the tradition of 'an Augustinian Christian'.<sup>8</sup> How did this intellectual nomad, the great iconoclast of the 1960s, reach this particular tradition? Following MacIntyre's own teaching, one would expect a contextual account of Augustine's work, which would allow the reader to identify with this crucial moment in the tradition's development and make it part of his or her own. Yet a careful reading of the book reveals a black hole at its centre. Augustine, who should provide the turning-point of the work, exists in a contextual vacuum. Greek thought, from Homer, through Thucydides, the sophists, the tragedians, Plato and Aristotle, is examined in loving detail. Shifting models of reason and justice are related to the political pressures of the Peloponnesian War. Aristotle's philosophical anthropology is located in the contemporary *polis*. MacIntyre examines Scotland in similar detail – its politics, religion, education and law, from the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century, and links their history to the assimilation of Aristotle, Augustine, Calvin and natural law. He traces the downfall of that tradition at the hands of 'Hume's anglicizing subversion'. But for Augustine's context we need to go to another authority.

When we do, the reason for the black hole becomes clear. As we know from Peter Brown's outstanding biography, Augustine's context is one of crisis, in both personal and public domains. In his *Confessions* Augustine tells the story of his conversion to Christianity as an agonized break with his pagan, classical past, in particular with the 'splendid countenance of Philosophy'.<sup>9</sup> Central here is the reality of the Fall from Grace, which affects our intellect as deeply as our morality. The conversion takes place in the North Africa of the fourth and fifth centuries, riven by the Donatist heresy and threatened by peasant rebellion. In response, Augustine must

demolish with quite exceptional savagery, the whole of the ancient ethical tradition: 'those theories of mortal men, in which they have striven to make for themselves, by themselves, some complete happiness within the misery of this life'.<sup>10</sup>

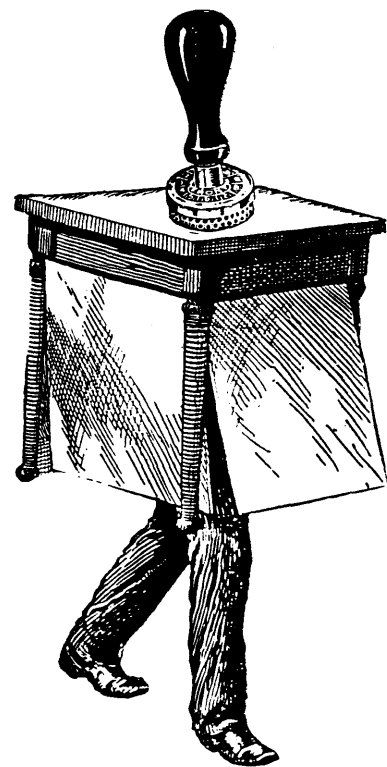
It is not hard to see how fifth-century Hippo corresponds to MacIntyre's America of the 1980s: a plurality of traditions in disarray, no properly constituted authority to settle them. It is also easy to see why Augustine's context has disappeared from MacIntyre's book. If he had brought it into the open, he would have at once displayed the impossibility of incorporating Augustine's tortured vision into a continuing shared tradition of contemporary democracy.

We can now begin to understand MacIntyre's reaction to contemporary 'liberal' readings of Aristotle and Aquinas. The Catholic John Finnis, for instance, has returned to those thinkers to revive the natural law tradition. For him fundamental human goods can be discerned and pursued by human beings 'without needing to advert to the question of God's existence or nature or will'.<sup>11</sup> Of course, for Aquinas Aristotle's 'secular' table of virtues is incomplete, but nonetheless, as Copleston pointed out many years ago,

Aquinas ... did not think that without revelation it is impossible to have any knowledge of the good for man.... Grace perfects nature but does not annul it: revelation sheds further light, but it does not cancel out the truths attainable by purely philosophic reflection.<sup>12</sup>

MacIntyre holds to the negative view that liberalism is a

bankrupt tradition and to the positive view that 'Augustinian Christianity' is the most promising rival tradition for the modern age. It should be apparent that the latter view is far from convincing. But what of the former? Even if MacIntyre has failed to find the remedy, is his diagnosis that liberalism is in terminal decline still correct? That diagnosis is in vogue in the United States. Indeed it is the received wisdom across the political spectrum from Alan Bloom on the right through Michael Sandel on the communitarian centre to Roberto Unger on the radical left. It is no surprise therefore to find MacIntyre, only five pages into *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, sneering at 'that parish magazine of affluent and self-congratulatory liberal enlightenment',<sup>13</sup> the *New York Times*. Would that we had such a parish magazine, indeed such a parish, in this country! But what is the evidence for the bankruptcy of liberalism? According to *After Virtue*, it lies in the fact that 'the debates and disagreements of the (liberal) culture' are 'unsettled'.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, they do get settled, particularly in the United States, by the law: in the last



instance by the US Supreme Court. But MacIntyre will not accept the liberal view that the courts provide true settlements, that they constitute what Ronald Dworkin calls a form of principle, expressing a continuing public moral debate within a shared moral tradition.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, according to MacIntyre, the Supreme Court plays 'the role of a peace-making or trucekeeping body by negotiating its way through an impasse of conflict, not by invoking our shared moral first principles. For our society as a whole has none.'<sup>16</sup>

MacIntyre continues the critique of liberalism in Chapter 17 of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* In keeping with his general methodology, he ties a particular view of rationality and of the individual to a particular view of justice. Liberalism, from MacIntyre's perspective, holds that society consists of individuals essentially endowed with wants or preferences. According to liberal rationality, each individual orders his or her preferences for presentation in the public domain, rationally translates preferences into decisions, and decisions into

actions. There is no public vision of an overriding good. Distributive justice merely 'sets constraints on the bargaining process' between individuals as their preferences conflict. For MacIntyre there are two tensions within this 'liberal' picture. First, each sub-group within a pluralist democracy has a substantive view of the good and of the theoretical and practical means of attaining it (its 'practical rationality'). Yet that practical rationality is disregarded at the public level of the liberal order. On the one hand, the substantive question of the correctness of the sub-group's view of the good is ignored. On the other hand, its substantive view is accepted simply as a preference. Second, the liberal ideology of justice is egalitarian: all individuals are to have an equal freedom not only to express and implement their preferences, but also to share in the means (money, power etc.) necessary thereto. But in reality the liberal order is radically inegalitarian: 'power lies within those who are able to determine what the alternatives are to be between which choices are to be available ... the range of possible choices is controlled by an élite ....' So liberalism stands accused by MacIntyre of impotence (failure to right substantive inequalities) and of inconclusiveness (not 'arriving at substantive conclusions, and more and more ... continuing the debate for its own sake'.<sup>17</sup>

But should the liberal be dismayed by these charges? It is held that there is a qualitative difference between liberalism and earlier 'healthier' traditions in that it is uniquely incapable of reaching substantive conclusions about the good life, lacking a vision of human beings' dominant ends. Here two questions should be posed: is this in fact unique to 'liberalism'? And is it not a sign of a healthy, rather than of a sick tradition? A little reflection shows that neutrality with respect to judgements of personal preferences is not unique to liberalism. Both Aristotle and Aquinas also regarded the individual as a competent judge concerning his 'apparent good' in most choices. For Aristotle the *polis* is 'by nature a plurality, consisting of individuals differing in kind'. For Aquinas 'the community of the political order is made up of many persons and the good of the community is achieved by the variety of actions of those persons'.<sup>18</sup> The idea of the common good in these thinkers is consistent with the fact that there is no automatic identity (but equally no automatic conflict) of interest between persons. For Aquinas 'the common good is the goal of individual persons living in the community.... Yet the good of one individual person is not the purpose of another'.<sup>19</sup> His view of the relation between law and morality is not so far from J. S. Mill's or Hart's: the law

does not forbid all the vices from which upright men can keep away, but only those grave ones which the average man can avoid, and chiefly those which do harm to others, and have to be stopped if human society is to be maintained, such as murder and theft.<sup>20</sup>

Now it may be true that the public moral-religious worlds of both Aristotle and Aquinas were more coherent and integrated than ours. But that simply means that their range of objects of choice (of mere preference) was more restricted than ours is. In other words, the range of rival religious systems or forms of rationality was not the same for them as it is for modern Americans. Yet those thinkers too encountered radically different systems, and MacIntyre is an acute historian of those encounters. At some stage of every system rich in intellectual resources, individuals holding different views of their own good, and often of the common good, will engage with each other, will express their views of the good against each other as preferences, and will need a public authority to regulate their conflicts. Liberalism differs from previous sys-

tems only in allowing individuals a greater range of choice. If the natural law tradition arose in a context of greater moral-religious consensus, there is no reason to think that it cannot be extended beyond it. In its Thomist form the most general precepts of natural law were already held to be universally accessible. The seeds of Enlightenment universalism, so much feared by MacIntyre, are already sown by St. Thomas, as Friedrich Heer noted many years ago in his *Intellectual History of Europe*.<sup>21</sup>

The charge that the legalistic egalitarianism of the liberal order is but a mask for the real inequalities of class and power is simply Marx's charge, deprived of Marx's sense of history and of any coherent political programme for setting things right. Liberal capitalist societies are indeed radically inegalitarian in just the ways Marx identified in his theory of class exploitation. But is MacIntyre seriously suggesting that the societies inhabited by Aristotle, Augustine or Aquinas were more egalitarian? Let's hope not. He might, on the other hand, be saying something rather more congenial to certain Marxists, namely that greater equality requires a sacrifice of the rights and freedoms of the deceptive liberal *Rechtsstaat*. Let's hope he doesn't mean that either, for socialism bought at that price is properly described as totalitarianism. On this, as on much else, Rawls got it exactly right.

Liberalism, in short, is neither incoherent nor inconclusive nor impotent. MacIntyre's own trajectory, from Anglicanism, through every shade of Marxism and post-Marxism, to his present resting-place in 'Augustinian Christianity', is conceivable only within an order which is more or less liberal. The string of élite institutions, of different intellectual and religious colours, through which MacIntyre has passed en route to the University of Notre Dame reflects the pluralism, defended by the Supreme Court in many decisions, which he now sets himself to attack. It is to be hoped that his arguments do not win the day.

The post-war liberal 'tradition' of constitutional rights and a more or less interventionist welfare state may not survive the Thatcherite assault in this country. MacIntyre's idiosyncratic package of anti-capitalism and 'Augustinian Christianity' hardly amounts to a political programme to match it. But it represents an ideological response to the troubles of our times which has reached a large audience. The thought that it could be taken seriously will not comfort Salman Rushdie. MacIntyre would do well to ponder the verdict of Friedrich Heer, a Catholic of an earlier and more humane generation:

Thomas realized ... that Augustine was a genius of dangerously inexhaustible fertility ... Augustine's highly personal and Platonic doctrine of the penetration of the divine light into man, the illumination of the Spirit of God, could be made to support every arbitrary position held by any self-appointed prophet.<sup>22</sup>

His words, now over thirty years old, have an increasing resonance today.<sup>23</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, Faber and Faber, London, 1967, p. 308.
- 2 A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, Macmillan, New York, 1966.
- 3 A. MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, Duckworth, London, 1971.
- 4 A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Duckworth, London, 1981, 1985/

- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- 6 A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London, Duckworth, 1988, p. 7.
- 7 J. Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987.
- 8 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 10.
- 9 Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 327.
- 11 J. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 49.
- 12 F. C. Copleston, *Aquinas*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1955, p. 198.
- 13 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 5.
- 14 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 252.
- 15 R. Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1985 (Chapter 2: 'The Forum of Principle').
- 16 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 253.
- 17 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 342-44.
- 18 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a 2ae 96.1.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 2a 2ae 58.9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 1a 2ae 96.2.
- 21 F. Heer, *The Intellectual History of Europe*, trans. J. Steinberg, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1966, p. 155.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- 23 My thanks to Nick Bunnin for advising me to read Friedrich Heer in 1967; and to Alan Malachowski and Jonathan Réé for correcting some of the mistakes in the present paper in 1989.

## LEFT CURVE no. 14

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