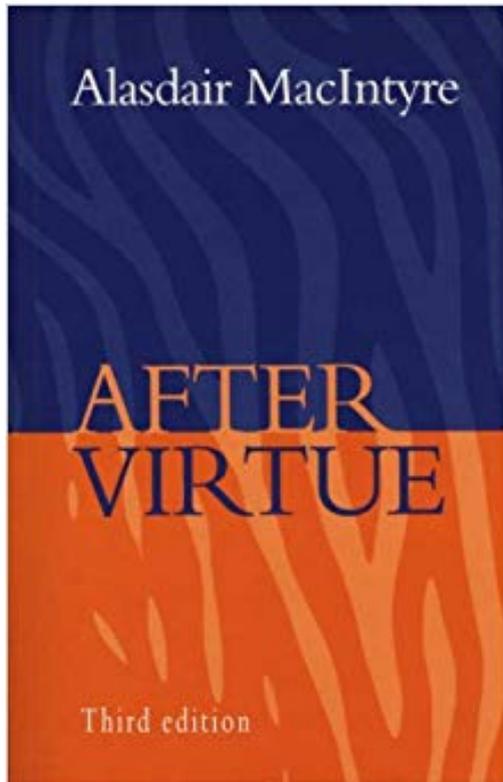


## After virtue: a study in moral theory *by* Alasdair MacIntyre



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**ISBN:** 0715636405

**ISBN13:** 978-0715636404

**Author:** Alasdair MacIntyre

**Book title:** After virtue: a study in moral theory

**Pages:** 320

**Publisher:** GERALD DUCKWORTH & Co.; 3Rev Ed edition (2007)

**Language:** English

**Category:** Philosophy

**Size PDF version:** 1899 kb

**Size ePUB version:** 1206 kb

**Size FB2 version:** 1577 kb

**Other formats:** lit txt docx mobi

0715636405



## Reviews of the *After virtue: a study in moral theory* *by* Alasdair MacIntyre

### Danial

After Virtue is one of those works which will stand the test of time as a initiator of a discourse long forgotten in the western world. The discourse concerns the nature of morality which "sustains" or fails to sustain the inner lives of the western man after the cruel shattering of all possible illusions of any kind of moral order in the universe, a world most devastatingly described by Nietzsche. Alasdair MacIntyre begins the work raising some fundamental questions about the incompatibility of perspectives which frequently meet our eye in popular culture, in media debates, in popular legislations in supreme court battles, and even in ordinary life, views which are characterized by shrill and often very violent rhetoric between individuals committed to one or other of the myriad positions available for adoption in our post modern marketplace of ideas. The feature of such

confrontations is not the lack of so called justifications, which are many, but in their fundamental incommensurability. Understood philosophically, Macintyre shows the underlying lack of any real basis to these arguments. Its not a surprise that they never end.

The book charts an impressive history of this discourse, its origins in the Enlightenment traditions of Kant and Hume, succeeded by Locke, Mill and Bentham, to the final death knell struck by Nietzsche. Its Nietzsche who could see the absolute destruction of the moral sphere that surrounded him and pulled no punches in decrying it. But this history is too short sighted, says Macintyre. The medieval world view which the Enlightenment repudiated, was the last remaining tradition, one inherited from the ancient Greeks, and more specifically, Aristotle, which gave the world a telos, a final goal for the life of man, and thus provided a framework which could synthesize seemingly disparate points of view and philosophical positions. One could question certain premises of that framework, but not the structural foundations of it. By dismantling the whole structure, he might have gained freedom from the oppressive weight of tradition, but his freedom had no goal to which he could aspire to. He was now free in a world where he didn't know what to do. Its at this juncture of history where the enlightenment philosophers came forward to provide the free man, a telos, a morality which could justify itself on its own terms without depending on theology or tradition. Reason itself would disclose to man, his goal. the great heights of such attempts is preserved in the works of Kant and Hume. But all these attempts failed. None could create a self-sustaining world of morality that could be justified by reason alone. Each had its glaring flaws and it was left to the powers that be to impose its own version of morality, also justified by reason. As time went by, the new oppression came from reason itself as it was twisted and turned to suit various ends , a world Nietzsche describes with horrifying precision in his Genealogy of Morals. So the author asks, was Nietzsche justified in decrying the Aristotelian world ? Was that too an example of power masking itself through a system of morals ? The answer as shown in the book is no. The greek view of morality was fundamentally different from the present system of externally defining certain acts as moral. To begin with, there was no word called morality in the greek society. There were certain unacceptable behaviour but the larger conception of modern day morality was missing. The life of ancient man was structured around a community which provided a coherent frame of action and path which he was trained to walk for his whole life ending with death, the character of which would give the narrative closure to his life. His life was a unity, a self contained block of time with its peculiar struggles and victories which made sense in the larger unity of the society which was the ground for his own existence. Thus it came to be that brotherhood was the greatest ideal of the past, an ideal which gave a kind of solidity to society we have no inkling of. Selfishness was a vice and so was acquisition. A modern liberal educated in ideas of individual success and freedom would recoil in horror at the implication of such a premise.

After the fall of the Greeks, Christianity incorporated much of it in its own moral frameworks, although modified by uniquely christian additions like charity or benevolence. Thomas Aquinas in his Summa Theologica provided the most famous synthesis of such a marriage of Aristotle and Christianity. In many ways. the telos or end goal of life remained the same in essence, though the outer character of it changed. It was around the 15th century when the corruptions of the Church and its institutional oppressiveness, forced a backlash from the society, ending its reign as the supreme moral preacher and ushering in the Enlightenment. So why is this history so important ? As the book shows in excellent detail, our problems can be understood as something not unique to our time, but only a later stage in a process which began hundreds of years ago. By understanding this process, we moderns can come to a enlightened understanding of why our debates never end, why we remain confused over life changing issues and what this entails for our fragmented inner lives. The world has been through its flirtations with easy glorification of despair in philosophies like Existentialism, and the great danger today is that the despair itself has stopped being a concern anymore. Art and popular culture has taken over the stage of comforting every searching soul with

easy customized and feel good solutions which destroy more than they heal. Its the great accomplishment of this book which is already thirty five years old, that it came out with a hard hitting attack at the post modern celebration of fragmented morality and gave a much needed push to historical understanding of moral structures. MacIntyre would go on to write two more books, *Whose Justice which Rationality ?* and *Three versions of Moral Enquiry*, completing a trilogy of moral philosophy that remains one of the great "philosophical performances" of our time as another reviewer has pointed out.

### **Runeterror**

This is one of those books that I've had for several years, really wanted to read, but kept putting off to get through some easier reads. It took me a few days to get through this dense work of philosophy, but I am blessed to have finally completed Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (3rd ed.)). I've had concerns and suspicions for years as to the foundations of moral arguments, particularly those of political establishments, but did not have the philosophical and historical background with which to articulate those concerns beyond simple observations of impractical and illogical teleological claims (or lack thereof). Without being well read in Aristotle, Nietzsche, Sartre, Hume, Hegel, Hobbes, Marx, and many others, some of us are unable to fully appreciate and adequately assess MacIntyre's arguments; so, we are left having to trust that MacIntyre has himself fairly and honestly done so with other philosophers. I do; and still lacking in this area, I am going to piggyback on MacIntyre with this one.

MacIntyre, a self-proclaimed Aristotelian, ultimately argues that Aristotle was wrong in his approach to morality, but that his arguments can be (are) broken down and restated to express a proper view. Basically, MacIntyre corrects Aristotle and helps us understand modern morality and the faults of arguments therein. This is an eye-opener; however, now thirty-four years since its first publication, it seems we still have a long way to go from academia to expressing these things in a way that pragmatically appeals to the general populous in order to make any kind of real change in the way we approach morality, virtue, and governance by way of such arguments.

I think I am right to assume this isn't going to be on most people's reading list, and even fewer will get excited enough about the material to do anything with it. So, I am going to make specific recommendations with this one. If you are or anticipate finding yourself working in any of the following fields, read and wrestle with this book: ethics, law, philosophy, politics, theology.

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