

Introduction

Hegel was right and Fichte was wrong; we cannot enjoy the outcome of the history of thought without reappropriating that history. (1980h: 46)

This book aims to provide a more or less comprehensive overview of the thought of Alasdair MacIntyre and to tell the story of his thought. Its concern therefore is Alasdair MacIntyre as thinker, not merely as ethicist, or historian of ethics, or social critic, or what have you. I take it that the primary task of studies of this kind is, as the great historian of philosophy and historical philosopher Etienne Gilson once noted, to understand and to make understood. But we also have Gilbert Ryle to thank for the lesson that crucial to a large-scale philosophical engagement with the work of another philosopher is an attempted, and to an extent conjectural, identification of the *problems* with which she or he is engaged – problems which may have a robust life of their own independent from her or his engagement with them (see Ryle's helpful statement of method in Ryle, 1971, Vol. 1: ix–x). Philosophy is indeed about a good deal more than understanding and interpretation of the thought of other philosophers: even in its interpretive moment it should be centrally concerned with criticism and counter-argument, with carrying their inquiries forward and aiming to improve upon their results. Still, philosophy with, and to a certain extent through, other minds ought *at least* to be about understanding them (and for a sign that self-described analytic philosophers have in recent years become increasingly aware of this, see Peter Hylton's comments in the Preface and Introduction to his highly acclaimed study of Bertrand Russell: Hylton, 1990: vii–17).

Bearing this in mind, while considerations of time and space have by and large required me to forgo attempts at extended criticism of theses of MacIntyre – and generally to avoid challenging his accounts of historical texts and figures – I have tried to specify what problems he has been exercised by and what the evolving shape of his solutions to them has been. And I have tried to raise various critical queries along the way, while devoting the third part of this study to a brief examination of exemplary criticisms of his overall standpoint. MacIntyre is an aspiring systematic philosopher: one best learned from and criticized when taken systematically. So this study aims at a perspicuous representation of MacIntyre's thought from the inside – an internal perspective on his work through which the system-under-construction that binds his thought together and the internal logic of that quasi-system can be brought into clearer view. The book is, and does not pretend to be other than, an introduction.

As he approaches full academic retirement, MacIntyre has made notable contributions in a number of areas of philosophy: moral philosophy, philosophical

psychology, the philosophy of the human sciences, political philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of explanation. His thought has also ranged far beyond certain conventional boundaries of philosophical interest into psychoanalysis, Marxist theory, religious sociology, and the literary imagination. I have tried to do some justice to his work in each of these areas while at the same time keeping an eye to the unity of interest and of intellectual commitment which connects them. MacIntyre's career can be divided roughly into three periods: a first in which he is groping for a systematic standpoint from which to address questions in ethics and in the philosophy of the human sciences generally; a second, corresponding to the writing of *After Virtue*, which aims at a sketch of such a standpoint; and, a third which seeks to fill in that sketch and respond by accommodation or rejoinder to criticisms of its central tenets and historical claims.

Since *After Virtue* amounts to the keystone in MacIntyre's *œuvre*, I have made it the centre of this book. It is no exaggeration to say that, since shortly *After Virtue* was published in 1981, it has changed the way ethics is written and studied in many parts of the English-speaking world and beyond. Indeed, it is not implausible to claim, as a long-standing interpreter of MacIntyre's thought has, that along with John Rawls, MacIntyre has been the most influential Anglophonic figure in, broadly speaking, practical philosophy in the last half-century (see David Solomon's comments in AM: 142). But *After Virtue* is a magisterial work, a rich synthesis dense with compressed treatment of issues from the first part of MacIntyre's career; as a magisterial work, a view from a lofty height, it is best approached through the works preceding it. So my effort has been to enter the river by the streams, as it were, and then to follow the river as it broadens, chiefly into his two subsequent book-length studies *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.

Speaking as I do of MacIntyre's work subsequent to *After Virtue* as forming part of a consistent project draws its initial justification from MacIntyre's own words. Since he addressed the first criticisms of *After Virtue*, and indeed to the present day, MacIntyre has repeatedly stated that his allegiance to *After Virtue*'s central claims and positions remains unchanged. Part of the task of this book will be to ascertain whether MacIntyre has attained the consistency for which he has striven—and whether reports of his changes in belief have been greatly exaggerated. My effort in this light has been to help the texts speak for themselves and not to rely in any straightforward way on MacIntyre's or others' accounts of his development.

While sharing Aristotle's conviction, expressed at the beginning of his *Politics* that, 'he who ... considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them' (1 252a 24-6), I am not unaware that developmental studies of the present kind are liable to a particular kind of philosophical criticism. As H.H. Price put the matter some time ago when this was a topic of particular controversy, it is of little interest to know how author or philosophical school x got from position A to position B to position C, if C or any of the other positions can be assessed on their own philosophical merits. Where they came from, or indeed how they arose, has little to do with their independently assessable epistemic value (Lewis, 1963: *passim*, esp. 21–2). This view, though,

it seems to me, represents a rather simplistic conception of what philosophical positions are. They are not, in general, free-standing answers to shared, impersonal, standpoint-independent questions; they are more often attempts at answering highly particular because highly contextualized questions. Position D of author x cannot often be *understood* in order to be assessed if the questions to which it is an attempted answer are not themselves first understood. One therefore needs the approach of both a Ryle *and* a Gilson to accomplish this.

Moreover, the worthwhileness of developmental studies of philosophical authors rests on certain highly plausible assumptions: that consistently focused inquiry yields increasingly positive epistemic results; that if, *ceteris paribus*, authors have been wrestling with roughly the same questions for a long period, their later views will generally be more sophisticated, more adequate, and more cogent than their earlier views. And if the later views can provisionally be assumed more reasonable than the earlier ones, it will be helpful and interesting to learn and to assess why they thought that abandoning tenet A for tenet B was called for, and so to trace the logical history of their inquiries and commitments.

Nevertheless, provisos must be made here. Systematic conceptions do not spring into their author's mind ready-made and fully formed, and it would be highly unusual if in the course of an academic career one were free from various external constraints – teaching out of the area of one's systematic interest, publication pressures, and the numberless other contingencies in a human life – to be able to elaborate some systematic framework in a straightforwardly chronological fashion without significant interruption, distraction, or deflection. Later needn't mean clearer or more adequate, earlier may sometimes mean more self-critical or more fine-grained. But if caveats like these are borne in mind, developmental studies of significant thinkers have obvious things to be said for them. Doubtless we may not ourselves engage in developmental studies of authors whose epistemic authority we do not hold in high regard, or whose initial starting point or framework we think not promising, but even for such authors, if we think their views merit or demand honest criticism, a developmental perspective on their work may be indispensable.

This style of approach seems particularly advisable in the case of a thinker like MacIntyre, who far from being a trend-follower in his career or a one-issue author, has consistently been a pathbreaker, initiating topics of philosophical investigation and conversation and then moving on to new areas, all the while trying to be mindful of the connection between his thoughts in the different domains. In the final section of this book I will consider questions of the overall coherence of MacIntyre's *œuvre* as well as noteworthy criticisms of his project in the moral sciences.

In part because of the colourful, multi-faceted nature of this career and in part because of his own work on the relevance of social and historical context for inquiry, there is considerable interest on both sides of the Atlantic in MacIntyre's past life. Where was he born? Where educated? What were his early beliefs and commitments? Why has he moved from place to place so frequently? What are the dominant influences of teachers and peers on the development of his thought? So before turning to an

examination of his written work, the following biographical sketch is provided in the hopes of satisfying some of this curiosity.

A Brief Biographical Sketch

Alasdair Chalmers MacIntyre was born in Glasgow on 12 January 1929 to Eneas John MacIntyre and Margaret Emily Chalmers, but his birth in Glasgow was due only to his mother's spending a brief period of time there. He was raised primarily in the East End of London, where his parents, both medical doctors, found work. He also spent part of his youth with a paternal aunt in Argyllshire in the west of Scotland. After his father's death, his mother moved to a home outside Belfast. MacIntyre spent much time there, as well as in a house outside Donegal, during summers and holidays of his early academic career. He remains a frequent visitor to Ireland.

His father's family, Protestants from the north of Ireland, had emigrated to the west of Scotland several generations earlier. His mother's family was Scottish. While baptised a Presbyterian, MacIntyre's upbringing was of a non-denominational Christian sort. At age 13 he enrolled in Epsom College, an independent school in Surrey specializing in the education of children of physicians. Illness prevented him staying in residence and completing the normal five-year course of studies at Epsom, but he remained in residence for much of four years and received private tutorials to make up for his absences. One of his tutors during this time was a former student of R.G. Collingwood at Oxford, and he introduced MacIntyre to the thought of his former mentor. To this day, MacIntyre lists Collingwood, and through Collingwood, John Ruskin as major influences on his thought.

In part owing to the discovery that his paternal family had remained Roman Catholic for several generations after the Reformation, and in part owing to his friendship with a number of Dominican priests, MacIntyre developed an interest in the thought of Thomas Aquinas and in Catholic doctrine in his teen years. He received instruction in the Catholic doctrine from several Dominicans in his mid-teens, and he read and discussed aspects of the thought of Aquinas with them. But certain fundamental religious doubts kept him from entering the Roman Catholic Church, and his then Catholic mentors advised him against doing so.

At age 16 MacIntyre enrolled in Queen Mary College of the University of London. Because of his promise as a student he was admitted one year prior to the ordinary age of entrance, and he completed his degree at Queen Mary in four years, graduating with an honours BA in Classics. While at Queen Mary, he spent much of his time reading Plato and Aristotle and mathematics. His university training was primarily philological, and he admits to being greatly influenced by the scholarly virtues of a noted Queen Mary classicist of the time, W. Alison Laidlaw. Laidlaw's attention to detail, love of truth, and ability to allow his mind to be governed by the objects of its inquiry made as much of an impression on MacIntyre, or so he has said in conversation, as have the traits of any teacher before or since.

During his university years, MacIntyre's first contact with the Communist Party came owing to contact with fellow university students in the party and with party workers in London's East End. He found the communist critique of the British politics of the time – and especially of a certain kind of liberalism – highly compelling, and at age 18 he joined the party and began attending party classes. His rapport with the party was not to last long, as after little more than a year he left dissatisfied. Though attracted by the party's involvement in the labour movement and in the peace movement, he found it to be, in his words, 'one of the most highly inefficient organizations conceivable', and he was also very put off by the party's dissimulations about the atrocities of Soviet Marxism. His interest in Marxism was to continue, though, and he was to resume allegiance to it in the form of Trotskyism until his definitive break with the latter around 1963. Of course, he still professes that there is much to be learned from the study of Marx, as we shall see.

While at Queen Mary, MacIntyre acquired a keen interest in philosophical questions, especially philosophical ethics, and he occasionally attended philosophy seminars at University College London (UCL) given by A.J. Ayer, then Grote Professor of Mind and Logic at UCL. MacIntyre's interest in Christianity led him also to involvement with the ecumenical Christian Student Movement at Queen Mary, and while he began moving in the direction of Anglicanism, he formed no firm ecclesiastical allegiance at the time. He did continue involvement with the Christian Student Movement during his Manchester years, and engaged in informal discussion groups on Christianity with friends at Manchester, several of whom were to become Roman Catholics.

Upon graduating from Queen Mary at age 20, MacIntyre decided to pursue a graduate degree in philosophy, and so he enrolled in the one graduate programme then available in Britain, an MA programme in philosophy at the University of Manchester. His continuing interest in ethics, and his perception of the challenge of emotivist ethics in the form presented at the time by C.L. Stevenson, led him to choose as a topic for his MA thesis, 'The Significance of Moral Judgements'. The thesis was written under the supervision of Dorothy Emmet, and received a mark of distinction on the recommendation of its external examiner.

Upon completion of his degree there were only two job openings in Britain available to him, an assistant lectureship in philosophy at the University College of North Staffordshire, and an assistant lectureship in the philosophy of religion at the University of Manchester itself. MacIntyre opted for the latter on account of the favourable research conditions it provided. Promoted to lecturer after three years, he taught courses at Manchester on the philosophy and the psychology of religion for six years. During these Manchester years MacIntyre came into contact with Michael Polanyi and Polanyi's assistant at the time, Marjorie Grene.

The desire to teach in a philosophy department proper – and especially to teach ethics – and a job offer at Leeds University, drew him next to Leeds in 1957. He remained there from 1957 to 1961, and during this period he acquired the conviction that ethics cannot be studied adequately without an accompanying knowledge of sociology. He so applied for, and received, a research fellowship at Nuffield College,

Oxford to engage in full-time sociological research. The fellowship at Nuffield was followed by a permanent fellowship at University College, Oxford. While enjoying and benefiting much from the intellectual atmosphere at Oxford, the desire to be in regular conversation with social scientists and the offer of a professorship in sociology drew him next to the University of Essex.

During the late 1960s, MacIntyre had been attending a study group in the USA organized by Marjorie Grene. In receipt of an offer from the Philosophy Department at Brandeis University in 1970, MacIntyre decided to move to the USA. This move was not without its political difficulties: since the time of his first academic visits to the USA beginning in 1961, he had been required to undergo political examinations by the US Department of Immigration on account of his involvement with the British Communist Party. On the occasion of the offer of a permanent position at Brandeis, it took the intervention of one of Massachusetts' senators, Senator Brooke, for MacIntyre to be permitted by US Immigration to take up the Brandeis position as Richard Koret Professor of the History of Ideas.

Disappointed, on his account, by the university's failure to provide promised resources, he began to look for a position elsewhere, and after only a two-year period at Brandeis he was recruited to Boston University by its President, John Silber. He remained at Boston University from 1972 to 1980. While at Boston, he was offered an open-ended professorship at Wellesley College, as the first Henry R. Luce, Jr. Professor of Language, Mind, and Culture. He accepted the offer, though he was to resign from the position two years later. During this time he met his wife, Lynn Sumida Joy, who was working on a PhD at Wellesley at the time. When Joy had completed her PhD, both she and MacIntyre received independent offers of posts at Vanderbilt University, and they decided to accept the offers and move to Tennessee, MacIntyre becoming the W. Alton Jones Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt. They remained at Vanderbilt from 1982 to 1988.

The promise of a bigger graduate programme and the opportunity to teach more graduate students drew them next to the University of Notre Dame, MacIntyre becoming McMahan/Hank Professor of Philosophy there from 1988 to 1994. Lynn Joy's interest in a philosophy department with a more historical orientation and joint offers at Duke University subsequently led them to Duke University in 1995, where MacIntyre was Arts and Sciences Professor of Philosophy.

In a state of semi-retirement now, MacIntyre has since returned to the recently founded Center for Ethics and Culture of the University of Notre Dame, where he is a Permanent Senior Research Fellow, and where he continues to write and to teach courses in philosophy.