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After Virtue: A Study In Moral Theory, Second Edition



Synopsis

"[I]t is something to have a book, devoted to certain quite central technical philosophical questions, which is likely to produce so passionate a response." —New York Review of Books "A remarkable synthesis" —Richard Rorty "A stunning new study of ethics. . . ." —Newsweek "The best book of philosophy in years." —John Gardner "To call this a good book is to be patronizing; it is an important book, one that will have to be followed up or answered. It may be a great one, as are all turning points in a tide of drama whose protagonists have thought their courses inexorable." —Choice, February 1982 When *After Virtue* first appeared in 1981, it was recognized at once as a significant and potentially controversial critique of contemporary moral philosophy. Now, in a new chapter, Alasdair MacIntyre responds to the questions and considerations raised by the many admirers and critics who made *After Virtue* such a widely read and discussed work of philosophy. Taking into account the dialogue generated by his book over the past three years, he elaborates his position on the relationship of philosophy to history, the virtues and the issue of relativism, and the relationship of moral philosophy to theology. In doing so, MacIntyre sustains the claims of his central conclusions to rational justification and demonstrates further the accountability of philosophy to the world and times it seeks to describe.

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Customer Reviews

After Virtue is a delightful book which presents the contemporary problem of moral philosophy today. MacIntyre says that there is an interminability of moral debate today. No consensus solution to the variety of moral issues such as abortion and war will present itself because proponents of

both sides of the arguments in these two issues argue from a different set of premises from a different tradition of moral philosophy. You have Thomistic ideals of the value of life and justice against Rousseauist ideals of individuality, for example, in life issues. Can any of the enlightenment moral philosophies really help us make rational, clear decisions about the morality of a particular decision? MacIntyre investigates the moral philosophies of Kant, Hume, & Kierkegaard, showing how each of them miserably fail as possible moral systems. Utilitarianism, pragmatism, and emotivism are also wonderfully skewered. With what are we left? It seems as if after the failure of these systems we are left with the Nietzschean amorality of total chaotic relativism. MacIntyre understands the enigma of Nietzsche's ideas and shows how his attacks toppled the pompous, arrogant ideals of the Enlightenment. But Nietzsche's system seems impossible from a human standpoint, since, for example, we are left with the unsettling discovery that events such as the Holocaust are not really "wrong" in any objective sense. MacIntyre interjects that there is another alternative: go back to the source of the Enlightenment project.

I read this book conflicted. On the one hand the book contained sentences, frequent sentences, of such numbing bodilessness as "For beside rights and utility, among the central moral fictions of the age we have to place the peculiarly managerial fiction embodied in the claim to possess systematic effectiveness in controlling certain aspects of social reality." On the other hand the book was so fascinating I could scarcely put it down at points. It felt like masochism. All this to say: MacIntyre writes a moral thriller of great drama and urgency. He writes it with a tactic used by more conventional suspense novelists like Ruth Rendell: give the end at the beginning, then explain how such a bizarre and catastrophic end came to be. Our moral language assumes a universality we do not believe, he argues at the beginning. How have our moral beliefs become so ruptured from (and so much smaller than) the language we use to describe them? That rupture is the history he traces. The setting is the Western world; the characters are philosophers; the plot is the murder of Aristotle. Who killed him? Was it Hume in the Enlightenment with the candlestick? Was it Machiavelli in the Renaissance? Was it Kierkegaard the Dane with a book: Enten-Eller? Was it the Bloomsbury group with their emotivist approach to ethics? Was it, after all has been said and done, Nietzsche? And, can Aristotle (and his teleological view of morality) be brought back to life? MacIntyre's style is that of a perfectly trustworthy guide. He fends off more counter-arguments than I could have generated for him in a lifetime. "How is he going to get out of this scrape he's just identified?" I asked myself, and rested in peace that he would.

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