with a meaningful signifier or string of signifiers. But the translation is always a failure: something remains enigmatic. There is always an element of otherness, of alienness, that cannot be captured or reduced. It is the enigmatic signifier (or thing-presentation) that is repressed and forms the core of the unconscious. The unconscious is not a primordial or biological id, but something alien that is implanted within the human being during the encounter with the other. Winnicott remarks that there is no such thing as a baby: no baby exists outside the relationship with the carer. Laplanche takes a similar view to the extent that he rejects the idea that there is – or was once – some monad-like organism closed in upon itself, which gradually opened itself up to the outside world and the other: this is biological solipsisms or idealism. The enigmatic and repressed thing-presentations – the other within – exert pressure from inside and are described by Laplanche as the ‘source-objects’ of the drives. Sexuality and the drives come from the outside or from the other, and they remain alien and non-integrated. The dimension of otherness is always there.

Based upon enormous erudition and a lifelong familiarity with Freud, Laplanche’s theses are seductive. They are also unsettling. The value of the exegesis is beyond doubt but the introversion and introspection do induce a feeling of theoretical claustrophobia. Laplanche denies being a historian of ideas, rejects the view that the Freudian unconscious has anything to do with other nineteenth-century theories of the unconscious, and chides Freud for his self-deprecatory comment that Schopenhauer had anticipated his discoveries. It is rather as though psychoanalysis were a continent unto itself, as though there were nothing outside it or alongside it. For anyone outside or even on the fringes of that continent, Laplanche’s theses look suspiciously like the contention that, unlike the human subject it decentres, psychoanalysis is self-centred, self-regulating and self-sufficient.

There is something disquieting about this serene self-sufficiency. The silence about actual child abuse is disturbing. To say, like Freud, that it is ‘common enough’ and then to say no more is not good enough. Nor is it good enough to remain as silent about it as Laplanche does, if only because – to parry the alternative accusations that psychoanalysis implants ‘memories’ in its patients or that it is too close to being a form of recovered-memory treatment – psychoanalysts will have to involve themselves in what they see as a debate that is taking place elsewhere. There is nothing enigmatic about the rape of children in care.

David Macey

Virtue after After Virtue


MacIntyre and Hampshire were already well known when I was a student in the sixties. Now they are both at that end stage of their careers where they are giving distinguished lecture series, which is what these books are made up of. They well illustrate the different paths the two thinkers have taken.

Hampshire established an early reputation as one of the more independent and original thinkers of the generation of Oxford philosophers who came after Ryle. He wrote a couple of much admired books (Spinoza and Thought and Action); but then he became Warden of Wadham College, Oxford, the sort of job which seems fatal to serious thought (perhaps it is all that sherry). Anyway, this book of his Tanner Lectures shows the after-effects. It is a tired and sorry piece of work, a mere assertion of a Rawlsian, proceduralist account of justice, without any attempt to set it in a contemporary context or defend it against recent criticism.

MacIntyre, too, had a brilliant beginning. He was associated with the New Left in its early days but, after an unhappy spell as a dean in Essex at the height of the student movement, he moved to the USA where his work seemed to become stalled. There were mutterings about his failing to live up to his early promise; but then, suddenly, After Virtue appeared and rapidly established itself as one of the definitive works of contemporary philosophy.

His Paul Carus lectures, which make up the present book, continue and extend the arguments of After Virtue. The audience at the lectures must have been bemused, but their loss is our gain. Instead of the philosophical easy-listening that is usually served up on such occasions, these lectures have the density and
tight construction of a text that is written to be read. They constitute a single, brilliantly sustained piece of philosophical argument in which a ‘Thomistic Aristotelian’ form of virtue ethics is developed and defended in the context of current ethical positions. Such an ethic is central to the argument of After Virtue, but what it involves is only sketchily indicated in that book: these lectures add detail and substance to the notion. There is no better account of how Aristotelian ideas can be developed and deployed in modern ethical thought.

In After Virtue, MacIntyre repudiated what he called the ‘metaphysical biology’ underlying Aristotle’s ethics. He has thought better of that now. A major theme in the present work is that we are physical, biological beings, and ethics must be grounded in our bodily, animal nature. The discussion of the issues raised by our animality is the most interesting part of the book. MacIntyre challenges the widespread and deeply rooted tendency to separate human beings from the rest of the animal world and to treat them as ‘exempt from the hazardous condition of “mere” animality’, despite the well-nigh universal theoretical acknowledgement of the truth of evolutionary theory.

This tendency is strong in both analytic and continental work. In the analytic tradition it is evident in the Davidsonian view that only human beings, as language users, can be said to have thoughts and beliefs. Heidegger arrives at a similar conclusion when he insists upon a fundamental distinction between being which is not Dasein (including animal being) and Dasein, human being, which has a ‘world’ and can apprehend something ‘as’ something. In the most closely argued part of the book, MacIntyre criticizes both sets of views. He draws on recent studies of dolphins to question the notion that there is a sharp dividing line between humans and other animals. Such animals, he argues, have many of the capacities which are at the basis of language use, and we should regard them as ‘pre-linguistic’ rather than non-linguistic creatures.

As bodily beings we are vulnerable to many kinds of afflictions, injuries and disabilities. This is the second main theme of this study. As MacIntyre observes, there is little reference to vulnerability and dependence in the history of Western philosophy, which has stressed rather the notions of human autonomy and independence. This may well be connected with the failure or refusal to acknowledge the bodily dimension of human existence. A central aim of MacIntyre’s argument is to redress this balance and to draw out the moral, social and political implications of such a changed perspective. He goes about this in Aristotelian fashion, by developing an account of the ‘virtues’, the conditions for human flourishing. ‘The virtues of rational agency need for their adequate exercise to be accompanied by what I shall call the virtues of acknowledged dependency’.

Recognition of our bodily being does not prevent MacIntyre from acknowledging that humans also differ from other animals in crucial respects. Language use gives us abilities which other animals lack; notably the ability to stand back from our desires and needs, and reflect upon and evaluate them. If we are to flourish as human beings we must develop our distinctive human capacities as rational beings. We must develop from infantile dependence and animality to become ‘independent practical reasoners’.

Language use is not the only condition needed for such development. The realization of our rational nature occurs only in and through relationship with others: with parents, teachers, and a wider network of social relationships. MacIntyre goes on to give an interesting account of the form these relationships must take if
we are to develop into independent practical reasoners. MacIntyre refers to these conditions as ‘virtues’. Though it has become fashionable again in recent years, such Aristotelian language still sounds stilted and antiquated. Nevertheless the ideas expressed by it are of great importance. They embody a naturalistic approach which, on the basis of a theory of human nature, aims to give account of the moral, social and ultimately political conditions required for human flourishing.

We all begin life as physically dependent creatures, and many of us will become so again in old age. Moreover, illness and disability are conditions which may afflict us all at any time in our lives. These facts lead MacIntyre to insist that we need patterns of social relationships of ‘giving and receiving’ which are not purely reciprocal. Parents, for example, have ‘unconditional responsibility’ for their children’s welfare. Such relationships cannot be understood as forms of market exchange, in contract theory terms (as suggested by rational choice theorists). Indeed, MacIntyre argues, the institutions of contract and free market exchange themselves presuppose prior communal understandings and practices.

The needs created by human dependency cannot be met either by the family or the state, according to MacIntyre, but just how they are to be met in the modern world is left open. At this point, his account becomes notably sketchier, vaguer and, as he puts it, ‘utopian’. Unfortunately, however, no specific ‘utopian’ suggestions are even indicated and, in this context, the phrase seems to mean little more than ‘unresolved’.

There is work still to be done here. But whether it can usefully be done by further pursuit of the sort of Aristotelian virtue ethics that MacIntyre has been developing is, it seems to me, questionable. For it is doubtful whether the forms of social and political life needed for individuals to flourish in the modern world can be specified in purely moral terms, or that they can usefully be thought of as forms of ‘virtue’ to be derived from a universal account of human nature in the Aristotelian fashion.

For example, the kinds of institutions and social relationship needed for the disabled and elderly to lead satisfactory lives in a modern capitalist society is not simply an issue about ‘virtues’, though no doubt certain social attitudes of universal human concern and care must underlie such institutions and relationships. How to realize such attitudes, however, is a social and political matter which can be decided only in the context of a specific society. In other words, this is not just a moral question; it is a matter of social policy which can be intelligently discussed only on the basis of some understanding of contemporary social and political realities. Care of the elderly and ill, which would have been the responsibility of the family in early periods (from Aristotle’s time until very recently), is now being taken over by the state. Whether or not this is a desirable development is not simply a moral issue, and to explore it properly we need to go beyond the limitations of Aristotelian ethics.

Aristotle himself was well aware of this sort of point – his Ethics leads directly into his Politics. MacIntyre’s arguments lead him in a similar direction. In the ethical sphere, MacIntyre is happy enough to recognize that Aristotle’s account of human nature needs to be supplemented with modern theories of biology, animal behaviour, psychology, and so on. It seems equally clear that Machintyre’s latter-day Aristotelianism similarly needs to be supplemented with modern social and political ideas. It is MacIntyre’s view, one suspects, that the resources for this job are best provided by Hegel and Marx; but he is reluctant to acknowledge this explicitly. These figures, it seems, are presences lurking somewhere in the background of MacIntyre’s philosophy, silently exercising an influence but seldom explicitly invoked. As this book more that ever makes clear, it is impossible to complete MacIntyre’s project of a modernized Aristotelianism without drawing on the sort of social and political theories which these figures provide.

Sean Sayers

Q&A


If you wish to become a French philosophical guru, there is, in the words of E.C. Bentley, a great deal to be said for being dead. Sarah Kofman now fulfilling this condition, the process of canonization has begun, in which this collection of essays is an important step. Two questions immediately arise. What is the exact object of the exercise? And is the subject worth it?

The answer to the first question is fairly obvious, and Enigmas makes a very good case for it. Kofman is the author of more than twenty books. Her range is impressive: there is hardly a philosopher dear to the heart of contemporary French culture, from Freud to