... but is a ... genuine event, which, however, has been indefinitely deferred.) Bennington’s precision in terms of this philosopher in the essays ‘Derrida and Politics’ (1989) and ‘An Idea of Syntax’ (2000) would be helpful here: for at least part of deconstruction’s difference to this philosopher is that in each moment of aporia, which encounters a ‘madness’ of decision, the possibility of justice is given alongside the possibility of injustice. In this complexity, deconstruction is radically political, and though politics is infinitely protracted, in the sense that it cannot be finally resolved, it does not fall simply within the terms of the Idea: although this would have to be read next to Derrida’s thoughts on the delay of thought in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003). It is also endlessly singular, so that it happens in each moment – now.

As these examples should indicate, Powell succeeds in neither speculative nor empirical terms; nor is there a productive relation between the two aspects of the book. Rather it is defined by awkward caesurae between plainly biographical and weakly critical paragraphs, between which no productive meaning emerges, synthetic, differential or otherwise. The book fails to function either as a remotely useful or accurate introduction to Derrida’s thought, or as a traditional biography that could be helpful as a basis from which to understand the world that changed around, and was changed through, deconstruction. Hence, if the publisher’s blurb refers to the ‘unnecessary apologetic tone that reveals more about the author’s milieu than Derrida’s recognized importance to the discipline of philosophy’, this recognition of Powell’s terribly limited knowledge of the state of Derrida’s position within the academy is correct. The book pitches part of its necessity in the negative response to Derrida on the part of analytic philosophers, but there is no impression of drifts, trends or conditions within the contemporary academy. And there are a number of things that the author should be very apologetic about indeed.

In addition to those things indicated, the book is made up of simple errors and badly articulated comparisons that are not clearly delimited at later points, thus demanding a great deal from the introductory reader. Some of these would require too much unpacking to explicate. For example: the central ‘philosophical’ thesis that Derrida is ‘basically Heideggerian’ and ‘basically Platonistic’. Many other errors are too numerous to catalogue here, though it might be mentioned that the trace ‘is’ Heidegger’s *Riss*, différence has a ‘true proximity’ to Lacan’s *objet petit a*, and, more horribly, the trace dismisses ‘any’ reference. While there are moments where différence is more or less adequately described, many attempts to qualify deconstructive ‘purity’ are nonsensical in their metaphysical articulation. Here, for example, différence appears, grammatically, as lack: ‘the true essence of language, *différence* (the absence within presentness)’. These are errors which have been rendered obsolete for some time and which should require no further parry. Finally, it is perhaps Powell’s own citation of Derrida’s comments on the 1993 reprint of Wolin’s Heidegger book that might best provide the reader with terms by which to ponder his contribution to Derrida scholarship: ‘Derrida called the collection of documents weak, simplistic.... It was “a bad book” “execrable.”’

*Sas Mays*

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### Shelter from the storm


These are important volumes by one of the most thought-provoking of contemporary philosophers, collecting together some of the main papers from the latest stage in MacIntyre’s long career, specifically the period 1985–99 – that is, after *After Virtue* (1981) and, as he puts it, ‘after I had recognized that my philosophical convictions had become those of a Thomist Aristotelian’. (An earlier collection, *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, appeared in 1971; *The MacIntyre Reader*, edited by Kelvin Knight, 1998, is a useful selection covering all periods of his work.) MacIntyre arrived at this conviction only after a complicated intellectual journey. He started his academic career teaching philosophy at Leeds and then Oxford. He was a member of the Communist Party in the early 1950s, but left just before Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. He flirted briefly with Trotskyism. Then he contributed to the *New Reasoner* (a precursor of *New Left Review*) and helped to create the New Left. However, he soon abandoned active involvement in left politics. After a bruising confrontation with student radicals at Essex.
University, where he had become dean in the late 1960s, he left for the USA where he has lived and worked ever since. In traversing all these different positions, what is striking is that MacIntyre has not simply repudiated his earlier views and replaced them with newer ones. He has continually incorporated insights and ideas from each so that his philosophy has been extended and enriched through the changes. The publication of *After Virtue* established him as one of the most original and influential contemporary moral and social philosophers. That book appeared to sum up his position. However, these volumes demonstrate that he is still thinking actively, and developing and changing his ideas.

The articles collected in them cover the main areas of MacIntyre’s work. This has been wide-ranging. In the first volume there are essays on the explanation of action, on the nature of truth, on problems of relativism, and on the nature of philosophy and the commitments it involves. There are also important pieces on the interpretation of the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas. One is reminded that, apart from his work in philosophy, MacIntyre has also made a major contribution in theology. There is an interesting discussion of the roles of philosophy and religious faith in an essay about a recent papal encyclical on this subject, *Fides et Ratio*. This is also one of a number of essays in volume 1 in which MacIntyre defends his Thomist reading of Aristotle. The encyclical upholds the autonomy of philosophy and MacIntyre’s Thomism is only one among the many different positions taken by contemporary Catholic philosophers. This should be known more widely. It refutes the mutterings that one hears from time to time to the effect that Catholics cannot be genuine philosophers since their commitment to the Church comes first for them. A fundamental tenet of MacIntyre’s philosophy is that theory and practice are inseparable. Values and ideas of the common good are always rooted in social practices. This approach inevitably raises problems of relativism. In the preface to the first of these volumes, MacIntyre describes how the impact of the work of Kuhn and Lakatos in the early 1970s provoked him into working out his ideas on this issue. There is a series of highly illuminating essays in the first of these volumes dealing with problems of relativism whose republication is particularly welcome.

The essays in the second volume deal mostly with issues in ethics and political philosophy. This has been the main area of MacIntyre’s work. MacIntyre is highly critical of the academicism and irrelevance of most contemporary philosophical work. What is refreshing about these pieces is MacIntyre’s engagement and commitment. Although he is not actively engaged politically, his work has little of the academic and scholastic quality which is present in so much contemporary philosophy. He is a powerful critic of modern society who wants his work to have an impact. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argued in an Aristotelian fashion that values are always rooted in social practices. In premodern society, in which there is a relatively unified and cohesive community, there are shared ideas of the common good and shared standards by which to arbitrate moral disputes. In the modern world this unity has been fragmented and destroyed. There are no longer common values and hence no basis for resolving disputes or grounding a shared idea of the common good. In these essays we can see how MacIntyre has been developing and extending these ideas. The Enlightenment, as he describes it, rejected Aristotelianism and tried to found ethics on a conception of universal reason. Such reason is supposed to provide a basis for individual autonomy and moral understanding. This is most clearly expressed in Kant’s philosophy, interestingly discussed here in the essay ‘Some Enlightenment Projects Reconsidered’. But, MacIntyre argues, the Enlightenment project has ‘failed’. The institutions which are supposed to embody the ideals of the Enlightenment – a legal system of individual rights, the free market, liberal democracy
— in fact undermine genuine liberty and democracy. In the world of the market and business, money and purely instrumental values hold sway. National politics are dominated by a powerful political elite, often subservient to corporate interests. Moreover, the reconciliation of moral disagreements is impossible because modern social life has been compartmentalized into different spheres, insulated from each other and each governed by its own social norms. In this situation rational moral discussion and debate cannot prevail.

These ideas have some similarities with Habermas’s view that in modern society public communication has been ‘systematically distorted’ and that this is destroying the possibility of rational moral deliberation. However, for Habermas (as for Kant) rationality is a universal and inherent human capacity. It is a distinctive feature and, I think, a great strength of MacIntyre’s position that he insists that reason and values are always rooted in particular social practices and institutions. We can always ask the questions ‘Whose justice? Which rationality?’ (the title of MacIntyre’s 1988 book). According to MacIntyre, rational discussion and debate can flourish only in small-scale communities, not unduly dominated by money and powerful political forces. Following Aristotle, his model is the ancient polis. In the modern world, the picture is bleak: such rational communities survive only in a few embattled groups in which ‘social relationships are informed by a shared allegiance to the goods internal to communal practices, so that the uses of power and wealth are subordinated to the achievement of those goods’. The academic world, fishing clubs and family farms are his favoured examples. I have little experience of the last two; it seems to me that he has a rather rosy view of the first. Regrettably, the influence of money and power are increasingly determining life in the academy, particularly under the impact of the RAE.

What is to be done? MacIntyre does not try to map out a way forward. However, the limitations of his Thomist Aristotelianism become evident when this question is posed. His philosophy is defiantly untimely, but is that a virtue? Even as Aristotle was writing the polis was being superseded. The scale of social organization has gone far beyond it. Though small-scale communities continue to exist, they tend increasingly to be located within a larger social context. Because of this MacIntyre is often accused of being a backward-looking and conservative thinker. He angrily rejects that criticism and recognizes an inevitability to the modern social order. However, he despairs of the possibility of significantly changing it for the better.

The only hope, he concludes, is to create and defend rational communities as enclaves, preserved and protected against the destructive forces of the capitalist market and the bourgeois nation-state.

Plato had a similarly bleak picture of the possibility of rational action in the society of his time. To portray the plight of the philosopher in an irredeemably corrupt society who cannot use his philosophy for the good, he invokes the image of a man sheltering behind a wall from a violent storm (Republic 496d). In using this image, Plato holds out the hope that the storm may abate and that philosophy may one day be influential in society. MacIntyre is more despairing. He seems to believe that the market and the corrupt politics of the nation-state are inevitably going to dominate. He has no thought of any other possibility. The storm will not abate. He dismisses his erstwhile hope that the market and the capitalist state might be restrained or even overcome in a single line: ‘Marxist politics have failed.’ And this is not replaced by any other vision. The only possibility left, it seems, is to try to preserve and protect moral values within the embattled enclaves of small rational communities. These communities may well provide a more fertile soil for the creation of shared values. However, such communities are also often limiting, stifling and oppressive. The widening out of social horizons and social relations, and the plurality of moral perspectives that have come with modernity, have been for many a liberating phenomenon that has provided greater opportunities for people to develop and flourish. A more complex picture of modernity is needed, in my view, which allows for a better recognition of the contradictory impact it has had.

For there is clearly also a negative side to modern society. The market and the state have indeed grown to be all powerful and, at the moment, there appear to be no forces capable of challenging them. The persistence of conflicts and contradictions in the world, however, give grounds for hope that this situation will not be permanent. It is true, of course, that the Communist politics of the last century ‘failed’, but the lessons to be drawn from this deserve a more complex and thoughtful response than MacIntyre seems prepared to give. Is the present state of things really the ‘end of history’, as MacIntyre seems to accept? Is MacIntyre really right to abandon all hope of radical social change? Is it not possible for us to organize our lives better than we do at present? These are some of the questions that these latest instalments of MacIntyre’s thought-provoking work raise.

Sean Sayers