An interview with Alasdair MacIntyre

Alasdair MacIntyre is the McMahon/Hank Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA. His writings in ethics, social and political philosophy, sociology, the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of religion are known to, and discussed by, an international audience. Many of his books are mentioned in the interview that follows; few readers of COGITO will have failed to read A Short History of Ethics, a book that has influenced a whole generation of students of moral philosophy. He has, remarkably, held appointments at the Universities of Manchester, Leeds, Oxford (Nuffield and University colleges), Essex, Princeton, Branders, Boston, Vanderbilt and Wellesley College before his present post at Notre Dame. His views stimulate and provoke; his ideas are widely discussed. We are pleased to welcome him to the columns of COGITO.

Cogito: We usually begin with a biographical question, and perhaps this is especially appropriate in your case, since After Virtue is so concerned with ideas of a quest and of a narrative of a life. What would you emphasize in your own ‘narrative’?

MacIntyre: Any adequate narrative of my life would have to emphasize a radical change in it around 1971. Before then I had had a number of disparate and sometimes conflicting sets of concerns and beliefs, and I was unable to move decisively towards any resolution either of the problems internal to each particular set of concerns or beliefs or of those which arose from the tensions between them. Both in political philosophy and in political practice I had learned, from Marxism, how to identify the moral impoverishment and the ideological function of liberalism. I had also learned, partly from Marxism and partly from non-Marxist sociology and anthropology, that certain older types of teleologically ordered community were incompatible with the dominant economic and social forms of modernity. But I did not as yet know how to disengage what I had learned from the erroneous and distorting theoretical frameworks, Marxist or Durkheimian, in terms of which I had formulated what I had learned. The work which issued in Secularization and Moral Change (Oxford University Press: London, 1967) had taught me that the moral presuppositions of liberal modernity, whether in its theory or in its social institutions, are inescapably hostile to Christianity and that all attempts to adapt Christianity to liberal modernity are bound to fail. But I did not as yet understand either the philosophical presuppositions of a biblical theism — bound up with the claim that this is a teleologically ordered universe — or the resources that the Catholic church has for sustaining its own form of life in antagonistic social environments. Consequently I then believed that the only versions of Christianity in which it retained its theological and religious integrity, that of Kierkegaard, for example, or Karl Barth, were philosophically indefensible.

In philosophy I had had to recognize very early that Frege and Wittgenstein had transformed our conception of what is problematic. Although I thought that I had already appreciated the truth in Professor Anscombe’s remark that investigations prompted by Frege’s and Wittgenstein’s questions ‘are more akin to ancient than to more modern philosophy’ (An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, Hutchinson: London, 1959, p.13), I was only much later beginning to understand the extent to which the inadequacies of my reading of Aristotle, inadequacies brought home to me by subsequent reflection on what I had written about ancient ethics in A Short History of Ethics
(Macmillan: New York, 1966), arose from my failure to bring Aristotle’s answers into relationship to modern questions and modern answers to Aristotle’s aporiai.

Critical reflection on the Short History also provided a better focussed view of the difficulties involved in giving a philosophical account of evaluative and normative concepts and judgments which was genuinely informed by an understanding of the range and variety of moral differences between different cultural and social orders, an account which therefore does not confuse the idiosyncratic local moral idioms of modern liberal individualism with ‘the’ language of moral evaluation.

The essays collected in Against the Self-Images of the Age (Duckworth: London, 1971) brought this period to a close. I set out to rethink the problems of ethics in a systematic way, taking seriously for the first time the possibility that the history both of modern morality and of modern moral philosophy could only be written adequately from an Aristotelian point of view. In the same period, after 1971, I had occasion to rethink the problems of rational theology, taking seriously the possibility that the history of modern secularization can only be written adequately from the standpoint of Christian theism, rather than vice versa. It was not until quite some time after I had completed After Virtue (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1981) that these two lines of enquiry finally coincided in a realization that it is from the standpoint of a Thomistic Aristotelianism which is also able to learn from modern philosophy—especially from Frege, Husserl, Wittgenstein and their critics—that the problems of philosophy, and more particularly of moral philosophy, can best be articulated. But already by 1977, when I began to write the final draft of After Virtue, I had identified in main outline the framework and central theses of my subsequent enquiries.

So my life as an academic philosopher falls into three parts. The twenty-two years from 1949, when I became a graduate student of philosophy at Manchester University, until 1971 were a period, as it now appears retrospectively, of heterogeneous, badly organized, sometimes fragmented and often frustrating and messy enquiries, from which nonetheless in the end I learned a lot. From 1971, shortly after I emigrated to the United States, until 1977 was an interim period of sometimes painfully self-critical reflection, strengthened by coming to critical terms with such very different perspectives on moral philosophy as those afforded by Davidson in one way and by Gadamer in quite another. From 1977 onwards I have been engaged in a single project to which After Virtue, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Notre Dame University Press: Notre Dame, 1988) and Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry (Notre Dame University Press: Notre Dame, 1990) are central, a project described by one of my colleagues as that of writing An Interminably Long History of Ethics.

Cogito: In fact, have you any plans to write an autobiography?

MacIntyre: Answering the previous question has already stretched my autobiographical powers to their limit. To write a worthwhile autobiography you need either the wisdom of an Augustine or the shamelessness of a Rousseau or the confidence in one’s own self-knowledge of a Collingwood. I fail in all three respects.

Cogito: After Virtue is also very much concerned with the idea of a ‘tradition’ and you
tackled this again in the Gifford Lectures you gave at the University of Edinburgh in 1987–8. Why is it so important?

**MacIntyre:** The concept of ‘tradition’ has at least three different kinds of importance. Concepts are embodied in and draw their lives from forms of social practice. To understand how a particular concept is used it has to be located in terms of the activities and norms of some form of established practice. But any practice of any importance has a history. Practices come to be, are sustained and transformed, and sometimes perish as parts of the histories of particular societies. Within such societies the normative and evaluative modes of judgment and action which inform both activity within practices and attitudes to practices have to be handed on from one generation to another. And one aspect of the social embodiment of concepts is their transmission in this way. So to abstract any type of concept, but notably moral concepts, from the contexts of the traditions which they inform and through which they are transmitted is to risk damaging misunderstandings.

Secondly, a shared ability to ask and answer together such questions as ‘What is our common inheritance from our common past?’ ‘What should we have learned from our shared experienced to value in it?’ and ‘What in it is open to criticism and requires remaking?’ is one prerequisite for the kind of social life in which the rational discussion of both ends and means, by its continuing elaboration and reformulation of some conception of a common good, provides an alternative both to the mindless conservatism of hierarchies of established power and to fragmentation through the conflicts of group interests and individual preferences, defined without reference to a common good.

Thirdly, rational enquiry is itself always tradition-dependent. The best established theories — those which it is rational to accept — in contemporary natural science are not worthy of acceptance because they conform to some timeless set of canons for scientific theories, positivist or otherwise. Rather they are worthy of acceptance because of their superiority to their immediate predecessors, in respect of providing resources for the solution of certain types of problem and remedying certain types of incoherence, in the light of some particular conception of what it would be to perfect theory in this or that area. And those predecessors in turn were related, although not in precisely the same ways, to their predecessors, and so on. The vindication of contemporary natural science turns out to be the history of that science, the retrospectively constructed history of a prospectively oriented tradition of enquiry, within which the development of the standards by which incoherence and resourcelessness are judged itself has a history. Of course traditions of rational enquiry may, like other traditions, be disrupted or fail or be displaced in various ways, as I believe the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues was.

**Cogito:** In the course of the Gifford Lectures you asked if the modern revival of Thomism had resulted in ‘too many Thomisms’. How can we distinguish controversy within a tradition from confusion and disputes not rooted in any tradition?

**MacIntyre:** Any tradition depends for its survival on retaining shared beliefs and practices sufficient for identifying common ends and for making and recognizing progress towards achieving those ends. Where there is not agreement in such identification and recognition, there may of course be forms of ad hoc cooperation, intellectual, social or whatever, derived from longer or shorter term coincidence of interests, but the necessary conditions for the survival, let alone the flourishing of a tradition will be absent. But when I raised the question “Too many Thomisms?” about the multiplicity of standpoints within Neo-Thomism, it was not because I believed that in its case these necessary conditions were lacking. What afflicted Neo-Thomism was much more mundane: too many different tasks were imposed upon it in too short a time. So at a very early stage in the Thomistic revival, Thomists were called upon to enter into a variety of philosophical and theological conflicts with different opposing views, while at the same time devising systems of instruction for a number of very different types of institution and student; yet the reappropriation of Aquinas’s work was itself still at a relatively early stage. So different and rival perspectives appeared all too soon. And it may be that in order for Thomism to recover adequately from these afflictions it
had to go out of fashion for a time, so that what has proved to be a continually deepening scholarly understanding of Aquinas could be dissociated from a variety of distorting educational tasks and polemical engagements. What has survived as a result of this respite is recognizably a tradition which is in its own terms flourishing.

Cogito: Both in After Virtue and in the Gifford Lectures one of your main complaints about modern secular liberal ethics seems to be that it does not constitute a tradition. But in Whose Justice? Which Rationality? you discuss the transformation of liberalism into a "tradition". Can you clear this up?

MacIntyre: We need to distinguish the culture of liberal individualist modernity at large from liberalism as a changing body of theory, expressing the practice of a set of theorists who have handed on, while reformulating, the doctrines of liberalism from the eighteenth century to the present. There has of course always been a close, if complex, relationship between these two, but they are not the same. Earlier liberal thinkers were avowed enemies of tradition. In 1865 Sidgwick declared to Oscar Browning, 'History will have in the future less and less influence on Politics in the most advanced countries. Principles will soon be everything and tradition nothing, except as regards its influence on the form'. This earlier liberal theorizing was the expression of modes of social, political and economic practice which in what Sidgwick called 'the most advanced countries' often enough dissolved tradition and deprived many ordinary people of its possibilities. But at the same time liberalism as theory embodied itself in a continuing and now often dominant tradition of enquiry, and recent liberal thinkers have to some degree recognized this. So there is no basic incompatibility between the account of the anti-traditional character of liberal culture in After Virtue and in my Gifford Lectures and the account of the development and nature of the liberal intellectual tradition as a tradition in Whose Justice? Which Rationality? But I would have done better to make clear the relationship between these.

Cogito: In your work you very much weave philosophy, sociology, history and literature together. Indeed, another of your basic complaints about modern ethics seems to be that it is so relentlessly abstract, as if philosophy can declare its independence from the world and get to and from first principles in a realm of pure, universal reason. But if there is a liberalism, that you criticize, of this highly rationalist, Kantian kind, do you not tend to overlook (like modern 'rationalists') a liberal tradition in which philosophy, sociology and history are interwoven? As, for example, in the Scottish Enlightenment, or in the work of Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Durkheim.

MacIntyre: The problem with trying to combine a sociological understanding of modernity with liberalism is that what the modern world has realized are the worst fears of the Scottish Enlightenment rather than its best hopes. What we confront in advanced societies is the conjunction of an excluded and dependent cultural proletariat with a set of overlapping elites who control the presentation of political choice, the manipulation of economic organization, the legal structures and the flow of information. Instead of that ever widening educated public of the democratic intellect, who were the intended
beneficiaries of those who understood the distinctive merits of the Scottish universities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—George Elder Davie has written their history in *The Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1961) and *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (Polygon Books: Edinburgh, 1986), two books which should be compulsory reading for every newly appointed university teacher in Britain—we have the mass semi-literacy of television audiences.

Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith both had their apprehensions about the moral effects of modern social and economic modes. Both also thought, however, that there were stronger grounds for optimism than for pessimism. But their pessimism—limited in Smith's case, less limited in Ferguson's—has turned out to be foresight.

Cogito: You argue that philosophical and ethical inquiry must be within a tradition. Many worry that this is a receipt for relativism, and you devote the last three chapters of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* to explaining why it is not. Is it possible for you to sum up here what is so wrong with relativism and why your view of philosophical and ethical inquiry does not lead to it?

MacIntyre: Those who impute relativism to me have, I suspect, both misunderstood my position and misunderstood relativism. Let me begin with the latter. The mistake in many versions of relativism is to take the argument one or two steps beyond what the relativist needs to make her or his crucial point. That crucial point is that there exist a number of culturally embodied systems of thought and action, each with its own standards of practical reasoning and evaluation. Some of these are such that not only do their adherents arrive at evaluative and normative conclusions which are incompatible with those of the adherents of some other such systems, but their standards of reasoning are such that from the standpoint of each contending party the reasoning of the other must be judged unsound. The relativist then further observes that in relation to some of these rival contending systems the system of thought and action which she or he espouses is in no different a position. It is up to this point that I agree with the relativist. Where then do I disagree?

Relativists universally proceed one stage in the argument beyond this and characteristically two stages. In neither do I accompany them. The first stage is that of supposing that somehow or other these conclusions about the multiplicity of concrete modes of reasoning and of modes of justification for evaluative and normative conclusions provide grounds for putting in question and altering one's view of the justification of one's own reasoning and conclusions. The second is that of supposing that the same considerations should lead to a rejection of the claims of any substantive conception of truth. Neither of these stages in the relativist argument is justified and it is of course only by having pursued the argument to this unwarranted point that the relativist lays her or himself open to those types of self-referential refutation which have so often been deployed against relativism.

Cogito: There are so many other questions we could ask about your work, whether relatively detailed and concerning, e.g. your interesting idea of a practice, or more general and concerning, e.g. your contribution to the revival of Aristotle and 'virtue ethics'. Can you offer a question of your own and answer it?

MacIntyre: The question which is perhaps the most important that you could put to me is that of how the concept of a practice must be further developed, if it is to be as philosophically fruitful as I hope that it may be. In *After Virtue* I provided a general characterization of practices and I gestured towards some examples. But a great deal more needs to be said, more particularly in order to throw light on how evaluative concepts and normative concepts have application. Consider how, within the context of at least certain types of practice, shared standards of success and failure make the application of such concepts relatively unproblematic, as, for example, among the crews of a fishing fleet. Their standards of success and failure are set by shared goals: to secure a large enough catch between spring and fall to ensure a reasonable income for the whole year; not to overfish the accessible fishing grounds, so as to deprive themselves of their livelihood; not to lose their lives or their boats or their nets; to be able by doing these things to sustain the lives of their families.

Two kinds of shared achievement provide the goods internal to this type of practice: that
which belongs to the attainment of excellence in the cooperative activity of fishing, the excellence or lack of it of each crew member in playing her or his part contributing to the excellence or lack of it of the whole crew, and that which belongs to the excellence attained in sustaining the lives of the households from which the crew members came and to which they return. The range of uses of ‘good’ and cognate expressions will be intelligible in terms of the structures of activity of the crew and the household. To be good at this or that aspect of the tasks of fishing requires skills whose utility depend on qualities of character and mind in those who use them, qualities which generally and characteristically enable their possessor, by doing what is required of them on the right occasions, to achieve the goods of both crew and household, for the sake of which all else is done. So ‘good at’, ‘good for’, the virtue words, the expressions which appraise performance of duty, and ‘good for its own sake’ are at once socially and semantically ordered. And the next philosophical task is to spell out these related orderings.

When ‘good’ and its cognates are used intelligibly outside the context of particular practices, it is a presupposition of their use — an Aristotelian presupposition — that human societies as wholes are ordered as practices, wholes of which particular practices, such as fishing or philosophy or cricket, are constituent parts. And here again the ordering of the uses of ‘good’, as these are socially and semantically structured, is a philosophically urgent task. When by contrast ‘good’ and its cognates are abstracted from any such context, either theoretically or practically, characteristically in social orders in which practice-based relationships have been marginalized, so that the use of such expressions has to change, they inevitably degenerate into what appear to some as no more than generalized expressions of approval, voicing either what we feel or what we want to feel, and to others as naming peculiar properties, perhaps in virtue of some relationship of supervenience. So philosophical controversies between moral realists and moral anti-realists are themselves perhaps symptomatic of a particular type of social condition.

To have understood this, of course, is no more than to have learned how to go back to the beginning in enquiries about good and ‘good’.

Cogito: Cogito has a special interest in the development of philosophy teaching in schools. American schools seem, in this matter, to be much further forward than those in the United Kingdom. Do you think there is a strong case to be made for teaching philosophy in schools? How would you state it?

MacIntyre: Introducing philosophy into schools will certainly do no more harm that has been done by introducing sociology or economics or other subjects with which the curriculum has been burdened. But what we need in schools are fewer subjects not more, so that far greater depth can be acquired. And philosophical depth depends in key part on having learned a great deal in other disciplines. What every child needs is a lot of history and a lot of mathematics, including both the calculus and statistics, some experimental physics and observational astronomy, a reading knowledge of Greek, sufficient to read Homer or the New Testament, and if English-speaking, a speaking knowledge of a modern language other than English, and great quantities of English literature, especially Shakespeare. Time also has to be there for music and art. Philosophy should only be introduced at the undergraduate level. And then at least one philosophy course and, more adequately two, should be required of every undergraduate. Of course an education of this kind would require a major shift in our resources and priorities, and, if successful, it would produce in our students habits of mind which would unfit them for the contemporary world. But to unfit our students for the contemporary world ought in any case to be one of our educational aims.

Cogito: When, perhaps in rare moments, you are away from philosophy, which books do you read? Could you tell us of some books that have been/are of importance to you?

MacIntyre: It is not always as easy as one might think to tell the difference between when in one’s reading one is reading philosophy and when one is not. So I leave out the clearly borderline cases, such as Dante, Jane Austen, Dostoevski, Kafka and Borges, including only among books that I have read every twenty years or so: Redgauntlet, Women in Love, To the Lighthouse, among books that I
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have read more often: Ulysses, Finnegan's Wake, Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds, short stories by Flannery O'Connor, Peter Taylor and Máirtín O'Cadhain; among books without which I might well not have lasted out the last twenty years: Saichi Maruya's Singular Rebellion, Randal Jarrell's Pictures from an Institution, Robertson Davies's Rebel Angels, Patrick McGinley's Bogmail; among what I hope still be be reading twenty years from now: The Táin Bó Cuailnge, Eileen O'Connell's lament for Art O'Leary, Akhmatova's 'Poem without a Hero', the poetry of George Campbell Hay, Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith and Máirtín O'Díreáin; and of course a perpetual low-life diet of Raymond Chandler, Philip K. Dick, etc, etc, although perhaps reading them is still reading philosophy.

They're trying to get rid of me

C.J.F. WILLIAMS

COGITO is pleased to publish in full the inaugural lecture of Professor Christopher Williams, recently delivered at the University of Bristol

I

Paranoia on the part of a philosopher will surprise no one who has been paying attention to the recent history of higher education in this country. Since 1979 the number of people teaching philosophy at British universities has declined by a third. Seven philosophy departments have been closed. Recruitment to the profession dried up almost completely until a year or two ago.

Bristol University has been more kind to its Philosophy Department, as the present occasion bears witness. But memories of previous dissolutions give us pause. Like the dissolvers of the monasteries, the destroyers began with the small and helpless. No doubt the smaller houses whose dissolution began in 1537 were told that their size made them 'non-viable'. Their larger sisters had not long to wait before the charge of uselessness was brought against them all. The axeman who began at Maiden Bradley Priory did not take long to reach Glastonbury Abbey. Will it take much longer for today's vandals to conclude at the University of Oxford what they began at the University of Surrey?

It is customary when a new professor is succeeding someone in an established chair for her to say a few words to honour her predecessor. Sometimes that predecessor has died suddenly in the prime of life, and the commemoration is the more poignant. That is