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## Whose Aristotelianism? MacIntyre, Neo-Aristotelianism, and Morality

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**Abstract.** MacIntyre explores in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* the relation between desire, objects and reasons, the character of practical reasoners, the virtues, and the relation between goods and the final end in order to argue for a particular conception of a well-lived life, one that is, broadly speaking, grounded on Aristotelianism. But there are varieties of approaches that invoke the authority of Aristotle, and there are often substantial differences between them. What constitutes Aristotelianism of the sort that supports MacIntyre's conclusions? If MacIntyre is right in his cultural diagnosis, any purported NeoAristotelianism in the thrall of what MacIntyre names 'Morality' represents not a new branch jutting out from the Aristotelian trunk, but rather a severed limb grafted onto an altogether different tree. In this article I explore ten criteria by means of which one can determine to which tree a given version of NeoAristotelianism belongs.

A central drama in MacIntyre's reflections on practical rationality in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* concerns the possibility of conversion in one's course of life. Two modes of practical rationality are explored as the poles between which one's way of living might shift. One is the dominant, rational-maximizing-of-preference one that gives expression to the reigning ethics of modernity which MacIntyre identifies as Morality;<sup>1</sup> and the other is focused on a consideration of goods, their rank-order, and the common good. The latter he identifies as Neo-Aristotelian,<sup>2</sup> and it is the

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<sup>1</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 64-65, for a specification of Morality.

<sup>2</sup> Or, in some places, as Thomistic Aristotelianism. See MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 166.

latter that entails reflection on character and the virtues interwoven with a narrative view of life. MacIntyre's readers, to the extent that we are at least partially under the sway of Morality, are in different ways adherents of both these modes of practical rationality. Some of us are more firmly settled in the dominant mode, others identify as Aristotelians of one stripe or another but may be lacking in conviction or the persuasive powers needed to convince others. All are in some measure, perhaps just implicitly, participants in the Aristotelian mode insofar as it represents the philosophical actualization of our natural inheritance. We learn from MacIntyre that we are often confused, but not irredeemably so. What sustains MacIntyre's case in favor of the Neo-Aristotelian mode of practical rationality is the hope that the dominant and perverse mode of rationality, and the shallow view of human life and purpose entailed by it, can be rooted out and replaced with an account of thinking and acting that befits our nature. The four lives MacIntyre reflects upon in his last chapter give substance to that hope.

MacIntyre's appeal to the Aristotelian in each of us proceeds in stages, each with greater levels of sophistication. He needs to show that desire is properly gauged by goods, rather than preferences, and that goods are subject to rank ordering by correct reasoning; and that for reasoning to be correct one needs the virtues as well as an account of the overarching good of life that is not in competition with any particular goods. MacIntyre is most detailed with respect to the basic features of the Aristotelianism he defends in his extended response to Bernard Williams in the fourth chapter.<sup>3</sup> These efforts lead him to summarize the main argument of his book in this way:

'It is that agents do well only if and when they act to satisfy only those desires whose objects they have good reason to desire, that only agents who are sound and effective practical reasoners so act, that such agents must be disposed to act as the virtues require, and that such agents will be directed in their actions toward the achievement of their final end'.<sup>4</sup>

These four claims — about the relation between desire, objects and reasons; about the character of practical reasoners; about the virtues; and

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<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 220-231.

<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 243.

about the relation between goods and the final end—are interdependent and, taken as a whole, constitutive of the basic requirements of a life well-lived. MacIntyre argues that these claims are grounded by Neo-Aristotelianism. What I hope to provide in what follows is some detail regarding what constitutes Aristotelianism of the sort that supports MacIntyre’s conclusion, as well as some means by which to distinguish between Aristotelianisms that are and those that are not up to that task. If MacIntyre is right in his cultural diagnosis, any purported Neo-Aristotelianism in the thrall of Morality represents not a new branch jutting out from the Aristotelian trunk, but rather a severed limb grafted onto a different tree. The criteria I provide below can be thought of as touchpoints to determine to which tree a given approach to moral philosophy, whether it calls itself Aristotelian or not, belongs.

One area in contemporary moral philosophy that is generally regarded as an Aristotelian revival, and so chocked full of Aristotelians, is virtue ethics. Upon closer inspection, such a reputation is undeserved.<sup>5</sup> Though there are a number of things written about contemporary virtue ethics that lead one to think it to be a revival of Aristotle’s ethics, a reading of the texts that constitute the movement make it clear that, whether considered on the level of the movement itself or with respect to some of its more Aristotelian leaning authors, it is not.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is in large part another instance of what Anscombe characterizes as ‘modern moral

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<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse is arguably the most prominent of the contemporary mainstream virtue ethicists. Here is how she describes the Aristotelianism of her approach: ‘The particular version of virtue ethics I detail and discuss in this book is of a more general kind known as “neo-Aristotelian.” The general kind is “neo” for at least the reason I noted above, that its proponents allow themselves to regard Aristotle as just plain wrong on slaves and women, and also because we do not restrict ourselves to Aristotle’s list of virtues. (Charity or benevolence, for example, is not an Aristotelian virtue, but all virtue ethicists assume it is on the list now.) It is ‘Aristotelian’ in so far as it aims to stick pretty close to his ethical writings wherever else it can’. (Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 8). An Aristotelian interpretation of Hursthouse’s book reveals it to be a more significant departure from Aristotle’s ethical writings than the quotation above suggests.

<sup>6</sup> See Sarah Conly, ‘Flourishing and the Failure of the Ethics of Virtue’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1998): 83-96; Martha Nussbaum, ‘Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?’ *Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 163-201; and David Solomon, ‘Virtue Ethics: Radical or Routine?’ in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, edited by Michael Depaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003): 57-80.

philosophy,<sup>7</sup> and what MacIntyre calls Morality.<sup>8</sup> These claims about contemporary virtue ethics may seem surprising given some narratives regarding the movement, and one would need to interpret with care the works of leaders in that movement to justify them. That interpretative and argumentative work can be found in the first half of my *Before Virtue: Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics*.<sup>9</sup> The focus for this short piece must remain on what constitutes Aristotelianism, but it will be instructive to consider examples from the literature of mainstream contemporary virtue ethics to emphasize the significance of clarifying what is meant by Aristotelianism. Does it make sense to distinguish between being more or less sufficiently Aristotelian? What is it to be sufficiently Aristotelian?<sup>10</sup> How does one measure such a thing, who is the arbiter for such a judgment, and why does this matter for contemporary debates in moral philosophy? One way to articulate what constitutes a particular school of philosophy is to identify and explain its basic principles. These can then be used as standards for evaluation when reflecting on other approaches to philosophy. Such a method does not yield a comprehensive account of the school of thought—in this case of Aristotelianism. Nonetheless, this method can be a significant contribution to a comprehensive account in addition to being an effective guide for sorting different approaches to philosophy, particularly those approaches that are more rather than less similar to each other.

There are at least ten features of Aristotelian ethics, and in the case of each the failure to embrace it in some serious manner, though a manner that varies significantly from one adherent to the next,<sup>11</sup> is tantamount to

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<sup>7</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1-19. On the irony of virtue ethics' developmental diversion from Anscombe, see Christopher Miles Coope, 'Modern Virtue Ethics', in *Values and Virtues: Aristotelianism in Contemporary Ethics*, ed. Timothy Chappell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006): 20-52.

<sup>8</sup> MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 64-69.

<sup>9</sup> Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> MacIntyre's own profession of Aristotelianism, and particularly Thomistic Aristotelianism, has been questioned on a number of occasions. See again Martha Nussbaum's 'Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?' where she classes MacIntyre together with Bernard Williams as a Humean non-admirer of Aristotle; as well as 'Non-Relative Virtues: Aristotelian Approach', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1998): 32-53, where she characterizes MacIntyre as non-Aristotelian because of his purported ethical relativism. See also John Haldane's 'MacIntyre's Thomist Revival: What Next?' in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, edited by John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994): 91-107.

<sup>11</sup> In the case of each of these ten principles there are, naturally, significant debates about what exactly Aristotle means in the relevant texts. I certainly do not take myself as settling anything about those debates

putting oneself at odds with Aristotelianism.<sup>12</sup> The principles I will briefly explore in what follows are these:

- (1) Aristotelian ethics does not recognize a special sphere of human action as moral;
- (2) Aristotelian ethics sees happiness as our ultimate end and insists that it is the activity of virtue;
- (3) Aristotelian ethics insists that practical wisdom is a virtue and is necessary for directing the virtuous to right action;
- (4) Aristotelian ethics insists it is impossible, with the exception of *technê*, to exercise a virtue wrongly;
- (5) Aristotelian ethics is non-consequentialist (in the Anscombean sense) precisely because it recognizes there to be exceptionless norms;
- (6) Aristotelian ethics cannot regard a 'selfless' and generic benevolence as a virtue;
- (7) Aristotelian ethics recognizes that to be human is to be communal;
- (8) Aristotelian ethics regards justice as a virtue that is intelligible and indispensable;
- (9) Aristotelian ethics makes friendship thematically central;
- (10) Aristotelian ethics insists upon the paramount importance of the virtue of contemplative wisdom and its best activity as tantamount to our highest fulfilment

There may be more principles than these that are necessary, but I do think that, taken together, this list of principles of Aristotelian ethics is sufficient for establishing an approach to moral philosophy as Aristotelian in just that way as to be able to provide the philosophical underpinnings to the four-part conclusion regarding desire, objects of desire, good practical reasons, the virtues, and the end of life that MacIntyre defends in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.

Is an Aristotelian in the areas of ethics and politics necessarily an Aristotelian in areas of natural philosophy, epistemology and ontology?<sup>13</sup>

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here. My articulations of these principles are general enough, I hope, as to side step the very important debates that arise when one starts moving through the weeds.

<sup>12</sup> I articulate these principles, in a different order, with more detail, and with some different arguments in *Before Virtue: Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 151-180.

<sup>13</sup> Famously, MacIntyre in *After Virtue* rejects what he characterizes as Aristotle's 'metaphysical biology' (*After Virtue*, Second Edition (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 196-7). Biology is second rather than first philosophy, and therefore not metaphysical according to the Aristotelian division of the sciences, so it is not clear what exactly MacIntyre may have meant by this phrase. What is clear is that MacIntyre corrects his earlier interpretation and shows the indispensability of many of Aristotle's natural

I think there is no way to hold what an Aristotelian needs to about desire and our final good, or about our political nature and the ways in which the virtue of justice perfects us, without adhering to identifiably Aristotelian principles in natural philosophy—such as that we have a *telos* which is an expression of a common human *ergon*; or, in epistemology, such as that our senses are actualized by their objects and knowing is a matter of becoming what one knows according to the mode of the knower; or, in ontology, such as that being is not univocal so that our existing as human is one thing and actualizing or failing to actualize our potential another. These are principles without which one cannot make sufficient sense of Aristotelian ethics. But defending them as such is unnecessary for making a number of claims, not about Aristotelianism as a whole, but rather about Aristotelian ethics. Finally, in articulating the following criteria as constituting a sort of standard by means of which to ascertain whether an approach really is Aristotelian, or, let us say, Aristotelian in a sufficiently thick manner, it is not enough simply to point to the importance of these criteria in Aristotle's own ethical writings, but one needs to make some case for why a contemporary Aristotelian ought to want to see this or that principle as an active feature of his or her approach to moral philosophy.

Each of the principles of Aristotelian ethics articulated below are thrown in finer relief when compared against certain features of Morality,<sup>14</sup> and perhaps this is nowhere else more clearly the case than in this first principle: *(I) Aristotelian ethics does not recognize a special sphere of human action as moral.* For Aristotle, as for Plato, and as for later Aristotelians such as Aquinas, ethics is concerned with the whole of human life, not some particular sphere of special occasion. Rather, whenever we deliberate—and we deliberate about everything we choose, and every human action is an expression of choice—we are in the realm of

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philosophical principles for ethical reflection in *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Paul Carus Lecture Series 20 (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> MacIntyre lists six characteristics of Morality within *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* at 115-116. In sum, they are: 1. Secularity, with no appeal to the divine; 2. Universally binding precepts; 3. Precepts whose function is to constrain individuals in such a way as to make it seem that following Morality is often contrary to one's own interests and desires; 4. Highly abstract formulations and an extremely thin conception of human beings as mere rational agents with general rights and duties; 5. A conceit that Morality is superior to all moralities; 6. A tendency to think one is in some dilemma or other and to focus on dilemmas as the touchstones of moral reflection.

the ethical. The ethical, in other words, reaches just as far as practical rationality does; it is, in fact, identical to it. Aristotle remarks, 'Hence choice is either desiderative thought or intellectual desire, and such an origin (*archê*) of action is man'.<sup>15</sup> The prescription of some special sphere for properly moral thinking, set apart from the rest of one's considerations, is a chief symptom of modern moral philosophy, and one finds it entrenched not just in deontological and utilitarian modes of moral discourse, but in the virtue ethical as well. This is evidenced in the work of such figures as Rosalind Hursthouse, Karen Stohr and Michael Slote,<sup>16</sup> who position virtue ethics as providing a more successful framework than its utilitarian or deontological rivals for answering the central questions of modern moral philosophy.<sup>17</sup> By playing by Morality's terms in taking its central preoccupations to be one's own, the game is already lost.<sup>18</sup> What is better is simply not to play that game at all. What one loses when narrowing ethical reflection to a particular sphere within one's whole life is the disposition to see one's life as a unified whole in which every feature of it is part and parcel to the overarching effort to live well.

MacIntyre pursues a rich account of happiness in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, providing an extensive defense of this next criterion: (2) *Aristotelian ethics sees happiness as our ultimate end and insists that it is the activity of virtue*. MacIntyre reveals several of the central inadequacies of the preference-satisfaction model of happiness that fail to account for whether satisfaction with certain desires and their objects are in fact good.<sup>19</sup> There is a notion of happiness, of our overarching good, that does not compete with other goods we seek. Happiness understood as our overarching good is that which Aristotle, in his two main ethical works, seeks to define. Aristotle deploys an account of the virtues, an account that is drawn from his immediate culture, and

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<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. W.D. Ross, in the *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984), VI 2, 1139<sup>b</sup>4-5.

<sup>16</sup> See David Copp and David Sobel's 'Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics', *Ethics* 114 (2004): 514-54.

<sup>17</sup> Consider Rosalind Hursthouse's entry, 'Virtue Ethics', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which is framed in just this manner.

<sup>18</sup> David Solomon is especially instructive on this point in his "Virtue Ethics: Radical or Routine?" in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, edited by Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 57-80.

<sup>19</sup> MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 196-202.



so is in its general features ready to hand, in order to pursue that definition. Happiness is defined in terms of the virtues, not vice versa. In contrast, the common approach in the contemporary mainstream literature of virtue ethics is to seek to define what the virtues are on the basis of a given account of happiness.<sup>20</sup> There is also a tendency in that literature to emphasize ‘being’ as opposed to ‘doing’, such that the goal of one’s life is the construction and maintenance of a good character.<sup>21</sup> Of course, Aristotelian ethics provides a focus on the development of one’s character, but it is in the service of a fully flourishing life that is necessarily a fully active and actualized life:

‘With those who identify happiness with excellence or some one excellence our account is in harmony; for to excellence belongs activity in accordance with excellence. But it makes, perhaps, no small difference whether we place the chief good in possession or in use, in state, or in activity. For the state may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive, but the activity cannot; for one who has the activity will of necessity be acting, and acting well. And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act rightly win the noble and good things in life’.<sup>22</sup>

It is virtuous activity, not possession of things or the satisfaction of other preferences, that is constitutive of happiness. Many contemporary virtue ethicists are rightly careful to distinguish the Aristotelian account of happiness from the utilitarian one that is dominant in our culture.<sup>23</sup> Aristotle’s emphasis on happiness as the activity, as opposed to the possession, of virtue is not as widely appreciated.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Peter Simpson presses this case in ‘Contemporary Virtue Ethics and Aristotle’, *Review of Metaphysics* 45 (1992): 503-24.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Daniel Statman’s introduction to the anthology he edited, *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997): ‘Only since the 1980s has the meaning of VE become more or less fixed. It now refers to a rather new (or renewed) approach to ethics, according to which *the basic judgments in ethics are judgments about character*’ (7, his emphasis).

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *NE* 1 8, 1098<sup>b</sup>30-1099<sup>a</sup>5.

<sup>23</sup> Hursthouse marks the difference as that between an objective Aristotelian notion and other approaches with a subjective stress on contentment (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 10). It is notable that Hursthouse characterizes her position on happiness as a version of enlightened self-interest (Ibid., 190-191). See also Julia Annas, ‘Virtue and Eudaimonism,’ *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998): 37-55, for an extended reflection on differences between various accounts of happiness.

<sup>24</sup> See Eugene Garver’s reflections on act, potency, happiness and other key terms of what he describes as the ethical dimensions of Aristotle’s metaphysics in his *Confronting Aristotle’s Ethics: Ancient and Modern Morality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 164-188.

I have often noticed undergraduate students who, when reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* for the first time, are surprised to hear of a class of virtues proper to the intellect. In contemporary English, to speak of ‘the virtues’ is often to imply only the moral virtues. ‘Knowledge’ we tend to think of in terms of being in possession of some sort of information or other, rather than as being a good habit of the mind. But of course, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, crafts and prudence really are perfections of a person. And yet, and perhaps not surprisingly given the dominance of the knowledge-as-information model, there are Aristotelian inspired moral philosophers who ignore the intellectual virtues,<sup>25</sup> and others who fail to recognize the central role that one of those virtues, *phronêsis* (alternatively called prudence or practical wisdom), necessarily plays in living well. Nevertheless, (3) *Aristotelian ethics insists that practical wisdom is a virtue and is necessary for directing the virtuous to right action*. Much of MacIntyre’s work in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* and elsewhere has sought to explore the workings and refinements of practical rationality with the effect of clarifying just what is entailed by the virtue of practical wisdom. Daniel Russell has similarly done much to emphasize the significance of prudence and to explain it and its relation to the other virtues in his manuscript, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, he notes the ways in which his own approach differs from the trend in the contemporary mainstream literature of virtue ethics—such as in thinkers as diverse as Christine Swanton, Robert M. Adams, Michael Slote and Julia Driver—to fail to recognize the indispensable significance of practical wisdom.<sup>27</sup> Some seek to replace it with rules, others with exemplars, and still others with intuitions. Still others see it as needed only on occasion, in those special circumstances of

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<sup>25</sup> See Gerasimos X. Santas, ‘Does Aristotle Have a Virtue Ethics?’ *Philosophical Inquiry* 15 (1993): 1-32.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Russell writes: ‘My view therefore stands in stark contrast to the trend toward increasing indifference to the notion of phronesis in recent thought about the virtues of character. Some virtue theorists argue that phronesis is important for some virtues, but certainly not all (Swanton 2003); others that while phronesis is part of the virtues, this requirement is soft enough that even the ‘kindheartedness’ of an ‘impercipient’ person, fragmentary and deficient in phronesis, still counts as a virtue (Adams, 187); others that phronesis and even deliberation are unnecessary if one’s motives are virtuous in a ‘balanced’ way (Slote 2001); and yet others that the virtues require no particular underlying psychological attributes at all, much less phronesis (Driver 2001)’. (*Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, xi).

life when specifically moral choices are in the balance. But there are no practical circumstances where prudence is not required.

One consequence of this indifference to the signal importance of *phronêsis* is to fail to appreciate a fourth criterion: ( $\neq$ ) *Aristotelian ethics insists it is impossible, with the exception of technê, to exercise a virtue wrongly*. Virtues, Aristotle argues, make us good, and our actions done well.<sup>28</sup> The moral virtues, perfective of our passions as well as our actions, are mutually dependent on *phronêsis*, such that one cannot be practically wise without the moral virtues and one cannot be morally virtuous without *phronêsis*.<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, and indeed Aquinas's, clarity on the point that there is no way to misuse a virtue is a large part of the reason that they made no provision for what Hursthouse has described, with great subtlety and precision, as tragic dilemmas, in which a virtuous agent cannot but do what would typically be regarded as vicious and ignoble.<sup>30</sup> Though there are difficult choices to make, and situations that might be described as tragic, as an Aristotelian, one ought to argue that there are no tragic dilemmas in the strict sense. This is so because there is no virtuous way to commit adultery, or to murder, or to steal, nor is one ever forced to commit a shameless act.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, in some circles in which Aristotelianism is said to be revived, it has become commonplace to speak of virtues being 'used' on occasion for bad ends. Gabrielle Taylor, for instance, argues in *Deadly Vices*, that one can be wickedly courageous, prudent, patient and self-controlled.<sup>32</sup> But in fact, what an Aristotelian ought to argue is that what looks like wicked prudence is cleverness, and what looks like wicked courage is one of the five varieties of pseudo courage that Aristotle examines in the third book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>33</sup> It is not altogether clear why such a core principle in Aristotelian ethics came to be abandoned in some varieties of Neo-Aristotelianism, but it is clear that it has been. It is also clear that thinking one can act virtuously for bad ends is related to thinking that there are occasions when it is right to do what is always regarded as wrong. That is to say, we find in some strands of

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<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *NE* II 6, 1106<sup>a</sup>15-23.

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *NE* VI 13, 1144<sup>b</sup>30-1145<sup>a</sup>2.

<sup>30</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 74.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *NE* II 6, 1107<sup>a</sup>9-26.

<sup>32</sup> Gabrielle Taylor, *Deadly Vices* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), see esp. 126.

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle *NE* III 8, 1116<sup>a</sup>16-1117<sup>a</sup>27.

contemporary Aristotelianism an embrace of just that consequentialism that Anscombe identifies, names and dismisses in 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.

Given the abandonment of moral absolutes in some of the contemporary mainstream literature of virtue ethics, it is a great irony that the contemporary philosopher most often heralded for reviving an Aristotelian approach to ethics that comes to call itself virtue ethics, coins the term 'consequentialist' in her fierce attack on all approaches that fail to recognize that there are certain courses of action that must never be entertained. In point of fact, Elizabeth Anscombe does both of these things in the same article, the landmark 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.<sup>34</sup> In this essay, Anscombe notices very little difference between the many varieties of modern moral philosophy, for all are willing to abandon, under certain conditions, what every ethic worthy of that name considers forbidden; that is, they seek to find exceptions for what used to be considered out of bounds by means of some exceptionless norm. She gives the example of the judicial execution of an innocent man, but examples abound. They abound even in some of the works of those contemporary Aristotelian ethicists, such as Philippa Foot, who had relatively close relationships with Anscombe and was among those who count themselves inspired by her. It is, after all, Philippa Foot who gives us the Trolley Problem.<sup>35</sup> Hursthouse treats the issue of consequentialism with care, and aims to correct what she describes as a misperception that virtue ethics dispenses with moral absolutes.<sup>36</sup> In her treatment of tragic dilemmas in *On Virtue Ethics*,<sup>37</sup> there are, she argues, certain scenarios in which a virtuous agent cannot act virtuously. There are, moreover, occasions when lying or killing can be what the virtuous agent might need to do, depending on the circumstances.<sup>38</sup> It is my position that allowing for such occasions

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<sup>34</sup> *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1-19.

<sup>35</sup> Originally given in Foot's 'The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect', *Oxford Review*, 5 (1967); and then included in *Virtue and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

<sup>36</sup> See Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, chapter 3, especially 83-87.

<sup>38</sup> For instances, see Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991): 223-46 (for a discussion of the circumstances in which Hursthouse argues abortion may be justified, see 236-242); also, 'Discussing Dilemmas', *Christian Bioethics* 14 (2008): 141-50, where Hursthouse writes, 'One need not share her [Anscombe's] belief that lying is always a sin, nor her belief that God's Providence

results in a consequentialism, albeit a subtle one.<sup>39</sup> Be that as it may, (5) *Aristotelian ethics is non-consequentialist (in the Anscombean sense) precisely because it recognizes there to be exceptionless norms.* This is certainly more clearly the case in Thomistic Aristotelianism than in Aristotle, but it is clear enough in Aristotle. MacIntyre argues that the contemporary obsession with approaching ethics through difficult cases and dilemmas is a result of a failure to recognize the significance of a narrative account of human life as essential to ethical reflection. In the four narratives MacIntyre provides in the last chapter of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, one finds the narrative subjects learning from their mistakes as an essential element in their progress towards happiness. One must first acknowledge a mistake as a mistake, as a failure in prudence and some one or more of the other virtues, in order to learn from it and move forward. When it comes to serious wrongdoing, such mistakes are known to be mistakes because they are in violation of moral absolutes. Exceptionless norms establish the parameters for one's life as narrative, much as the rules of grammar set conditions for any novel. Consequentialism betrays fundamental precepts of the natural law, precepts that we know to be true through reflecting on them. One way to appreciate that betrayal is to see how it cuts short a life's narrative by rationalizing fundamental errors as unavoidable and justifiable. However, growth in the virtues and towards our ultimate good of happiness requires, among other things, honesty about our wrongdoing.

Within Kantian, utilitarian, and contractarian inspired approaches to ethics we expect appeals to general rules for human beings as such, abstracted from any particulars, exhortations to do only what is universalizable, or for the greatest benefit of the greatest number, or what we would choose to do if behind a veil of ignorance. These appeals are often appeals to benevolence. Such appeals to benevolence are also commonplace among some varieties of Neo-Aristotelians, such as with Rosalind Hursthouse, who when describing her approach to virtue ethics as a faithful expansion to Aristotle's gives an example of one point of such

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ensures that an agent will be confronted with a forced choice between forbidden acts only through previous wrongdoing of his own, to accept her point. I do not believe either'. (143).

<sup>39</sup> *Before Virtue: Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics*, 75-80

expansion in stating that, ‘Charity or benevolence, . . . , is not an Aristotelian virtue, but all virtue ethicists assume it is on the list now’.<sup>40</sup> One wonders, naturally, whether *all* virtue ethicists count benevolence, which she treats as synonymous with charity, as a virtue, but we ought also to wonder what exactly Hursthouse takes this supposed virtue to be. It is clear from her examples, as it is from the examples provided by others working in a similar vein,<sup>41</sup> that charity or benevolence as it has come to be regarded is not only not held by Aristotle to be a virtue, but that an Aristotelian of the Thomistic sort would find the contemporary notion incoherent.<sup>42</sup> The notion as found in Hursthouse or Slote is not grounded on love of God, or a God who is love, or even on the perception of individuals as the objects of one’s good will and desire for unity. It is rather connected in an intimate manner to the emergence of the distinction between altruism and selfishness that MacIntyre notes as one of the features of Morality.<sup>43</sup> Benevolence as it is treated in the literature of contemporary virtue ethics is a habit or even mere sentiment that wishes good to others,<sup>44</sup> sometimes without regard to self and other times along the lines of a rule consequentialism.<sup>45</sup>

Aquinas, on the other hand, treats charity as a kind of friendship born from God’s love for us, a friendship through which we are able to love God and then neighbor.<sup>46</sup> It is inspired both by Aristotle’s account of friendship and by the words of Jesus Christ in which he commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>47</sup> The love Jesus commands is predicated upon proper self-love, as is the friendship that Aristotle commends. Charity, moreover, is not benevolence insofar as charity always entails a desire for union with another. In love, we will another’s good *and* we will union with that other. Love is, therefore, always focused on the other as

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<sup>40</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Slote writes: ‘I hope to persuade you thereby that basing morality ultimately in a motive like caring or (universal) benevolence or even love makes a good deal of sense’. (*Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), x).

<sup>42</sup> As Coope, following Peter Geach’s lead, takes pains to show in ‘Modern Virtue Ethics’, 33-36.

<sup>43</sup> MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 115.

<sup>44</sup> See Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), x.

<sup>45</sup> Nicholas Everitt argues that Hursthouse’s account of the virtues, including benevolence, is a variety of rule consequentialism in ‘Some Problems with Virtue Theory,’ *Philosophy* 82 (2007): 275-299.

<sup>46</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, qq.23-27.

<sup>47</sup> The Gospel of Matthew 22:39. See also Leviticus 19:18.

a concrete person. There simply is no such thing as selfless love to be found in Aristotle or Aquinas, and for good reason, since, (6) *Aristotelian ethics cannot regard a 'selfless' and generic benevolence as a virtue*. The elevation of benevolence, and the reduction of charity to benevolence, only make sense within the context of tribute paid to the hegemony of Morality.

Central to the task of *After Virtue* is the identification of the modern invention of the individual as deeply flawed because of its inability to account for the sociological and narrative dimensions of human life. *Dependent Rational Animals* adds to the sociological and narrative accounting of human life a biological one, a thoroughgoing grounding of the human being as a social animal which provides the foundation for making sense of those virtues which are distinguished by the acknowledgment they imply of our dependency on others and their dependency on us. Of course MacIntyre is building on Aristotle and Aquinas, both of whom stress the political nature of the human being.<sup>48</sup> Both also recognize that human happiness is most attainable only within political orders in which justice is present, and both hold out for special admiration, and this is especially so in the case of Aquinas, the virtues of acknowledged dependency (such as justice, equity, friendship, and, in the case of Aquinas, compassion and charity). But MacIntyre goes beyond Aristotle and is clearer than Aquinas on some points in articulating just why it is that we can only really be said to flourish when we are in possession of and exercise those virtues that are the fruit of our acknowledged dependency on others.<sup>49</sup> All those versions of Morality, including those that take some inspiration from Aristotle, that see the human as an individual the successful life of which is to maximize the satisfaction of one's desires, fail to appreciate the significance of why, (7) *Aristotelian ethics recognizes that to be human is to be communal*. The communality of our nature is the reason why we flourish only relationally. To acknowledge as much does not set us on the course to a vague or mystical notion of our interconnectedness, but is rather an acknowledgement of our biological reality and continued lived experience.

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<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 12, 1253<sup>a</sup>28-38.

<sup>49</sup> MacIntyre, *Dependent*, 125.

In their important survey of recent literature of virtue ethics — focusing especially on Hursthouse, Foot and Slote — Copp and Sobel complain of a general lack of attention to the virtue of justice and the vice of injustice.<sup>50</sup> How is it that the virtue declared by Aristotle to be so rich as to be complete virtue is ignored by his contemporary heirs?<sup>51</sup> The simple answer is that Morality intervened, with its thin anthropology, its focus on rights, and its relegation of justice to the work of institutions. (8) *Aristotelian ethics regards justice as a virtue that is intelligible and indispensable*, but the work required to reclaim it as such can seem overwhelming. And yet, such work is of a piece with the efforts to revive a sufficiently teleologically rich anthropology that makes room for grounding justice as a virtue of human beings whose efforts to live well with others ought to be characterized by the activities of this virtue. MacIntyre's efforts on this front put him at odds with a majority of the contemporary virtue ethicists, for whom justice, if it is to be considered a virtue at all, is seen to be dispensable. Hursthouse, for instance, though she says she regards justice as a personal virtue, considers the consideration of justice a corrupted topic:

'I say "corrupted" because it has become all too common to allow a vague concept of justice and rights to encompass large areas of morality that virtue ethicists believe are better dealt with in terms of other, more concrete, virtues. According to virtue ethics—and in this book—what is wrong with lying, when it is wrong, is not that it is unjust . . . but that it is *dishonest*, and dishonesty is a vice. What is wrong with killing, when it is wrong, may be not so much that that is unjust, violating the right to life, but frequently that it is callous and contrary to the virtue of charity'.<sup>52</sup>

Hursthouse is certainly right that justice has become a vague notion connected to rights. This is especially evident in the uses and abuses of the phrase 'social justice' which can mean just about anything, just so long as it is anchored in some right or other. But, that does not mean that the *virtue* of justice has lost its meaning or its importance. Losing the meaning and importance of justice when we do not see dishonest and murderous

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<sup>50</sup> David Copp and David Sobel's 'Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics', *Ethics* 114 (2004): 514-54.

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *NEV* I, 1129<sup>b</sup>30-1130<sup>a</sup>11.

<sup>52</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 6.



acts as unjust acts, as Hursthouse suggests we need not, is a great loss indeed, for that loss represents the absence of a unifying virtue to make sense of our common life.

Because human nature is communal, justice, which is that virtue which is always another's good, is the crown of virtues. Friendship, which is a still further perfection of justice and a singularly rich fulfilment of our nature, is essential to the happy life. Aristotle devotes one-fifth of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to friendship because he considers it an incalculable good the lack of which no one, unless dispossessed of their senses, would choose. Friendship makes life worth living, it fosters the cultivation and exercise of the virtues, and, in its best form, enables contemplation.<sup>53</sup> For these reasons, (9) *Aristotelian ethics makes friendship thematically central*. Contemporary virtue ethicists generally note the importance of friendship, but very few have developed thematic treatments of friendship, with a few notable exceptions in the works of Julia Annas and Talbot Brewer.<sup>54</sup> For many mainstream Aristotelian-inspired virtue ethicists, significant obstacles are to be found should they endeavor to make friendship thematically central because of that movement's adherence to Morality. Some of those obstacles are what many contemporary moral thinkers, virtue ethical and otherwise, condemn as elitist, since friendship of the fullest sort is rare because it requires virtue, and virtue is rare; as out of step with the times, since a philosophical account of friendship requires a rich account of practical rationality and the purpose of life which is at odds with the dominant one aligned with Morality; as contrary to the exalted good of freedom, since a full account of friendship entails a socially dependent view of the human person; and, as either bizarre or quaint, since true friendship presages and facilitates contemplation as our highest activity. No one within or outside the virtue ethical movement doubts that friendship is important. However, the absence of robust philosophical treatments of friendship has left the term open to mean

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<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, *NE* IX 9, 1169<sup>b</sup>31-1170<sup>a</sup>3.

<sup>54</sup> Julia Annas, 'Self-Love in Aristotle', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, supplement 27 (1988): 1-18; and 'Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism', *Mind* 86 (1977): 532-54. Talbot Brewer, 'Virtues We Can Share: Friendship in Aristotle's Ethical Theory', *Ethics* 115 (2005): 721-58; and chapter 7 of *The Retrieval of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

nearly anything, including electronically mediated connections to persons with whom one has never had a personal conversation.

The tendency of friendships of the best sort to foster contemplation brings us to the last of the criteria necessary for a sufficiently Aristotelian ethics, namely: *(10) Aristotelian ethics insists upon the paramount importance of the virtue of contemplative wisdom and its best activity as tantamount to our highest fulfilment.* There are three stages to the claims that Aristotle makes about contemplation in *Nicomachean Ethics*. First, in his discussion of the three lives, he holds out the theoretical life as the best—or at least, as the way of life to which he offers no objections.<sup>55</sup> Second, his readers begin to learn more about what this entails when at the conclusion of Book VI Aristotle ranks contemplative wisdom as superior to any other intellectual virtue because its activity is the very being of our happiness.<sup>56</sup> Third, we learn at the end of chapter seven of Book X that cultivating the activity of contemplation is a divinizing work, and we are exhorted to achieve that work without regard to the naysayers who complain that we are thereby neglecting our practical lives.<sup>57</sup> God's activity, indeed his very life, Aristotle tells us in both his ethics and his *Metaphysics*, is contemplation,<sup>58</sup> and insofar as the activity of contemplation consumes us, we will be imitating God. If we read Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* as compatible with his *Nicomachean Ethics*, we can add to these a fourth stage, for Aristotle recommends at the conclusion of that work that we think of God above all else precisely because he is the measure of all our actions and activities:

‘What choice, then, or possession of the natural goods—whether bodily goods, wealth, friends, or other things—will most produce the contemplation of god, that choice or possession is best; this is the noblest standard, but any that through deficiency or excess hinders one from the contemplation and service of god is bad; this a man possesses in his soul, and this is the best standard for the soul—to perceive the irrational part of the soul, as such, as little as possible. So much, then,

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<sup>55</sup> Aristotle, *NE* I 5, 1096<sup>a</sup>4-5.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, *NE* VI 13, 1145<sup>b</sup>7-11.

<sup>57</sup> Aristotle, *NE* X 7, 1177<sup>b</sup>30-1178.

<sup>58</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII 9, 1074<sup>b</sup>15-34.

for the standard of nobility and goodness and the object of the absolute goods'.<sup>59</sup>

One might be tempted to dismiss Aristotle's remarks on contemplation as Platonic flights of fancy that he had yet to shake off, but that would certainly be a disservice to Aristotle's ethics. He has good reasons, reasons grounded in his anthropology and in his metaphysics, for recognizing contemplative activity as constituting our fulfillment. And so do we. Now, it is one thing to claim that an Aristotelian must see in contemplative activity our highest aspirations, and another to claim that one must think there to be a god whose activity is contemplative. I am claiming the former, and not the latter in the articulation of this criterion; but I do think the former opens into the latter.

MacIntyre certainly recognizes, and argues for, contemplation as our highest activity in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, as he does in other works—the most famous formulation of his on this point is that from *After Virtue*: '[T]he good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is'.<sup>60</sup> MacIntyre's explicitly Thomistic Aristotelianism in his latest work, without leaving behind his earlier emphasis on self-reflection as contemplative activity, opens up to the contemplation of God in response to the quest for an infinite good.<sup>61</sup> MacIntyre contends, however, that a consideration of that infinite good, what it is and what it entails, belongs to natural theology, and not to politics and ethics.<sup>62</sup> On this rigid distinction between natural theology on the one hand and politics and ethics on the other, I think that Aristotelians can disagree; and, indeed, I do disagree with MacIntyre on this score.

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<sup>59</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, tr. J. Solomon, in the *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), VII 15, 1249<sup>b</sup>16-25.

<sup>60</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 219.

<sup>61</sup> 'But there is no particular finite good the achievement of which perfects and completes one's life. There is always something else and something more to be attained, whatever one's attainments. The perfection and completion of a life consists in an agent's having persisted in moving toward and beyond the best goods of which she or he knows. So there is presupposed some further good, an object of desire beyond all particular and finite goods, a good toward which desire tends insofar as it remains unsatisfied by even the most desirable of finite goods, as in good lives it does'. (MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 315).

<sup>62</sup> 'But here the enquiries of politics and ethics end. Here natural theology begins'. (MacIntyre, *Ethics*, 315).

It is the proper work of natural theology to consider God's existence and nature. However, that proper work, I think, needs to be framed in ethical and political terms. It is MacIntyre who consistently teaches us that no actions or activities fail to be ethical and thereby political. The metaphysical consideration of God is an activity, or rather set of activities involving many participants, and so at least is ethical in the broad sense of a metaphysical activity carried on within an ethical framework. Moreover, for Aristotle, the contemplation of God includes thinking about God, which is to say that the contemplation of God entails natural theology. Insofar as the contemplation of God is the fulfilment of our lives, as Aristotle argues it is, and the fulfilment of an activity is not separate from that activity but rather its perfection, it would seem that thinking about God, which is to say natural theology, is a part of ethics. Natural theology, I assert, does not begin where ethics and politics ends, but is rather the continuation, and indeed a continuation of the highest order, of the work of those disciplines. This conclusion does not entail that natural theology and ethics are not distinct disciplines. Nor does it rank one discipline with respect to the other. Nor does it entail that a natural theology entails a particular political or ethical theology. Rather, as Aristotle says of practical wisdom with respect to philosophical wisdom, namely that practical wisdom governs philosophical wisdom, so too does ethics govern, in a way, natural theology.<sup>63</sup> Natural theology is its own activity, and, rightly understood, it does not take orders from ethics and politics with respect to how it is to be pursued, but the practical wisdom which is of particular importance to ethics and politics does order natural theology to be pursued insofar as it is recognized as necessary to our flourishing. It is in just these ways that the activity of thinking theologically is encompassed by ethics and politics.

The ten criteria I have identified, though I think helpful for the purpose at hand, should not be taken as comprising the whole of what's required in Aristotelian ethics, nor do they, in and of themselves, provide the argumentation necessary for making the case that Aristotelian ethics is

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<sup>63</sup> Aristotle *NE* VI 13, 1145<sup>b</sup>6-8: "[Practical wisdom] is not *supreme* over wisdom, i.e. over the superior part of us, any more than the art of medicine is over health; for it does not use it but provides for its coming into being; it issues orders, then, for its sake, but not to it."

superior to its competitors. Such argumentation would entail, among other things, making the case that Aristotelian ethics does a better job than its rivals in providing cohesive, comprehensive and coherent answers to those questions presupposed by any ethics about what it is to be the sort of beings we are, what the purpose of our lives are, and by what means we ought to evaluate the particular habits, actions, and relationships of our lives and indeed our lives as a whole. Aristotelian ethics, especially of the Thomistic variety, provides a richer account of our nature, its purpose, and practical rationality than any of its rivals. One way to attempt to summarize the arc of MacIntyre's myriad contributions to moral philosophy is to appreciate the effectiveness of the case he has made for just that.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> With special thanks to the participants, and especially the organizers, of 'Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: Debating MacIntyre and His Rivals', June 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> 2017, St. John's College, University of Oxford.