

The Craftsman's Tools: MacIntyre on Education

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If someone were to enter a carpenter's workshop who did not understand the use of the craftsman's tools, they would seem to him to be needlessly multiplied, whereas, to the one who looks upon them having the virtue of the craft, the reason for their multiplication is apparent.

--St. Thomas Aquinas, Q. D. *de Veritate*, q. 5, art. 5, ad 6

AN ATTEMPT to elucidate the educational ideal of one who has declared that "any conception of the philosophy of education as a distinct area of philosophical enquiry is a mistake" must proceed with caution.¹ Yet it ought to be made, for over the past half-century Alasdair MacIntyre has provided arguably the most trenchant and original commentary on education in the English language. The reason he gave for his claim that there can be no independent philosophy of education—that "all teaching is for the sake of something else" and that therefore "enquiries into education" are always a "part" of "enquiries into the nature and goods of those activities into which we need to be initiated by education"—is a principle that has animated his thoughts on the subject since the 1950s.² Yet as his own conception of the human good has been

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre and Joseph Dunne, "Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne," *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 36 (2002): 1–19, at 9.

² *Ibid.*

progressively articulated, so also has the standard to which he has held the role of the teacher and the institutions of schools and universities. An examination of MacIntyre's writings on education, therefore, promises to shed light on the broader tendencies of his thinking. What may be more surprising, however, is to see the way in which the end-point of the development of his thoughts on education represents a further extension of his response to the crisis of secular rationality.

MacIntyre has written memorable lines about the philosopher as a craftsman, and so it is fitting to attend to his discussions of the craft—to his shoptalk—over the decades of his labor. From his participation in the New Left in the 1950s through his more recent writing as a Catholic and Thomist, he has consistently raised important theoretical issues while discussing the practices of the university life he has led. At the same time, his theoretical writings include many passing references to, as well as sustained treatments of, educational matters. Given the number of these passages, it will be necessary to choose but a few as representative. Yet even these reveal the trajectory of his thought: from his early concern that the reform of educational institutions be a part of the quest for a just society, through the broader discussions of the role of higher education in the life of moral virtue during the middle decades of his career, to his renewed appreciation of the speculative virtues in the last two decades of his life. Each stage in this development has been a refining rather than an abandonment of the previous analysis, and the conclusion of it has been an integrated reflection upon the practices, virtues, institutional structures and communities that make possible the attainment of the highest of speculative virtues, wisdom. It is in MacIntyre's recent discussions of exemplars of a philosophical life that his treatment of education finds both its deepest significance and its greatest relevance to the malaise of secular modernity.

A Voice from the Moral Wilderness

One constant of Alasdair MacIntyre's career is certain: its moral seriousness. From the third decade of his life to the ninth, his writing has been characterized by an earnestness about the human good worthy of a Solzhenitsyn or a Wojtyła. As a committed Marxist, his reaction to the unmasking of Soviet tyranny in the 1950s was neither cynical nor

romantic: it was to seek from the “moral wilderness” of his loss of confidence in communism a first principle sturdy enough to serve as the foundation of an ardent quest for the common good. Since at least 1956, he has robustly affirmed the priority of the common to the private or individual good, together with the truth that such a common good must be accessible to reason and indeed must be a good of reason.³ His earliest discussions of education are in conformity with this principle and, like it, emerge from his opposition to classical liberalism. He insisted that the work of cultural criticism needed to remain “part of the political and industrial struggle,” and, with other New Left writers, held that the “whole way of life which capitalism imposes” was the essential source of the moral failures of the age.⁴ The necessary response was to struggle for a just society. “The philosophers,” as he memorably put it, echoing Marx, “have continued to interpret the world differently; the point remains, to change it.”⁵

MacIntyre’s most sustained discussion of education from the 1950s, an essay titled “Manchester: The Modern Universities and the English Tradition,” was written with a reforming zeal to match his more overtly political essays. The concern that seems to have prompted the piece was a fear that the distinctive tradition of the provincial universities was soon to be eroded by the tide of incoming young faculty trained at Oxford and Cambridge who were not much inclined to respect the character of the institutions they were joining. Their unwillingness to think through the problems that these universities faced in light of the traditions proper to them had led to a “rash of Oxbridge solutions to Redbrick problems.” MacIntyre found such proposals wanting: “To turn the provincial universities into residential institutions, to deplore specialist training and pine over something called general education, to long for

³ See Alasdair MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness-II,” *New Reasoner* (1956): 89–98, at 96–97.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, “The ‘New Left,’” *Labour Review* 4 (1959): 98–100, at 99, 100. On MacIntyre’s participation in the New Left, see Émile Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair MacIntyre: Une biographie intellectuelle. Introduction aux critiques contemporaines du libéralisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), 19–61.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, “Breaking the Chains of Reason,” in *Out of Apathy*, ed. E. P. Thompson (London: Stevens, 1960), 195–240, at 240, with thanks to Christopher Lutz for pointing out the connection to Marx.

a tutorial system; this is to replace glorified technical colleges by rather inglorious imitations of Oxbridge.”⁶

Worse than merely unrealistic, the attempt to imitate the ivy-covered colleges was the result of misaligned intention. Instead of a genuine spirit of service, these academics seemed chiefly to want to reproduce the trappings of a comfortable life of privilege. Speaking of these “immaculately attired young men on the teaching staff whose accents and umbrellas” signaled their pedigree, MacIntyre took a satirical turn: “After one has heard from them a dozen times how grossly inferior Manchester or Sheffield or Leeds is to Oxford or Cambridge one begins to weary of a nostalgia which is as inordinate as that of Ovid’s Black Sea exile, but lacks all his elegiac charm.” The sharpness of his rhetoric was proportionate to his concern that genuine goods were threatened. He admired the nonconformist tradition of English radical Protestantism, and spoke in praise of the “poetic standards of Watts and Wesley.” And just as those Protestant traditions risked being contemptuously discarded, so also did the other great dissenting tradition of the British Isles risk having its character leached out by the acid bath of affluence. English Roman Catholics, he warned, were all too likely to have “learned from . . . upper-class converts to seek an Oxbridge elegance.”⁷ Against this danger, MacIntyre sought to identify—so as to defend—what he called the “provincial tradition” of English university life. He identified four characteristics of this tradition, two of which—their intellectual seriousness and liberalism—are not surprising. But two others are. He praised these institutions for having been “immersed in the life of local communities,” a connection that helped to protect them from the creation of “an ingrown and hot-house social life.” Again, there is a strong note of social critique in his account: “That one should not live on a campus or in a university town, but close to mills and factories . . . is as good a way as any of preserving the university teacher from illusions about his place in society.” The fourth characteristic was “a certain quality of thought,” which he described as “an impatience with intellectual cant and with nonsense of all kinds,” explaining what he meant in this

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, “Manchester: The Modern Universities and the English Tradition,” *Twentieth Century* 159 (February 1956): 123–29, at 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 123–25.

paraphrase, “the contempt of the provincial for what he sees as the fripperies of aestheticism.” What MacIntyre was most suspicious of was the elitism of the Oxbridge colleges, an elitism whose darker side he readily perceived, warning of “small collegiate communities” in which “it is easy for those with power to appoint like-minded people.”⁸ His indictment of the leading institutions of higher education in England was that they did not serve excellence and the common good so much as privilege and smug self-satisfaction.

In 1960, in another essay that addressed the topic, MacIntyre again sounded the note of class critique, making reference to an “American sociologist” who had “pictured our university teachers in a state of complacent delight, drinking port and reading Jane Austen” and jabbing at the “sweet smell of the academic’s social success.”⁹ That essay, a jeremiad entitled “Breaking the Chains of Reason,” bemoaned the complacency and irrelevance of academics and ascribed the apathy and conservatism of university scholars to their inability to affirm a substantive conception of human freedom based upon the exercise of reason. In an analysis that anticipated the central argument of *After Virtue*, he argued that capitalist society engenders habits of living and of thinking that mutually reinforce one another: “The vices of our lives and the errors of our concepts combine to keep both in being.”¹⁰ And because these vices are inculcated by the power structures of capitalist society, the attempt to fix habits of thought by themselves will be futile: “you can only carry through any effective educational effort as part of the political and industrial struggle.”¹¹

Communities of Virtue

Whether or not MacIntyre’s immigration to America should be taken to represent his coming to terms with the structures of liberal democracy, his active participation in leftwing politics did come to an end with the

⁸ Ibid., 126–27.

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, “Breaking the Chains of Reason,” in *Out of Apathy*, ed. E. P. Thompson (London: Stevens, 1960), 195–240, quotations from 195, 196.

¹⁰ Ibid., 231.

¹¹ MacIntyre, “The ‘New Left,’” 100.

tumultuous 1960s.¹² During the 1970s, his great labor was one of intellectual conversion, documented in the pages of *After Virtue*. In addition to being a strikingly original work of moral philosophy, that book is also in important respects an example of confessional literature, and the conversion that it documents is one that brought MacIntyre to differ with his own previous academic life and so, necessarily, with the practices and institutions of the modern academy generally. The crucial difference is that whereas MacIntyre had earlier criticized university life as symptomatic of the cultural ills of capitalism, in *After Virtue* the modern university is singled out as a contributing cause of the misunderstanding of the moral life and, consequently, a barrier to be overcome if both the theory and the life of the virtues were to be regained. Over the next decade and a half, he would elaborate an alternative vision of university life that is at once a response to a crisis in the academy but also a part—and perhaps even a necessary one—of the moral regeneration of society.

MacIntyre's essential claim about education in *After Virtue* has lost none of its ability to surprise with the passage of thirty years: that the form taken by our academic life prevents us from rightly understanding the character of our age. The transition to modernity that he understands as a loss of the tradition of the virtues is one that is "invisible" from the value-neutral "standpoint of academic history." Moreover, the "habits of mind engendered by our modern academic curriculum" make it difficult, if not impossible, to see the connection between conceptual and social changes—shifts in our way of thinking and in our patterns of life. In view here is the habitual compartmentalization, or, as he put it, "the tendency to think atomistically about human action," that characterizes not only our moral lives in general, but our academic institutions and practices as well.¹³ Philosophy, from having been the common habit of reasoning possessed by an entire educated public, has become a highly circumscribed and narrowly professional pursuit.¹⁴ Not only is philosophy cut off from life, it is even rigidly separated from subjects that either

¹² See Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair MacIntyre*, 47–61.

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition (1981; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 4, 61, 204.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, 50–51, and his subsequent elaboration of this point in "The Idea of an Educated Public," in *Education and Values: The Richard Peters Lectures*, ed. Graham Haydon (London: University of London Institute of Education, 1987), 15–36.

should be closely annexed to it or, arguably, should be thought of as its own subordinate parts, such as the sociology of morals. This artificial curricular division—the product of professionalization—itself reproduces the essential ways in which modernity earlier broke with traditional society and the morality of the virtues that enlivened it: by rejecting the broadly speaking Aristotelian conception of man as having both a nature and a function within a larger social whole. In MacIntyre's own words, "the disjunctions and divorces of the eighteenth century perpetuate and reinforce themselves in contemporary curricular divisions."¹⁵

The solution to the ills of modernity that MacIntyre proposed at the end of *After Virtue* is well known. Yet it may not have been sufficiently realized just how central to his conception of a community of virtue is the role of teacher and the institution that is the school. The very choice of St. Benedict as his archetypal exemplar did point in that direction, for Benedict famously called the monastery a "school for the Lord's service" and understood the mutual teaching of the brother monks to be an essential part of their quest for virtuous living. MacIntyre himself subsequently stressed that all of the virtues "have to be developed throughout one's entire life" and that our quest for happiness must be understood as "a lifelong process of learning and imparting truths," a process that unfolds in a context of "mutual relationships of teaching and learning."¹⁶ The school, then, and the student-teacher relationship, turn out to be places where the pursuit of virtue is condensed and, as it were, crystallized. If we ought to consider our lives as a whole as being a kind of education, then it seems fitting that we consider our formal education as essentially serving that larger and more universal pursuit of the good. Educational practices and institutions, therefore, not only provide evidence or symptoms of our success or failure in the pursuit of virtue, they are microcosms and the crucial test cases of that pursuit.¹⁷

¹⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 72–73, 82.

¹⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Privatization of Good: An Inaugural Lecture," *Review of Politics* 52 (1990): 344–61, at 358.

¹⁷ Thus, presumably, his readiness to address the concerns of teachers and teachers themselves. See, for instance, his "Traditions and Conflicts," *Liberal Education* 73

Nowhere does MacIntyre's earnestness about education impress itself upon the reader more than in his inaugural lecture at the University of Notre Dame on "The Privatization of Good." Essential to the task of refuting secular liberalism in its various guises is the witness of a successful pursuit of the traditional virtues. The claim made by the traditional theory of the virtues, after all, is not merely that it manages to avoid contradicting itself, but also that, if the theory be followed, it will in fact result in a tolerable approximation of the good life. This is why, as MacIntyre put it, "the strengths of an Aristotelian and Thomistic position will only become clear insofar as it too is seen to be embodied in particularized forms of practice."¹⁸ Having sounded this note, he closed the lecture by challenging his audience to join him in the attempt to make the academic community at Notre Dame provide in its common life compelling evidence of the truth that men and women are perfected by the virtues as traditionally understood. The passage is more than a little poignant: "as to that remaking of ourselves and our own local practices and institutions through a better understanding of what it is that, in an Aristotelian and Thomistic perspective, the unity of moral theory and practice now require of us, we have as much to hope for as we have to do, and not least within the community of this university."¹⁹

Overshadowed by MacIntyre's striking conception of a university as a battleground upon which competing traditions fight for the mastery, a conception developed in his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990), the aspiration this passage expresses has been overlooked. Yet its significance within the course of his thinking should not be minimized, for if the tragedy of secular reason and the failure of the Enlightenment project have come about because of the progressive instantiation in social forms of a shift in philosophical principles, it seems reasonable to suppose that the shift back to an Aristotelian way of thinking and liv-

(1987): 6–13; "How to Be a North American," lecture presented at the National Conference of State Humanities Councils (Washington, DC: Federation of State Humanities Councils, 1987); and "How Is Intellectual Excellence in Philosophy to be Understood by a Catholic Philosopher? What Has Philosophy to Contribute to Catholic Intellectual Excellence?" *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 12 (1991): 47–50.

¹⁸ MacIntyre, "Privatization of Good," 360.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 361.

ing could be accomplished best—and perhaps even first—in a college or university, precisely because a school is the kind of institution in which principles and practices can and ought to be most closely harmonized. It is precisely this aspiration that makes sense of the tenor of much of his subsequent commentary on higher education.²⁰ The inability of the contemporary Catholic university to reverse the trend of the fragmentation of curricula and the narrow focus of undergraduate education upon preparedness for professional life—even, and perhaps especially, in the humanities—is nothing less than a tragedy because of the high promise of a well-thought-out and well-run educational institution: the formation of its students for lives of creative and trustworthy practical judgment about weighty matters.²¹

Exemplary Philosophical Lives

By comparison to the prophetic tone of *After Virtue* and the high seriousness of the vision of intellectual combat offered in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, one is struck by what Reinhard Hütter described as the “disquieting, not to say despairing” tone of MacIntyre’s *God, Philosophy, Universities*.²² On the subject of education, the volume appears to mark a decisive retreat from his earlier thought. It is, after all, a frankly professional model of philosophy that he discusses at the book’s end, which, though tempered by his discussion of John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio* and his insistence that philosophy find both its origin and its destination in the questions asked by us all as “plain persons,” nevertheless seems much less idealistic than his earlier contributions. And at the level of controlling metaphor, it is one thing to be imitating St. Benedict, quite

²⁰ Even if perhaps expressed somewhat diffidently in his “Aquinas’s Critique of Education: Against His Own Age, Against Ours,” in *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (London: Routledge, 1998), 95–108.

²¹ See “Catholic Universities: Dangers, Hopes, Choices,” in *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions*, ed. Robert E. Sullivan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 1–21; but also, and with greater insistence, his “The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University,” *Commonweal* (October 20, 2006): 10–14; and more recently, “The Very Idea of a University: Aristotle, Newman, and Us,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 57 (2009): 347–62.

²² Reinhard Hütter, “Seeking Truth on Dry Soil and under Thornbushes—God, the University, and the Missing Link: Wisdom,” in *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 392.

another to bring a sweeping narrative of the history of philosophy to an end by tacitly recommending an apprenticeship to one who is most assuredly a philosopher's philosopher, Elizabeth Anscombe.²³ Such a retreat, moreover, would even seem to be a confirmed fact about the latter MacIntyre. For, at least on the face of it, to suggest that "perhaps the point of doing philosophy is to enable people to lead, so far as it is within their powers, philosophical lives," as he did in an essay published in 2006, seems to be worlds apart from his earlier rallying cry, "the philosophers have continued to interpret the world differently; the point remains, to change it."²⁴ An emphasis on the practical living out of philosophical convictions remains, to be sure, but his focus seems now to be decisively private and personal. Yet the retreat is merely apparent, and when *God, Philosophy, Universities* is placed in a broader context, its true significance can be better appreciated.

A work that should be considered if one is to understand the latter MacIntyre is his philosophical biography of the young Edith Stein. What at first glance may seem to be merely the report of a difficult bout of wrestling with phenomenology is in fact also a highly dramatic narrative of the pursuit of truth within the context of the modern university. At the heart of MacIntyre's narrative are the life, death, and philosophical inquiry of Stein's mentor and friend Adolf Reinach. Like other talented young philosophers of his generation—such as Max Scheler and Dietrich von Hildebrand—Reinach had come to Göttingen to learn from Edmund Husserl. Yet this was no easy task. Husserl's prickly and abstracted character was, to a degree, smoothed out and compensated for by his wife, but his students do not seem to have been really comfortable with him. They called him "the Master," feared disagreements with him, and learned to lower their expectations of his hospitality. The forbidding role of the professor in those days was only one of the challenges of German academic culture; Stein's colleagues and fellow students were also at times a cause of grief. MacIntyre writes of the "tiresome vani-

²³ See *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 160–62.

²⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Ends of Life, the Ends of Philosophical Writing," in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 125–42, at 132; the earlier statement is from his "Breaking the Chains of Reason," cited above in note 5.

ty” of Scheler, gently points out the rudeness of another member of the Husserl circle by saying that the “focused intensity of his conversational manner sometimes alienated listeners,” and sums up the misanthropy of Martin Heidegger by explaining that after he left the Husserl circle, he entered into “relationships only with those who [were] prepared to acknowledge his superiority.”²⁵

Adolf Reinach, to the contrary, was a model of the virtues necessary for the successful pursuit and sharing of truth. Both Reinach and his wife Anna were unstinting with the gift of their friendship, a gift that the young Edith Stein seems to have found especially valuable. Reinach, moreover, was known for his patient, teacherly expositions of Husserl’s turgid thought. He was generous with his time and encouraging with his advice. And, crucially, Reinach understood and practiced philosophy as a “cooperative enterprise,” as MacIntyre puts it. The academic life pursued by Adolf Reinach, Edith Stein, and a few others during the early 1910s in Göttingen was a common life of friendship in pursuit of truth. Although the friendships were not destined to be prolonged into a happy old age, they did much to shape the lives of those who enjoyed them. Reinach, a dutiful subject of the Kaiser, went off to the Great War, won the Iron Cross, and was killed in action. But not before he had been baptized a Christian. He took with him to the front his New Testament, the *Imitation of Christ*, and Augustine’s *Confessions*. From this spare but deep reading, he nourished his reflection upon his own personal experiences of God in prayer, leaving behind notes for a book on faith and reason. Writing to his wife from the front, he testified to his conviction that this inquiry was crucial: “To do such work with humility is most important today, far more important than to fight this war. For what purpose has this horror if it does not lead human beings closer to God?”²⁶

In addition to his own noble death and his widow Anna’s equally noble reaction to it, Reinach bequeathed to Edith Stein an example of the serious and disinterested pursuit of truth that made it possible for her to choose a path in life that led—so far as these things

²⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue, 1913–1922* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), quotations from 67, 90, 103, and 185.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, quotations from pages 139 and 146.

can be judged by outsiders—to a high degree of rational contentment. In place of the alienating and frustrating experiences of the German university system, she enjoyed a fruitful career as a secondary school teacher and part-time catechist and apologist for the Catholic faith, before joining the Carmelite order and pursuing her philosophical and theological studies with renewed vigor. Although it may require the perspective of faith in order fully to apprehend the nobility of her death and thus to be able to see her life as a successful and integrated whole, the more modest conclusions that MacIntyre offers in his study of her early life are readily appreciable. He takes the silence that followed her conversion to Christianity as an especially important sign. Unlike other philosophical conversions that he discusses in that study and elsewhere, Stein's seems incontestably to have brought about a deep satisfaction of mind, even a peace, which manifested itself first by years of quiet thoughtfulness and subsequently by her ability to give of herself generously to the community in which the truth she had been seeking—the truth about God—found a home.²⁷

The lasting or deepest significance of *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue* within MacIntyre's corpus of work, then, may not be in its discussion of phenomenology, but instead in the way it provides a kind of completion to his discussions of education. The reforming zeal he had displayed in the 1950s has not been entirely lost here; indeed, he forthrightly portrays the failures of the German university system in the early twentieth century. The earnest seeker of truth that was Edith Stein did not find a lasting home at Göttingen or in the German university system as a whole, but instead in a Carmelite convent. With this story, MacIntyre offers an understated proposal that is just as important as his hope for a new St. Benedict or his defense of Manchester University, for Stein's life as a religious sister who wrote philosophical and theological works is an example of service to the truth every bit as eloquent as these earlier ones.

Yet there is another and still more important dimension to MacIntyre's *Edith Stein* and his recent essays touching on education, and that

²⁷ On Stein's silence, see *ibid.*, 172–73. For MacIntyre's treatment of philosophical conversions, see chapter 15 of the same volume and also his essay covering much of the same ground, "Ends of Life, the Ends of Philosophical Writing."

is his increasing confidence in metaphysical affirmation. The trajectory of his metaphysical convictions may be rapidly sketched. In the 1950s and 1960s, although reading deeply in metaphysics, he nevertheless wrote as a reporter and a critic.²⁸ His discussions of education terminate with moral truths and social facts: his chief concern is not that undergraduates are failing to learn their proofs for the existence of God, but rather that they are being habituated for a life as upper-middle-class consumers of luxury goods. In the 1980s and 1990s, MacIntyre's analysis goes further. The essential failure of the modern university is that it deforms not merely the social aspirations of the students but the practical intellect itself. The fragmentation of the curriculum mirrors and reinforces the compartmentalization of life, and the end result of this must sooner or later be tragic.²⁹ Beginning in the 1990s, however, MacIntyre more and more robustly affirms propositions about the natures of things, beginning with the nature of man as a reasoning animal, but then more and more explicitly and insistently, propositions about truth and God.³⁰ His increasing attention to prior and more universal causes goes along with an increasing insistence about the guiding principle of education. It is in the context of this trajectory that *God, Philosophy, Universities* should be read, not as a retreat, but as a fresh start.³¹ One ought to marvel at a philosopher in the evening of his life attempting such an endeavor, his earlier career having been so different, and even in important respects at variance with it. MacIntyre's address at the annual meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association in 2011, "How to be a Theistic Philosopher in a Secularized Culture," brings the

²⁸ See, for instance, his "Analogy in Metaphysics," *Downside Review* 69 (1950): 45–61, and "Being," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), I:273–77. It could be that his early convictions would be qualified as not merely detached from but positively negative about the possibility of traditional metaphysics. See his "A Society without a Metaphysics," *Listener* (September 13, 1956): 375–76, at 376: "to anyone working within contemporary philosophy it must be clear that the old metaphysical Absolutes are dead beyond recovery."

²⁹ In addition to the essays cited above in notes 17 and 21, see his "Social Structures and Their Threat to Moral Agency," *Philosophy* 74 (1999): 311–29.

³⁰ In addition to his *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1999), one ought to note the essays "What Is a Human Body?" and "Truth as a Good: A Reflection on *Fides et Ratio*," both in *Tasks of Philosophy*.

³¹ For such a reading, see Hütter, "Seeking Truth on Dry Soil," esp. 392, 402–3.

development of his thought about education to a kind of apogee with the statement that the difference between a theist and an atheist is not merely what they say about God, but what they say about everything else. "To be a theist," he explains, "is to understand every particular as, by reason of its finitude and its contingency, pointing towards God." To be a theist, accordingly, is "to hold that all explanation and understanding that does not refer us to God both as first cause and as final end is incomplete."³² This search for satisfactory explanations not only divides the theistic from the secular philosopher, but it also has immediate and evident ramifications for education.

A Response to the Secular Mind

One may well ask just what sort of secular mind MacIntyre has in view by his division between the theistic and the atheistic philosopher. After all, the Stephen Weinbergs of the world do not seem to be lacking in their search for ever more capacious and powerful explanations. In the essay at hand, MacIntyre quite rightly responds to the physicalist reductionism that characterizes much contemporary atheism. Yet one may also observe that the ironic detachment exemplified by Richard Rorty seems to be just as characteristic of the secular mind, if not more so. For the closing off of systematic inquiry into causes seems much more likely to take place today at an earlier moment, long before elementary particles have been reached. Rorty's astonishing assertion that it is literary criticism rather than philosophy that is the governing discourse—and his equally if not more astonishing display of philosophy as a kind of storytelling—does seem an accurate assessment of both our common culture and, in a certain sense the academy as well.³³ Rorty's concern was to discover what effectually moves us to adopt a more tolerant attitude toward other men and women; his conviction is that the reading of novels and even the watching of movies and television shows today supplies the fuel for moral conviction that in the past was provided by philosophical conviction or religious belief. But his assessment, of course, applies more

³² Alasdair MacIntyre, "On Being a Theistic Philosopher in a Secularized Culture," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 84 (2011): 23–32, at 23.

³³ See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

broadly. In Rorty's pragmatism, practical judgments seem to rest not so much upon utility or profit or the avoidance of pain, but upon aesthetic sensibilities and passions. And this is why he seems indeed to have captured the secular mind almost perfectly—much like David Hume before him. For today, our mental preoccupations seem more than ever to rise from our changing desires as consumers of cultural products, whether those products be made in Hollywood or by a university press.

Why is MacIntyre's insistence that the theistic philosopher ought relentlessly to pursue the task of explanation until he has arrived at the consideration of the first cause and final end so important? Because the alternative to it is the suave sophistry of our age, in which communities of discourse artificially limited to matters of narrow scope threaten to stultify our pursuit of truth and the mental lives of our students. Just as in the case of Protagoras of old, the personal charm, ready wit, and moral authority conferred by success and rank that were enjoyed by Rorty himself and are shared by so many of our fellow academics today are qualities quite capable of generating a subculture—or even a dominant culture—that is almost impervious to critique. Socrates plainly thought that he needed to proceed to the drastic step of drinking the hemlock in order to convince friends like Crito that the rational life of the virtues was better than the life of pleasure. And, to recall MacIntyre's own examples, for Adolph Reinach, the experience of war seems to have been crucial in deepening his quest for truth, while for Edith Stein, Reinach's death and his wife's acceptance of it were the essential witnesses.

But what does all of this have to do with education? Precisely this: the culture of higher education—and this is increasingly true of secondary education as well—has been shaped by the Rortys of our time. The result has been a retreat into a professional mode of philosophizing in which the work of many of us is characterized by overly nice distinctions, an insistence upon apparatus over argument, and an overall soft skepticism in which affirmation is undervalued and politeness to interlocutors overvalued. These habits are chiefly to be seen in the writing and speaking of our professional lives, but they also have a way of making themselves felt in curricular discussions and even the grading of student papers. This is why more and more voices are warning that the intellectual life is being

dissolved into mere professionalism.³⁴ The challenge of affirming that, in the last analysis, it is the knowledge of God that perfects the human intellect is a test that is being failed even by philosophers and theologians of unimpeachable Christian seriousness.³⁵ But short of a serious attempt to make the difficult ascent toward the affirmation of propositions about things we cannot see—the virtues, the natures of things, truth, and God—we will not be able to put our educational practices and institutions into any satisfactory order. Their present disorder is so very grave, that even the danger of premature metaphysical affirmation seems worth running if the alternative is to acquiesce in the way we live now.

And so, by proposing as models Anscombe and John Paul II, Edith Stein and Adolf Reinach, Alasdair MacIntyre has at once offered a vision of academic life as well as a response to contemporary secularism. Against the self-satisfied and resolute aestheticism that takes any intellectual inquiry to be good so long as there is someone to desire it and insists that these intellectual goods have no order among them, MacIntyre has argued for a deeply purposeful approach to the life of the mind.³⁶ But perhaps just as crucially, he has exemplified it in his own philosophical

³⁴ See, for instance, Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3: “at the present time, the study of the humanities runs a risk of sliding from professional seriousness, through professionalization, to a finally disenchanted careerism.”

³⁵ For instance, Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 180: “We have to reckon with the possibility that what some serious people take to be knowledge is not knowledge, and that that what some people take to be intellectual virtues are not virtues,” but the matter “could be decided only by a sort of metaphysical adjudication which is in all probability unavailable to human beings.” And, in a different key, but to a similar end, Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 111: “There is, however, no single, obvious, compelling taxonomic ordering of appetites: any particular ordering depends on and is deeply articulated with local catechesis.”

³⁶ See, on this point, the whole of his “Truth as a Good: A Reflection upon *Fides et Ratio*,” in *Tasks of Philosophy*, but especially this formulation of the typical stance of contemporary academics with respect to intellectual goods, at 208: “if we lacked any conception of such an absolute standpoint, we might well conclude that there is no such thing as a final terminus for enquiry concerning any particular subject matter. What directs enquiry on this alternative view are whatever may happen to be our explanatory interests and in taking this or that as the goal of enquiry in some particular area we are only giving expression to our interests as they happen to be now, but may not be in the future, interests that may also differ from social group to social group.”

life. Broad in his interests from the beginning of his career, he did most rigorously pursue his particular craft, moral philosophy; *After Virtue* will continue to be read as long as moral philosophy is studied in the English-speaking world. Yet by committing him to the defense of a tradition of inquiry encompassing more than ethics, that work led him to tackle progressively more capacious questions, and led him eventually to the philosophy of nature and metaphysics. As anyone conversant with his career can validate, MacIntyre is no dabbler: it is plain that he has been following out a line of inquiry with seriousness and skill. The virtue that has shaped that inquiry is his openness to consider difficulties with respect to progressively prior principles and, accordingly, progressively broader explanations. This openness is the precise opposite to the premature closure upon questioning that is seen in Rorty's prescription that we ought simply to accept as boundaries the sensibilities that history has bequeathed to us. In contrast to that antiphilosophical orientation, MacIntyre's life of inquiry is characterized by the relentlessness of a quest. His questions have deepened and broadened, from "What does justice require?" to "What sort of life will make me happy?" to "What sort of being am I?" to "What is truth?" and, finally, to Aquinas's question, "What is God?"

It is because of his fearless pursuit of truth that MacIntyre is the great craftsman-philosopher of our age. As his biographer the late Émile Perreau-Saussine aptly said, although MacIntyre was initially "carried away by the political passions of his century," in his later life he "progressively rediscovered wisdom."³⁷ He is like a furniture maker who, as a young man was trained to make chairs and then worried, and sweated, and toiled to make better ones, and succeeded. But then, instead of seeking only to profit from his chairs, he looked abroad and saw that in the making of chests further excellences remained for him to seek. So he acquired new tools, learned to use them, and made new works. He remains known for his chairs, chairs that have only improved because of his work on more difficult pieces. Yet he should especially be celebrated for his love for the craft, for he has exemplified the pursuit of the excellence it holds out. And, in the case of Alasdair MacIntyre, the craft he has shown us how to practice is the craft of crafts, the most

³⁷ Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair MacIntyre*, 163.

human of arts, the art of thinking. In his recent address to the American Catholic Philosophical Association, he said that “what we need now are thinkers who combine philosophical acumen and argument with the wit of Chesterton and the satire of Waugh.”³⁸ Could it not be said that the quality we—and our students—need first is the thirst for truth of Alasdair MacIntyre?

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³⁸ MacIntyre, “On Being a Theistic Philosopher,” 32.