

Thomas D. D'Andrea. *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue. The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre.* Ashgate, 2006. 504 pages.

Alasdair MacIntyre, who recently celebrated his 80th birthday, is widely ranked as one of the most important and provocative moral and social philosophers of our day. Thomas D'Andrea's new book, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, is now the best guide to MacIntyre's authorship with regard to the connection between the arguments presented in works published in the early part of MacIntyre's career and the three books for which he is best known: *After Virtue* (1981), *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (1987) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (1989). The central accomplishment of D'Andrea's book is his ability to trace the development of the arguments from MacIntyre's published works, connecting lines of reasoning from (now) lesser-known articles and books that MacIntyre wrote during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s with the above-mentioned trilogy, which D'Andrea dubs the "After Virtue project."

MacIntyre's central contribution as a philosopher is the way he sounds an alarm to warn us that contemporary moral philosophy and contemporary culture are both in crisis. As a gadfly, MacIntyre wants to warn us that the depth of the disorder is hidden because of the state of the new Babel. (In the biblical story of Babel, confusion entered social life because of the proliferation of languages. In the new Babel, language is confused, not by a profusion of languages, but because the same words are unwittingly used to mean different things.) Our moral discourse is muddled, warns MacIntyre, because it is drawn from fragments that now lack the contexts from which their significance derived. Disagreement about the central moral issues of our time—abortion, war, the allocation of resources for health care—is a symptom of a deeper disorder. Unless properly diagnosed and treated, the new Babel will result in interminable debates that appear rational but which mask drives that are non-rational and destructive. The way forward, proposes MacIntyre, is to retrieve insights from a culture somewhat alien to the contemporary secular world, e.g., the ancient-medieval understanding of the virtues, especially as exemplified in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. The sting of MacIntyre the gadfly carries a message: Wake up. The barbarians have been ruling us for quite some time. What is needed is a new St. Benedict who will cultivate local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained.

D’Andrea’s extensive study is divided into three parts. For me, the most informative part was the first: “The Roots of MacIntyre’s Thought.” Before reading D’Andrea’s book, I had already read (and frequently assigned in my teaching) texts from MacIntyre’s “*After Virtue* project.” Prior to reading D’Andrea’s book, my knowledge of MacIntyre’s early writings was more limited, (gained principally from Kelvin Knight’s helpful collection, *The MacIntyre Reader*). MacIntyre began publishing when he was 19 years old, and he produced more than 100 pieces prior to *After Virtue*. I found D’Andrea’s work in Part One to be a particularly helpful guide through the first three decades of MacIntyre’s career as a writer. D’Andrea details the vast “roots” of MacIntyre’s thought in four chapters, focusing on 1) MacIntyre’s early criticisms of the way that ethical inquiry proceeds in British analytic philosophy, 2) his attraction to and use of Marx and Marxism, 3) his early attraction to and criticisms of Christianity, and 4) his contribution to debates about human action and criticisms of various approaches employed in the social sciences.

Part Two provides the same detailed account of MacIntyre’s arguments as presented in the trilogy of books in the *After Virtue* project. Students and those working through those texts for the first time should find D’Andrea to be a helpful explicator and commentator; he has a steady hand.

Part Three examines MacIntyre’s work as it flows out of the “*After Virtue* project.” D’Andrea does this in two chapters. While these two chapters are very helpful in examining apparent discontinuities in and criticisms of MacIntyre’s project, this final part is, in a certain way, the least satisfactory part of D’Andrea’s outstanding book. Here is the problem: MacIntyre’s project is ongoing, and he continues to be very productive. For example, just as D’Andrea’s book appeared in print, MacIntyre published four more books!¹ The central shortcoming of D’Andrea’s book is that he leaves us thinking that the *After Virtue* project is the culmination of MacIntyre’s contribution to moral and social philosophy. Increasingly, I have come to think that it is not.

As D’Andrea meticulously shows, the *After Virtue* project proposes a three-stage account of virtue that points to social practices, the lives of individuals, and the history of communities. Character traits are virtues, according to MacIntyre, insofar as the possession and exercise of the trait enables the possessor 1) to achieve those goods internal to social practices, 2) to engage in the quest for self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good, and 3) to have an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs (which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context) and/or which one confronts.

In the 2007 Prologue to the Third Edition of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre makes it clear that he has come to think that his three-stage account of virtue is incomplete. He added a fourth element in *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999). There he argued that the virtues include those traits that allow us to flourish with the acknowledgement that human beings are dependent, vulnerable animals. D'Andrea treats briefly this addition and change in MacIntyre's thought, but not with comparable detail. Two other themes that have emerged in MacIntyre's writing in the last two decades receive similarly condensed treatment by D'Andrea: MacIntyre's effort to properly understand the first principles of the natural law and his concern to address himself to the "everyday plain person." Consonant with Pope John Paul II's call in *Fides et Ratio* to stimulate philosophy "to conform to its proper nature," MacIntyre's writing increasingly aims to cultivate in readers the confidence to engage deep philosophical issues of meaning and purpose as faced by plain persons.

Another significant shift in MacIntyre's thought comes into focus with the publication of MacIntyre's most recent book-length study, *Edith Stein*: his concern with the relationship between a philosopher's thoughts and life. D'Andrea's book does not address this development, nor does it take this approach. D'Andrea obviously cannot be faulted for leaving out of consideration a book that MacIntyre published while his own manuscript was in press, but certain similarities and differences are instructive. Each is a detailed study of a philosopher. D'Andrea's book is written as a sort of intellectual biography that focuses on arguments. It uses an approach similar to that of those grand and careful histories of philosophy produced by James Collins during the middle of the 20th century, in which a serious Catholic thinker would detail philosophical arguments from the texts of important thinkers with precision and care.² In contrast, MacIntyre's book on Edith Stein is of a very different sort, and this for two reasons: 1) MacIntyre is addressing an audience of professional philosophers who are, he presumes, mostly unfamiliar with Stein's contribution to philosophy. MacIntyre notes that "there is no entry for Edith Stein in the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, or the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*" (vii). So, part of his purpose is to show that Stein's work merits philosophical attention. However, MacIntyre's greater accomplishment in his book on Stein is that he 2) forges a new genre of philosophical writing.

In his essay, "The Ends of Life, the Ends of Philosophical Writing," published for the first time in *The Tasks of Philosophy* (2006), MacIntyre proposed a need to invent a new mode of philosophical

writing that would move beyond both biography and the history of philosophy. He names this proposed new genre “the history of philosophers.” Authors who write in this mode would explore the relationship between attitudes expressed in a philosopher’s writing compared to the philosopher’s life. Indeed, in that essay, MacIntyre’s text develops into an instance of this genre, both in his treatment of John Stuart Mill and Thomas Aquinas, and even more in his treatment of Franz Rosenzweig and Georg Lukács.

As Thaddeus Kozinski suggested in his review of MacIntyre’s *Edith Stein* (in last year’s issue of this journal), MacIntyre has produced an instance of this genre. MacIntyre’s subject matter is the relationship between writing and life in Stein. Readers of this journal are presumably well aware that Stein, who was raised in a secular Jewish context and studied under Edmund Husserl, became a Roman Catholic, entered the Carmelites, was martyred during World War II, and was canonized by Pope John Paul II as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. What emerges from MacIntyre’s text is an investigation of what it means to live a philosophical life. Many of the early chapters aim to explain Husserlian phenomenology (and Stein’s philosophical formation in that approach) to an audience of philosophers trained in the analytic, rather than the continental, mode. Some Catholic social scientists may be most interested in Chapter 13, “Stein’s Conception of Individual and Community.” With regard to clarifying concepts, I think it is the best part of the book. However, MacIntyre’s central purpose in his book on Stein is neither to explain her doctrines nor to compose a “lives-of-the-saints” biography. Instead, MacIntyre wants to dispose his reader to see that Stein’s life, her flesh-and-blood existence, is far more philosophical than that of her better-known contemporaries, such as Martin Heidegger.

D’Andrea’s study is not an instance of this new genre. He does very little to focus on MacIntyre’s flesh-and-blood biography, and he is not principally interested in the relationship between writing and life in MacIntyre. Indeed, Professor MacIntyre may find it embarrassing for me to intimate that his life and works might merit such a study. Further, perhaps it is possible or appropriate to write that sort of book only after the subject’s earthly pilgrimage is complete.

For a guide to MacIntyre’s arguments as presented in his texts, especially up to and including “the *After Virtue* project,” D’Andrea’s *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue* is first rate. For a history of a philosopher, that is, a study of the relationship between a philosopher’s writing and life, MacIntyre’s book, *Edith Stein*, is a model of this new genre.

Gregory R. Beabout
Saint Louis University

Notes

1. These include not only his book on Stein, but also two volumes of *Collected Essays* (Cambridge, 2006) and a 25th anniversary republication of *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame, 2007). The first volume of collected essays contains two pieces on John Paul II's encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, that merit the attention of readers of this journal.

2. For examples, see James Collins, *A History of Modern European Philosophy* (Bruce, 1954) and *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Regnery, 1954).