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Book Review by Daniel J. Mahoney

## BETWEEN MARX AND AQUINAS

*Alasdair MacIntyre: An Intellectual Biography*, by Émile Perreau-Saussine, translated by Nathan J. Pinkoski.  
University of Notre Dame Press, 216 pages, \$40



**I**N THE WEST THE LIBERAL ORDER HAS reigned supreme for many years. This liberal order—as distinct from the theory or philosophy of liberalism—consists in a world of commercial republics marked by constitutionalism, the rule of law, a market economy, and broad protections for political, intellectual, personal, and religious liberties. That order has always had more intrinsic merits than the theory—contractarian, individualistic, and vaguely relativistic—that often justifies it. But today it is subject to unremitting intellectual assault from both the woke Left and the post-liberal Right. Critics from the Left typically attack liberalism in the name of an amorphous “social justice,” while critics on the traditional Right fault it for flattening and homogenizing the human soul. And so our age is marked by an impatient and imprudent rush to jettison the delicate systems that have brought peace and prosperity to the West for the better part of a century.

This does not mean that the liberal order is without its problems. Its best advocates have almost always acknowledged as much. Nearly

200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville already highlighted the tendency of democracy to “democratize”—to self-radicalize in ways that undermine liberty and the inherent dignity of the human soul. Though he profoundly admired the American Founders as statesmen-thinkers of the first rank, he worried deeply about the pathologies that haunted the new order: an excessive “passion for equality,” the threat of tyrannical majorities, a paltry and petty preoccupation with material goods, and the degrading withdrawal from civic life that he called “individualism.”

To keep these tendencies in check, Tocqueville famously put forward an “art” of liberty, a “new political science for a world wholly new.” Its foundation stones were vigorous local self-government, ample and energetic voluntary associations, respect for religion, a non-utilitarian education for the few, and an attentiveness to the remaining prospects for human greatness in a democratic age prone to mediocrity. Despite his critical assessment of democracy’s nature, Tocqueville refused to despair about democracy in practice, or about the liberal order with which democracy was

more or less coextensive. Human beings still had free will and reason to which one could appeal. Of course, Tocqueville would have been appalled to see what has worn the name of liberalism over the last hundred years or so: doctrinaire egalitarianism, state centralization, and ever more aggressive hostility to religion and traditional wisdom. The displacement of statesmanlike prudence with a scientific cult of expertise and administration, and the rise of a nihilistic “culture of repudiation,” would have filled him with what in another context he called “religious dread.”

**I**N LIGHT OF ALL THIS, HOW CAN ONE SAVE liberalism from itself? The task of a prudent liberal-conservative has always been to do precisely that. As Harvard’s Harvey Mansfield recently put it, Tocquevillian conservatism aims to preserve the best of liberal republicanism and the American Founding while never losing sight of the “land of virtue” best approached through the Great Books of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, among others. That is undeniably a noble project. But is it a viable one still? Or in light of today’s mani-



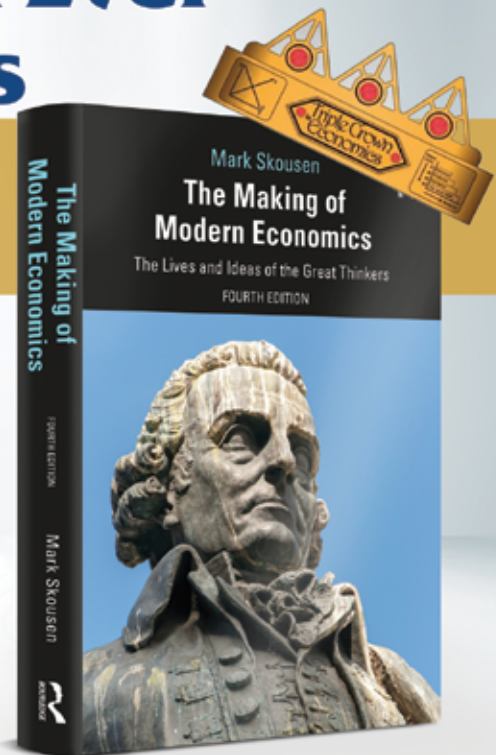
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fold crises, must we reject liberalism root and branch?

The most penetrating thinker to answer the latter question in the affirmative is undoubtedly the Scottish moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who has made his home in the U.S. since 1969 and who, at age 93, remains active at the University of Notre Dame. He is the subject of a new book by the deceased French political theorist Émile Perreau-Saussine, *Alisdair MacIntyre: An Intellectual Biography*, carefully translated by Nathan J. Pinkoski of the Zephyr Institute. A student of the conservative philosopher Pierre Manent and a professor at Cambridge University in the U.K., Perreau-Saussine died tragically in 2010 at the age of 37. As Manent points out in his substantive foreword to the book, Perreau-Saussine treats MacIntyre as “a cas éminent”: a paradigmatic example (the phrase belongs to the poet and essayist Charles Péguy). MacIntyre’s thought typifies the strengths and weaknesses of anti-liberal thought and ire in our day.

MACINTYRE’S CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM is primarily concerned with “the objective reality of the good” and its vulnerable position within the liberal order. In books such as *A Short History of Ethics* (1966), *After Virtue* (1981), and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), MacIntyre argues for “the dependence of moral life on traditions of enquiry” while lamenting “the progress of relativism and irrationalism under the corrupting influence” of democratic individualism. He decries “instrumental reasoning,” which fails to acknowledge the ends and purposes that inform human freedom. This is the most compelling feature of MacIntyre’s arguments. In the name of truth, tradition, practical reason, and respect for the moral life, he excoriates a relativism that can only speak about human life in terms of means, never of ends. More deeply, he indicts liberalism—and the entire modern “Enlightenment project”—for extolling “autonomy over all socially embodied authority.” MacIntyre is the philosopher of mutual dependence *par excellence*.

In the early 1970s, MacIntyre turned to Aristotle to broaden and deepen his critique of modernity’s moral vacuity. He converted to Catholicism in 1983 as his readings of Aristotle incurred an ever-increasing debt to Thomas Aquinas. Today, he extols a tradition of moral inquiry that looks back to both Aristotle and Aquinas, while nevertheless remaining a Marxist of sorts—although a confirmed critic of Leninist-Stalinism. Early in his career he attempted to synthesize Marxism and Christianity. He has long given up on that

impossible enterprise. But Marx can still be located very high in MacIntyre’s intellectual pantheon. His residual Marxism helps inspire his anti-liberal and anti-bourgeois polemics.

FOR MACINTYRE, THE APPEAL OF MARXISM is its opposition to the spiritually deadening forces of capitalism. Capitalism, he argues, is unjust *per se* and to the core. It reduces human beings to the status of consumers and unleashes what the Greeks called *pleonexia*, the insatiable hunger to possess *more*, on a massive scale. MacIntyre dismisses as a fiction the “low but solid” bourgeois virtues (inventiveness, self-discipline, humanity toward strangers, delayed gratification, and a preference for peace) extolled by the likes of David Hume, the Baron de Montesquieu, and Benjamin Franklin. MacIntyre thus prefers Marxism to the run-of-the mill social democracy promoted by the British Labour Party of the 1950s and ’60s. Such social democracy was, and is, too pedestrian and morally unimaginative for MacIntyre. With good intentions perhaps, social democracy buys off the working class with prosperity and bourgeois contentment. This, for MacIntyre, is too high a price to pay.

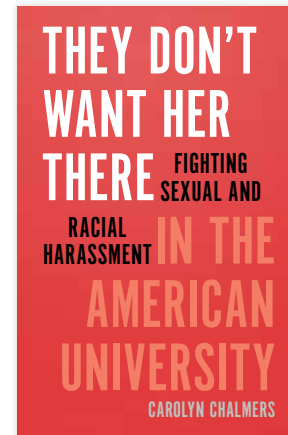
But MacIntyre’s brand of “Marxism” is not in the end all that compelling, nor even truly Marxist—although it has had a troubling influence on young Catholics of the traditionalist sort. Marx derided “the idiocy of rural life,” whereas MacIntyre remains fond of “guild socialism,” a romanticized neo-medieval approach to political economy. In an essay from 1995 examining his half-century engagement with Marx (“Three Perspectives on Marxism”), MacIntyre rejects the atheism and materialism central to Marxist theory and practice. At the same time, he makes Marxism practically synonymous with a concern for justice. Above all, he refuses any identification of Christianity “with the cause of the anti-Communist West.” He fails to appreciate that Marx fully approved of and even radicalized the modern political economy’s “productivist” goals. “Really existing socialism,” as it was called in the east of Europe, perfected various forms of inhuman capital accumulation as capitalism never did. All of this is ignored by MacIntyre.

In contrast, the late Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski has persuasively argued that Stalinism is a perfectly legitimate outcome of Marx’s Marxism, even if not the only possible one. Marx despised the merely “formal liberties” integral to modern constitutionalism. He dismissed all appeals to natural right or law as a bourgeois swindle, and emphatically called for the elimination of property, family, religion, and the nation. MacIntyre shares

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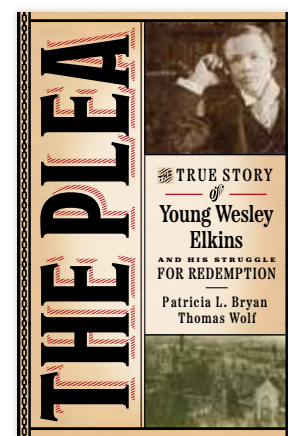


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Marx's disdain for the nation-state, although not his hostility to family, religion, or property (at least on a small scale). For both Marx and MacIntyre, the nation-state is an instrument of oligarchical domination that hides the enduring reality of class struggle. "True unity is in fact social class and not the nation," writes Perreau-Saussine in summary of MacIntyre's position. Politics for MacIntyre can only truly flourish in guilds, local unions, craft associations, and fishing villages—in what Marx himself called the "pores" of bourgeois society (or the feudalism that preceded it).

**I**N LIGHT OF THESE CLAIMS AND COMMITMENTS, Perreau-Saussine and Manent both question whether MacIntyre defends any meaningful and realistic understanding of political life. They rightly characterize him as a partisan of human *sociality* against the individualism and "autonomy" celebrated by late modern man. That is no mean thing. But for MacIntyre, are human beings truly *political* animals in the robust Aristotelian sense of the term? Though Marx would have contempt for MacIntyre's efforts to recover the local and the traditional as the true home of meaningful practice, MacIntyre ultimately shares Marx's preference for the social over the political. Marx aimed to depoliticize human existence, hoping that the state would ultimately wither away—after a period of revolutionary despotism, to be sure! But whatever the moral attractiveness of this vision, it is impossible to share MacIntyre's view that the Marxism of Marx can in fact deliver on the crucial intellectual and moral resources required to sustain a neo-medieval localism. Nor can Marxism, so inveterately hostile to the supernatural, ever nourish a new Benedict of Nursia in monastic retirement from the liberal nation-state.

It is this nation-state, and the territorial democracy it makes possible, that MacIntyre ultimately fails to appreciate. For all its imperfections, the modern nation-state provides a home for political freedom, an obstacle to sentimental cosmopolitanism, and an alternative to the ferociously tyrannical vision of a "universal and homogenous state." MacIntyre opposes Communism, to be sure, but he does not loathe it, because he does not see it for what it really is. To do so would give comfort to liberalism, opposition to which defines MacIntyre's whole enterprise. He cannot admit, even grudgingly, that democratic capitalism might have anything to recommend it—and so he is thrown back on the kind of unworkable wishcasting that promises vaguely to redeem Marxism from its own manifold failures.

In this connection, despite MacIntyre's genuine efforts to mount a serious moral critique

of Stalinism, he remains largely unmarked by a book such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1973). He doesn't understand the soul-destroying despotism for which Marxism bears some responsibility. MacIntyre's fear and trembling are directed elsewhere. He abhors democratic capitalism for its moral individualism, which he considers a profound "solvent of participatory community." Thus, this great moral philosopher fails as a political philosopher, because he allows his judgment to be excessively swayed by what I have termed anti-liberal ire.

**F**OR ALL THIS, ALASDAIR MACINTYRE IS A moral philosopher of the first rank. He scathingly assaults the spiritually vacuous utilitarianism which reduces the good to the useful, pleasant, and efficient. His critique of emotivism, the view that moral judgments are nothing but expressions of our subjective feelings, is particularly effective. He demonstrates with impeccable logic and great rhetorical flourish that Friedrich Nietzsche and decayed liberal relativism have one crucial premise in common: in the end, they both identify appeals to objectivity as "expressions

### MacIntyre's thought typifies the strengths and weaknesses of anti-liberal thought and ire in our day.

of subjective will." For MacIntyre, Nietzsche was right about the sorry "condition of moral judgment in his own day." But he made the crucial mistake of conflating a widespread modern error—that of reducing morality to subjectivism—with "the nature of morality as such." That is why the central chapter of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's most famous book, is titled "Aristotle or Nietzsche?" This is the fundamental choice that MacIntyre leaves us with in all his mature writings. For him, Nietzsche is a superb and unsurpassed diagnostician of the moral crisis that is coextensive with Enlightenment rationalism. But as MacIntyre forcefully states in *After Virtue*, Nietzsche's positive alternative to liberal rationalism (like Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism-Cum-Marxism") belongs "in the pages of a philosophical bestiary rather than in a serious discussion." With a pungent eloquence, MacIntyre takes effective aim at what Perreau-Saussine calls "a particular moral philosophy that can be described under different names: 'nihilism,' 'existentialism,' 'emotivism'—moral philosophies that can be characterized by their rejection of all

practical rationality, and, in the end, by their extreme poverty." One could not say it more clearly or effectively.

Though he describes himself as both a Thomist and Aristotelian, MacIntyre does not understand Aristotle and Aquinas as they understood themselves. Both considered themselves to be articulating absolute truths, valid in all times and places and defensible by universally valid reasoning. Such a claim is completely foreign to MacIntyre's thinking, as he acknowledges in *After Virtue*: for him, the moral claims of a given tradition only make sense from *within* that tradition, and may not obtain or persuade outside of it. At the same time, MacIntyre readily acknowledges that some traditions are more persuasive and coherent than others, better suited to explain the limits and conundrums inherent in certain modes of moral inquiry. This, he argues, is precisely what the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition can do for the inconsistencies of modern utilitarianism. Thus, MacIntyre does his best to avoid replacing Enlightenment rationalism with pure perspectivism or a traditionalism closed to universal truth.

**I**N ANY CASE, IT IS HARDLY CREDIBLE TO fault MacIntyre for relativism of the moral or historical sort. In his later writings, MacIntyre moves, as he has put it, from "an account of the human good in purely social terms" to an attempt to provide "his Aristotelian commitments" with a firmer metaphysical and even biological foundation. He has argued effectively enough that while traditions provide a social framework for practical rationality to operate within, they are ultimately able to do so because human beings have a nature that directs them toward the good in its various manifestations. He has thus melded traditionalism with classical rationalism to create a Thomistic Aristotelianism that is *sui generis*.

In his idiosyncratic if thought-provoking 1999 work, *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre turns to the social behavior of dolphins to explore "the moral significance of the animality of human beings" (as he put it in the prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue*, published in 2007). Through the sociability and mutual dependence he observes among dolphins, MacIntyre enumerates some of the crucial preconditions for the practical rationality that only flourishes fully in human beings who live well. This is not Aristotle's natural biology, but it is part of a larger and coherent effort to establish a natural grounding for human sociability.

But MacIntyre's Aristotelianism remains "curious," to quote Perreau-Saussine. Ar-

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istotle's *Politics* plays hardly any role in his moral and political reflection. A partisan of the "plain man," MacIntyre confesses to being repulsed by the *hauteur* of Aristotle's magnanimous man, the model for greatness of soul. He has decidedly conventional views about Aristotle and slavery, not appreciating that Aristotle's defense of natural slavery condemns almost every historical variant of that practice. MacIntyre states that Aristotle believed in the inherent inferiority of foreigners, even though he placed Carthage among the three best regimes in practice. He emphasizes Aristotle's low view of women, without noting his emphatic argument that men's rule over women should be "royal and political," and thus never despotic—since Aristotle famously defined political rule as "ruling and being ruled."

There is thus an element of carelessness and proto-political correctness in these facile assertions on MacIntyre's part. More importantly, MacIntyre's work contains no serious discussion of political regimes and political forms, except ritualistic denunciations of late capitalism and the nation-state. The all-important (for Aristotle) conflict between the democrat and oligarch, and the political philosopher as umpire or mediator between the partisans, is nowhere to be seen. As Manent argues, MacIntyre instead finds the heart of practical life "in the practice of the craftsman or skilled worker" when their deeds give rise to a sustained "habit or tradition." There is no role for the *phronēsis*, the practical wisdom, of the statesman who alone can put the full range of the virtues into meaningful practice. A strange Aristotelianism, indeed.

**I**NDEBTED TO LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN and the Catholic analytic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe as much as to Aristotle and Aquinas, MacIntyre's work is exemplary when it comes to exposing the

philosophical fragility of moral relativism. MacIntyre insists that "practical rationality" necessarily "unfolds in the context of a particular community." In this connection, his writings have richly articulated a *philosophy of tradition*, as Perreau-Saussine calls it. But despite MacIntyre's unrelieved contempt for conservatism and conservatives (whom he caricatures beyond verisimilitude), and despite his best efforts at being subversive, he is a traditionalist in important respects. So much so that he fails to recognize that even the most sober and responsible philosophizing sometimes must pose a powerful challenge to ossified traditions. As Manent puts it, MacIntyre never dreams "of exiting the cave as long as the cave is unpretentious and lit by candlelight."

Since our "most venerable institutions," universities and churches among them, are now "but shadows of themselves," Manent suggests that one must increasingly rely on the resources of the "rational animal as such." (MacIntyre himself thoughtfully addresses the crisis of the university in his 2009 book, *God, Philosophy, Universities*.) Of course, political reason should never show contempt for salutary traditions, and MacIntyre's work is invaluable in pointing that out. But not all truth is, or can be, "traditional." Sometimes, Manent indicates, it must be approached through a "phenomenology" of the human condition or through "the 'great books' of the philosophical tradition, which are custodians for the tradition of rupture with the tradition." A philosophy of tradition is not enough, especially in an era beset by tradition-destroying nihilism.

MacIntyre is right that the poor "individual" of modern moral theory is bereft when equipped with nothing but his own subjective judgment. Those contemporary theorists of liberalism who leave us with a merely "procedural" freedom and who are

largely silent about the "good life" can hardly help defend or renew a liberalism worthy of the name. But MacIntyre's demi-Marxist, demi-Thomist traditionalism leaves us bereft, too, in other decisive respects. One way of putting our task is to recognize that we must moderate "the abstract universalism of the most dogmatic liberals," while opposing particularities that lose sight of the good as such. We must constantly recall, as Perreau-Saussine does, that "liberalism presupposes a social order that it does not produce and that it even tends to destroy." With that in mind, we must reject the "absolutizing" of individual consent and the facile moral relativism all around us. But the liberal order is not equivalent to whatever theory aims to justify or rule it. It has strengths of its own that theory often ignores. We must defend the *best* of the liberal order while acknowledging its intrinsic weaknesses and temptations, even learning from the most cogent arguments directed against it. But it is a mistake, and positively un-Aristotelian, to succumb to anti-liberal ire. There is nothing wise, judicious, or responsible about that.

As Perreau-Saussine writes, with a nod to Leo Strauss, "The tension between liberalism and these criticisms, between freedom and truth, does not weaken the West. On the contrary, this tension constitutes one of the secrets of its vitality." May our contemporaries be receptive to the wisdom and moderation that informs this splendid and timely book.

*Daniel J. Mahoney is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute, professor emeritus of Assumption University, and the author, most recently, of The Statesman as Thinker: Portraits of Greatness, Courage, and Moderation (Encounter Books), and Recovering Politics, Civilization, and the Soul: Essays on Pierre Manent and Roger Scruton (St. Augustine's Press).*



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