

Preface: Alasdair MacIntyre's C. L. R. James

David Scott

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Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most remarkable contemporary moral and political philosophers. Certainly, his work has had a large influence on my own thinking over the years. Born in Scotland in 1929, MacIntyre is a generative and prolific writer, the author of a number of pathbreaking books, among them *After Virtue*; *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*; and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. These are books, systematic interventions into ongoing debates, that have sought to alter the character and project of Anglo-American philosophy against the liberal “self-image of our age,” whether represented in the neo-Kantian foundationalism of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, on the one hand, or the postmodern antifoundationalism of Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature*, on the other.¹

To my mind, one of the more significant features of MacIntyre’s work has been the development of a cluster of interconnected concepts—among them tradition, narrative, practice, the virtues—that offer a sensitive response to diverse social and historical and cultural questions about power, knowledge, and difference. It matters, therefore, that in MacIntyre’s philosophy there

1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). See also *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1971), one of MacIntyre’s earlier collections of essays on debates in the social sciences and philosophy on the role of ideology. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

has been a concerted critique of the narrow, ahistorical, and largely academic character of much Anglo-American philosophy, philosophy shaped more by the technical imperatives of the classroom than by a receptive commitment to *worldliness*. To be sure, what MacIntyre calls philosophy is not without dense internal complexities (his critique of “emotivism,” for example, or his claims for Thomistic Aristotelianism) that make appreciation of it hard-earned, but more importantly it is animated by an engaged openness to a wide range of scholarly disciplines, including social history, anthropology, psychology, and literature. What MacIntyre calls philosophy is less an authorized canon of great books belonging exclusively to Europe, or anyway, to a dominant *idea* of Europe (including European America), than a *style* of self-conscious and self-reflective imagination that culturally and historically has taken a variety of forms. In this respect, it has been of interest to me that MacIntyre has always been self-conscious of the bivalence of his own cultural-intellectual heritage, caught between the subaltern Gaelic oral culture of his upbringing and the hegemonic modernity of his formal schooling.² Finally, it matters also that MacIntyre’s philosophy has always evolved within “shouting distance” (as Stuart Hall might have said) of Marxism and therefore has never been unmindful either of Marxism’s criticism of capitalist modernity *or* of its hopes for a political society beyond it. Indeed, it probably would not be too far-fetched to suggest that MacIntyre’s questions and directions have evolved partly as a way of responding to, grappling with, the moral grounding that Marxism has arguably needed but famously lacked. His radical neo-Aristotelianism might well be described as a partial rewriting of Marx.³

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This is nowhere more evident than in MacIntyre’s most recent book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*.⁴ Its subject matter and style of discourse are not entirely unfamiliar for readers of his earlier work, save for a number of more explicit emphases. The book develops a reworked critique of capitalist modernity and the conceptions of the “good” (and of morality more generally) that conform to its ethos and forms of self-knowledge; it advances, further, a Thomistic Aristotelian claim about the proper connection between the virtues, desires, practical reasoning, and human flourishing.

Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity thus deepens and extends arguments that are elements of what MacIntyre has himself referred to as his “interminably long history of ethics.”⁵ But one of the surprising parts of this book is the last of its chapters, “Four Narratives,” in which MacIntyre aims to think about the modes of practical reasoning in the concrete lives of four self-examining

2 For a sense of the arc of MacIntyre’s intellectual biography, see the following instructive interviews: “Alasdair MacIntyre,” in Andrew Pyle, ed., *Key Philosophers in Conversation: The Cogito Interviews* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 75–84; and “Nietzsche or Aristotle? Alasdair MacIntyre,” in Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, trans. Rosanna Crocitto (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 137–52.

3 See Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, eds., *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism* (London: Haymarket, 2009).

4 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

5 See Pyle, “Alasdair MacIntyre,” 77.

individuals, drawn from different walks of moral-political life. And what is further surprising and fascinating for anyone concerned with Caribbean intellectual traditions is that the third of these four narratives is about C. L. R. James (the others concern Vasily Grossman, the Russian Jewish novelist; Sandra Day O'Connor, the American jurist; and Denis Faul, the Irish priest and activist). MacIntyre's interest in this chapter is to exemplify what he has been arguing throughout the book, namely, 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."⁶ James, for MacIntyre, was one such agent whose life, therefore, is worth learning from.

Now, to my mind, one of the things that make this account of James so stimulating is that MacIntyre has little or no sense of, or interest in, the debates about James in Caribbean studies, let alone the *stakes* in those debates. Indeed, MacIntyre is barely interested in the *substance* of James's ideas and thus helpfully *evades* the well-trod preoccupations in the burgeoning archive of James scholarship. Something else interests MacIntyre, namely, the *moral agency* that shaped the arc of James's intellectual life and that is revealed, for example, in the reflective self-consciousness of James's letters to Constance Webb, in the final chapter of his *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, in his reflections on tragedy, and, most of all, in the autobiographical *Beyond a Boundary*.⁷ For, unlike his more theoretical, historical, or programmatic books, these are texts in which James is at pains to offer a *justificatory* account of how he lived, the virtues he sought to cultivate and practice, the desires that animated his projects, and the reasons that led him in one direction rather than another. These are texts, in other words, in which we see James as a practical reasoner or a moral learner, someone generating and shaping aspirations, someone ranking and ordering sometimes competing individual and social ends. In short, we see James as a profoundly *human* agent, at once directed and disciplined *and* exposed to vulnerabilities and contradictions in his effort to live out a virtuous life. In this respect, notably, MacIntyre is summoned by Steve Pyke's great photograph of James, included in the first edition of his magnificent collection of portraits, *Philosophers*.⁸ Not surprisingly, both MacIntyre and Pyke are moved by James's famous retrospective statement: "Time would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and the relations of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not quality of goods or utility which matter, but movement; not where you are or what you have but where you have come from, where you are going and the rate at which you are getting there."⁹ On MacIntyre's account, this statement, though lacking an abstract and argumentative character, not only reveals the philosopher in James

6 MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 243.

7 See C. L. R. James and Constance Webb, *Special Delivery: The Letters of C. L. R. James to Constance Webb, 1939–1948* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (New York: James, 1953); and C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Hutchinson, 1963). On James and the tragic, see, for example, "Notes on *Hamlet*," in Anna Grimshaw, ed., *The C. L. R. James Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 243–46.

8 Steve Pyke, *Philosophers* (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1993). See the image and Pyke's remarks on his visit to James's residence at www.nme.com/photos/8-intimate-photos-of-kurt-cobain-joe-strummer-and-more-by-world-renowned-photographer-steve-pyke-1421813, image 5.

9 James, *Beyond a Boundary*, 113.

but also demonstrates the philosophical significance of the idea that human lives have a structure that is not simply invented but also *discovered*.

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The one and only time I had the privilege of meeting C. L. R. James was in February 1988, the year before he died, the year, too, before Pyke's astonishing photograph was taken. I was returning to New York from eighteen months of fieldwork in Sri Lanka for my PhD, and I'd stopped in London, partly to meet M. G. Smith, the Jamaican anthropologist, with whom I had briefly corresponded from Colombo. At some point in our conversation, and I can't now remember why, Smith asked me whether I wanted to meet James, and, wild with disbelief, I said yes, *please*, if it could be arranged. Smith instantly rang up James's then assistant, Anna Grimshaw, herself an anthropologist, who vigilantly supervised James's every moment, and by some astonishing luck it was arranged that I should meet James the following morning at his modest flat at the corner of Railton and Shakespeare Roads in Brixton.

It is impossible to adequately convey to anyone what this meant to me, meeting C. L. R. James, an almost mythical figure to my Caribbean generation, and I am not going to attempt to offer a full account of it here. What I want to convey is something of the character of that encounter that speaks to what I believe MacIntyre is saying. For more than the content of what James said to me that morning (about Marxism or literature, for example, two of our topics), it was the moral movement of his mind that captivated me, the sense I had, sitting in that close but ordered little room, of an old, world-weary, yet unrelenting spirit, still, after so long and trying a journey, looking to find his way toward a coherent narrative of the life he'd come to live, the ideas he'd come to hold and develop, the individual ends and common goods he'd made it his purpose to pursue, the values that ordered and directed those preoccupations and commitments, and the reasons he gave, to himself and others, for choosing one path as opposed to another.¹⁰ I had always thought that the audio recording of that conversation of more than thirty years ago was lost (James had insisted on the recording), but I gather now this might not be the case.¹¹ I have no desire to listen to it, however. What matters to me is my memory of that vivid experience of someone (someone whose life I could partly imagine and partly not) whose very presence gave eloquent expression to the illuminating beauty and poignant finitude of an incomplete and incompletable moral quest. It is something of *this* that Pyke shows us in his portrait—and MacIntyre in his narrative.

Kingston—Amsterdam—New York

July–August 2019

10 This is the direction of my interest with respect to Stuart Hall in *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

11 See "5095—C. L. R. James, Interviewed by David Scott, 1988 February 4," box 28, folder 4, C. L. R. James archive, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; findingaids.cul.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-rb/ldpd_6910705/dsc/7#subseries2. Many thanks to Aaron Kamugisha for bringing the recording's existence to my attention.