

MACINTYRE'S *AFTER VIRTUE*: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING

Uma leitura fenomenológica do Depois da Virtude de MacIntyre

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Abstract: This essay offers a phenomenological reading of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. It is intended to both illustrate the similarities between MacIntyre's mode of argumentation in this work and the early Heidegger's method of phenomenological destruction, and to highlight the potential fruitfulness of a deeper engagement between phenomenology and MacIntyre's work. MacIntyre's critique of modern moral philosophy, like Heidegger's destruction, turned upon the groundlessness of abstract concepts separated from the experiential and social context in which they were originally at home. Drawing upon Heidegger's phenomenology allows one to better understand MacIntyre's critique as well as the role of his notion of a practice as a corrective to these tendencies.

Keywords: MacIntyre, Phenomenology, Heidegger.

Resumo: Este ensaio oferece uma leitura fenomenológica do livro *Depois da Virtude* de Alasdair MacIntyre. Pretendemos simultaneamente ilustrar as similaridades entre o modo de argumentação de MacIntyre nesta obra e o método inicial de Heidegger da destruição fenomenológica, bem como sublinhar o potencial frutífero de um engajamento mais profundo entre fenomenologia e a obra de MacIntyre. A crítica de MacIntyre à filosofia moral moderna, assim como a destruição de Heidegger, se voltaram para a falta de fundamentação de conceitos abstratos separados do contexto social e experiencial nos quais foram originalmente formulados. Apoiar-se na fenomenologia de Heidegger nos permite compreender melhor a crítica de MacIntyre, bem como o papel de sua noção de uma prática como um corretivo a essas tendências.

Palavras-chave: MacIntyre, Fenomenologia, Heidegger.

“Dismantling, here this means: a regress to Greek philosophy, to Aristotle, in order to see how a certain original position came to be fallen away from and covered up and to see that we are situated in this *fallen away*.” (Heidegger, 1985, p. 59)

“We only begin to see what Aristotle saw when we first bring the phenomena home to ourselves.” (Heidegger, 1985, p. 285)

In this brief essay my aim is to offer a phenomenological reading of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. By so doing I want to both illustrate the similarities between MacIntyre's mode of argumentation in this work and the early Heidegger's method of phenomenological destruction, and to highlight the potential fruitfulness of a deeper engagement between phenomenology and MacIntyre's work. Those unfamiliar with MacIntyre often misunderstand the nature of his work. It is typically assumed that he has

simply argued for the necessity of returning to an Aristotelian (teleological) metaphysics. As I indicate below, *After Virtue* represents an attempt to re-appropriate Aristotelian teleology on a practical, social – and I argue, phenomenological – basis. MacIntyre's re-reading of Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* attempts to highlight the phenomenological basis of the Aristotle's central ethical concepts, especially that of virtue. For MacIntyre, Aristotle's moral philosophy rests on a largely unarticulated account of everyday life as characterized by participation in, what he calls, *practices*. Using this as a technical term, MacIntyre intends to indicate a contingent and distinctive type of social structure that is cooperative, goal-directed, and rule based. According to MacIntyre, this form of social life and the experiences constitutive of participation in such activities form the necessary sociological foundation of an adequate moral philosophy. While I provide a summary of MacIntyre's arguments it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a detailed defense of his claims; rather I intend to highlight the fruitfulness of a deeper engagement between phenomenologists and proponents of MacIntyre's work.

Alasdair MacIntyre begins *After Virtue* by considering what he calls, “a disquieting suggestion” (2007 p. 1). Speaking of ordinary moral discourse he says,

We possess...the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost, both theoretically and practically, our comprehension of morality. (2007 p. 2).

According to MacIntyre, ordinary moral discourse, the everyday use of moral terminology, is characterized by a set of conflicting claims, which typically disregard the social and historical contexts where such claims were originally at home. Often appeals to incompatible normative concepts are made by the same person in different contexts. MacIntyre's claim is that contemporary moral discourse is characterized by fragments of earlier forms of moral discourse stripped from the social and historical contexts within which they can be properly understood; and used without reference to, or understanding of, the experiential contexts which originally grounded such normative notions.

MacIntyre views the mode of theorizing typical of modern moral philosophy in a similar manner. This was the attempt to ground moral principles and rules without reference to a concrete form of life. MacIntyre offers two reasons for rejecting the attempts to ground moral claims in abstract conceptions of human rationality. The first centers upon the multiplication of disagreements and competing conceptions of reason that has resulted from this attempt. If a set of universal ethical claims could be derived from a timeless conception of rationality, why has the attempt to do this only resulted in increased disagreement? MacIntyre claims that appeals to purportedly neutral, timeless moral principles mask partisan answers to questions regarding the human end. He also draws upon Quine's critique of the analytic/synthetic distinction to question the viability of the foundationalism of modern moral philosophy. According to MacIntyre, modern moral philosophy was structured by the perceived necessity of articulating and justifying moral principles and rules in the absence of a concrete conception of a *telos* (2007 p. 62). Lacking a coherent notion of a *telos*, modern moral philosophy was bound to lapse into incoherence; something that MacIntyre takes to have been articulated most pointedly by Nietzsche (2007 p. 113). The project of modern moral philosophy resulted from the radically changed social structures brought about by the industrial revolution (MacIntyre, 1984 p. 253-4). The rise of capitalism, along with a variety of other factors, resulted in the destruction of the social structures that provided the context within which a notion of a *telos* had application. What I want to suggest is that MacIntyre's

mode of argumentation, despite his own claims¹, has much in common with Heidegger's method of *destruction*.

In an early lecture series – *The Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression* – given before the publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers an argument for the indispensability of the phenomenological method and for the importance of 'destruction' as a component of that method. He says, "The leading towards the problem comes about by means of the phenomenological-critical destruction, such that above all the concealed sense-moments come to a philosophical terminus in the manner in which they press towards something decisive" (Heidegger, 2010 p.21). By means of destruction concepts long reified are brought back into a relationship with lived experience. Heidegger claims that "it is naïve to suppose that one could today, or ever, start again from scratch in philosophy and be so radical to suppose that one could dispense with all so-called tradition" (Heidegger, 2010 p. 21). Because of this impossibility, destruction is an essential element of the phenomenological method. Destruction is a form of reading that seeks to bring the ideal constructs, the concepts, theories, and assertions back to their roots in experience and from this to uncover the nature of the enactment underlying the adoption of such a framework. It does this by exposing the fundamental assumptions, presuppositions, and orientations underlying any given theoretical framework.

Husserl's development of the phenomenological method was seen by Heidegger as a new beginning for philosophy.² Husserl's primary breakthrough revolved around the notion of intentionality. Heidegger says, "What makes us blind to intentionality is the presumption that what we have here is a theory of the relation between physical and psychic, whereas what is really exhibited is simply a structure of the psychic itself" (1985 p. 35). According to Heidegger, the importance of the phenomenological method is its ability to make manifest the structures of experience, as opposed the relation between theoretical constructs. By assuming that intentionality was a theory, as opposed to a structure manifest in experience, the neo-Kantians, and especially Rickert, failed to grasp its import. He accused such philosophers of thinking in "dogmas and directions," and assuming that intentionality was "something along the same lines" (1985 p. 36). Their failure was to assume that Husserl's account of intentionality was another instance of theory construction as opposed to a claim about the way phenomena present themselves. It is important to understand Heidegger's claim about phenomenology; that philosophical theories of necessity make claims about experiential content and that it is always possible, and necessary, to bring theoretical constructions back to their purported experiential content so that their phenomenological adequacy, or lack thereof can be made manifest. Heidegger states that "philosophy does not consist in deduced general definitions, but is always an element of *factual life experience*" (2010 p. 26). He explains this by pointing to what he calls, the *fading of meaningfulness*. This is "a transition into the stage and into the mode of non-primordially where the genuineness of the enactment and beforehand the renewal of the enactment are lacking, where even the relations wear themselves out and where merely the content that itself is not primordially had 'is of interest'" (Heidegger, 2010 p. 26). In such a situation the concepts employed lack

¹ "So if we are to look for resources to investigate the hypothesis about morality which I have suggested, however bizarre and improbable it may appear to you now, we shall have to ask whether we can find in the type of philosophy of history propounded by writers such as Hegel and Collingwood – very different from each other as they are, of course – resources which we cannot find in analytical philosophy or phenomenological philosophy" (MacIntyre, 2007 p. 3).

² "Even more unusual than the subject matter and totally contrary to the customary way of philosophizing is the kind of penetration and appropriation which the work demands. It proceeds in a thorough-going investigative fashion. It calls for a step-by-step, expressly intuitive envisaging of the matters at issue and a verifying demonstration of them... If the impact of the work were compared to what it demands of us, then it would have to be said that its impact has been minimal and superficial, in spite of the major revolutions initiated by it in the last two decades" (Heidegger, 1985 p. 26).

their intrinsic relationship to either the intuitions by which they are fulfilled or the orientations underlying the use of such concepts. What is of interest is *not primordially had* because it is detached from the experiential context within which its phenomenological adequacy (or lack thereof) can be made manifest.

Heidegger's discussion of fulfillment in another early lectures series, *The History of the Concept of Time*, speak to this point. Heidegger says, "We accordingly speak of a *definitive and thoroughgoing fulfillment* when on the side of presuming *all the partial intentions are fulfilled* and, on the side of the intuition which bestows fulfillment, that intuition presents *the whole matter in its totality*" (1985 p.49). The 'relation' which is lost sight of in the fading of meaningfulness is to be understood in terms of the notion of 'evidence.' Heidegger says

Identifying fulfillment is what we call evidence. Evidence is a specific intentional act, that of identifying the presumed and the intuited; the presumed is itself illuminated in the matter. This elaboration of evidence was for the first time brought to a successful resolution by Husserl, who thus made an essential advance beyond all the obscurities prevalent in the tradition of logic and epistemology. (1985 p. 50).

Evidence, by bringing what is presumed – in theories, concepts, and statements – into a relationship with what is intuited, makes manifest the necessary phenomenological grounding in experience of any such ideal constructs. It is important to note that Heidegger does not limit intentionality to cognitive engagements with the world. Heidegger says that evidence "is not restricted to assertions, predications, [and] judgments"... , that there is "evidence of willing and wishing, of loving and hoping" (1985 p. 51). This relates to his development of a hermeneutics of facticity, where he argues that practical comportment, rather than cognitive engagement, is the more fundamental manner in which *dasein* engages with the world.

At this point we can consider MacIntyre's project, the outlines of which were sketched above, in the light of Heidegger's method of destruction. MacIntyre claimed that contemporary moral discourse is characterized by a variety of conflicting normative concepts, "which lack the contexts from which their significance derived" (2007 p. 2). In Heidegger's terminology, contemporary moral discourse is not *primordially had* and is characterized by a *fading of meaningfulness*. Lacking a relationship to experiential grounds, such claims become essentially arbitrary. According to MacIntyre the incoherence at the level of ordinary moral discourse is a result of the failure of modern moral philosophy to ground moral discourse in abstract reason. The attempt to ground moral claims in abstract principles was driven by the rejection of the notion of a *telos*. It is important that one not misunderstand this claim. Were one to conceive of the notion of a *telos* as an abstract account of the good, it would be susceptible to the same critique as that of modern moral philosophy. A position similar to this was ascribed to Plato by Aristotle, only to be rejected (see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1). On MacIntyre's account the notion of a *telos* that is lacking in modern moral philosophy is that of a concrete, *factual*, social order. He claims that changing social structures, especially as a result of the industrial revolution, served to eliminate the concrete social orders which provided the experiential context within which notions of a *telos*, could find application (2007 p. 239).

Lacking this concept and its grounding in distinctive social and historical contexts, moral rules, which had been given authority insofar as they provided for the achievement of such a *telos*, needed new sources of justification. "Hence there is a pressure to vindicate them [moral rules] either by devising some new teleology or by finding some new categorical status for them" (MacIntyre, 2007 p. 62). The latter possibility is exemplified by Kant, who attempted to deduce authoritative moral principles in abstraction from conceptions of the

good. MacIntyre notes that Kant admitted the necessity of a teleological perspective for a proper grounding of morality (in the *Critique of Practical Reason*) but that this notion was presented as merely hypothetical and abstract. The other possibility was exemplified by the tradition of utilitarianism. Jeremy Bentham's development of this viewpoint grounded moral precepts in a crude and univocal conception of the good. Bentham's crude notion of good as pleasure lacked phenomenological grounding; goods give themselves in a variety of ways. John Stuart Mill's development of utilitarianism provided for a more concrete conception of the good but in so doing – by recognizing that ends are heterogeneous – he undermined the basic claim of utilitarianism, that moral claims can be grounded in a summation of pleasures. Mill's recognition of the limitation of Bentham's abstract understanding of good as pleasure and Kant's acknowledgement of the inescapable role of the notion of a *telos* as the ground of moral claims illustrate the non-primordially of the most prominent modern theories of moral philosophy. Speaking of the potential for the fading of meaningfulness of various types of conceptual frameworks, Heidegger says, “[t]he fading is at work in the factual time of the enactment so that scientific theories, propositions, and concepts just like philosophical explicate (in the mode of usability) of the no longer primordially experienced are taken up, handed down and further developed” (2010 p. 142). These philosophers adopted concepts that lacked reference to a concrete social order in which human life is enacted. These theories are not phenomenologically adequate because they consist of reified moral concepts that lack reference either to the experiences that necessarily fulfill these notions or to the orientations and motivations that underlie their use. According to MacIntyre, this experiential context is constituted by a very particular, concrete social order in which, a primarily practical, conception of a *telos* can be embodied.

In the broad outlines of his critique of modern moral philosophy, MacIntyre's account recalls Heidegger's claims regarding the philosophical tradition. Describing the philosophy of the 20's Heidegger says, “This context of being or validity is either taken to be something free-floating, absolutely valid in itself, or characterized as being *both* what is thought by an Absolute Spirit *and* its thinking—and the latter is in turn taken either in Hegel's sense or in that of Augustinian Neoplatonism” (1999 p. 32). About such a mode of philosophizing, Heidegger says, “Thus, one strives for an a priori transcendental science of reason and values as a distribution of the ultimate principles, values, goals of the factual life of the individual, of the community, of cultures in general” (2010 p. 161). For Heidegger the philosophical tradition generally – and especially modern rationalism³ – was characterized by *fallenness*. He says, “Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial ‘sources’ from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn” (1962 p. 43). According to Heidegger, the concepts and ideal structures of the philosophical tradition are not genuinely had. His proposal is to return to being-in-the-world in order gain access to *dasein's* primordial understanding of being in terms of practical comportment (Heidegger, 1985 p. 156).

³ Heidegger says that for Descartes “the possibility of a pure problematic of being gets renounced in principle... Because ‘being’ is not in fact accessible as an entity, it is expressed through attributes—definite characteristics of the entities under consideration, characteristics which themselves are” (1662 p. 127). These characteristics are of course extension and consciousness. Since Descartes denies that human beings have access to the being of entities – their substantiality – he takes it that these attributes provide an original mode of access to beings respectively characterized by such attributes. Because of the particular fore-conception operative in Descartes' thought, the world is understood primarily as the totality of entities that are present-at-hand, and thus primarily as objects for a knowing subject. Speaking of Descartes' philosophy, Heidegger states, “Thus the Being of the ‘world’ is, as it were, dictated to it in terms of a definite idea of Being which lies veiled in concept of substantiality, and in terms of the idea of a knowledge by which such entities are cognized” (1962 p.129).

Whereas Heidegger turns to Dasein's being-in-the-world as the locus of a phenomenologically adequate grasp of being, according to MacIntyre, ethics can only be properly understood in terms of practices. MacIntyre understands a practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (2007 p. 187)

Practices are significant because they provide "the arena in which the virtues are exhibited and in terms of which they provide their primary, if incomplete, definition..." (*Ibid.*). Practices are distinguished by the role that cooperation plays in the identification and achievement of goods that are specific to a given practice. The virtues are experientially manifest to participants of practices insofar as they make it possible for participants to achieve the goods specific to a given practice.

MacIntyre considers a wide variety of activities – including arts, sciences, some forms of productive labor, the making and sustaining of households and local communities, as well as games and sports – to be practices. Understood phenomenologically, practices provide the context for the fundamental experiences in terms of which ethical concepts are given primordially. Of destruction, Heidegger says, "It leads into the situation of the pursuit of the pre-delineation, of the enactment of the preconception and thereby of the fundamental experience" (2010 p.25). MacIntyre's reading of the history of moral philosophy serves as a destruction of this tradition. He claimed that the concepts and modes of argumentation typical of modern moral philosophy can only be understood in terms of the rejection of an earlier, broadly Aristotelian, approach to ethics in which a notion of a *telos* was grounded in a concrete form of life; and further that Aristotle's ethics can only be understood in terms of practices as the locus of the fundamental experiences that serve to *define* or ground the fundamental concepts constitutive of Aristotelian ethical theory. This notion of practice was never explicitly thematized by Aristotle and can be understood as derived from a destruction of Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*. Speaking of an approach to ethics grounded in this understanding of practices MacIntyre says, "[A]lthough this account of the virtues is teleological, it does not require any allegiance to Aristotle's metaphysical biology" (2007 p. 196). On the traditional understand of Aristotle, his ethics were grounded in a theoretical understanding of human nature – 'metaphysical biology' – rather than in an account of a concrete social order constituted by practices. MacIntyre's project is an attempt to uncover the practical and experiential – one could say phenomenological – grounds of Aristotle's moral philosophy.

MacIntyre's reading of the tradition extends beyond moral philosophy. He argued that the social sciences, and especially dominant perspectives in managerial theory, also shared many of the shortcomings of modern moral philosophy. He notes that claims to managerial expertise rest on "the aspiration to value neutrality and the claim to manipulative power" (2007 p.86). These two aspects of the claims of managerial expertise, in turn, require for their "vindication... a justified conception of social science as providing a stock of law-like generalizations with strong predictive power" (2007 p.88). MacIntyre rejects both of these claims, which he calls 'fictions.' Neutrality presupposes that social structures and states of affairs can be identified and described independently from the observers perspective but actions, events, and states-of-affairs in the everyday world are always understood as relevant to the projects and plans of the people who encounter them. Heidegger makes the same point, saying, "[B]eing-in-the-world is so to speak constantly being summoned by the *threatening* and *non-threatening* character of the world" (1985 p.254). A neutral account of the

world (in Heidegger's sense) presupposes an ability to identify the structures of meaningfulness *simpliciter*, independent of their meaningfulness to someone in particular. The notion of neutrality is a fiction because the structures of meaningfulness presupposed in managerial directives, ostensibly identified without reference to anyone in particular, in reality can only be identified with reference to the project of the manager and the class or group of which she is a member.

A similar point can be made about managerial, or generally, social scientific pretensions to possess a body of knowledge enabling such persons to control and bring about desired events. This presupposes that the motivations of human beings can be understood in the way that, say, various properties of chemicals and their interactions, can be catalogued. Heidegger makes a similar point about, what he calls, 'the humane sciences.'

In distinguishing the existential analytic from anthropology, psychology, and biology, we shall confine ourselves to what is in principle the ontological question. Our distinctions will necessarily be inadequate from the standpoint of 'scientific theory' simply because the scientific structure of the above-mentioned disciplines... is today thoroughly questionable and needs to be attacked in new ways which must have their source in ontological problematics. (1962 p. 71).

For Heidegger, these sciences – he mentions – ethnography as well – lack an adequate or original understanding of the being of human being, and instead, presuppose a reified conception of human beings as objects ready to hand. But such a reified notion presupposes that human beings and their actions can be understood independently of their concrete social structures, from the perspective by which they understood themselves; it was just this claim that MacIntyre rejected in articulating his critique of modern moral philosophy and in his rejection of Aristotle's 'metaphysical biology.'

In the preceding I have attempting to manifest the similarities between MacIntyre's genealogy of moral philosophy and Heidegger's method of destruction. To those familiar with MacIntyre's work, these similarities should not be surprising; *After Virtue* was an attempt to re-appropriate Aristotle's moral philosophy while at the same time rejecting his metaphysical biology. Rather than offering an account of human nature, MacIntyre points to the experiential context of various practices, as the foundation of a contemporary appropriation of Aristotle's moral philosophy. Heidegger's phenomenological destruction sheds light on MacIntyre's project and serves to clarify what is at stake in such a re-reading.

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