MacIntyre and The Ethics of Catastrophe
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ABSTRACT
MacIntyre characterises liberal societies as suffering distinctive, structural forms of malaise: they are a ‘disaster’, a ‘moral calamity’, sites of ‘barbarism and darkness’. I argue that, whilst we well understand why MacIntyre thinks liberalism is false, it is unclear why this falsity should imply such moral catastrophe. I begin by motivating the question and distinguishing it from the classic liberal-communitarian debates (§§1–2). In particular, I highlight liberalism’s ability to offer ‘workarounds’, accommodating at least some of MacIntyre’s commitments and so forestalling the prospect of moral disaster. I then introduce two arguments which supply the missing premises, in each case juxtaposing MacIntyre with other critics of liberalism. First, I argue that liberalism’s conception of the private sphere systematically marginalizes MacIntyre’s vision of pedagogy (§3). I compare the argument and the attendant conception of privacy with Adorno’s (§4). In §5, I introduce the second premise: I argue that liberalism espouses a conception of maturity that actively undermines MacIntyre’s model of development, subverting liberal ‘workarounds’. I contrast this claim with recent attacks on liberalism by Deneen. I close with some methodological implications: MacIntyre’s case against liberalism should be seen as a form of external, not immanent, critique.

KEYWORDS MacIntyre; liberalism; private sphere; pedagogy; Adorno; Deneen

MacIntyre characterises liberal societies as suffering distinctive forms of structural malaise: they are a ‘disaster’, a ‘moral calamity’, sites of ‘barbarism and darkness’. I argue that, whilst we well understand why MacIntyre thinks liberalism is false, it is unclear why this falsity should imply such moral catastrophe. I begin by motivating the question and distinguishing it from the classic liberal-communitarian debates (§§1–2). In particular, I highlight liberalism’s ability to offer ‘workarounds’, accommodating at least some of MacIntyre’s commitments and so forestalling the prospect of moral disaster. I then introduce two arguments which supply the missing premises, in each case juxtaposing MacIntyre with critics of liberalism from the left and the right. First, I argue that liberalism’s conception of the private sphere systematically marginalizes MacIntyre’s vision of pedagogy (§3). I compare the argument and the attendant conception of privacy with Adorno’s (§4). In
§5, I introduce the second premise: I argue that liberalism espouses a conception of maturity that actively undermines MacIntyre’s model of development, subverting liberal ‘workarounds’. I contrast this claim with recent attacks on liberalism by Deneen. I close with some methodological implications: MacIntyre’s case against liberalism should be seen as a form of external, not immanent, critique.

(§1) Liberalism and Moral Catastrophe

One of MacIntyre’s central claims is that liberalism implies an ‘institutional order that is inimical to … the best kind of human life’ (AV:xv).1 Contemporary liberal societies are thus products of ethical ‘decline’ (AV:3,18), the site of a ‘new dark ages’ (AV:263). MacIntyre is not uniformly negative, a point missed when Buchanan and Powell chide his view as ‘absurd … deeply misplaced’.2 He accepts that ‘modernity’s social and political liberations’ are ‘in key respects a history of genuine and admirable progress’ (ECM:123). Since he typically equates ‘modernity’ and ‘liberalism’, such praise plausibly extends to the latter too.3 Elsewhere, he talks positively of core liberal commitments such as the ‘rule of law, liberty, toleration’ (ASA:283). Even the ‘acids of individualism’ have effects for ‘good and ill’ (SH:169). But, despite this, it is clear that he regards liberalism as morally catastrophic: it is a ‘disaster’, a ‘moral calamity’, a time of ‘barbarism and darkness’ (AV:4, xviii, 263).4

Much of MacIntyre’s critique is well understood, a consequence in part of the liberal- communitarian debates of the 1980–1990s: there is a vast literature on those disputes and I will not rehearse it here.5 MacIntyre himself rejects the ‘communitarian’ label (DRA:142), and I will stress differences between his approach and theirs.6 Instead, I want to address an issue which remains unclear: what exactly is MacIntyre’s argument not for the claim that liberalism is false, but for the claim that it is catastrophic, a ‘disaster’? I will begin by distinguishing and motivating this question.

Before doing so, a terminological clarification. Part of MacIntyre’s view is that the very idea of ‘morality’ as liberalism conceives it is a mistake: hence his emphasis that the term has no Greek equivalent (TRV:20). In his later work, he distinguishes ‘morality’, understood broadly as an exercise in practical reason in which he or Aristotle are also engaged, and the capitalised ‘morality’, the distinctive theoretical project characteristic of his opponents (ECM:115; TRV:26). I will likewise use ‘morality’ for the broad project, shared by all. I use “ethics” as a stylistic variant for this broad ‘morality’.

MacIntyre obviously believes that liberalism rests on false premises: I summarise the core ones in §2. Suppose we assume this: the claim that it is ‘inimical’ to the good life or a ‘moral calamity’ does not immediately follow. This is because the truth or falsity of a theory, even a moral theory,
does not have straightforward implications for its moral impact. The ‘noble lie’ tradition from Plato to Sidgwick warns of the dangers posed by moral truths. Conversely, a false moral theory might overlap extensionally with its true rivals. Consider consequentialism and deontology: as each has been tested against our intuitions and the other side’s counter-examples, they have been tweaked to deliver increasingly co-extensive results whilst differing in their underlying justification. This drives the popular ‘consequentializing’ project, pioneered by Drier, which glosses any deontological breach as a negative outcome.\(^7\) The result is that ‘for any remotely plausible non-consequentialist theory, there is a consequentialist counterpart that is . . . extensionally equivalent’.\(^8\) The deontologist might well regard such ‘copy-cat’ consequentialism as false, but to see it as ‘catastrophic’ when it is extensionally equivalent requires some further premise. There are, of course, possibilities to hand: for example, a Kantian-style move assigning overriding weight to the justificatory structure of agents’ intentions. But such a premise needs stating and defending to deliver the verdict of moral disaster.

Similar ‘mutual adjustments’, creating extensional overlap, characterised the communitarian-liberalism debate itself: Bell thus talks of the ‘communalization of liberalism’.\(^9\) Crucially, in the case of MacIntyre and liberalism, the gap between truth and catastrophe is not a merely abstract possibility. Consider two examples. First, MacIntyre places foundational stress on skilled, communal practices, for example working together in an orchestra or fishing crew, and on the virtues cultivated within them (for example, AV:191–5). This is because such practices exemplify a normative framework different from the one he associates with liberalism: in them agents are educated to desire complex, ‘internal’, common goods, which cannot be specified independent of the practice and which are irreducible to what is achieved by any individual members considered in isolation (AV:193; DRA:109,141). Such practices enable ‘participation in those social relationships through which she has learned how to transform her dispositions, to improve her capacity for practical judgment, and to pursue common goods’ (ECM:58). Second, MacIntyre places foundational stress on a substantive conception of the good in the public sphere: the ability of a society to debate thick moral questions, such as ageing or just war, using a common language and standards. His complaint is that liberalism’s public arena, characterised only by neutral procedural restrictions, cannot support this (PG:352–3).

This begs some obvious responses. First, why can’t liberalism accommodate such skilled, communal practices perfectly well? If my friends and I dedicate every day of our life to an orchestra, no liberal is going to stop us. Indeed, there is an important strand of the early liberal-communitarian debate in which commentators including Kymlicka and Schneewind simply deny there is any dispute to be had: as Kymlicka saw it, the liberal point is not that such projects are unimportant, but rather that their importance is so
obvious as to require no special emphasis.\textsuperscript{10} This is particularly the case because in \textit{After Virtue} at least, MacIntyre does not insist on any specific conception of the good life, leaving its pursuit open.\textsuperscript{11} For Schneewind, MacIntyre’s position thus differs little ‘from that of every good bourgeois moralist from Butler to Rawls’ in accepting the ‘central tenet of modern liberal morality: that the human good is to be decided upon by each person for himself’.\textsuperscript{12} The suspicion, as Kymlicka elsewhere puts it, is that ‘the advertised difference with the liberal view is a deception’.\textsuperscript{13}

Second, liberalism need not entirely banish thick conceptions of the good from the public sphere. As Larmore and others have stressed, liberal neutrality pertains only to the state: there is no reason why individuals sharing conceptions of the good cannot band together in the public sphere to discuss life in those terms, to persuade others, and to work towards the relevant communal goals.\textsuperscript{14} This fits with what Rosenblum called ‘pluralist communitarianism’ where one treats communities as subgroups within liberal society, effectively \textit{embedding} MacIntyre within a liberal framework.\textsuperscript{15} For the liberal, the lesson is that there is little wrong with their conception of the public sphere that, as Barber put it, ‘a strong dose of political participation and reactivated citizenship cannot cure’.\textsuperscript{16}

Of course, for some subgroups there will be a very direct tensions between their views and liberal society: for example, if the group actively seeks to undermine the liberal legal framework or holds a fixed view of the good life that renders interactions with other groups violent or unsustainable. But these familiar points cannot be MacIntyre’s worry: as noted, \textit{After Virtue} is explicitly open-ended on the good life and he indicates no wish to radically undermine liberalism’s legal scaffolding.

These moves allow liberalism to accommodate some of MacIntyre’s concerns: from that perspective, we might call them ‘workarounds’. The result is that even if liberalism \textit{were} shown to be false, it is not obvious why it should be morally catastrophic or ‘inimical’ to the best life. On the contrary, the situation looks closer to the co-extensivity seen in the consequentialism case. Of course, one can add some further premise. For example, it might always be morally catastrophic to have false beliefs about important matters. But this does not hold automatically as the ‘noble lie’ shows. Alternately, it might be that such liberal ‘workarounds’ will undermine the very values they purport to serve. But that proves precisely my point: some further premise is needed to justify that.

In many ways, it is the sophistication of MacIntyre’s position among anti-liberals which creates the lacuna. If his view were that liberalism fails because, say, its basic commitment to equality is wrong, the catastrophic nature of such a flawed social model would follow relatively directly.

Here is another way to put the point. Fellow critics of modern liberalism, such as Adorno and Heidegger, often suggest that the rot is so deep that it
requires the very restructuring of classical logic. Heidegger’s ‘other begin-
nings’ requires us to see that “logic” itself is only a residue of the power-
lessness of thinking’. Adorno presents even genocide as linked to ‘the
compulsion of identity’ present in our syntax. As both stress, it is conse-
quently hard to conceive the alternatives they desire. In contrast, the com-
munities of which MacIntyre approves appear eminently realisable within
a liberalism simply shorn of some of its excesses. He cites, for example,
‘Welsh mining communities and of a way of life informed by the ethics of
work at the coal face, by a passion for the goods of choral singing and of
rugby football and by the virtues of trade union struggle’ and factories where
teams ‘cooperate in taking each car through the different stages of its
production’ rather than repeating a single stage (DRA:143; ECM:170). Yet
he shares Heidegger’s almost apocalyptic rhetoric – indeed, in both we must
wait for deliverance, be it from some new god or some new saint. Again, the
puzzle is not his belief that liberalism is false but his fear that it is cata-
strophic. It is this puzzle that the present paper seeks to solve.

(§2) MacIntyre and the Anti-Liberal Tradition

To begin, we need a brief overview of the existing landscape. MacIntyre is
a member of what, following Holmes, one might call the ‘anti-liberal tradi-
tion’, where this is defined by the claim that liberalism mistakenly gives
methodological and axiological priority to the individual conceived of as
distinct from social relations. I prefer this to definitions, ironically includ-
ing Holmes’ own, that focus on liberalism’s downstream goals, such as legal
impartiality, restrictions on police behaviour, religious toleration or personal
security. The problem with such definitions, as noted in §1, is that
MacIntyre intends his view to incorporate many of these goals within
a foundationally different ethical framework. Of course, he may fail, but
glossing ‘liberalism’ in terms of them would establish that by definitional fiat
rather than argument.

As I have defined it, the anti-liberal tradition has a wide range of members
from fascists to communitarians to conservatives of various stripes. For
Gentile, liberalism reduces society to ‘an aggregation of individual human
beings . . . autonomous and self-sufficient’; for Taylor it treats individuals as
‘political atoms’; for Deneen it assumes that humans are ‘nonrelational
creatures, separate and autonomous’; for MacIntyre it holds that ‘the identi-
fication of individual interests is prior to and independent of any moral or
social bonds between them’. Such atomization generates the distinctive
agenda of liberal political thought: for example, ‘the central question’
becomes how such distinct individuals can have ‘good reasons for subjecting
themselves to the constraints imposed by any particular social and political
order’ (WJWR:211).
One question is whether liberalism is in fact committed to such atomism: as Walzer and others have noted, atomism’s more extreme formulations rapidly become implausible.²³ There are, of course, also alternative ways of defining liberalism: in a recent overview, Duncan Bell helpfully distinguishes ‘prescriptive, comprehensive, explanatory’ approaches.²⁴ But let us grant MacIntyre his initial characterization of the opponent: my primary concern is with him, rather than with liberalism per se. Within the broad charge of atomism, he then makes three main criticisms.

First, he argues that liberalism assumes an instrumental or Humean view of the good on which ‘first-person expressions of desire themselves’ constitute ‘reasons for action’ (ECM:79; TRV:338). This allows no distinction between ‘desires whose objects are such that their attainment will please us and desires whose objects are such that, whether they please us or not, their achievement will be the achievement of a genuine good’ (ECM:80). Thus, each of the three key ‘characters’ of liberal modernity, the therapist, the bureaucrat and the rich aesthete, treat ‘ends as given’ and confine themselves to ‘the realm of means’ (AV:30). MacIntyre, in contrast, operates with a rich neo-Aristotelian picture of the good on which ‘to err is to act from a desire for some object that the agent has no good reason to desire’ (ECM:221).

Second, he argues that liberalism assumes a thin, procedural conception of the right, whereby the interaction of these Humean agents is governed by negative, other-regarding moral principles.²⁵ The categorical imperative is one example; Habermas’ discourse framework, with its careful ‘abstinence’ towards the good life is another.²⁶ Such morality, now starting to take on the characteristic marks of ‘Morality’ in the sense which MacIntyre opposes, ‘make it possible for each of us to pursue the objects of our desires, no matter how conceived, provided only that we permit others the same freedom that we enjoy’ (ECM:115). It ‘sets limits to the ways in which and the means by which we conduct our lives; it does not give them direction’ (ECM:115): that is left to our Humean desires.

Third, he argues that the result is a socio-politics in which the state occupies the neutral role identified by Dworkin: uncommitted to any substantive notion of the good, it only polices interaction, in line with this conception of right, between the Humean agents, rendering the public sphere at best a ‘meeting place for individual wills’ lacking common values (AV:25). One consequence is that the liberal is unable to explain notions such as patriotism: as MacIntyre bitingly puts it, with the state reduced to this essentially bureaucratic role, ‘it is like being asked to die for the telephone company’ (PR:303).

In response, liberals followed two strategies. Some sought to thin down their metaphysical commitments with respect to the priority of the individual: Rawls’ later claim that his principles are ‘political, not metaphysical’ is an obvious example and one sees a similar trend in Fukuyama who now
presents liberalism as motivated by pragmatic exhaustion rather than anything grander. Others sought to inflate the theory to provide a more substantial vision of a common good: Galston’s ‘provisional telos’ and Macedo’s liberal virtues illustrate this. One can see how such moves might resist MacIntyre’s telephone company jibe.

As I said, I do not want to rehearse these debates because I want to address a different, but related, issue: what justifies MacIntyre’s talk of catastrophe? How, for example, does it differ from that of other anti-liberals? These are the questions to which I now turn.

(§3) The Marginalization of Pedagogy

To answer this, I want to unpack the liberal ‘workaround’ sketched in §1. It is worth noting that MacIntyrean practices are sufficient but not necessary to escape Humeanism: if the latter is the cause of the catastrophe, the liberal may have other means of avoiding it. But for current purposes, I will stay on MacIntyre’s chosen ground.

Let’s begin by fleshing out the relevant notion of a practice. Suppose Sally dedicates herself to Baroque music. This may come from induction into the practice by another: this is the case MacIntyre focuses on, as an adult uses a child’s desire for sweets to get them to play chess, gradually exposing them to a new set of reasons (AV:188). Alternately, it may take the form analysed by Callard in which Sally has a vague understanding of the practice’s goods and motivates herself, perhaps again through rewards, to pursue it until she has internalised its values. Similarly, suppose Tom is inculcated into a practice of charitable work with the elderly in which he learns to distinguish, care about and act on a range of thick ethical concepts: ‘frailty’, for example. Both he and Sally undergo the type of revelatory attunement to new reasons which MacIntyre prizes: they ‘accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of [their] own performance as judged by them’ (AV:190).

Looking back, for example, Tom sees his earlier understanding of such matters as crude, insensitive, missing much of what was important. Both he and Sally thus come to recognise the ‘distinction between . . . what merely seems to me good and what really is good’ (TRV:84). Their value judgements cease to be mere expressions of pleasure and manifest instead a recognitional ability (ECM:145).

Where should liberalism stand on this? Let me note three immediate responses. First, there are obviously some practices which would conflict with liberalism’s legal framework – for example, supporting the elderly by enslaving the young. But given MacIntyre’s stated openness around the good life, his claim must be broader: liberalism’s supposed problem is with practices generally rather than with any single, particular practice. Second, the liberal may recognise that the goods which Sally and Tom track are not
directly derived from the classical liberal value of individual autonomy and nevertheless form an essential part of a worthwhile life. To avoid the accusation of ‘moral catastrophe’ or ‘inimical’, liberalism surely needs to show only that it can foster such goods, not that it can derive them from any one single value – or at least if full derivation is required, further premises are needed, premises that seem to demand an implausibly monistic axiology.\(^{30}\)

Third, MacIntyre would doubtless respond that whatever is good in such scenarios happens despite liberalism, rather than because of it. Yet there are countless citizens in every liberal society who commit their lives to music or charity or fishing or any other MacIntyrean practice in this way. Given that liberal society provides the framework in which this occurs and offers everything from legal protections to training to awards for such practices, we need to hear more about the force of this ‘despite’.

The real issue for MacIntyre, I suggest, is liberalism’s privileging of individual autonomy irrespective of whether the choices made are the ‘educated’ results of such a learning process. Whilst the liberal may share, as Kymlicka explicitly does, MacIntyre’s view that uneducated Humean whims cannot sustain a worthwhile life, she therefore cannot allow any coercion to correct them.\(^{31}\) Yet to express the matter in terms of coercion is still not quite right: MacIntyre’s focus is on coming to desire complex goods and it makes little sense to talk of coercing such affective dispositions. The issue is rather is pedagogical: MacIntyre assumes that liberalism’s stress on negative individual liberty will ‘sideline’ the practice of desires being routinely educated towards independently valuable goods. For him such an ‘apprenticeship’ is a necessary part of any good life.

Just as an apprenticeship in sculpture or architecture is required in order to recognize what excellent performance in these arts consists in . . . so a capacity for identifying and ordering the goods of the good life . . . requires a training of character in and into those excellences, a type of training whose point emerges only in the course of the training. (WJWR:110)

If this is true, a society that treats such pedagogy as optional, personally and politically, is problematic.

We can now start to understand MacIntyre’s claim that liberalism is ‘inimical’ to the best life. The complaint in full is that ‘liberalism promotes a kind of institutional order that is inimical to the construction and sustaining of the types of communal relationship required for the best kind of human life’ (AV:xv). The problem is not, as it was for the classic communitarian, that liberalism encourages us to question community affiliations: if anything, MacIntyre prizes such questioning because it is part of induction into and development of a practice’s space of reasons (WJWR:358). Indeed, there are passages where his emphasis on ‘stepping back from one’s commitments to put them in doubt’ are reminiscent of Kantians such as Korsgaard
Rather, the worry is that liberalism sidelines the distinctive form of learning, apprenticeship, within which such questioning should occur, treating the transition to ‘educated or virtuous desires’ as itself a matter of individual choice. This is culturally disastrous in his eyes – and it is as sites for such learning that communities are important.

To cut oneself off from shared activity in which one has initially to learn obediently as an apprentice learns, to isolate oneself from the communities which find their point and purpose in such activities, will be to debar oneself from finding any good outside of oneself. (AV:258)

In this sense, MacIntyre’s preferred example of a child learning chess is no accident. Liberalism, even if modified in the manner of Raz or Buchanan, must retain a foundational status for individual adult choice – and yet without education such choices are, for MacIntyre, the choices of moral children. Indeed, given that MacIntyre defines ‘oppression’ as any relationship which inhibits ‘the possibility . . . of learning from each other about the nature of [the] common good’, it follows that liberalism is in fact ‘oppressive’ (PPCG:250). We can now see why Schneewind’s equation of early MacIntyre with liberalism’s own search for the good life is misguided. Even if both valorize a life spent seeking the good life without any particular good life that must be sought, they have an essentially different conception of the epistemology of the search. On, say, a Millian liberal framework, that search is compatible with a structural safeguarding of individual adult choice, be it ‘educated’ or ‘uneducated’, because what is needed is a breadth of experimentation. On MacIntyre’s model, in contrast, what is needed is a search structured as an apprenticeship, that is by recognition of authorities which guide it. This holds even though MacIntyre does not claim to know, at least in After Virtue, how such a search will terminate.

This enables an initial answer to the question of why liberalism is not simply false but ‘inimical’ to the best life and thus a moral catastrophe. MacIntyre’s concern is not that liberalism rejects any specific value: key communitarian shibboleths, such as family or rootedness or faith, have no central role in After Virtue and MacIntyre is clear that communities themselves have no automatic value (DRA:142). His concern is rather with a specific form of pedagogy, ‘apprenticeship’, and with those ‘communities which find their point and purpose in such activities’ (AV:258). The danger is that liberalism’s ‘workarounds’, those features which seem to support such practices, in fact systematically undermine them: to guarantee a ‘private sphere’, where agents are free to take up or to ignore such practices, is to marginalize them.
(§4) MacIntyre, Adorno and the ‘Private Sphere’

It is worth developing this formulation: the concept of the private sphere is a notoriously slippery one. To bring out what is distinctive in MacIntyre’s line of thought, it may help to contrast it with another noted critique of liberal society, Adorno’s.

We can distinguish several issues raised by talk of ‘spheres’, public, private or otherwise. First, there is the classic problem, internal to the liberal project, of how to balance various normative domains: for example, feminist discussions of how to reconcile public and domestic spaces or religious worries that believers will be forced to betray their consciences by anti-discrimination laws. This debate accepts the principle of various ‘spheres’, each with their own rules and requirements, and worries about their inter-relation.

Second, there is a worry that the ‘private sphere’, typically construed either volitionally in terms of individual choice or domestically in terms of intimate or family relationships, will prove insufficiently robust and so open to penetration by market or bureaucratic forces. This is an incredibly common worry and MacIntyre at times echoes it, stressing the pressure labour markets exert on families (ECM:122). But it is not his fundamental concern. To see why he is distinctive in that, let us consider Adorno.

There are, of course, obvious differences between Adorno’s critique of modernity and MacIntyre’s: for example, avant-garde art has zero role in MacIntyre’s project. There are also evident similarities: for example, the worry that instrumental reason has come to dominate or the claim that the ‘atomised individual’ flows from developments ‘in political economy, especially the urban market place’.37 However, Adorno places much more stress on the domination of the private sphere, conceived in terms of the intimate or the domestic, by the exchange relationship. Thus, Minima Moralia painstakingly catalogues how ‘the exchange relationship has entirely absorbed’ everything from love to sexuality to gift giving.

This is evident in the realm of the private. Thoughts concerning money and the conflicts attendant on such invariably reach deep into the most heartfelt erotic, sublime and spiritual [geistige] relationships.38

As Adorno rather wistfully suggests, such ‘private’ domains used to provide some resistance to the economic framework.39 The result is a critique which will prompt a very natural liberal reaction: namely, to bolster an intimate or domestic sphere, seeking a sharper delineation of it from market forces. In Habermasian terms, we would need to stop the ‘colonization’ of the lifeworld.

MacIntyre, of course, shares some worries about the modern workplace: thus, his counsel to be ‘wary and antagonistic in all . . . dealings with the
market economy’ (PPCG:252). But he makes little mention of the intimate or domestic and the problem as he sees it is quite different. It is not that private sphere might be insufficiently robust and so open to penetration by market forces. Rather, it is precisely the idea of a delineation between spheres that is pernicious: ‘a compartmentalized society imposes a fragmented ethics’ (PPCG:236). He contrasts this with Aristotle, where the practical life is a ‘seamless whole’ (PPCG:236).

This desire for a ‘seamless’ normative horizon is also clearly different from the classic liberal worries as to how such spheres should be balanced. Rather, MacIntyre’s view is that even recognising such distinct spheres is itself an error. The reason is that the private sphere is understood by MacIntyre as it was in the arguments of §3, namely as space for *optional* individual development whose very existence stems from the liberal assumption that such development cannot be mandatory. The model of privacy in play is thus very close to Rorty’s, on which privacy is a space in which individual choice, educated or not, is insulated from moral or pedagogical critique.  

MacIntyre thus differs from Adorno both in his conception of the private domain and in his account of what is wrong with it: the danger is not the penetration of the private sphere but the maintenance of it.

(§5) Deneen, Kant and Liberalism’s Vision of Maturity

This ‘sidelining’ of apprenticeship into the private sphere is, however, only part of the problem from a MacIntyrean point of view. This section unpacks the related phenomenon of ‘discrediting’ to complete the account. Again, it will help to have a comparison to bring out what is distinctive in MacIntyre: in this case, I use a thinker from the socially conservative right, Deneen.

One of Deneen’s key complaints is that liberalism treats individual consent as the only normative criterion:

Liberalism begins a project by which the legitimacy of all human relationships . . . becomes increasingly dependent on whether those relationships have been chosen.

By extension, ‘unchosen’ relationships of family and community are seen as under threat. This has become the ‘stock’ form of conservative anti-liberalism: if you read, Bill Barr’s speeches, for example, there are obvious continuities.  

However, Deneen’s approach overlooks another aspect of the liberal model, ironically the one many social conservatives find most infuriating: that explicit consent, for example by adult female followers of traditional religious groups, does not suffice to legitimate practices which liberalism regards as backwards. MacIntyre’s focus on pedagogy makes his approach more subtle here. This is because liberalism’s marginalization of
apprenticeship is accompanied by the promulgation of an alternative model of maturity, exemplified in Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment’, on which learning consists in gradual emancipation from any merely ‘local’ authority – be this is geographical or historical. As MacIntyre notes, Gifford’s Encyclopedism simply borrowed this view from Kant (TRV:64). Such thinkers do not need to hold that local reasons have zero force, but they do treat them as necessarily subordinate to cosmopolitan norms, i.e. those grounded in rational agency as such. Since MacIntyre assumes that the practices on which apprenticeship is based are historically conditioned, cosmopolitanism discredits the ability of apprenticeship to provide ultimate answers to the question of the good life. Liberalism’s erroneous view of reason thus:

[D]eprives most people of the possibility of understanding their lives as a quest for the discovery and achievement of the good, especially by the way in which it attempts to discredit those traditional forms of human community within which the project has to be embodied. (WJWR:123)

This is because merely adult consent is not enough, pace Deneen, to validate a choice in liberal eyes: what matters is consent given by mature agents, where those are understood as granting systematic priority to cosmopolitan notions of reason, notions of reason binding on rational agents as such.

In focusing on the issue of pedagogy, MacIntyre thus identifies potential problems in both strands of the liberal tradition – empiricist and Kantian. In contrast, Deneen’s narrower focus on consent misses the latter. The cumulative effect is that liberalism not only marginalises the crucial forms of learning, apprenticeship, it actively undermines them with its own model of personal and social maturity.

(§6) Catastrophe and Immanent Critique

I began by asking why MacIntyre believed liberalism to be not simply wrong but catastrophic, ‘inimical’ to the good life. As noted in §1, the mere fact that it might be mistaken about important issues does not explain this: error is not automatically disaster. The key is rather liberalism’s inability to sustain the ‘workarounds’ that would allow it to do justice to those issues despite supposedly mistaken foundations. The question thus became why these ‘workarounds’ are inadequate.

We now have a viable answer: liberalism is a ‘moral disaster’ because it both sidelines and discredits the apprenticeship model. In this sense, MacIntyre’s fundamental complaint is a pedagogical one. By presenting MacIntyre as an Aristotelian rather than a communitarian, I have avoided the unsubstantiated psychological claims often found in such discussions: for example, that people are generally more ‘committed’ or ‘bound’ to unchosen
or involuntary ties. Finally, I have distinguished MacIntyre’s point from Deneen on the right and Adorno on the left.

My focus has been primarily reconstructive: I have tried to articulate a missing dimension of the MacIntyrean critique. I have not directly addressed the underlying choice between his normative framework and a liberal one: that would require a book in itself. But it is worth closing with one methodological point in that regard.

There is a familiar distinction between immanent and external critique, where the former, roughly, starts from premises one’s opponent can accept. MacIntyre’s official account of inter-theoretic rationality, as D’Andrea has noted, sounds very ‘immanent’: it aims to identify limitations in a theory recognisable to the theory’s own adherents and to provide a remedy attractive to those adherents (TRV:119–20). Yet it is striking, when we consider the analysis above, how ‘external’ MacIntyre’s approach is. There is little here that would compel the liberal, on their own grounds, to shift in MacIntyre’s direction.

This ‘externality’ is, however, readily understandable now that we have an account of liberal as morally disastrous. Immanent critique is attractive in two cases: when we are concerned to motivate the opponent to change position, instead of simply identifying their errors, and when we believe that the opponent has grasped parts of the truth from which one can work outwards. The former is visible in what Hills called ‘the Holy Grail of moral philosophy’, the search for arguments moving the egoist from premises that he accepts to the recognition of moral obligations. The latter is visible in systems such as Hegel’s whose metaphysics requires that some commitments of every opponent are retained within the ultimately endorsed position. Prima facie, MacIntyre occupies neither category. The condemnation of liberalism is sufficiently foundational to block the Hegelian route and the famous insistence that we must wait out the ‘dark ages’ until the arrival of some new Benedict suggests that the scope for persuading liberals is limited. This applies as much to philosophers as to society at large. In his accounts of thinkers as different as Prichard and Stevenson, MacIntyre sees philosophy as systematically rationalising modern social arrangements (SH:56; AV:72). If this is the case, a requirement to supply immanent critiques again makes little sense since one’s opponents’ premises are likely be systematically erroneous. Precisely because liberalism is morally catastrophic for MacIntyre, there is no reason to assume its adherents will be able to grasp that fact.

Notes

1. I cite MacIntyre’s works by the abbreviations given at the end of the paper.
2. Buchanan and Powell (2018, 1–2).
3. I address the precise definition of liberalism in §2. On ‘modernity’ and ‘liberalism’ see ECM:143; AV:x, xv; WJWR:392.
4. Taylor, sympathetic to many of MacIntyre’s concerns, talks more weakly of a ‘malaise’ (Taylor 1991, 1).
5. Neal and Paris (1990), Shapiro (1995) and Bell (1993) are fair introductions to the literature. The magisterial D’Andrea (2017) provides the most detailed analysis of MacIntyre’s own trajectory in the period.
6. Knight (2005) provides an exceptionally clear account of the differences between MacIntyre and communitarians.
7. Dreier (1993, 23).
8. Portmore (2014, 85). For extremely helpful discussion see also Baumann (2018).
9. Bell (1993, 17).
10. Kymlicka (1991, 170).
11. Some of MacIntyre’s later work, Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity for example, is perhaps more dogmatic, in both the usual and theological senses of the term. But I take it that After Virtue gives the most sophisticated and influential formulation of the basic view.
12. Schneewind (1982, 659).
13. Kymlicka (1988, 190).
14. Larmore (1987, 45).
15. Rosenblum (1989, 157–8).
16. Barber (2003, xi).
17. Heidegger (1989, 170).
18. Adorno (1973, 5, 362).
19. AV:263; Heidegger (1976, 206).
20. Holmes (1993, 2). The target of such ‘anti-liberalism’ is thus close to what one might call ‘classical liberalism’, although the phrase is obviously vague. Anti-liberals in this sense should be sharply distinguished from those who defend a broadly ‘classical liberalism’ against ‘liberals’ in roughly the contemporary American cultural sense (see, for example, Gray 2000).
21. Holmes (1993, 3–4).
22. Gentile (1946, 65), Taylor (1991, 68) and Deneen (2018, 31) AV:68, 250.
23. For example, Walzer (1990).
24. Bell (2014, 682).
25. I borrow ‘procedural’ from Taylor: in this at least the two agree entirely.
26. See Habermas (1993, 15).
27. Rawls (1987) and Fukuyama (2020).
28. Galston (1991) and Macedo (1990).
29. Callard (2018, 56).
30. Similarly, Kantian architectonic excesses aside, there is no liberal requirement to see the goods of great art or avoiding animal cruelty or establishing a just society as strict functions of individual liberty, only as supported by it.
31. Kymlicka (1991, 169–70).
32. See also DRA:69–72.
33. Raz (1986) and Buchanan (1989).
34. I thus agree with Jaeggi that for MacIntyre the problem with liberal societies is “a characteristic blockage to learning”. But I think she is wrong to equate this with an inability to ‘facilitate a reasonable debate about their design’ (Jaeggi 2018, 298). The liberal replies to MacIntyre, from Kymlicka to Rawls, clearly show such a debate in action: the danger is much more specifically the erosion
of a certain kind of learning on which MacIntyre assumes the good life depends.

35. He is particularly keen to distinguish his own Aristotelianism from what he calls the ‘volkisch’ dimensions of Herder or Heidegger (TGC: 241).

36. Traditional communitarians may use the language of marginalisation too but the underlying argument is very different. Conservatives worried that religion is ‘marginalised’ when a bakery, say, is unable to refuse services to gay couples (most famously, *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 2018) are motivated by the desire for a quite specific first order set of norms to be given parity or precedence over the liberal legal order. There is no corresponding principle in MacIntyre: his problem is with the sanctification of ‘uneducated’ choice generally. I say more on this below.

37. Adorno, (2006): Dedication, §97.

38. Adorno, (2006, §22). Similarly:

   “Human beings are forgetting how to give gifts. Violations of the exchange-principle have something mad and unbelievable about them; here and there even children size up the gift-giver mistrustfully, as if the gift were only a trick, to sell them a brush or soap.”

   (Adorno, 2006, §21).

39. Adorno, (2006, §2).

40. Rorty (1989, xv). There are other aspects of Rorty’s view, such as the treatment of writing as private activity, which are deeply problematic for separate reasons.

41. The delicate issue of Adorno’s positive vision for intimate or family relationships is beyond this paper.

42. Deneen (2018, 32).

43. Deneen (2018, 38). Whilst Hume’s own views on consent were complex, one can see how the Lockean dimensions of liberalism stressed by Deneen fit with §2: if preferences are purely Humean, there is no standard beyond harmonious mutual agreement.

44. For example, Barr (2019).

45. As Buchanan nicely put it ‘from the fact that a commitment to community in liberal society is often voluntarily chosen, it does not follow that all such commitments are dissolvable at will’ (Buchanan 1989, 869).

46. Some authors draw complex sub-distinctions between, for example, ‘immanent’ and ‘internal’ critique depending on the degree of normative change the critic seek to enact: for an influential recent example, see Jaeggi (2018, 53).

47. D’Andrea (2017, 366).

48. Hills (2010, 90–1).

49. My thanks to the Journal Editor and to audiences in Liverpool and Toronto for their comments on previous versions.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
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