Paul Kelly July 2nd, 2025

MacIntyre's post-liberalism was not political

Alastair MacIntyre was one of those rare philosophers whose impact transcended the boundaries of the academy. Following his death in May, a number of commentators have tried to link MacIntyre's critique of modernity with the post-liberal political movement. ***Paul Kelly*** *argues that while MacIntyre was one of the sharpest critics of the intellectual foundations of liberal thought, he would not have aligned himself with the politics of post-liberalism.*

Alasdair MacIntyre who died on 21 May 2025 has inspired many fond obituaries and praise from across the political and cultural divides as is fitting for one of the giants of late twentieth century British philosophy. MacIntyre made both a significant contribution to academic philosophy and British philosophical culture as well as offering one of the most relentless and interesting philosophical challenges to the self-image of the age. One of his most interesting books published in 1971 carries the very title Against the Self-Images of the Age.

MacIntyre's entire outlook involved a rejection of the overarching intellectual and sociological frameworks that aimed to explain and sometimes even justified some version of liberal, capitalist modernity as "the only game in town". His intellectual journey through his analysis of and response to this background sociological and philosophical framework is well captured in the many short biographies that are appended to appraisals and critiques in the obituaries. What I want to do in this short appreciation is to pick up on a theme that has appeared in many of the obituaries: his post-liberalism and alleged relationship to the post-liberal movement.

A critique of modernity

MacIntyre was an enormously prolific writer of important books, but in some respects his career (with a couple of exceptions) was spent writing and re-writing the same book. What unites his works is a historically situated critique of the rise to dominance of the contemporary self-images of the age of liberal capitalist modernity. This is the story of his wonderfully readable A Short History of Ethics, and of course his most famous work After Virtue.

In these books, he diagnoses the ills of modern moral philosophy as an activity and as an institutional culture. Like his contemporary Bernard Williams, MacIntyre challenges the very idea of modern moral philosophy. Both of the dominant normative theories – Kantian deontology and utilitarianism – fail, according to MacIntyre, as stable accounts of our moral practices. But more importantly, he wishes to challenge the idea of this institutional practice or what Williams calls the "peculiar institution of morality" as it has been cut off from its foundations in broadly Christian moral ontology. Without that foundation we merely have will and arbitrary desires or wants, but no way of distinguishing amongst them as we have no criterion of "the good" independent of desire satisfaction and arbitrary will. Understanding how we got to this position is the animating question of MacIntyre's reconstructions of the history of ethics and of contemporary moral philosophy through to his Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity. But making sense of that history was also essential to overcoming the challenge of liberal modernity and reorienting ethical theory and practice in a new, but also ancient, direction: recovering an Aristotelian philosophical anthropology, which he also argued must be understood through the interpretation of Thomas Aquinas. This Thomistic turn was philosophical but also personal with his turn to Catholicism from the early 1980s.

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In the face of the crisis of modern moral philosophy and its collapse into emotivism – meaning that philosophers understood moral claims to be tantamount to expressions of emotional approval or

disapproval – MacIntyre abandoned the liberal public culture of his age in its attempts to transform the place of ethics in the modern moral life of liberal societies. For MacIntyre, liberal society with its negative liberty – the idea that freedom is merely the absence of restraint – and tolerance was a self-undermining dead end, and one that opened the space for neo-liberal political economy and the triumph of the worst aspects of liberal capitalism that he had fought against from the beginning of his professional academic life and his brief political career as part of the Universities New Left.

A post-liberal philosopher, but not a post-liberal

It is no surprise then that MacIntyre is claimed as a source of post-liberalism, and indeed I make a modest claim for his place amongst the sources of post-liberalism in my Against Post-Liberalism. But it's important to distinguish carefully the way in which he is a post-liberal in philosophy and separate that from how far he can be seen as part of the post-liberal political movement. I would argue he has a place as a post-liberal philosopher, but that he would have nothing but disdain for the current political movement which seeks to transform politics and policy in a socially conservative and authoritarian political direction.

Whilst MacIntyre's philosophical position is clearly opposed to the main currents of liberal modernity, whether Kantian, utilitarian or contractualist, this is a long way from endorsing a political position. Indeed, although he is often credited with Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel and others for the philosophical turn to communitarianism, he always rejected that label. He was first and foremost a Catholic and consequently an Aristotelian Thomist, as he sets out in God, Philosophy and Universities. His concern to recover a viable account of an objectively good life certainly has political implications, but these are subtle, complex and far from the kind of triumphalist integralism of many contemporary post-liberal authoritarians. His Thomism is not about the priority of Church over state and individual, and even in many of his most Catholic writings he combines moral objectivism with a recognition of the fact of reasonable pluralism when it comes to the common good, echoing the Second Vatican Council rather than the first, and qualifying his Thomism with a strong Augustinian flavour (like Popes Benedict XVI and Pope Francis I).

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For MacIntyre the good life was a quest that we all must follow and the best that philosophy can hope to do is provide guidance on how we understand that quest and recognise the tools that will help us succeed, hence his interest in virtue theory. It orients us but does not give us a route map or set of rules. Yet even here MacIntyre does not provide a theory of virtue ethics of the sort offered by Philippa Foot or Martha Nussbaum. MacIntyre was uninterested in seeking a theoretical response to the challenges of ethical life in conditions of modernity, and in his Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity he ends the book with a four exemplary narratives on Vassily Grossman, Sandra Day O'Connor, C.L.R James and Fr Denis Faul, rather than a checklist of the virtues and a formal moral psychology. Equally importantly he does not offer a political doctrine or agenda that follows from his account of an ethical life. Indeed, he was disdainful of those such as the American post-liberal campaigner Rod Dreher who sought to co-opt MacIntyre into his moral crusade in the US.

MacIntyre refused to read Dreher's Benedict Option, which takes its title from the end of After Virtue. MacIntyre's Catholicism was deliberately not party political, and in so far as we can find hints of his political beliefs and prejudices these were far more radical than many of his readers would have been comfortable with. His disdain for Capitalist modernity carried over from his youthful Marxism and continued within his late Catholicism, despite his scepticism about practical revolution.

The idea that his Catholic philosophical anthropology brought him over to the side of a post-liberal political movement that wants to foreground, faith, family and flag could not be more wrong. In a wonderful passage from Dependent Rational Animals, he writes

It is therefore a mistake, the communitarian mistake, to attempt to infuse the politics of the state with the values and modes of participation in local community. It is further a mistake to suppose that there is anything good about local community as such… local communities are always open to corruption by narrowness, by complacency, by prejudice against outsiders and by a whole range of other deformities, including those that arise from a cult of local community.

So much for the populism of post-liberal communitarianism and Blue Labour, Red Toryism, Orbanism or the "Aristotelianism by Machiavellian means" peddled by Patrick Deneen and his US post-liberal followers.

In short, MacIntyre's philosophical post-liberalism appears to preclude the post-liberal politics of the contemporary movement, just as he proved unhelpful to the communitarian movement in the

1990s. Those who have sought to claim him for their movement have gravely misunderstood what he was trying to do across his lifetimes philosophical quest.

Image credit: on Wikipedia

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