

After Virtue Notes

Chapter 1 - the thesis

Begins with a experiment reminiscent of A Cattle for Leibowitz: imagine there's breakdown of the scientific tradition, and what future vestigial inheritances would look like.

There'd be a linguistic component: e.g., use of terms like "specific gravity" may resemble usage of earlier periods, but the beliefs presupposed are lost, thus also lending to an arbitrary appearance of the terms. AM says this is what has in fact happened to ethics and ethical language in our own time.

Because his thesis is partly historical, his investigation will be historical, and will shy away from certain kinds of philosophy since analytical and phenomenological philosophy is only descriptive.

His argument will have to demonstrate that a catastrophe occurred in history even though there is apparently no record of it, will also have to examine the historical reasons why it happened. This history will also be partially evaluative in nature.

Part of the issue confronting this project is the way in which (academic) history is conducted - value-neutral, etc. - it is affected/compromised by the catastrophe.

His positive argument will be for recovering the tradition that has been lost. It is a historical tradition, so part of the argument will be an historical evaluation of that tradition to see if it coheres, and is worthy of adopting. Note that the argument will not be for any particular philosopher (e.g. Aristotle - he critiques Aristotle at points), but for the tradition as a whole, more or less as a kind of meta ethics, although he will extract specific virtues along the way.

Chapter 2 - Moral discourse today and the question of emotivism

AM gives examples of common moral arguments, then makes some observations:

1. They boil down to rival initial premises which are incommensurable (e.g. rights to personal bodily autonomy vs imperative against murder, in abortion) - and since there are no reasons for preferring one premise over another — so that we can neither convince somebody to adopt one over the other, and subsequently we fear that our own moral arguments lack rational foundation — debate takes on a shrill character.
2. They are nonetheless impersonal — which leads to a paradox: if they are personal beliefs, why use impersonal language?
3. The arguments have clear historical/cultural antecedents (e.g. Marxism, Christianity, rights theory, etc.)

All this raises the question of emotivism: are all moral judgments merely expressions of personal preference / attitude? (when I say "this is wrong" what I mean is "this—yuck!")

Initial criticisms of emotivism as a theory of meaning:

1. Unclear what feelings/attitudes exactly are expressed (what is "approval"?)
2. Moral statements function differently from expressions of attitude (commonsense objection)

- Persuasive force of expressions of attitude is dependent on context (e.g. boss to employee) whereas moral expressions is ostensibly not

3. Emotivism is a theory about meaning. However, attitude is a function not of the meaning of a sentence, but of its use.

So: is emotivism better expressed as a theory of use rather than meaning? Which is to say, is meaning at odds with use, such that use conceals meaning, even for the speaker? (I.e., do we use impersonal moral language to express personal attitudes, even though we may not know that's what we're doing?) Is moral language seriously misleading/manipulative?

What follows is an analysis of the history of emotivism as a theory — main takeaway (I think) is that the development of the theory seems to have been in response to intuitionism, which began at Cambridge in 1903 and flourished shortly after. (Intuitionism was a reaction to the idea of “good” as an objectively discoverable property, which in turn was intended to replace classical natural law.) Analytic philosophy rejected emotivism b/c moral reasoning does occur. Problem is, analytic philosophy requires justification by first principles, which appear to be a matter of preference. Modern analytic philosophers attempting to discover, articulate, and/or justify first principles can't come to agreement, or gain any ground. (see Rawls & Nozick, ch 18)

(Also of note: MacIntyre rejects the characterization of ethics, and philosophy in general, as just a single conversation w/ may different players... a characterization which leaves out the changing terms and context to that discussion)

Critical question is not only whether emotivism is true, but what would happen if everybody believed that it was?

AM posits that by and large we actually do, and in the next chapter will analyze features of our society that demonstrate that belief.

Chapter 3 - sociological analysis of widely-held emotivism in action

Everything is manipulation (contrast w/ Kant's ideal morality in which manipulation — treating others as means rather than ends — is wrong)

Analysis of three “characters” / moral representatives of modern society (identities where character merges with individual identity, normative requirements are imposed from the outside, and the character is an object of social regard, a focal point of debate):

1. bureaucratic manager — ends are neutral, it's efficiency that counts (also, power=authority); obliteration of distinction between manipulative and nonmanipulative social relations
2. wealthy aesthete, pursuer of his own enjoyment
3. therapist — manipulation in private life (I would also include teacher/educator here)

1&3 operate in terms of effectiveness, not moral debate; ethical questions are left to one side.

(key aside, p.30-31 — psychological effectiveness has replaced truth as the aim of education & religion)

The emotivist self: detached view from nowhere, singular moral agent with no necessary social identity. (See Sartre on self's lack of content or essence — also Hume etc. on self's lack of continuity ala buddhism) No goals, no rational/objective means of evaluating one's life.

Is this self a deprivation, specifically deprived of telos?

Contrast with pre-modern identity: bound up in social membership (brother, member of tribe, etc.) with set goals.

Back to social context:

There's been a bifurcation of (a) value-judgments, delegated to detached individual [internal self] and (b) manipulation, delegated to bureaucratic organizations [external world]. This sets the stage for debate between individual liberty (republicans, classical liberalism) and social planning and regulation (democrats, socialists) as the only two options. (key passage p. 34-35)

Chapter 4 - historical origins - going backwards from Kierkegaard to Kant to Hume

Fragmentation of morality and creation of emotivist self is a philosophical development originating in the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment is not merely an episode in French history but European history

1630-1850: project of rationally justifying "morals" apart from theology, legal, etc. foundations

Moral commitment as criterionless choice originates in Kierkegaard's Enten-Eller, in which he presents the choice whether to live morally (good or evil) or aesthetically (amorally). No rational grounds for taking life seriously.

Contradiction: morality that we can choose to regard as authoritative or not, chosen for no reason other than whim or caprice, cannot actually be authoritative (it would maintain authority independently of one's choice). Clearly, Kierkegaard's morality is not of this arbitrary kind. For Kierkegaard, there are not rival moralities as there are for us. The question for him isn't which morality to choose, as it is for us. So what Kierkegaard is engaged in is trying to provide a new foundation for an older way of life.

Kierkegaard's inherits from Kant, who tried to ground morality in reason, rather than radical choice. Kant's rules are inherited - he doesn't question them, but seeks to ground them in reason. Reason here is divorced from conceptions of happiness (since that would make the moral law contingent on the happiness produced) and religion (since the authority of divine command is redundant to the authority of reason itself). The test for reasonableness is whether it's

universalizable - AM includes examples to falsify this idea, and notes that the flaws in Kant's arguments — which could only be helped by considerations of overall human happiness — mean that his project of justifying morality on pure reason is a total failure, which was what Kierkegaard was responding to.

Kant himself was responding to Hume and Diderot, who presented a primitive emotivism — morality guided by the passions — but both exhibit some very conservative moral tendencies, and admit there must be some means of choosing between competing, mutually exclusive passions. Furthermore, Hume assumes initially that morality must be based in either reason or passion, a false choice which sets off the chain reaction of Hume's own failure, and subsequently Kant's failure, and finally Kierkegaard's failure.

Chapter 5 - why they failed

All of these figures were attempting to move from a concept of human nature (i.e., his rationality, his passions, his ability to choose) to an ethics.

contrast with key elements of traditional/classical ethical scheme:

1. Essential human nature (untutored)
2. Potential/ideal human nature (telos)
3. Means of moving 1 to 2 (rules/precepts of ethics)

... which remains consistent even through Christian, Jewish, or Islamic revisions in the middle ages

Protestant reformers changed the status of (2) — man's power of reason [i.e., ability to discern telos] was corrupted by the fall; reason is powerless to correct passions (Hume has a Calvinist heritage) — we can only discern telos via divine revelation. This sets the stage for eventual rejection of teleology via the rejection of both Christian theology and Aristotelianism, which we see in Hume, Kant, Kierk. and which is exactly why the project failed (like sawing a leg off a 3-legged stool and then wondering why it doesn't stand up).

AM assesses Enlightenment thinkers, and how aware they were of this — Kant, the winner, (inconsistent with his own theory) admits that w/o teleology, morality is unintelligible.

This is how the is/ought "problem" arose - and the "problem" of new terms appearing in conclusion not present in premises. These "problems" are overcome with the re-introduction of functional concepts. Functional concepts (e.g., "watch" or "farmer") include a purpose or function which enables evaluation (e.g. watch doesn't tell time correctly; therefore bad watch). In Aristotelianism, "man" is a similarly functional concept - enables ethical statements to be factual.

The loss of functional concepts has radically changed language and usage, impoverished our moral discourse, creating confusion and ambiguity (what is the status of moral statements, since they cannot be factual?)

This turn can also be seen historically. Many consequences, most importantly in new conceptions of the “self.”

Chapter 6 - historical consequences, and modern moral fictions

In Bentham’s utilitarianism, the new telos is simply maximizing pleasurable sensation, avoiding painful sensation - which is rooted in a simple psychology that says that humans are motivated merely by sensation. Main problems: how to derive morality from psychology? and, in Mill, how to choose w/ diverse types of pleasure and varying preferences for them? Utilitarianism is an easy tool for justifying nefarious social engineering projects. The failure of utilitarianism, seen in Sidgwick, is the direct antecedent to emotivism in Moore and his followers.

Moving on, AM offers a critique of Gewirth as paradigm example of the analytic attempt to justify morality (the originally Kantian project): requirements to the free exercise of will imply rights to them. But the argument does not follow: (1) just because I need something doesn’t mean I have a right to it and (2) why are rights universal? “Rights” are social/historical invention, relatively new concept.

Utilitarianism and analytic philosophy failed to answer why individual moral agency, free from divine law, teleology, or social hierarchy, has any authority. The meanings of moral language suppose that these projects have succeeded, but the use is emotivist, which admits that they failed. This schizophrenia is reflected in the self, seen simultaneously as autonomous and as the subject of bureaucratic manipulation.

Critique of key modern concepts:

“Rights” fails as a concept b/c the enlightenment project gave us no good reason for believing in them. It is a convenient fiction, which clashes with the other fiction, ‘utility,’ in contemporary culture. Individuals assert their rights in the face of bureaucratic utility - the incommensurable premises of each guarantee that debates go nowhere. (Popular quote about belief in rights being of the same status as belief in witches & unicorns)

Protest arises out of the incommensurability of these fictions, and admits an unconscious awareness that incommensurability cannot be overcome rationally.

“Unmasking” is showing that somebody’s justifications, whether of rights or utility, are mere masks for arbitrary will or desire. (Hence Freud’s scheme of inherited superego as essentially irrational, arbitrary, which we must free ourselves from).

The “characters” from Chapter 3 trade in these fictions. The rich aesthete is the most likely to be cynically aware that they are fictions. Therapy is obviously based in fiction, as evidenced by so much internal disagreement — why does it even persist as a discipline?

Critique of managerial effectiveness as yet another fiction. Managers are seen as morally neutral, yet trade in systematically manipulating others. “Effectiveness” is a masquerade of social control and justifying otherwise unjustifiable authority. Ability for the manager to actually do what he says he can is based in fictions. Thus we are not really oppressed by power, but by impotence. Claims to managerial effectiveness are of the same kind as unjustified appeals to fictional religious authority.

As for managerial claims to knowledge: social science is not “science,” i.e., not falsifiable, and does not produce law-like generalizations as it would like to. Appearance of “scientific” expertise implies authority and neutrality, but is baseless, and yet another fiction.

Chapter 7 - deeper critique of the moral fiction of social science, the strategic split between “fact” and “value”

The concept of “fact” as pure sense-data, or whatever other “experience” prior to theory, is mistaken — all perception is theory laden (from Kant, but also echoes of Heidegger and phenomenology).

During the Enlightenment period, empiricism and natural science co-existed uncomfortably: Empiricism seeks to merge “seems” with “is” while natural science radically calls “seems” into question. Empiricism vindicates thru basic experience, while natural science vindicates thru theory. The Enlightenment worldview is thus hopelessly confused. But they all agree on the overthrow of Aristotle.

One critical Aristotelian idea that was overthrown was that of the telos — the end toward which each species moves, which could be considered its “good” — which has both sociological (explanatory) and ethical (normative) power.

But in the Enlightenment, man ceases to be a functional concept; action is explained by physiology, now divorced from normative ethics. So after this development, human action is now to be explained in the manner of mechanical generalizations, like Newton’s laws — antecedent conditions as sufficient causes (in case of condition x, a human will [always] y).

Problems:

1. Language must eliminate all references to beliefs, including reasons, purposes, etc. (Beliefs are complex and difficult to prove.)
2. Predictability paves the way for easier manipulation. But who is doing the manipulating, and how are we to characterize that particular agent (or worse, the subjective “I”)? Obviously not in the same way we characterize those being manipulated.

Despite these and other difficulties, the social “sciences” have believed themselves to be largely successful, and provide the supposed authority for all kinds of governmental and bureaucratic activity. This kind of activity has a direct lineage back to the original enlightenment reformers.

Chapter 8 - AM further critiques social “science,” using his critique as a basis to investigate/critique power structures and authority of our own age in general.

What are the achievements of social science? Certainly nothing remotely scientific: e.g., lawlike, falsifiable generalizations. Rather:

1. generalizations coexist w/ counterexamples yet remain unfalsified
2. no scope modifiers or quantifiers to give precision
3. no set of counterfactual conditionals — they are more like observations, not laws (they are not even probabilistic)

Calls into question the supposed ancestry of the social sciences (i.e. Comte, Mill, etc.) and suggests rather a Machiavellian ancestry. Machiavelli saw social science as a project to minimize the influence of Fortuna (the unpredictability of human affairs)

Sources of unpredictability in human affairs:

1. Radical conceptual innovation (e.g. the wheel, relativity, quantum mechanics, etc. ... copernicus?)
2. One’s own future actions (also recall manipulated vs manipulator)
3. Game-theoretic character of social life - multiple games being played at once, sometimes without the knowledge of participants (hindsight reveals what “game” was being played)
4. Pure contingency / butterfly effect

[Here AM digresses, answering whether he thinks he’s disproved the kind of predictability the social sciences would like to suppose exists— to which he argues no, but that he’s demonstrated that such a concept is unintelligible]

On the other hand, what gives our life predictability?

1. Scheduling and coordinating
2. Statistical regularities (even if unexplained - e.g. suicide rises at Christmastime)
3. Regularity of nature
4. Causal regularities in social life (e.g. social status determines opportunities)

Predictability is necessary for us to engage in long-term projects which help our lives be meaningful; unpredictability enables us to be not merely the objects of somebody else’s project

Back to the question: what exactly is the character of social science?

It's based on research but inductive; not lawlike; prefaced by qualifiers not quantifiers; etc. — in other words, it's rooted in human life as we know it, which is to say, unpredictable.

On unpredictability:

1. Errors in social sciences, typically disregarded merely as failure, may be studied to learn more about how unpredictability affects human life
2. Even the project of maximizing predictability would have to cultivate flexibility in order to succeed — in other words, embrace unpredictability. This is why any form of totalitarianism (and bureaucratic control) are doomed to failure

Conclusion: the claim to managerial effectiveness and expertise is a contemporary moral fiction, arbitrary will and preference disguised by a false metaphysics — nobody is or could be actually in control.

Chapter 9 — Nietzsche or Aristotle? first stage of argument complete

The Marxist critique of ideology is yet another attempt by social science to produce lawlike generalizations.

How has morality become a mask for arbitrary will and preference?

It works like “taboo” rules which depend on background beliefs (cosmology, taxonomy, etc.), the loss of which impoverishes the meaning of the word though it will still be used. But without any new interpretation/justification, it will lose its power.

The case is the same for our moral language - so we must investigate the historical background beliefs if we are to understand the words we use

Nietzsche correctly saw that people in his day were using moral language as a disguise for their arbitrary will and preference, but jumped to conclusions about the nature of morality as such. Thus, Nietzsche urges the replacement of reason and the illusion of rationally justified morality with the will.

Erving Goffman's sociology of everyday life is the small-scale counterpart to Nietzsche and Weber's theories. For Goffman, there is no objective merit or “good”, only what the society decides — therefore, he treats honor as the chief good. (Note that “honor” here is a very different concept from that in Aristotle)

Nietzsche's moral philosophy — in particular the contention that all rational vindications of morality fail — was written in response to the failure of the attempts of the Enlightenment to justify morality, which in turn were undertaken following the rejection of Aristotle. So the REAL question is, was it right to reject Aristotle? If so, we have to follow Nietzsche's conclusions.

This is not to say that Aristotle is the only alternative, but it is to say that in the pre-modern world, it was the most powerful & influential. So if we're not going to go the Enlightenment route and end up with Nietzsche, Aristotle or something very like him must be vindicated.

A couple of considerations before investigating:

1. Modern morality is concerned with what rules must be followed. Virtue becomes a utilitarian means to following the rules better. But if we suppose virtue has primacy of place over what the rules are and why to follow them, investigation will look different than one might expect.
2. AM must write a history of Aristotelianism outlining a whole tradition of which Aristotle himself is only a [central] part

Chapter 10 — Let's start at the very beginning: Primordial virtue in heroic societies

Epic poems provided foundations for ancient societies in many ways, including ethics. Ancient societies had well-defined roles in determinate systems. Virtues were embedded in the social structure; morality and social structure were basically the same thing. (This in contrast with detached emotivist self.)

Some more notes about the shape of his investigation:

1. All morality is tied to time & place; the modern attempt to achieve universality w/o any particularity is in vain (AM keeps harping on this)
2. Possession and understanding of virtues depends on the tradition through which we receive them, which begins with the heroic era.

Key elements of heroic conceptual scheme:

1. social role
2. virtues (excellences) which enable success in the role
3. fragility and mortality

Narrative epic form gives unitary framework to all three

The ancient/heroic self is a social creation. Nietzsche anachronistically projected an individualist self onto heroic culture.

Chapter 11 - Virtues at Athens

In the Republic, Plato redefines virtues to make them more coherent than the Homeric conception.

In Sophocles' Philoctetes we have two rival, incompatible conceptions of honorable conduct (the basis of tragedy), remaining unresolved (conflict merely ended thru divine intervention, not solved).

The major change in this period is that the primary community moves from kinship group to city-state. Values of kinship survive, though in a broader context (see Antigone), and virtues are now detached from particular social roles. On the other hand, it is still in context of Athenian (as opposed to Spartan, or barbarian) life the virtues are understood, even if the relationship between society and virtue is put to the question.

There were rival conceptions of virtue, even in Athens (what we usually mean by 'Greek'), e.g., the Sophists vs Plato vs Aristotle vs tragedians (Sophocles)

Interesting note: classical vice of pleonexia (acquisitiveness) is central to modern economics.

Another conflict: traveling Sophists want success, so they adopt a relativistic stance in order to fit in, but fitting in means adopting virtues of a particular city, thus they adopt non-relativist positions.

One solution to the different virtue theories is from Callicles — sort of precursor of Machiavelli? Other is Plato, in the theories laid out in the Republic, and which includes the idea that virtue is harmony — ruling out the possibility of rival competing goods. But tragic drama has competing goods as its basis. Here, the virtues are seen as elements within the story of a human life that enable success in its progress through harm & danger.

In contrast to both Plato and Sophocles, modern philosophy (Weber) holds that the Platonic tradition of unity of goods leads to totalitarian straight-jacketing, and there is no objective moral order (and thus no tragedy).

AM seems to favor the Sophoclean view b/c Plato denigrates the dramatic form of life, and the Weberian view says there is no such form — and also b/c it emphasizes (1) the presence of community in individual choices and (2) ethical accountability.

Chapter 12 - Aristotle's Virtues

First, AM gives a disclaimer about treating Aristotle in an unAristotelian way: as part of a tradition (Aristotle saw himself as the end of the line).

Aristotle's sociological/political starting point:

Every human practice aims at some good — and there is an overall good (telos) for man (as there is for all other species): eudaimonia, or a complete human life lived at its best. Virtue is both a means and an end. Virtue is a habit or inclination to do the right thing at the right time, formed by education. There's a difference between what someone takes to be good and what really is good for him. Virtue helps make the distinction. (It's not rule based)

As a citizen, there are two ways to fail: either not being good enough (omission) vs committing an offense. These ways are linked because they make the social project less likely to succeed, and they mean that both virtues and rules are necessary. Proper application of law requires virtue. Virtue requires intelligence (in contrast to later conceptions). The central virtues are interrelated — one cannot be just without also being wise (which comes from Plato).

Aristotle defines friendship in a unique way: as the shared recognition of and pursuit of a good. This is also the root of the political community, in complete contrast to the modern form where everybody is basically a stranger to everybody else. Aristotle would regard modern society as citizens of nowhere banded together for protection, and our forms of friendship as inferior, founded only on mutual advantage.

There are some things Aristotle got wrong: e.g., writing off of Barbarians as incapable of achieving a polis, which is based in turn on his understanding of natures as fixed.

Two key insights: (1) pleasure/enjoyment supervenes on successful activity. Thus enjoyment/pleasure is the telos, but it would be wrong to seek it (seek excellence instead)

(2) there is a practical/moral reasoning component. Actions express beliefs; therefore an act can be a conclusion in a syllogism providing the necessary conditions to make action intelligible.

1. Wants/goals of the agent
2. X is good for agent
3. Y is an instance/occasion of X
4. conclusion: action

Three important problems arise:

1. Aristotle's teleology is based on his metaphysical biology. If we reject the latter, doesn't that mean we must reject the former? How can we have an adequate account of telos w/o Aristotle's biology?
2. Aristotle's virtues presuppose the ancient polis. Since the latter no longer exists, how can the virtues be formulated in a meaningful way? How can we be meaningfully Aristotelian in modern times?
3. The Sophoclean problem: tragedy and conflict are essential components of human individual & political life, and often how we learn our true ends/purposes. In Aristotle, tragedy is only the result of an individual flaw. How can we reconcile tragedy?

Ch 13 — The Virtues in Medieval times

In the Enlightenment, the classical tradition was repudiated as Aristotelianism specifically.

In the middle ages, a central question was how to reconcile paganism with Christianity, how to integrate the virtues. Is the Bible all-sufficient? Not in answering the question of how to exercise

the virtues in the current age. Another central question was how to reckon w/ virtues in light of sin, and concept of human will.

Contrast virtue w/ Stoicism: in Stoicism, there is no telos, only a good will or virtuous character (since there is no guarantee that any action will result in its intended outcome). Good will/ character is conformity to the cosmic order, doing right is just doing the right thing for its own sake, not with any particular goal in mind. Stoicism is the ancestor of all subsequent theories which invoke law as the basis of ethics. (Was the disappearance of telos connected to the disappearance of that type of society in which telos was a key component?) Stoicism and other law-based paradigms (e.g. Judaism/Christianity) are solid alternatives when virtues lose their place.

The question of virtue also comes up in the context of educating common people (outside monasteries) to obey moral law. Ancient virtue ethics are a resource for this project.

Medieval communities pursued the common, human good, like the Aristotelian polis — thus embedding identity in social role. But this did not last.

For example, compare the story of Henry II and Thomas Becket with Henry VIII and Thomas More. In the former, there is a shared understanding of a single narrative structure; in the latter, there are rival concepts and narratives.

Medieval developments, refinements of Aristotle:

The new virtue of charity would have been alien to Aristotle, and radically alters the conception of “good” for man, and community is now centered on reconciliation. Life is seen as a quest or journey. The will may delight in evil. No one is excluded from the vision of the good life (whereas in Aristotle, great misfortune excludes). Human life is seen as historical/narrative, based in the Biblical narrative. Virtues enable men to survive evils on historical/narrative journey. The importance/ranking of virtues depends on what’s happening in the story of a particular human life.

Next are some questions on Aquinas which AM later redacted, concerning the unity of virtues. He gives the example of re-educating a Nazi: would he have to re-learn courage as well as charity? Seems that he would not — thus Aquinas’ theory of unity is put in question.

Ch 14 - Nature of the Virtues

In the Aristotelian/virtue tradition, is there is too much discrepancy to adopt it as a coherent tradition?

Steel-man: compare 5 strikingly dissimilar sets of virtues:

Homer

Aristotle

New Testament
Jane Austen
Ben Franklin

Homer: virtues attach to social roles (ends are external)

Aristotle: virtues attach to man as such, ends are internal

NT: introduces charity. same conceptual structure as Aristotle, though particular virtues are different

Austen: introduces constancy. Christian, so compatible with previous two

Franklin: utilitarian (external ends, again)

Aristotle, NT, and Austen are compatible. This narrows things down to 3 different conceptions, still apparently different. What are their common features?

1. Each requires a concept of social and moral life, i.e.:
 - a. concept of “practice”
 - b. narrative order of human life
 - c. concept of moral tradition

By “practice” he means: “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.” So for example, architecture is a practice, but not bricklaying.

He emphasizes “internal goods” as benefits that can only be got from the practice itself, and not through any other means — e.g., playing chess to earn candy (external) vs playing chess for the goods that only chess can provide (internal)

“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.” (191) A key concept here is subordination to the authority residing in the tradition of the practice. (I have to admit I have something to learn from the tradition.) Therefore, necessary to any practice, he says, are these virtues: justice, courage, and honesty.

This dictates a certain kind of relationship that people must have to one another (marked by these three virtues) or else the relationship is to redefine the relationship as “special or distinctive.”

Truthfulness is treated differently at different times by different cultures, but remains a virtue nonetheless (there is no culture in which the concept simply does not exist)

Note that a practice is not defined by its set of technical skills, nor by its particular goals at any given time. The goals are dynamically informed by its history.

There is a difference between traditions and their institutions (e.g., education vs a university) though they are dependent on one another, and institutionalizing a practice is itself a practice, therefore also requires the virtues.

When external ends become dominant, the virtues suffer.

By this point in his analysis of the tradition, AM has overcome some key objections: It does not require Aristotle's metaphysical biology. It also includes potentially rival practices (multiplicity of goods) explaining tragic conflict not resulting from individual character (which Aristotle could not).

But it is still Aristotelian in that it borrows from (1) Aristotle's concepts of voluntariness, the distinction between intellectual & character virtues, and the relationship of natural ability, passion, and reasoning; (2) his concept of pleasure and enjoyment from internal goods (whereas Ben Franklin and other utilitarians cannot explain or integrate the distinction between internal and external goods) and (3) links evaluation and explanation (e.g. failure of a historical kind resulting from a failure of virtue, the latter of which is no longer 'a fact')

Potential objection: are there evil practices? e.g. torture

1. Torture and the like are probably not practices by AM's definition
2. Explaining the virtues as belonging to practices does not validate all practices as virtuous — thus also the necessity for law/rules

So how do we know which practices are good, especially in light of multiplicity of (mutually-exclusive) goods? Are we back to the initial problem of criterion less choice between rival conception of the good?

The only way to answer this is to articulate a telos of a whole human life

Chapter 15 - Virtues, unity of life, and tradition

Viewing a human life as a whole is hard because socially we are trained to compartmentalize (work vs home vs family vs hobby, etc.) and philosophically we are trained to eschew a unitary self (via analytical philosophy, in which we think atomistically, or via existentialism, in which self is distinct from the "roles" it plays...existence precedes essence)

BUT

We characterize action in terms of narrative context ('setting'): "What is he doing?" — answer: "Gardening" vs "Pleasing his wife" vs "Preparing for winter" etc. All of these imply some context or other. Without context, action is unintelligible.

Hypothesize opposite outcome to determine intentions: if it did not please his wife, would he still do it? If not, that was the primary motive, and should then be the primary way of characterizing the action (“he was pleasing his wife”)

(As an aside, this all means that behaviorism, and analytical philosophy’s conception of human behavior, is doomed to failure: since action can only be made intelligible with reference to intentions, beliefs, and setting. Example of a recipe: breaking eggs into a bowl is only intelligible in the context of a recipe — performing the same action mid-lecture would be unintelligible, i.e., demand explanation)

Human life is narrative in structure, and is only understandable in that context.

Objection: don’t we retroactively apply story structure to understand an event, or a human life? Narrative is not an essential feature of life, but a framework imposed on it retroactively.

Rejoinder: “an action” is derived/abstracted from narrative context, not the other way around — how do we know how much context to leave out? (“baking a cake” is an action, but so is “cracking two eggs in a bowl,” but so is “letting the insides of an egg fall out of its shell,” etc.) — decontextualized actions will always appear so disjointed as to demand some sort of narrative in order to become intelligible again.

The question of telos arises in narrative context: we determine what to do in terms of where we are going. This requires a stable, robust concept of personal identity as the unity of a character in a story (so not as strict as Leibnitz’s law, but stronger than modern psychology) and a personal history/narrative.

Interesting aside about suicidal ideation as resulting from sense of unintelligibility of personal narrative p 217

This structure implies accountability (making-intelligible-of); which also implies the possibility to demand an account from someone else (interconnectedness of narratives). The narratives of our lives take the form of a quest. Quest for what?

Quest for “the good” — by which he seems to mean quest to find out what the good is. The virtues help us overcome dangers and obstacles, and increase our knowledge of the good itself. This is made intelligible through the traditional roles we inhabit (I am son, father, etc.) Rebellion against an identity is also one way of expressing it - there is no true detachment in practice. Likewise there is no escaping from particularity into pure detached theoretical reasoning, like Kant. I am the bearer of a tradition.

*What he says here (p 220) about modern individualism detaching itself from responsibility in regards to slavery (“I never owned any slaves”) probably needs amendment in regards to the contemporary postmodern social justice push in the other direction. What would he say?

Living traditions are socially embodied arguments taking place in time. [Interesting aside on 222 about conservatives wanting to preserve merely earlier iterations of the same tradition (liberal individualism) which is probably why they always lose the culture wars.] Virtues are what sustain them (lack of virtues are what destroy them). The sense of tradition becomes another virtue, since the story of the tradition in which I live is the context for my own story.

Again, the question again of rival, incompatible goods arises: which tradition, which practice do I choose?

The answer is that, short of a conclusion drawn from a narrative, there is no “ought” except *within* practices aimed at goods. Outside of practices, there is only the tragic fact that human beings are limited and cannot do everything all at once. I think a good example here would be Kierkegaard’s dilemma: do I marry what’s-her-name, or do I write philosophy? Doesn’t really matter; what’s important is that, if you choose to marry, you endeavor to be a good and faithful husband, or if you do philosophy, you do it logically, honestly, etc.

Chapter 16 - More modern versions of the virtues, including degenerate/debased forms

Fragments of virtue concepts survive in modern culture alongside other concepts (like utilitarianism, rights theory, etc.). Part of the problem with virtue ethics in later periods is that the concept of narrative unity of human life was dismantled/denigrated — academia separates art from ethics. Similarly, concept of practices w/ internal goods has been marginalized, e.g., production moved outside of household for the sake of generating capital; art, games, etc., are not considered “work” except for a few. Without the background of narrative unity, virtues become either an expression of the passions or a means of repressing them.

Problems in Hume:

1. why be virtuous when it is not in our interest to be so? (Hume has no answer)
2. Hume seems to think everybody has natural knowledge of the virtues, yet criticizes “monkish” virtues...
3. He believes virtues to be merely expressions of approval/emotion, but sees fit to pass judgment on alternative accounts of virtues - where his judgment can be nothing but the disapproval of himself, which is basically a reflection of his own social situation.

Further observations:

1. Without a shared conception of good, the virtues are redefined superficially (e.g. charity becomes vague & utilitarian ‘benevolence’)
2. Virtues become the means - proper disposition - of obeying rules
3. Virtue becomes a singular concept, eventually focusing on sexual purity in Victorian era

Stoicism reappears - virtue for its own sake - in Dr Johnson and Adam Smith

In this state of disarray, morality of rules (chiefly Kant) arises. The ethical question now is, which rules do I follow?

Republicanism marked an attempt to revive the virtue tradition without Aristotle's name attached.

Jane Austen also carried on the tradition in her novels. Her virtue of constancy is important, since it acknowledges the general loss of telos and narrative unity, and the concomitant difficulty of maintaining virtue and the prevalence of counterfeit virtues. She also adds self-knowledge as an important virtue. She is the last major representative of the tradition.

Chapter 17 - Examining modern concepts of justice

Thought experiment about A and B: A is a fiscal conservative and B is interested in social justice. A is willing to sacrifice equality of wealth and opportunity in the name of the principles of just acquisition and entitlement; B the reverse. Legitimate entitlement vs need — incommensurable ethical paradigms, as we've seen all along.

These positions have representatives in academic philosophy:

A=Nozick

B=Rawls

Rawls first: justice is what would be chosen by rational agent behind "veil of ignorance" (unaware of what place in society he is to hold), which means equal liberty for all, and a rearrangement of resources to make this happen. How one came to be in need is irrelevant; needs must be met.

Nozick champions rights of just acquisition (ignoring the vast history of illegitimate entitlements). Present patterns of distribution are irrelevant.

But there is a key difference between these philosophers and their "everyday" counterparts.

A & B made reference to the notion of desert, whereas Rawls and Nozick do not. Desert is only at home in community understanding of good for man.

Community is also absent from these writers. Rawls & Nozick share a conception of community as shipwrecked, unconnected strangers with different, competing interests. They also exclude the past.

The difference shows the residual traces (and thus the robustness) of the Aristotelian and Christian tradition in the common view. Communities at the margins of society, mostly Christian, preserve virtue ethics as well, but the need to enter public debate puts them at risk.

Again, modern moral discourse is characterized by incompatible ethical paradigms and consensus is impossible. AM sees the job of the Supreme Court as keeping the peace between rival factions, since it can't resolve anything. Patriotism is also impossible, since there is no unified moral vision that the polis stands for. Thus follows a rejection of the modern political order (though not as an argument in favor of anarchy or apathy).

Chapter 18 - Conclusion

Nietzsche does not win out against Aristotle - first, because of the successful argument in ch. 14 & 15. But also Nietzsche's übermensch is characterized by isolation, and virtue is only possible in community, thru practices and institutions. Thus the übermensch is one more iteration of liberal individualism, and a part of the culture it would wish to criticize.

AM says that an account of moral rationality is forthcoming.

Then he addresses some counterarguments:

He admits that there might be some internal disagreements about his interpretation of the tradition, but his argument was for the tradition itself as an arena where arguments take place, so no problem there.

Some Marxists might want to say that human autonomy can be rescued from individualism via dialectical conflict between individualism and the tradition.

Rebuttals: Marxism is not a morally distinctive standpoint; it borrows from utilitarianism, chiefly. Also, Marxism has failed historically across the board.

Call to action: we need local communities in which morality can be sustained through the "dark ages" of moral discourse at large.

19 - P.S.

Responding to critics, AM offers further clarification on the relationship between history and ethical/philosophical argument. To critics urging that AM be able to offer an ethics disentangled from history, he replies that the demand for purely moral argument presupposes existence of morality as such, distinct from time and place, which is what he rejects. (Example of Kant, whose ethics were secularized Protestant values.)

Against further demands of analytic philosophers, he leverages a sort of Popperian concept of metaethics... although he has offered us a few virtues, he's also been arguing for the tradition

itself as a process or means of arguing. It's like the difference between arguing for relativity as a theory, and arguing for falsification as a means of vindicating (or defeating) theories. So what he's saying is Aristotelianism is the best so far, the historical reasons for overturning it were insufficient, and it remains the most robust theory for explaining the failures of others. Which is another way of vindicating his historical approach. It is only in light of understanding the Aristotelian tradition that the failure of the Enlightenment can be understood.

On the other hand, he admits that the history he covers is more complex than he was able to articulate in the book.

2. Relativism?

In order to address the charge of relativism, he clarifies part of his earlier argument.

There are three stages in his account of the virtues:

1. they are necessary to achieve goods internal to practices
2. they are qualities necessary to the good life
3. they are related to pursuit of a good for human beings (which comes from an ongoing social tradition)

Virtues are counted virtues in light of the conditions met in all three of these stages, not primarily or only in the first.

E.g. ruthlessness and relentlessness are not virtues, though they can be useful qualities in certain situations.

As regards no. 3, does not that entail relativism? (rival and incompatible traditions) I.e., how do we evaluate traditions against one another?

If two rival traditions share the same issue, they must have something in common, and in a Popperian way again, they can compare which tradition is most useful/revealing in regards to that issue.

Might not totally satisfy the question, but to demand more — to demand some solid, immutable law that transcends all traditions, useful for evaluating traditions against one another — was precisely what Kant was after, and precisely what he and his followers failed to produce.

3. Theology

AM admits inadequacies in relating Aristotle to Aquinas and describing the refinements that went on in the middle ages