

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE AND THE ECONOMY OF ETHICS

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Both Alasdair MacIntyre's friends and enemies have so focused on his "disquieting suggestion" about the fragmentation of moral language that they often overlook the "contemporary vision" that he suggests sustains the appearance of morality without its substance. This contemporary vision is central to his argument. It gives morality a certain coherence in modernity, but this coherence is a-rational. This contemporary vision is a formal "rationality" that functions by refusing to order desire to anything other than what the individual wants. We can still use moral language intelligibly, but not substantively, because all morality is now reduced to "values." This reduction of morality is a result of the ever-encroaching power of the capitalist global economy in each facet of our lives.

MacIntyre may have left his Marxism behind him in his turn to Aristotle, St. Thomas and Rome, but he has not left behind his trenchant criticisms of capitalism. He does not critique capitalism based on a social scientific analysis of its inevitable failures; his critique is a moral one. Capitalism destroys the possibility of a virtuous life because it separates our labor from any meaningful contribution to a common good. Christian theologians can take heart from MacIntyre's analysis because he has led a foray into hitherto sacred territory. He has torn down the walls that rigidly separated academic disciplines from one another and he has revealed that, especially when it comes to economics and theology, we are not discussing two different realms of action; we are discussing the same realm of action differently. Both descriptions cannot be correct. MacIntyre finds the theological description of our human action more reasonable than its reduction to value-preferences by the economists. Thus he finds traditional Catholic moral theology's "functional economy" a compelling alternative to both capitalism and Marxism.

The Contemporary Vision of an A-rational Inheritance

The "disquieting suggestion" that begins *After Virtue* bears a striking resemblance to Walter M. Miller's novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.¹ Reading MacIntyre's "suggestion" in light of that novel illuminates why it is