ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

The Tasks of Philosophy

SELECTED ESSAYS, VOLUME 1

CAMBRIDGE

CAMBRIDGE www.cambridge.org/9780521854375

THE TASKS OF PHILOSOPHY

How should we respond when some of our basic beliefs are put into question? What makes a human body distinctively human? Why is truth an important good? These are among the questions explored in this collection of essays by Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the most creative and influential philosophers working today. Ten of MacIntyre's most influential essays written over almost thirty years are collected together here for the first time. They range over such topics as the issues raised by different types of relativism, what it is about human beings that cannot be understood by the natural sciences, the relationship between the ends of life and the ends of philosophical writing, and the relationship of moral philosophy to contemporary social practice. They will appeal to a wide range of readers across philosophy and especially in moral philosophy, political philosophy, and theology.

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE is Senior Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a Fellow of the British Academy. His publications include *A Short History of Ethics* (1967), *After Virtue* (1981), *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), and numerous journal articles.

THE TASKS OF PHILOSOPHY

Selected Essays, Volume I

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE
University of Notre Dame

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

Preface *page* vii
Acknowledgments xiv

PART I DEFINING A PHILOSOPHICAL STANCE

1 Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science 3
2 Colors, cultures, and practices 24
3 Moral relativism, truth, and justification 52
4 Hegel on faces and skulls 74
5 What is a human body? 86
6 Moral philosophy and contemporary social practice: what holds them apart? 104

PART II THE ENDS OF PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY

7 The ends of life, the ends of philosophical writing 125
8 First principles, final ends, and contemporary philosophical issues 143
9 Philosophy recalled to its tasks: a Thomistic reading of *Fides et Ratio* 179
10 Truth as a good: a reflection on *Fides et Ratio* 197

Index 216

Preface

The earliest of these essays appeared in 1972, the latest as recently as 2002. In 1971 Colin Haycraft of Duckworth in London and Ted Schocken of Schocken Books in New York had published a collection of my earlier essays, *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays in Ideology and Philosophy*, in which I had set myself three goals. The first was to evaluate a variety of ideological claims, claims about human nature and history, about the human good and the politics of its realization, advanced from the standpoints of Christian theology, of some kinds of psychoanalytic theory, and of some dominant versions of Marxism, the second to argue that, although there were sound reasons for rejecting those particular ideological claims, they provided no support for the then still fashionable end of ideology thesis, defended by Edward Shils and others. Yet these negative conclusions would have been practically sterile, if I were unable to move beyond them. And, if I was to be able to move beyond them, I badly needed to find resources that would enable me to diagnose more adequately the conceptual and historical roots of our moral and political condition.

A third task in *Against the Self-Images of the Age* was therefore to reconsider some central issues in moral philosophy and the philosophy of action. Yet the effect of rereading these essays in 1971, when collected together in a single volume, was to make me painfully aware of how relatively little had been accomplished in that book and how much more I needed by way of resources, if I was to discriminate adequately between what still had to be learned from each of the standpoints that I had criticized and what had to be rejected root and branch. How then was I to proceed philosophically? The first of the essays in this volume, "Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science," marks a major turning-point in my thinking during the 1970s.

It was elicited by my reading of and encounters with Imre Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn and what was transformed by that reading was my conception of what it was to make progress in philosophy or indeed in systematic thought more generally. Up to that time, although I should have learned otherwise from the histories of Christian theology and of Marxism, I had assumed that my enquiries would and should move forward in a piecemeal way, focusing first on this problem and then on that, in a mode characteristic of much analytic philosophy. So I had worked away at a number of issues that I had treated as separate and distinct without sufficient reflection upon the larger conceptual framework within which and by reference to which I and others formulated those issues. What I learned from Kuhn, or rather from Kuhn and Lakatos read together, was the need first to identify and then to break free from that framework and to enquire whether the various problems on which I had made so little progress had baffled me not or not only because of their difficulty, but because they were bound to remain intractable so long as they were understood in the terms dictated by those larger assumptions which I shared with many of my contemporaries. And I was to find that, by rejecting the conception of progress in philosophy that I had hitherto taken for granted, I had already taken a first step towards viewing the issues in which I was entangled in a new light.

A second step was taken when I tore up the manuscript of the book on moral philosophy that I had been writing and asked how the problems of modern moral and political philosophy would have to be reformulated, if they were viewed not from the standpoint of liberal modernity, but instead from the standpoint of what I took to be Aristotelian moral and political practice, and if they were understood as having resulted from a fragmentation of older Aristotelian conceptions of the practical life, a fragmentation produced by the impact of modernity upon traditions that had embodied such conceptions. What I discovered was that the dilemmas of high modernity and their apparently intractable character become adequately explicable *only* when viewed and understood in this way. This was the highly controversial claim that I first advanced in *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, Second Edition, 1981) and developed in subsequent books.

It is a claim that may seem to have a paradoxical character. For, if we inhabit a cultural, social, and moral order that we can only understand adequately from some point of view external to that order, how is it possible for us simultaneously to remain inhabitants of that order and yet to transcend its limitations? The answer is that the cultures of modernity are arenas of potential and actual conflict in which modes of thought and action from a variety of pasts coexist with and put in question some of the distinctive institutional forms and moral stances of individualist and corporate modernity. So from within modernity critiques of that same modernity from the standpoint of past traditions pose philosophical as well as political and moral questions.

Those who identify themselves with such critiques need to be able to say where they stand on a range of philosophical issues and to give adequate reasons for their commitments. Some of those issues are addressed in the next five essays. "Colors, cultures, and practices" is an enquiry into the range and significance of our agreements and disagreements in our color vocabularies, our perceptions of color, and our ascriptions of color. It begins from Wittgensteinian considerations about how language use is socially constituted and how agreements in our naming of colors within cultures is compatible with significant disagreements between cultures as to how colors are to be named. But these are preliminaries to asking what good reasons there might be for discriminating and classifying colors in one way rather than another and to arguing that the context for such reasoning is provided by practices, notably, for example, by the practice of the art of painting, in which the goods aimed at within some practice at some particular stage of its development may well provide us with grounds – generally and characteristically grounds that are only identified retrospectively – for attending to and discriminating colors in one way rather than another.

A good deal more needs to be said than is said in this essay. But even when this enquiry is carried no further forward, it involves a critical evaluation and rejection of the claims of a sophisticated cultural relativism. The reasons that we have for rejecting such claims have some bearing on the closely related issue of moral relativism and that relativism is confronted directly in "Moral relativism, truth, and justification," a paper written for a *Festschrift* published to celebrate the splendid philosophical work of Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach on the occasion of their fiftieth wedding anniversary. What my argument is designed to bring out – and I draw upon some of Geach's insights and arguments in doing so – is the place of the concept of truth in our moral discourse and our moral enquiries. That place is such as to put the theoretical moral relativist at odds with the inhabitants of those cultures on whose moral and other practical claims he is passing a verdict. The inhabitants of every moral culture, it turns out, have already rejected relativism and the problems that relativism was designed to solve, problems arising from radical moral disagreements within and between cultures, need to be approached in a very different way.

The fourth and fifth essays are concerned with how we ought to understand human beings. For the last three hundred years the project of explaining human thought and action in natural scientific terms has been an increasingly influential aspect of the distinctively modern mind. The sciences to which appeal has been made have undergone large changes. But the philosophical questions posed by that project have remained remarkably the same. So Hegel's critique of the claims advanced by the pseudosciences of physiognomy and phrenology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is still to the point. And in "Hegel on faces and skulls" I conclude that Hegel provided us with good reasons for rejecting the view that human attitudes and actions are explicable by causal generalizations of the kind provided by the relevant natural sciences, in our day neurophysiology and biochemistry. In "What is a human body?" I argue further that we all of us have and cannot but have a prephilosophical understanding of the human body that is incompatible with treating its movements as wholly explicable in natural scientific terms. This understanding is presupposed by, among other things, those interpretative practices that make it possible for us to understand and to respond to what others say and do. So that in and by our everyday lives we are committed to a denial of the basic assumptions of much contemporary scientific naturalism.

These five essays address familiar philosophical issues. The sixth is very different. Moral philosophers often take themselves to be articulating concepts that are at home in the everyday life and utterances of prephilosophical moral agents, plain persons. But what if the moral concepts that inform the social and cultural practices in which both philosophers and plain persons participate in their everyday social life are in fact significantly different from and incompatible with the moral concepts of the philosophers? What if the moral concepts embodied in everyday practice are not only different and incompatible, but such that the way of life to which they give expression makes it difficult, perhaps impossible to find genuine application for the moral concepts of the philosophers? In "Moral philosophy and contemporary social practice: what holds them apart?" I suggest that just these possibilities are realized in the social and cultural order of advanced modernity and that the conclusions advanced within moral philosophy by rights theorists of various kinds, by proponents of virtue ethics, and by utilitarians are unable, except on rare occasions, to have any effect on contemporary social realities. The practices of individualist and corporate modernity are well designed to prevent the arguments of moral philosophers, whatever their point of view, from receiving a hearing.

If this is so, then the task of moral philosophers is not only to participate in theoretical enquiry and debate. Theoretical enquiry on moral and political matters is always rooted in some form of practice and to take a standpoint in moral and political debate is to define oneself in relationship to the practices in which one is engaged and to the conflicts in which one is thereby involved. Yet the social and cultural order that we nowadays inhabit is one that prescribes for philosophy a severely limited place, that of a discipline suitable for educating a very small minority of the young who happen to have a taste for that sort of thing. Its modes of public life are inimical to philosophical questioning of those modes and their presuppositions. And philosophers who seek to be more than theorists, whatever their point of view, are either forced into struggle against this marginalization or are condemned to speak only to and with other philosophers and their generally minuscule public. In this situation therefore the questions arise more sharply than at certain other times: Why engage in philosophy? What ends does philosophical enquiry serve? And what kind of philosophy will enable one to move towards the achievement of those ends? These are questions that I address in the four final essays in this volume.

In "The ends of life, the ends of philosophical writing" my enquiry is about the different relationships that may hold between the ends that philosophers pursue in their lives and the ends that they pursue in their writings and about the difference between those philosophical texts that enable us to ask better questions about the ends of life and those that divert us from asking such questions. The case made in this essay is indeed a case for a particular kind of philosophy, but it is not a case for any one philosophical standpoint. Yet this was not because I do not speak and write from a particular point of view. I wrote these essays and I write now with the intentions and commitments of a Thomistic Aristotelian. What these commitments amount to I tried to say, at least in part, in "First principles, final ends, and contemporary philosophical issues," a revised and expanded version of my 1990 Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University.

In that essay I had three aims. First, I needed to spell out for myself the conception of progress in philosophical enquiry that my work now presupposed, a very different conception from that which I had rejected while at work on "Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science." Secondly, I hoped to make the Thomist conceptions of first principles and final ends intelligible to at least some of my contemporaries who were and are deeply committed to a rejection of those conceptions. And, thirdly, I wanted to identify the consequences for the history of modern philosophy of such rejection. The emphasis of this essay is therefore on the extent and nature of the disagreements between on the one hand Thomists and on the other analytic and postmodernist philosophers. Yet this makes the need to find common ground for debate and enquiry between Thomists and such critics, and the need to argue, so far as possible, from premises that are widely shared, all the more urgent. For in philosophy it is only by being open to objections posed by our critics and antagonists that we are able to avoid becoming the victims of our own prejudices.

Yet it is not always possible to find such common ground and sometimes this is a consequence of the fact that no one engages in philosophy without being influenced by their extraphilosophical allegiances, religious, moral, political, and otherwise. What is important here is twofold: first, not to disguise such allegiances as philosophical conclusions and, secondly, to make their influence on one's philosophical work explicit. The first is a danger that threatens those who fail to recognize, for example, that atheism requires an act of faith just as much as theism does and that physicalism is as liable to be held superstitiously as any religious view. The second is necessary, if one is to clarify the relationship between one's philosophical and one's other commitments. The next two essays are in part concerned to achieve such clarification in respect of my own commitments as a Roman Catholic who is a philosopher. Both are responses to John Paul II's encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio.*

That encyclical is concerned both to insist upon the autonomy of the philosophical enterprise and to identify those philosophical theses to which anyone who affirms the Catholic creeds is inescapably committed. There is clearly a tension between these two themes and in "Truth as a good" I address the nature of that tension and more particularly enquire what understanding of truth is consistent with the Catholic faith. In "Philosophy recalled to its tasks" I have a number of concerns, but most centrally that of the relationship between the enquiries of the academic philosopher and the questioning and self-questioning of plain persons about their own nature and about the nature of things which is central to every developed human culture. In the encyclical we hear the voice not only of the pope, John Paul II, but of the philosopher, Karol Woityla, and I engage with it not only as an expression of the church's *magisterium*, but as a significant contribution to a both philosophical and theological understanding of philosophy.

Finally, I need to acknowledge my debts, particularly to those who have been or are my colleagues and to those who have been or are my students in the departments and centers to which I belonged at the time that I was writing these essays: at Boston University, at the Center for Kulturforskning of Aarhus University, and at the University of Notre Dame, where since the year 2000 I have been both a member of the Philosophy Department and a fellow of the Center for Ethics and Culture. My late colleague Philip Quinn was especially helpful in commenting on "Colors, cultures, and practices." I must once again thank Claire Shely for extraordinary work in preparing this volume.

Everyone whose academic life has been as long as mine has has incurred a special kind of debt to those with whom they have engaged in philosophical discussions that have extended over quite a number of years. I name them here, both the dead and the living, knowing that nothing I say can express adequately my sense of what I owe to them: Eric John, Herbert McCabe, O.P., James Cameron, Harry Lubasz, Max Wartofsky, Bernard Elevitch, David Solomon, Hans Fink, Ralph McInerny. I add to their names that of my wife, Lynn Sumida Joy, in acknowledgment of a still greater debt.

Acknowledgments

Of the essays in this first volume numbers 5, 8, and 9 were previously unpublished. I am grateful to the following for permission to reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere:

- the Director of the Hegeler Institute for the first essay, previously published in *The Monist* vol. 60, no. 4, October 1977, pp. 453–72 (copyright© 1977, THE MONIST, An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Enquiry, Peru, Illinois, 61534);
- the University of Notre Dame for the second essay, first published in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 17, 1992, edited by P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, Jr., and H. K. Wettstein, pp. 1–23;
- the Four Courts Press, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, for the third and tenth essays, first published in *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honor of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe,* 1994, pp. 6–24, and in *Thomas Aquinas Approaches to Truth,* 2002, edited by J. McEvoy and M. Dunne, pp. 141–57;
- Doubleday, a division of Random House Inc., for the fourth essay, first published in *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays,* 1972, pp. 219–36;
- the Director of the Center for Kulturforsknung at Aarhus University for the sixth essay, first published as *Arbejdspapir* 113, 1992;
- Marquette University Press for permission to reprint the eighth essay, first published as the 1990 Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University.

PART I

Defining a philosophical stance

CHAPTER 1

Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science

1

What is an epistemological crisis? Consider, first, the situation of ordinary agents who are thrown into such crises. Someone who has believed that he was highly valued by his employers and colleagues is suddenly fired; someone proposed for membership of a club whose members were all, so he believed, close friends is blackballed. Or someone falls in love and needs to know what the loved one *really* feels; someone falls out of love and needs to know how he or she can possibly have been so mistaken in the other. For all such persons the relationship of *seems* to *is* becomes crucial. It is in such situations that ordinary agents who have never learned anything about academic philosophy are apt to rediscover for themselves versions of the other-minds problem and the problem of the justification of induction. They discover, that is, that there is a problem about the rational justification of inferences from premises about the behavior of other people to conclusions about their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes and of inferences from premises about how individuals have acted in the past to conclusions expressed as generalizations about their behavior, generalizations which would enable us to make reasonably reliable predications about their future behavior. What they took to be evidence pointing unambiguously in some one direction now turns out to have been equally susceptible of rival interpretations. Such a discovery is often paralysing, and were we all of us all of the time to have to reckon with the multiplicity of possible interpretations open to us, social life as we know it could scarcely continue. For social life is sustained by the assumption that we are, by and large, able to construe each other's behavior, that error, deception, self-deception, irony, and ambiguity, although omnipresent in social life, are not so pervasive as to render reliable reasoning and reasonable action impossible. But can this assumption in any way be vindicated?

Consider what it is to share a culture. It is to share schemata which are at one and the same time constitutive of and normative for intelligible action by myself and are also means for my interpretations of the actions of others. My ability to understand what you are doing and my ability to act intelligibly (both to myself and to others) are one and the same ability. It is true that I cannot master these schemata without also acquiring the means to deceive, to make more or less elaborate jokes, to exercise irony and utilize ambiguity, but it is also, and even more importantly, true that my ability to conduct any successful transactions depends on my presenting myself to most people most of the time in unambiguous, unironical, undeceiving, intelligible ways. It is these schemata which enable inferences to be made from premises about past behavior to conclusions about future behavior and present inner attitudes. They are not, of course, empirical generalizations; they are prescriptions for interpretation. But while it is they which normally preserve us from the pressure of the other-minds problem and the problem of induction, it is precisely they which can in certain circumstances thrust those very problems upon us.

For it is not only that an individual may rely on the schemata which have hitherto informed his interpretations of social life and find that he or she has been led into radical error or deception, so that for the first time the schemata are put in question, but also that perhaps for the first time they become visible to the individual who employs them. And such an individual may as a result come to recognize the possibility of systematically different possibilities of interpretation, of the existence of alternative and rival schemata which yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on around him. Just this is the form of epistemological crisis encountered by ordinary agents and it is striking that there is not a single account of it anywhere in the literature of academic philosophy. Perhaps this is a symptom of the condition of that discipline. But happily we do possess one classic study of such crises. It is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Hamlet arrives back from Wittenberg with too many schemata available for interpreting the events at Elsinore of which already he is a part. There is a revenge schema drawn from the Norse sagas; there is a Renaissance courtier's schema; there is a Machiavellian schema about competition for power. But Hamlet not only has the problem of which schema to apply; he also has the other ordinary agents' problem: whom now to believe? His mother? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? His father's ghost? Until he has adopted some particular schema as his own he does not know what to treat as evidence; until he knows what to treat as evidence he cannot tell which schema to adopt. Trapped in this epistemological circularity the general form of his problem is: "What is going on here?" Thus Hamlet's problem is close to that of the literary critics who have asked: "What is going on in *Hamlet?*" And it is close to that of directors who have asked: "What should be cut from Shakespeare's text and what should be included in my production so that the audience may understand what is going on in *Hamlet?*"

The resemblance between Hamlet's problem and that of the critics and directors is worth noticing; for it suggests that both are asking a question which could equally well be formulated as: "What is going on in *Hamlet?*" or "How ought the narrative of these events to be constructed?" Hamlet's problems arise because the dramatic narrative of his family and of the kingdom of Denmark, through which he identified his own place in society and his relationships to others, has been disrupted by radical interpretative doubts. His task is to reconstitute, to rewrite that narrative, reversing his understanding of past events in the light of present responses to his probing. This probing is informed by two ideals, truth and intelligibility, and the pursuit of both is not always easily reconciled. The discovery of an hitherto unsuspected truth is just what may disrupt an hitherto intelligible account. And of course while Hamlet tries to discover a true and intelligible narrative of the events involving his parents and Claudius, Gertrude and Claudius are trying to discover a true and intelligible narrative of Hamlet's investigation. To be unable to render oneself intelligible is to risk being taken to be mad, is, if carried far enough, to be mad. And madness or death may always be the outcomes which prevent the resolution of an epistemological crisis, for an epistemological crisis is always a crisis in human relationships.

When an epistemological crisis is resolved, it is by the construction of a new narrative which enables the agent to understand *both* how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs *and* how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them. The narrative in terms of which he or she at first understood and ordered experiences is itself now made into the subject of an enlarged narrative. The agent has come to understand how the criteria of truth and understanding must be reformulated. He has had to become epistemologically self-conscious and at a certain point he may have come to acknowledge two conclusions: the first is that his new forms of understanding may themselves in turn come to be put in question at any time; the second is that, because in such crises the criteria of truth, intelligibility, and rationality may always themselves be put in question – as they are in *Hamlet* – *we* are never in a position to claim that now we possess the truth or now we are fully rational. The most that we can claim is that this is the best account which anyone has been able to give so far, and that our beliefs about what the marks of "a best account so far" are will themselves change in what are at present unpredictable ways.

Philosophers have often been prepared to acknowledge this historical character in respect of scientific theories; but they have usually wanted to exempt their own thinking from the same historicity. So, of course, have writers of dramatic narrative; *Hamlet* is unique among plays in its openness to reinterpretation. Consider, by contrast, Jane Austen's procedure in *Emma.* Emma insists on viewing her protégé, Harriet, as a character in an eighteenth-century romance. She endows her, deceiving both herself and Harriet, with the conventional qualities of the heroine of such a romance. Harriet's parentage is not known; Emma converts her into the foundling heroine of aristocratic birth so common in such romances. And she designs for Harriet precisely the happy ending of such a romance, marriage to a superior being. By the end of *Emma* Jane Austen has provided Emma with some understanding of what it was in herself that had led her not to perceive the untruthfulness of her interpretation of the world in terms of romance. *Emma* has become a narrative about narrative. But Emma, although she experiences moral reversal, has no more than a minor epistemological crisis, if only because the standpoint which she now, through the agency of Mr. Knightley, has come to adopt, is presented as though it were one from which *the* world as it is can be viewed. False interpretation has been replaced not by a more adequate interpretation, which itself in turn may one day be transcended, but simply by the truth. We of course can see that Jane Austen is merely replacing one interpretation by another, but Jane Austen herself fails to recognize this and so has to deprive Emma of this recognition too.

Philosophers have customarily been Emmas and not Hamlets, except that in one respect they have often been even less perceptive than Emma. For Emma it becomes clear that her movement towards the truth necessarily had a moral dimension. Neither Plato nor Kant would have demurred. But the history of epistemology, like the history of ethics itself, is usually written as though it were not a moral narrative, that is, in fact as though it were not a narrative. For narrative requires an evaluative framework in which good or bad character helps to produce unfortunate or happy outcomes.

One further aspect of narratives and their role in epistemological crises remains to be noticed. I have suggested that epistemological progress