

interpretation

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example, “*Brok*—Belyávkí—Белявский—“white hare”). To these tables any reader could go immediately to find, in the most direct and concise form, the meaning that is automatically available to the native Russian reader. Whenever the derivation is not certain, a question mark prefaces the offered possibilities. In short, no matter which section of this wonderful guide is turned to, there is no bit of information that is not thoroughly researched and carefully presented. It is a book useful at all levels and should be on the shelves of anyone having even one Dostoevsky novel.

Charles Passage's death is a loss not only to those of us who knew him and worked with him, but a loss to all those who love letters and know the difference the best of scholarship makes in our appreciation of texts that show us how to live and what to do. His gentleness and generosity—the qualities most apparent to those who knew him—were the features that made his scholarship fit for the category “best.” His gentleness translated into the sensitivity with which he read and with which he composed his careful sentences. His generosity shows itself to anyone whose enjoyment of reading Dostoevsky, E. T. A. Hoffman or any of the other figures to whom he devoted attention has been enriched by his additions. Many more than those who knew him will miss him, because there will be no more of his work.

Two Critiques of Nihilism

After Virtue. By Alasdair MacIntyre. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981. 252 pp.: cloth \$15.95, paper \$7.95.)

Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay. By Stanley Rosen. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969. xx + 241 pp.: cloth \$22.50, paper \$6.95.)

WILL MORRISEY

“There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture,” MacIntyre writes. Morals are said to reduce to the sentiments of individuals. When on occasion they have not simply endorsed “emotivism,” both ‘analytic’ and existentialist philosophers have failed to overcome it. In this they echo the nineteenth-century debate on “utility” versus “rights”—that “matching pair of incommensurable fictions.”

The language and even the “integral substance” of morality have been destroyed, albeit slowly and often quietly, leaving us with today’s farrago of petty calculation and arbitrary self-righteousness. MacIntyre traces this destruction to the Enlightenment, wherein philosophers attacked religion but in effect judged philosophy morally incompetent to replace religion. He traces the En-

lightenment's failure to Protestantism and to Jansenist Catholicism, which convicted reason of moral incompetence (except for the calculation of means) and upheld divine revelation as man's only trustworthy source of teleological enlightenment. "[O]nce the notion of essential human purposes or functions disappears from morality, it begins to appear implausible to treat moral judgments as factual statements"—unless, one might add, one regards sentiment or faith as a reflection of morally significant fact.

MacIntyre observes that older writers understood ethics differently. Discussing virtue as conceived by Homer, Sophocles, and Aristotle, he endorses Sophoclean tragedy's presentation of an "objective moral order" that avoids the harshness of Homer's tribalism and the too-optimistic ethical harmony that MacIntyre ascribes to Aristotle. (In addition, he rejects Aristotle's "metaphysical biology" and repeats Hegel's complaints about the defense of slavery and Aristotle's refusal to provide a sense of 'History,' a *telos* for all mankind. He does approve of *phronēsis*.) He ends the historical survey with a chapter on the medieval 'synthesis' of Aristotle and Christianity in which he carefully leaves Christianity in limbo.

Thus the first two-thirds of the book contain an outline of our current moral dilemma and of reasons for it. They do not contain an explanation of why moral sentimentalism is false—that is, why moral chaos is a true dilemma. Nor do they contain an account of the foundation(s) of MacIntyre's praise and blame of Western intellectual history's various aspects. This is, after all, a history told with more care and at least as much accuracy by several earlier writers.

MacIntyre began to discuss these more fundamental matters while he discussed Sophocles, just before turning to Aristotle. MacIntyre's "theory of knowledge" allows him to call "each particular set of moral or scientific beliefs . . . intelligible and justifiable—insofar as it is justifiable—only as a member of a historical series." But even the last "belief" in the series "is open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some more adequate point of view." This, obviously, requires some standard of "adequacy" by which one can correct and transcend current beliefs. After discussing Aristotle and sidestepping Christianity, MacIntyre returns to this problem, devoting his two longest chapters to an account of the moral virtues.

He attempts a compromise between rationalism and historicism whereby he can produce a "core conception" of the virtues, a conception that "*in some sense* embodies the history of which it is the outcome" [italics added; in what sense, by the way, can a "conception" *embody* a history?]. He describes the three "stages" of this conception's "logical"—hence not only historical?—"development."

MacIntyre calls the "first stage" of the virtues' logical development a "practice": "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the

course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence [that] are appropriate to, and partly definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the goods and ends involved, are systematically extended.” Architecture is a practice, bricklaying is not; farming is a practice, planting turnips is not. War, household management, flute-playing, and geometry are all practices. Virtues are acquired human qualities needed to achieve the goods internal to a practice. “Practices never have a goal or goals fixed for all time—painting has no such goal nor has physics—but the goals themselves are transmuted by the history of the activity.”

Of the several problems here, two stand out; credit MacIntyre for seeing one of them. By defining an art, painting, and a science, physics, as practices, MacIntyre forgets that, while an art’s *telos* may change, a science’s *telos* may not—at least insofar as it is a science and not an art. The purpose of physics remains knowledge of *physis*. It cannot become anything else and remain physics; it has not become anything else. Of course, the purpose of acquiring knowledge can and has changed.

MacIntyre does see that his definition of a practice could include evil activities. He mentions torture but, following his own distinction between farming and planting turnips, a concentration camp would be the better example. He could mitigate this consequence by putting extra weight on “human conceptions of the goods and ends involved” in a practice; his “second stage” of virtue’s logical development does in fact attempt a definition of *humanitas*.

Man is “essentially a story-telling animal” whose stories combine intentions, beliefs, and settings. (This may account for the enthusiasm of the late novelist John Gardner, who called *After Virtue* “the best book of philosophy in years.”) Man “is not essentially, but becomes through history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth.” What, then, is the background of “history,” this story whereby story-tellers come to aspire to truth? MacIntyre calls it a quest for “the good,” a quest the virtues sustain. This leads to a somewhat tautological formulation: “the good life for man is the life spent in seeking the good life for man.” On to the “third stage.”

MacIntyre calls it “tradition.” Here we get something that begins to look a bit more like philosophizing. A tradition is “an historically extended, socially embodied argument . . . in part about the goods which constitute it.” One needs, first, “an adequate sense” of one’s tradition and of any other tradition(s) that confront(s) one and, second, “a grasp of those future possibilities [that] the past has made available to the present.”

Such undefined notions as “argument,” “the good,” “adequacy,” “sense,” and “grasp” leave MacIntyre with a lot of explaining to do. Credit him, again, for acknowledging this. “My negative and positive evaluations of particular arguments do indeed *presuppose* a systematic, although here unstated, account of rationality.” He promises one in a subsequent book.

The unresolved problem of this book—its insufficiently defined combination of logic, storytelling, events, and social forms—results in part from MacIntyre’s failure to see the significance of historicism (as distinguished from history) in modernity. MacIntyre omits from his bibliography one book that could have prevented this failure: *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* by Stanley Rosen. If MacIntyre does not come to see the links between historicism and such lesser doctrines as analytic philosophy and existentialism his project will collapse. That would be unfortunate; for a number of reasons, MacIntyre has the attention of many intellectuals who may never hear Rosen.

This quasi-political consideration leads to a purely political consideration. MacIntyre ends his book with a call for “the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages [that] are already upon us.” However he intends this, it will surely be read as an endorsement of some ‘small-is-beautiful,’ Lindisfarnesque communalism. Imagining himself surrounded by barbarism pure and simple, MacIntyre fails to distinguish between barbarians who tolerate Lindisfarnes and barbarians who don’t. To show what emergence from the postvirtuous age would mean in practice as well as in theory, he will have to begin with that distinction.

Rosen observes that nihilism “reduces reason to nonsense by equating the sense of significance of speech to silence.” If one conceives of reason “exclusively on the model of mathematics,” defines mathematics as the mode of expressing Newtonian physics, and insists that the nature physics describes changes constantly to no purpose, one will conclude that reason alienates man from his own desires. “Today philosophy and historical existence are both threatened by the nihilistic consequences of the denaturing of reason, which was ostensibly a purification of reason.”

Dividing his book into six chapters, Rosen shows the nihilism implicit in the West’s two dominant contemporary philosophic schools, then discusses the philosophic ancestors of those schools and the political consequences of their teachings. He concludes the book with two chapters contrasting nihilism with Platonic philosophy.

Wittgenstein believes nature and theory mythological. He celebrates convention and practice. His ‘analytic’ or ‘linguistic’ philosophy ends in circularity because he cannot make his conventionalist claims without interpreting something; by conventionalist definition, definition reduces to “an arbitrary attribution of sense to nonsense.” Unlike Nietzsche, whose arbitrariness partakes of grandeur, Wittgensteinian arbitrariness prides itself on a verbal microscopy that limits it to triviality. He “teaches us to philosophize, not with a sledgehammer, but with a nail file.”

Any “theory about speech [that] is itself a denial that such a theory may be stated or fully formulated” yields nihilism. This is as true of Heidegger as it is

of Wittgenstein. Heidegger differs from Wittgenstein in that he does not simply deny Being but regards it as so radically temporal/historical that it cannot be said to be a thing at all. 'His' Being is rather like Wittgensteinian convention, but in fact is no-thing. This belief gives Heidegger the unenviable job of trying to speak silence; he produces a sort of poetry he calls 'ontic' speech, a celebration of acts—that is, a celebration of not-words. This is "not just self-refuting but self-canceling."

Both doctrines offer us the curious spectacle of attempts to simultaneously exalt and dissolve the present. Rosen traces their genealogy to the Christian (as he calls it) effort to divide nature into prelapsarian and postlapsarian phases. After the Fall, reason can aim only at utility, at secondary goods, whereas understanding of the primary good is said to be transrational, a divine gift. Disbelieve the existence of divinity and one will invent a sort of imperial utilitarianism that would use all of nature to satisfy human desires. Historicism, "the inability to distinguish between being and time," theory and practice, results from this attempt at a vast subsumption of existing nature to restless, acting man.

Historicism finally yields poeticist politics. Heidegger's notorious endorsement of Nazism exemplifies this on the 'Right'; perhaps Merleau-Ponty, particularly in his book *Humanism and Terror*, best exemplifies it on the 'Left.' This politics destroys cruelly in order to bring the forgetfulness ostensibly needed in order to create. "To be reborn means to recur to the level of beasts through the loss of one's memory." Nietzsche's 'death of God' is, in Rosen's striking phrase, "the self-preservation of chaos." The poeticist politician negates the present "on behalf of an unknown and unknowable yet hoped-for future." Historicism thus exalts those aspects of the present that tend toward the destruction of the present. Unfortunately for historicism's publicists, "in the absence of a creator God, creation ex nihilo is unintelligible."

Rosen avoids suggesting that historicism may be fully explained by a history, even by a history of philosophy. Although nihilism has become easily noticeable today because a series of thought-events have encouraged it, "nihilism has its origin in the nature of man, and not in contingent historical events." This insight underlies his final two chapters, which concern the good and wisdom, respectively.

Nihilism "is doomed to shipwreck because it sunders courage from wisdom, justice, and moderation." Undirected wilfulness, *thymos* without reason, cannot know what it wants. It therefore cannot distinguish divine madness from mere madness. With no measure to refer to, it can sustain no human life, political or philosophic. Plato regards the good as intelligibility, visibility. Nihilism denies the goodness of reason by denying that the good exists; being's source is nothingness, or being itself is nothing.

Plato indicates that the good illuminates but does not generate the particulars. If it did, the good would be identical to God. Religion posits the existence

of God, that is, a link between the good and life. Marx and Nietzsche attempt to do away with God but retain the link; they would “replace the church with the body.” They end in nihilism because the body has nothing to say.

Of all the historicists, Hegel comes the closest to overcoming nihilism, in Rosen’s estimation. Hegel decides that ‘History’ has come to an end in his own work, the assertedly comprehensive speech about being. Earlier, Rosen had noted in passing that Hegel’s solution is not so much refutable as unbearable—excessively elitist for democratic souls. He now contrasts Hegel’s self-deification to the teaching of Plato’s Socrates. To deify the human, obviously, one must destroy its nature in an attempt to achieve a different and superior nature—if godliness can be said to be a ‘nature.’ But the love of wisdom embodied in the word “philosophy” is not wisdom itself, at least in the sense of the attainment of a comprehensive speech about the whole. Socrates regards the whole as intelligible; he does not believe it achievable by the best characteristically human means of achievement, speech. Much less does he believe it achievable by human action. A philosopher may be thought wise in that he partakes of wisdom. He cannot make himself into wisdom. At most, Socrates may playfully suggest that he is a god; literal-minded self-deification—often monotheistic self-deification, at that—he leaves to more hubristic souls. “In effect, one may say that Hegel makes the suppression of nihilism dependent upon hybris, or the sanctioning of man’s desire to become a god.” The suppression lasts only as long as the would-be god can imagine himself successful.