

Hayman's accounts of the love affairs are unrelenting in their presentation of this great writer as a pathetic, paralyzed human being.

I think there is no other way to write a life of Franz Kafka. He was pathetic. Deeply sad and incapable of finding a way out of his sadness, he was nearly a "Man Without Qualities" (to quote another German writer, Robert Musil). Nothing much *happened* to him, and that may have been largely his choice, too. Yet his twins number in the millions in this world we have created for ourselves—men and women whose lives are spent shuttling from neurosis to depression and back again. They are, as Auden says, "children afraid of the night, who have never been happy or good."

The difference, of course, is that Kafka did write. He articulated, in a series of imperishable tales, the abyss into which many people stare wordlessly. And that was an act of heroism, an act that perhaps kept him sane. Hayman is inadequate on this central fact. Skillful in indicating the pathos of the life, intelligent in describing the brilliance of the stories, he nevertheless fails to show how the two come together. Perhaps no one could show us that, for it seems to have been a miracle. How could a little man with so many crippling neuroses have written *The Metamorphosis*? *The Trial*? *The Castle*? We know that Kafka himself wanted at least the last two works destroyed. Unpublished during his lifetime, and unfinished, they were to have been burned by his friend and literary executor, Max Brod, and to Brod's eternal credit, he betrayed his dead friend and had them published (another Kafkaesque twist).

Thus, Hayman gives no answer to the *final* riddle of Kafka, the question, "Whence came his courage?" But he does explore, more precisely than anyone before him, the wreckage of a life out of which such glories were constructed. It is impossible to read *Kafka: A Biography* without turning again to Kafka's own work and being awestruck at the effort that it must have cost. If Hayman does not explain that effort, it may be because he does not need to. The stories embody it, and the biography underscores how strongly they do.

—Frank McConnell ('78)

AFTER VIRTUE

by Alasdair MacIntyre
Univ. of Notre Dame, 1981
258 pp. \$15.95

Professor MacIntyre, an accomplished philosopher who practices his art at Wellesley College, has given us a book that seeks to recast our understanding of moral philosophy. *After Virtue* is an engaging exercise. Yet it is also a bewildering book, whose arguments are often at odds with its premises. As a result, MacIntyre puts himself into the awkward position of the skeptic described by

Kant who would try to "prove through reason that there is no such thing as reason."

MacIntyre argues that our moral language—our inventory of terms, such as *good* and *bad*, *justified* and *unjustified*—is a collection of fragments

lingering from our past but cut off now from the contexts that were necessary to their meaning. (Those contexts were supplied, he thinks, by the Greek or Renaissance city-states or by medieval Christendom.) Others may see these fragments of understanding as pieces of a more coherent design, which requires for its completion the imagination and artfulness of our current philosophers. But MacIntyre denies that possibility.

He begins with the apprehension that "there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture." But from the fact, hardly unique to our time, that people disagree over questions of right and wrong, MacIntyre draws the conclusion that there are no rational grounds for moral judgments—"no unassailable criteria" by which we may judge between competing moral claims. Moreover, all efforts, in philosophy, to supply that foundation have failed.

MacIntyre suggests that moral obligations could be drawn more persuasively in the past when human beings were not viewed as individuals abstracted from their webs of relations. When a man could be seen functionally as a member of a family, a citizen of a polity, a soldier or a cobbler, he could be connected to a *telos*, or a system of ends. If we know the proper ends of a polity or a family, we can speak more knowingly of a "good citizen" and a "good man."

To regain at least the coherence that attached to moral systems in the past, MacIntyre proposes a "corrected" version of Aristotle's understanding. He would place human beings in a political community that takes, as its principal concern, the moral condition of its members. But the morality of the community would not be derived from rational explanations; it would be drawn, rather, from a tradition of "narratives"—from works of literature (like Homer's epics) or from biographies of exemplary men and women. For MacIntyre, these narratives can connect individuals with their communities and make their obligations comprehensible.

This vision of moral order makes room for a variety of "virtues" or "excellences" that may not always be compatible with one another. And as MacIntyre seems to appreciate, that congenial pluralism can be preserved more easily if the whole design is somehow disconnected from what he calls Aristotle's "metaphysical biology"—or, to put it more plainly, Aristotle's understanding of "human nature."

For Aristotle, human nature was marked most distinctively by the capacity to grasp universals and to give reasons concerning matters of right and wrong. As Kant would later observe, the notion of "a rational creature as such" would itself become the source of moral judgments, for acceptance of this notion would signify an appreciation of the faculties, virtues, even the ways of life, that are higher or lower, better or worse. It would help establish, for example, that the capacity for moral understanding is higher than the capacity for brute physical force, and that creatures who can give and understand justifications do not deserve to be ruled in the way that one rules creatures who cannot understand reasons or knowingly tender their consent.

In other words, an awareness of human nature helped alert us to the standards of judgment that were already implicit in the logic of morals and in the very notion of a "moral being." Without these standards, we

could not choose between "good" and "bad" narratives. We could not know, then, whether to commend to our children the personal "story" of Christ or of Hitler.

But MacIntyre denies that we can know human nature, and therefore he denies that there are any rights that arise from that nature. A belief in natural rights "is one with belief in witches and in unicorns."

Yet the American republic was founded on the premise that there are indeed rights that arise from human nature—that, to quote the Declaration of Independence, this nature could be known to us with the force of a "self-evident" truth. Today, philosophers would speak, more precisely, of apodictic (or "necessary") truths—truths that cannot be denied without falling, in turn, into contradiction. MacIntyre dismisses "self-evident" truths, but he says nothing about necessary truths. Had he dealt with this issue, he would have run into the obvious question of how a philosopher may deny the possibility of establishing, through reason, the truth of any moral proposition—and then seek to establish the truth of his own moral argument through nothing less than the artful marshaling of *reasons*.

MacIntyre intimates that he may address this problem in a later work, which will explain more fully the meaning of reason and rationality. But he may find it useful also to address an even more telling point: namely, that he presupposes throughout his book the very logic of morals—and the idea of human nature—which have furnished the core of the argument he has been seeking to resist. When he conveys his hope, in the end, for a "moral" life, he plainly understands a moral life to be concerned with more than emotive likes or dislikes. He assumes that moral propositions can speak about things that are *universally* right or wrong—for anyone, for everyone—quite regardless of personal tastes or the level of "disagreement." He is convinced that certain virtues are good in themselves, that their goodness cannot depend merely on their usefulness in attaining other ends. And he assumes, as a matter of course, that "human beings can be held to account for that of which they are the authors." From propositions no more astounding than these, men as varied as Rousseau, Kant, and Lincoln were able to extract the argument against slavery and the argument in principle for "government by consent" as the only legitimate form of government for human beings.

MacIntyre would presumably reach the same conclusions. But his own premise—that there are no rational grounds for moral judgments—must finally call into question the truth of any pronouncement he himself offers on any issue of moral consequence. At the same time, he runs the risk of confirming his readers in that moral skepticism that he counts among the maladies of our age: the conviction that our moral propositions represent nothing more than our emotive likes or dislikes, with no claim to being true or justified in any strict sense.

If that idea is warranted, there is no need for the discipline of moral philosophy that MacIntyre practices. And if it is not, MacIntyre could find no higher mission—and no service more suited to his large talents—than to use his arts of philosophy to rescue us from this modern superstition.

—Hadley Arkes ('77)