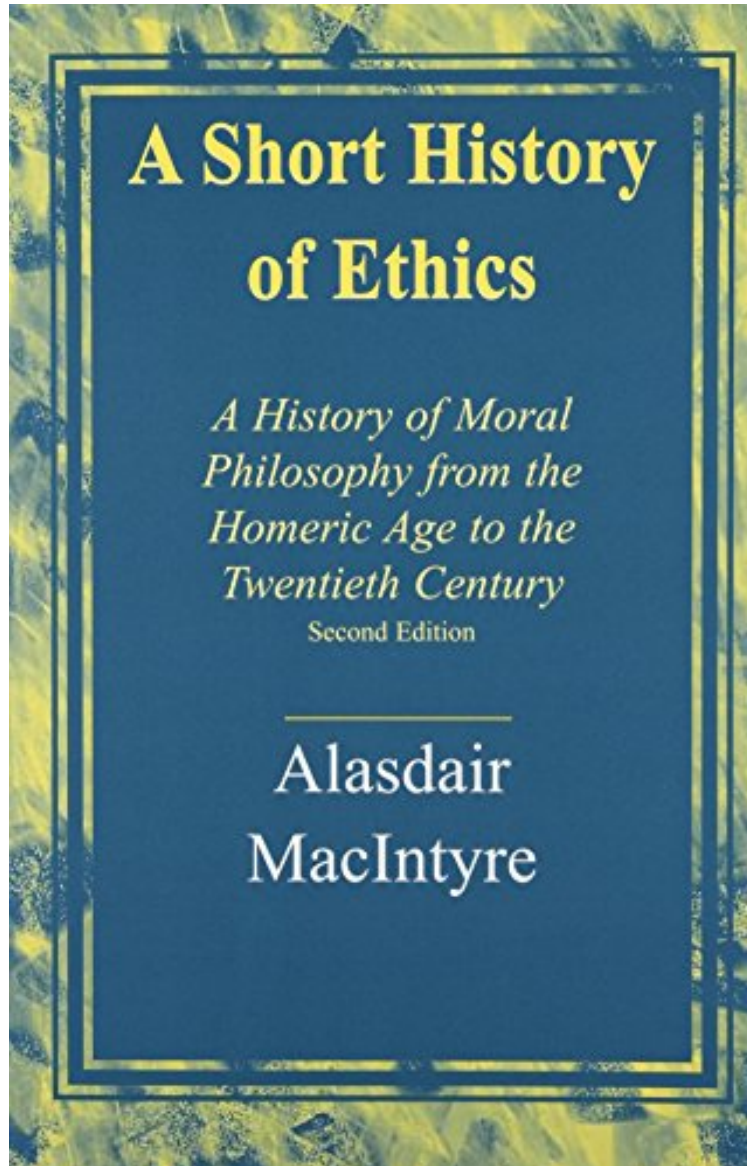


(Download pdf ebook) A Short History of Ethics

A Short History of Ethics

Alasdair MacIntyre

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Alasdair MacIntyre : A Short History of Ethics before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Short History of Ethics:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Excellent, Profound Work By Andre Excellent! Reread the chapters on Greek ethics twice on the first read and a third time afterwards. Worth it just for that section. Great concise explanations for such a large body of work (Homer to Socrates-Plato-Aristotle). Cannot recommend enough. Much

food for thought. Whatever the works shortcomings in covering so much, it's clarity and incisive observations and exposition more than merit the work 5 stars. 5 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Too much analysis, too little exposition, but it is a good read.

By Jacob
Edit: I first read this book seven years ago. I now change some of my original observations. His section on Greek ethics is simply too good to warrant anything lower than a five star rating. I do think the writing is clunky at times and the last half of the book is very uneven, but it is still a fine survey. The title of the book is misleading. It gives one the impression that AM will give us a survey of the history of ethical positions. While he does do this to a degree, that is not the point of the book. AM's argument is that key terms in ethics change meaning with the change in language and/or social custom (269). Secondly, key moves in philosophy and social theory change ethical foundations. AM begins with Greek ethics and gives a thorough review of it. Interestingly, AM wrote this book before he endorsed Aristotelian ethics as the way out of the modern morass. He is more critical of Aristotle here than he is in *After Virtue*. The next key move is Christianity. This section is weak for a number of reasons. AM had not yet converted to Christianity and as a result he depended on much out-of-date and long-refuted German scholarship on Christianity. Secondly, ten pages on Christianity? He tried to summarize Augustine and Aquinas in two paragraphs! That being said, his summary, while too brief, was accurate. Augustine and Aquinas reinterpreted key sections of Plato and Aristotle, respectively, into explicitly Christian categories. But something changed in the history of Christianity. Luther arose. Luther introduced a character that had been absent in ethical discussions: the individual. Luther also introduced new rules for social ethics. Luther bifurcated morality by positing absolute and unconditional ethical commands on the one hand (God says so) with the self-justifying rules of market and state on the other (124). This paved the way for autonomy and secularism. The rest of Western ethics can be seen as a footnote or an outworking to this. With the idea of contract introduced, social ethics now revolved around the tenuous idea of "natural rights." Western thinkers could not (still can't!) reconcile an authoritarian state with limits to the state's power. Locke tried and came very close to doing this.

Evaluation:
The Good: the reader has a good understanding after reading AM. This book's argument is much tighter than that of *After Virtue*. Also, AM does a superb job in showing (hinting, rather) the inevitability of interpreting ethical norms from within a community. He perfects this move in *After Virtue*.
The Bad: The writing style could be improved. It is like watching an elephant run. I forgot how many times the author used the word "just" (and not in the sense of justice). Secondly, as he notes in his preface, his section on Christianity is weak. Thirdly, he spends too much time on analysis and too little on exposition. This is okay if the reader already understands the thinker in question. It is annoying if he doesn't. My title might have given the impression of a negative review of the book. Far from it. Alasdair MacIntyre is the most important ethicist I have read, and I heartily commend all of his works.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful.
Magisterial
By mhshaw
Ethics is a complex field, covering both logical and pragmatic issues, and at the same time addressing issues in which we all have an interest. MacIntyre is a sane and serious guide.

A Short History of Ethics is a significant contribution written by one of the most important living philosophers. For the second edition Alasdair MacIntyre has included a new preface in which he examines his book thirty years on and considers its impact. It remains an important work, ideal for all students interested in ethics and morality.

From the Back Cover
The author writes... 'This history of moral philosophy which runs from the Greeks to contemporary Anglo-Saxon discussion is necessarily compressed and selective, but is intended to enable the general reader and the student to place particular texts in moral philosophy in an historical perspective. The function of this perspective is to clarify three kinds of historical and philosophical connection whose importance is often underrated. The first is a matter of the debts which moral philosophers owe to their predecessors; the second concerns the question of the nature of the moral concepts which furnish any moral philosopher with the objects of his enquiry upon moral concepts themselves and the extent to which the philosophical analysis of a concept may play a part in transforming or even discrediting it. A consequence of these preoccupations is that the book contains a higher proportion of purely philosophical enquiry than might be expected in an historical work.'

About the Author
Alasdair MacIntyre is Rev. John A. O'Brien Senior Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of numerous books, including *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame Press, 1990).