

*Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Novak on the Common Good:
Irreconcilable Differences, or Fruitful Cross-Pollination?*

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Abstract

On one hand, in a three dimensional map of thinkers in human history, Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Novak would seem to appear close to each other – both are theists, both believe that Aristotelian virtue is integral to human happiness, and both follow the teachings of the Catholic Church. But on the other hand, they seem to appear rather divergent or even incompatible: one following Marx, the other Lord Acton; one rejecting Modernity, the other incorporating elements of Modernity into his vision; one focusing on labor, the other advocating entrepreneurial endeavors. Can MacIntyre’s philosophical and empirical critiques of capitalism be reconciled with Novak’s optimism about the role of free markets in the Common Good?

How does each thinker approach and describe the Common Good? In answering this question as faithful Catholics, it could be that both thinkers are emphasizing different attributes of God (whether consciously or unconsciously). Whereas MacIntyre seems to be fostering an “aesthetic of Mercy” through his advocacy of social practices that support virtues of acknowledged dependence, Novak has fostered an “aesthetic of Co-Creation” through his advocacy of the entrepreneurial spirit in the context of free markets. How can this difference in their emphasis help to explain the apparent incompatibility in the other areas of their thought? Also, given MacIntyre’s understanding of economics and the tragic choices and trade-offs that need to be made, he seems to exhibit an “economics of Tragedy” in a zero-sum game of local, controlled order; whereas with Novak’s ebullient hope, he seems to reveal an “economics of Comedy” in a positive-sum game of unplanned order (this contrast of Tragedy vs. Comedy in both the ancient and the modern senses). What can these two thinkers learn from each other?

As three cases in point, how do these two thinkers envision i) human freedom and ii) the human person’s role in fostering the Common Good? Also, iii) could Novak’s proposal of adding the new virtue of “enterprise” into the canon of virtues, ever be acceptable to MacIntyre?

Ultimately, what kinds of institutions, for supporting the Common Good do MacIntyre and Novak advocate?