

Alasdair MacIntyre: The critique of modernity

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Abstract

Modern subjectivism and its isolation of each individual in the prison of his own mind insist on autonomous individuality that has only produced simulacra of morality. MacIntyre rejects the Enlightenment liberalism and absolute self determination that assert moral privacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity. In this paper, I agree with MacIntyre that moral value is not determined by individual choice and decision. We have to go back to the Aristotelian ethics that is based on teleological and not mechanistic conception of man. I shall pitch camp with MacIntyre by submitting that the human being has a purpose and that is crucial to his doing good and avoiding evil.

Key words: *subjectivism, autonomous individuality, simulacra, enlightenment, liberalism, absolute self-determination,*

Introduction

MacIntyre presents a view of an uncompromising critique of modernity. He takes individualism and liberalism to be at the heart of the central culture of modernity. His case is a clear disenchantment with modern moral philosophy. He contends that we must discover and reinvigorate Aristotle's tradition, in which the idea of an essential human nature or function played a crucial part. Where modernity trades on moral fictions such as "utility" and "natural rights", Aristotle's scheme allows moral judgments to be matters of fact. For him Aristotle's Ethics is the embodiment of objective, true, and in personal standards which follows that, what is good or best for anyone or anything is so in virtue of its

being of a certain kind, which peculiarly belongs to the flourishing of being of that kind.

What MacIntyre is saying is that contemporary ethical theories have reached a series of dead end and that moral discourse has become paralyzed. Moral debate has become interminable and its origin he explains is the Enlightenment's decisive break with Aristotle; with this a gradual but steady loss of any teleological conception of moral agency. His central claim is that modern morality is in deep disarray. It is no more than the fragments of a conceptual scheme which has lost the context that made it intelligible.

So for MacIntyre, if morality is again to make sense for us, we must recapture something from Aristotelian traditional moral philosophy. We also need to recapture the notion of a whole human life. The Idea lost to it now because, bureaucratic modernity has made our lives not to have unity. And finally we should need to recapture the Sense that what we are is largely a matter of what we have become through our history and tradition.

The malaise of modernity

The "*after virtue*" begins with a disquieting question with which MacIntyre shows that modern morality is in a state of grave disorder, perhaps of chaos and that we lack the resources even to recognize the extent of the chaos, much less to extricate ourselves from it¹. He says that the most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character². Thus the condition of modernity is a condition in which we possess only fragments of a conceptual schema, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance was

derived. Though we use moral expressions, we have in reality lost our comprehension of what morality really ought to be - we have only "simulacra of morality"³.

In order to highlight the poverty of modern moral theory, MacIntyre begins by contrasting modern conceptions of morality with those which were prevalent in ancient Greek especially in the work of Aristotle. For Aristotle, the good is the life lived, in accordance with virtue (arete), where virtue is to be understood against the background of a teleological conception of man - a conception according to which human beings have a special nature which determines their proper aims and goals.

However, in the post-Enlightenment period, this Aristotelian conception of morality has been supplanted by a rejection of teleology, and a denial that we have any specific or identifiable purpose beyond that which we choose. So, post-Enlightenment man is seen as governed not by a telos external to him, but simply by the dictates of his own inner reason.

Again Aristotle's conception of the good man has an essentially societal dimension. Excellence is not fixed or determined for all time, but is inextricably linked to the nature of one's society and this in turn sets limits to the ability of individuals to create their own conception of the good. But this is largely lost within the anomic and alienating conditions of modernity where we are not merely choosers but isolated choosers.

These two features of MacIntyre's account - his insistence on the need for teleology which will enable us to distinguish between what we are and what we ought to be and his insistence on the social embeddedness of our telos, together serve to situate

his thought in (or against) the wider context of contemporary moral and political philosophy.

Modernity and emotivism

The chief target of MacIntyre's attack on the moral philosophy of modernity is what he calls "emotivism". He tries to prove that the interminability and incommensurability of public moral debate is reflected in similar inconclusiveness of philosophical discussions of Ethics, and that the reasons for the inconclusiveness are due to the "emotivist" character of modernity. He defines emotivism as "the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative character"⁵. MacIntyre acknowledges that the protagonists of emotivism have presented it as a theory of the meaning of moral statements but believes that emotivism is in fact widely accepted as a theory of the use of moral judgments. That is people now think, talk and act as if Emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be⁶.

Emotivism as a theory of meaning is that theory that moral judgments express feelings or attitudes rather than represent matters of fact while Emotivism as a theory of use of moral judgments is the theory that people do in fact behave as if moral judgments were simply disguised expressions of preferences rather than representations of facts. MacIntyre comments on Max Weber as an alleged example of an emotivist thinker insofar as Emotivism is considered as a theory of use. He says that the contemporary vision of the world ... is predominantly, although not perhaps in details Weberian and that Weber embodies just those dichotomies which Emotivism embodies and obliterates just those distinctions to which emotivism has to be blind. Questions

of ends become questions of values, and on values reason is silent, conflict between rival values cannot be rationally settled. Hence Weber is in the broader sense ... an emotivist

We can consider Weber's motivation for the sentiments attributed to him by looking at his well-known essay "science as a vocation" in which very similar sentiments are expressed. In this essay, Weber suggests that scientific progress is the most important elements of the process of rationalization that he takes to be definitive feature of modernity. Hence in modernity, there is the widespread feeling that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play ... one can, in principle master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to marginal means in order to master or implore the spirits ... Technical means and calculations perform the service"

According to Weber, Science can provide knowledge with which to act upon the world, as well as providing methods of thinking and enabling us to gain clarity of thought. It enables us to get a clearer picture of the means by which we must achieve our ends, but it cannot tell us what those ends of action are to be. "Does the end justify the means? Or does it not? The teacher can confront you with the necessity of choice¹⁰. Thus with Weber, too, underlying idea seems to be that there is no objective moral truth about how we ought to live and to act.

Heidegger in this self-consummating essence of the modern age laments technology's totalistic oblivion of Being. According to L. J. Hatab, Ethics "must acknowledge a pre-philosophical traditional heritage that present us with a degree of consensus ahead of time regarding better and worse ways of living, [this is an Aristotelian point reaffirmed by Heidegger]¹¹. In one of his

publications, *Phanomenologische Interpretations zu Aristoteles* Heidegger mentions the problems in absolute, transcendental moral systems owing to their detachment from a worldly, finite, lived morality. It is Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics particularly its critique of Platonic moral philosophy that gives Heidegger a historical focus for another beginning, both in ontology and in ethics. Aristotle as we have seen presents a phenomenology of ethics in that he does not bracket tradition or experience; he examines what "appears" (*phainesthai*) in culture and then submits it to analysis, clarification, puzzle resolution. "Moreover, despite the acceptance of tradition in Heidegger's analysis, the notion of authenticity opens up issues relating to the tension between individuation and conformity which goes far beyond the gesture towards particularity in Aristotle and which presents a more contemporary range of ethical topics regarding how we should, engage social norms and controls So despite Heidegger's view on question of tradition, the notion of authenticity still looms very high in his thought - when we focus on group interest we cancel individuality.

However, as a matter of fact, MacIntyre's contention is that if moral judgments are merely expressions of preference than they can be neither true nor false and there can be no assessment of the ultimate rationality or value of these various preferences. And the fundamental role of preferences and commitments on our emotivist culture means that there can be no ultimate authorities which are external to the preferences of the subject.

The concepts at the heart of MacIntyre's moral philosophy

Narrative

Against modernity's conception of self as essentially or ideally a decider and chooser, MacIntyre advances what he calls a narrative conception. He sees a person as having identity which is at least partly given in advance of any decisions or choices the person makes. In consequence the central question of our moral lives is not, as liberals maintain, about which choices we ought to make, but rather a question about how we are to understand who we are independent of aim antecedent to our choices. Put differently where liberalism emphasizes our status as choosing and deciding beings, MacIntyre draws attention to the importance of the background circumstances and moral context which inform and make intelligible those choices but which are themselves unchosen. So what MacIntyre advocates is that individuals cannot be properly understood without reference to their being at least partially socially constituted and this fact has implications for the way in which people should act. So MacIntyre's argument against liberal individualism rests on this claim that the story of my life is always embedded in the story or those communities from which I derive my identity.

According to MacIntyre, to understand what I ought to do I must recognize that the story of my life possesses a certain narrative structure in which what I am now is continuous with what I was in the past. This search for what I am or "quest" as MacIntyre calls it is essential for the unity of a person's life. The unity of human life is the unity of narrative quest. This is unity always to be understood in a social context. Only social context can give any substance to a person's life, and social context is not something a person chooses".

Practice

By practice MacIntyre means ... any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of that form of activity with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and good involved are systematically extended. He goes to give examples of practices as chess, football farming architecture, physics, chemistry and biology, painting and music and the creation of political communities.

One crucial feature of a practice is that it implies a standard of excellence internal to that practice. An internal good is one which can be specified only in terms of the practice itself, and which can be recognized and competently judged only by those with the relevant experience of practice. For example, in order to play chess well, a player must heed the standards which define the playing of chess. Not just anything counts as playing chess well, and the features which do count are ones which are defined by practice. They are not just matters for individual preference or decision-making

An external good by contrast would be externally attached to the practice and would never be attainable solely through practice. Examples are goods such as prestige, money or status. For external goods are only someone's property or possession and are objects of competition such that one person's gain of such goods is another person's loss whereas the achievement of internal goods though still eventuating from competition is good for the whole community who participate in the practice

MacIntyre goes on to draw conclusions about what all practices have in common. The virtues he claims are essential to the process by which a person relates his or her life to the various practices which constitute the context of that life. They are those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will punish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. However, practices in turn need to be situated in a wider context. "Ultimately we have to locate our individual lives and existing practices within the broader social and temporal context of tradition.

Tradition

The account of MacIntyre's concept of tradition was succinctly given by Stephen MuChall and Adam Swift as follows:

A tradition is constituted by a set of practices and is a mode of understanding their importance and worth, it is a medium by which such practices are shaped and transmitted across generations. Traditions may be primarily religious or moral (for example Catholic or humanism) economic (for example a particular craft or profession, trade Union or Manufacturer), aesthetic (for example modes of literature and painting) or geographical; (for example crystallizing around the history and culture of a particular house, village or region.

For MacIntyre, the narrative of an individual's life is to be understood against the background of the wider social context within which that individual finds himself or herself.

This wide social context consists of sets of practices which serve to define the virtues, and those practices in turn sustain and are situated within a tradition which provides the resources with which the individual may pursue his or her quest for the good. "I am never able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only qua individual. MacIntyre stressing the importance and indispensability of community in individual's pursuit of his quest for good says, "My story is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. Without such communities, I would find nowhere from which to begin; yet it is moving forward from such particularity that the search for good, for the universal consists. Therefore for MacIntyre, tradition is not simply concerned with conserving what has been passed down but also embodies conflict about what tradition is or ought to be. Traditions when vital embody continuities of conflict.

Evaluation and Conclusion

It is noticed that the definitive conceptions of "man and society" that form the core of liberalism are central conceptions from Enlightenment that become the driving forces of the project of modernity. And according to John Gray, "Liberalism is the political theory of modernity". Liberalism's individualism and absolute self-determinism, a view which denies that communal values are authoritative horizons, "asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity, and accords a secondary importance to specific historic associations and cultural forms"²⁸. So "Liberalism in an attempt to protect and promote the dignity and autonomy of the individual has

undermined the associations and communities and traditions which alone can nurture human flourishing.

From what we have seen so far, MacIntyre rejects outright this stand-point of contemporary liberalism. He objects to the liberalism's conception of the self-which implies that moral value is determined by individual choice and decision. He also objects to liberalism's denial of telos for man which results in its inability to differentiate satisfactorily between what are and what we ought to be. Again he objects to liberalism's disregard of social context which results in its inability to acknowledge fully the role of what is "given" in moral life. Thus in place of the morally expressive and Emotivist self of Enlightenment thinking in general and liberal theory in particular he proposes a narrative conception of self. And in place of the exclusively abstract and rule governed ethic of modernity he proposes a conception of Ethics which restores the centrality of Virtues. Also in place of asocial individualism he appeals to traditions.

May I conclude this write up by pitching camp with MacIntyre. His critique of modern moral philosophy is cogent and lays down a challenge of which contemporary modern theories have to take into account. That is, that the human beings have essential purpose and function. For me unlimited freedom of choice in moral issues leads to mechanistic individualism without a standard. Society then becomes a State of "every one to himself and God to us all" - a state of chaos and confusion.

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