Seiriol Morgan

Moral Philosophy, Moral Identity and Moral Cacophony: On MacIntyre on the Modern Self*

Abstract: This paper focuses on Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the modern self, arguing that we are not as bereft of the resources to engage in rational thought about value as he makes out. I claim that MacIntyre's argument presumes that philosophy has a much greater power to shape individuals and cultures than it in fact has. In particular, he greatly exaggerates the extent to which the character of the modern self has been an effect of the philosophical views of the self that have been influential during the period, leading him to be overly pessimistic about its nature and powers. Finally, I argue that MacIntyre has provided us with no strong reason for thinking that a moral tradition structured by modern values could not be viable.

0. *After Virtue*: Thesis and Reception

Certain curious works of philosophy face an unusual problem, of how to account for the success of their own reception. It seems to me that *After Virtue* is amongst them.[1] For it is clearly undeniable that the book struck a definite chord with its audience, so much so that it remains extremely influential over twenty-five years after its publication, and that many of its readers found its pessimistic theses to be an eloquent and persuasive statement of the modern condition. But the worry is that precisely this positive reception casts doubt upon the truth of some of its central claims. If modernity so comprehensively robs those whose selfhood it structures of the resources needed to grasp and articulate its failings, how come so many of those same people were able to recognise the value of a book which does just that, and indeed to welcome it with such enthusiasm?

One might be inclined to think this criticism a cheap shot. It must certainly be very irritating to be targeted by such an argument. Just imagine: you have what you consider to be a compelling and challenging vision of the nature of our society, and the lives we live within it, and then you are told by some critic that the picture must be a distortion, just because you can articulate it. But it is usually irritating to have one's flights of fantasy curtailed, so a mere psychological

[1] MacIntyre 1985. Unless otherwise noted, all page references in the text are to this work.

unwillingness to accept such a line of argument would in no way undermine it, as I'm sure MacIntyre would acknowledge. And it is also noteworthy that this is an argumentative strategy that MacIntyre himself has made use of, in his notorious critique of Marcuse:

> "The central oddity of *One Dimensional Man* is perhaps that it should have been written at all. For if its thesis were true, then we should have to ask how the book came to have been written and we would certainly have to inquire whether it would find any readers. Or rather, to the extent that the book does find readers, to that extent Marcuse's thesis does not hold." (MacIntyre 1970, 70)

What's more, in a strange tempting of fate, the first edition of *After Virtue* itself predicted its own deadborn fall from the press, at least beyond a small circle of like-minded iconoclasts (MacIntyre 1981, 4–5). Surely then it is legitimate to ask why this did not happen, and what we should conclude from this perhaps unexpected result.

In my view the issue of *After Virtue*'s reception does raise a genuine question, and one which MacIntyre has not yet adequately addressed. One of the aims of this paper is to suggest why he faces it. This will be a corollary of the main aim of the paper, which is to draw out and critique the account of the self that MacIntyre offers in *After Virtue*, an account which underlies both his trenchant attack on modernity, and his suggested positive programme for overcoming the modern condition (or at least, the positive possibilities for doing so that he hints at). In what follows I am going to take issue with this critique of modernity, and contest his characterisation of the modern self. I would not want to deny that MacIntyre has helped us make some very important advances in moral and political philosophy, and that much of his critique of modernity hits the mark. But in my view his more radical conclusions are overstated, in particular his claim about the need to subvert the whole enterprise and return to pre-Enlightenment modes of evaluative thought. Nor are modern individuals as bereft of the resources to engage in rational thought about value as MacIntyre makes out. We aren't the emotivist selves he says we are, in any of the senses in which that could be understood. As far as a general philosophical conception of selfhood goes, I agree in large measure with MacIntyre about the conditions required to give a self a substantial 'identity', or 'depth', and also that this is a necessary condition for rational moral thought to take place. But the direction of my reasoning is the reverse of his. MacIntyre argues that the modern self essentially lacks the necessary grounding for such conditions, and as a result it can be no more than a 'ghostly' insubstantial entity (1982). By contrast, I deny that we are such entities, and so conclude that we must share in these conditions in at least some measure, despite being the products of the modern world.

1. The Enlightenment Project and the Erosion of Selfhood

MacIntyre begins *After Virtue* by advancing a 'disquieting suggestion', that our current situation with respect to morality is analogous to that we would be facing with respect to scientific knowledge, should some sort of catastrophic societal breakdown disrupt the teaching and learning of the sciences for several generations (1–2). After such a catastrophe, fragments and survivals would mean that people would still be aware of central scientific concepts, such as charge, electron, relativity, and so on, and might try to use them in their discourse about the world. But they could only be used at best in an impoverished fashion, because they are largely meaningless outside the background frameworks which give them sense, frameworks which *ex hypothesi* are no longer available to these post-apocalypse people. According to MacIntyre, our moral discourse now is similarly fragmented, with the result that current moral discourse and argument has a similarly incoherent character. This idea—that a moral concept can carry the appearance of sense, and yet in fact lack it, due to the destruction of the background framework which is required to provide it—is not original to MacIntyre, having been earlier advanced with respect to moral obligation by Elizabeth Anscombe. Anscombe argued that the notion of obligation requires for its sense a lawgiver to whom one is obligated, and hence a background theological framework which has largely disappeared in the modern world, at least in any form upon which significant numbers of people can agree. Consequently it has lost its original sense and its contemporary use is confused, she argued (1958, 5–6). MacIntyre's more radical suggestion is that this is the case for the bulk of moral concepts used and arguments advanced in the modern age.

The result has been moral cacophony. Whatever their avowed opinions, people in the modern world behave in public and private as if emotivism were true. Emotivism is the metaethical position in moral philosophy that claims that moral judgements are expressions of personal and ultimately arbitrary emotion, and so at root are not amenable to rational defence or criticism. As a claim about the meaning of moral utterances, as proposed by the original emotivists, the position is palpably absurd, as MacIntyre points out; however, as a claim about the use of moral utterance in the contemporary world it is spot on, he argues (12–14). No-one ever wins any moral argument, at least by rational means. Since the characteristic modern moral concepts of 'rights' and 'utility' are both fictions (70), they are useless for converging upon rational moral progress, and those appealing to them do no more than simply hurl their claims at one another. Certain older concepts which are survivals from discarded schemes are still appealed to in moral argument, but they are various and disconnected and frequently also incommensurable, so their legitimacy is easily just rejected by those for whom the conclusions are uncongenial. As a consequence the characteristic 'moral scene' of modernity is interminable disagreement, combined with ongoing protest, since although no-one can rationally win moral arguments, no-one can lose one either, so those whose views are marginalised politically, by the power or weight of numbers of the opposition, feel their opinions to be merely repressed and not

defeated. Unsurprisingly then, indignation is the corresponding characteristic moral sentiment of modernity.

So people in the modern world inhabit what might aptly be called an emotivist culture. And that culture correspondingly shapes the nature of the individuals that inhabit it, so that selfhood in the modern world adopts a distinctive character. Unsurprisingly MacIntyre's description of the emotivist self is a deeply pessimistic and unattractive one. On his account the central distinguishing feature of the selves of modernity is precisely our lack of essential features of any substance; our sheer ghostly insubstantiality is what defines us. Since it lacks any essential features, no goals or ties or social roles are necessary for any emotivist self to be the self that it is. And lacking as it does any such necessary ends, the only thing for it to be in itself is the bare power to assess and adopt them as it sees fit. As MacIntyre puts it, the emotivist self is "in and for itself nothing" (32). Consequently it cannot possess a rational history, and so cannot have any substantial unity over time (33). Indeed, these may all be ways of saying the same thing. To be sure, people appear to pursue extended projects and temporally integrated goals. But for the emotivist self, what looks like rational continuity can be no more than contingent reaffirmation or extension of preference, since there are no authoritative grounds beyond its own individual choice that constrain the course of life it must adopt; whatever its goals and projects in the past, the only ties they can have on the self come through its decision to continue in them in the present and into the future. As MacIntyre notes, some modern philosophers have celebrated this condition as the essence of a robust freedom which is required for us to be self-governing agents (31). But MacIntyre's portrayal of the agent in this condition suggests that this kind of freedom is not worth having, if it can even be described as freedom and agency at all upon reflection. There is a thus a deep sense of alienation associated with the picture of the modern self that MacIntyre provides us with, as the flimsiness of its commitments attach a certain meaninglessness even to its successes. Success for an emotivist self can only be to achieve the satisfaction of contingent ungrounded preference, or to occupy some social role in a manner judged to be effective. Since neither of these has any rational grounding, each could equally well be different and none the worse for that, and this injects an alienating arbitrariness into the heart of the modern individual's life.

One might feel like asking: what is it about us that makes us like this? Various modern philosophers give answers, alluding to the ultimate impotence of human reason in the practical sphere, the inescapable vertigo that human freedom brings with it, and so on. But MacIntyre thinks that the right way to phrase the question is rather to ask "How did we get like this?", since he holds of course that the emotivist selves of late modernity have the character they do because of the effects of a historical process, a process that must be understood as one of relentless decline. The essentials of his historical narrative are as follows. On MacIntyre's account of it, ethics had a clear place within premodern thought, as part of a teleological conception of human nature first articulated by the Greek classical tradition (52–53). This conception had three elements: human nature, human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realised-its-telos, and ethics as the bridge from

one to the other. As the classical tradition became fused with Christianity in the medieval period a new conception of ethics, as obedience to divine command, was introduced. This did not transform the substance of the scheme, however, since the notion of the human *telos*—now conceived of in supernatural as well as natural terms—is equally at home within Christian theology as it was in ancient ethics, and the precepts of divine law and those rules which must be followed in order for a human being to be able to achieve his good were held to be one and the same.

Two intellectual currents arose at the end of the Middle Ages which between them shattered the firm foundations that ethics had enjoyed within ancient thought and the medieval synthesis (53–54). The first was Protestant Christianity, which undercut the classical tradition's confidence in the power of reason to direct human beings towards the good. According to Luther, Calvin and others, the fall of man crippled our rational capacities, so that in our state of original sin it is simply directed by our passions, for good or evil. Indeed, in the absence of assistance in the form of divine grace, such direction inevitably will be for evil, so the only hope for a human being is faith, and complete personal submission to the revealed divine will. So whilst retaining a teleological conception of human nature, Protestantism insisted that this nature is in no way amenable to rational enquiry. The second was the rise of modern science, as Aristotle's metaphysically-based teleological account of the natural processes of physics was attacked and ultimately totally defeated by the mechanistic accounts of Galileo, Descartes, Newton and their followers. In the face of that victory in the natural sciences, the notion of teleology as such was widely held to be discredited. This of course struck at the foundations of classical and medieval thought about ethics. It was also easy for even those later rejecting Protestantism's pessimistic fideism to inadvertently retain a conception of the powers of reason which had been shaped by its agenda, as did Hume, and even Kant to some degree. This compounded antagonism to the classical tradition.

So for these and other reasons it appeared clear to philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the classical tradition's understanding of the foundations of ethics had to be abandoned. And so they were faced with the task of providing a new one, since without significant exception they had no disagreement with the bulk of the moral precepts their societies had inherited from their Christian culture, such as those forbidding murder, theft and the like. Having expelled teleology of any kind from their list of respectable notions, and correspondingly lacking any substantive conception of practical rationality, these philosophers were unable to avail themselves of the idea of teleologically realised human nature, and consequently were obliged to attempt to derive the various obligations from human nature as such. This was the Enlightenment project in moral philosophy. Various attempts were made, appealing to shared sympathetic passions, the formal features of rational decision-making, the psychology of happiness, and so on.

All these attempts failed. Sentimentalists found themselves unable to explain why someone even partially lacking a sympathetic temperament should be bound by moral rules; rationalists like Kant couldn't explain why abstract reason pre-

cludes self-centredness, or even gives the rules determinate content. Whilst the particular inadequacies of individual versions of the project were revealed in the course of internecine conflict, there is a general historical explanation why they were all doomed. The very idea of trying to derive such precepts from human nature as such would have struck ancient and medieval philosophers as confused, because the moral strictures were precisely supposed to be at odds with 'untutored' human nature, as they would have described it; instead, living the ethical life is the way for a human being to transform that nature into one in which the human *telos* is realised. Consequently, the Enlightenment project as such was bound to fail, since it involved attempting to reconcile two things that had been "expressly designed to be discrepant with each other" (55).

Moral philosophy in the Enlightenment's wake tried to revive notions of teleology and categorical law, in utilitarianism and deontology respectively; so concepts such as 'utility' and 'natural right' were introduced into moral discourse. These however are illegitimate children; for the original notions relied for their sense upon a shared picture of the world and humanity's place within it which the modern world has rejected. Lacking the background frameworks required to make these kind of concepts intelligible, their later simulacra can have no determinate referents, and so can be no more than moral fictions, and as such their use can only serve to mask some other interest of those who make use of them, characteristically both from the audience, and the speaker as well. Whilst other thinkers struggled, usually without fully realising it, the much more acute philosopher Nietzsche clearly perceived the exhaustion of the whole project. Concluding that no attempt to derive morality from any aspect of human nature succeeds, and taking the Enlightenment project to be the legitimate successor of the classical tradition, he rejects the idea that morality can have any rational justification. At the same time he takes himself to expose every moral demand as a groundless assertion of arbitrary individual will wearing the mask of objectivity, something sufficiently at odds with the moral outlook's self-conception that it cannot survive recognition of it. Hence he concludes that those clear-sighted individuals with the courage to confront this shocking truth should abandon morality altogether.

Meanwhile, as philosophy's failures multiplied, moral discourse underwent a slow but ultimately comprehensive fragmentation, with the dire consequences outlined at the beginning of this section. In MacIntyre's view the whole process has been a largely unmitigated disaster, and the so-called advances of modernity have been anything but. The pursuit of freedom and the fetishisation of the individual have led us instead to nihilism. Whilst he is occasionally willing to ascribe some worth to modern values and institutions (e.g. 1988, 104–105), his more consistent inclination has been to reject the evaluative thrust of the whole epoch as a mistake. For instance, he can be seen explicitly advocating the defence of a "premodern view of morals and politics", and describing the Enlightenment project as a mistake "that should never have been attempted in the first place" (118), and these seem to represent his fundamental outlook. This is why the core of *After Virtue* poses the stark and unnerving choice, "Aristotle or Nietzsche?". In MacIntyre's view the individualistic assumptions at the root of modernity's

attempt to replace premodern modes of moral thought inevitably lead in the direction of Nietzsche's amoral affirmation of the personal will; in this at least Nietzsche was right. If nihilism is to be avoided, then, the revival of premodern conceptions of selfhood and morality are essential.

2. The Self-Conception of Modernity, and its Bankruptcy

This narrative will be very familiar to anyone immersed in MacIntyre's work; of course, I will need to take issue with it in order to resist his hypotheses about modern culture and the modern self. I aim to do so in two complementary ways. First, I will try to show that, insofar as I agree they actually obtained, the conditions MacIntyre identifies were not sufficient to bring about the kind of impoverishment in the self's substance and powers that he maintains has occurred. Second, I will have to say something about how substantial selfhood has in fact been maintained, since it is unclear that any default assumption of substantiality is warranted. By way of a preliminary observation, one important but insufficiently remarked aspect of MacIntyre's history is the central role he thinks *philosophy* is playing in all this. He is quite explicit that central events in the genesis of emotivist culture were events in the history of philosophy, particularly moral philosophy:

> "What I am going to suggest is that the key episodes in the social history which transformed, fragmented and, if my extreme view is correct, largely displaced morality—and so created the possibility of the emotivist self with its characteristic form of relationship and modes of utterance- were episodes in the history of philosophy, that it is only in the light of *that* history that we can understand how the idiosyncrasies of everyday contemporary moral discourse came to be and thus how the emotivist self was able to find a means of expression." (36)

Indeed, it turns out on his account that these episodes in the history of philosophy play the major causal role in shaping the nature of the modern self. But I want to question whether we can really believe that the philosophical failures MacIntyre identifies could have such dramatic effects upon the very nature of selfhood in human beings, effecting such an impoverishment upon it as he says occurred over the modern period. In my view, MacIntyre's story of historical decline is over-intellectualist, in two ways in particular. First, he swallows too uncritically the account of the modern philosophical project provided by modernity's own philosophers. Whilst MacIntyre very skilfully draws out the implications of the conceptions of selfhood that they advance, he is too quick to conclude from this that this is what we have become, since this gives too much credence to modernity's philosophical self-understanding in the first place. Second, he overstates the power of philosophy to shape the development of culture, and for that matter of the character of a culture to determine the nature of the selves that can exist within it.

But before I can develop an argument along these lines, we first need to get

clearer about what the philosophical problems are supposed to be, since it remains somewhat murky in the narrative as I have presented it so far. After all, aside from a few specific attacks on the arguments of individual Enlightenment philosophers, which are hardly comprehensive (e.g. 43–47), the crux of the Enlightenment's problem is said to be its cack-handed failure to grasp the way that the tripartite scheme of the ancients had to fit together. But pointing out that the Enlightenment philosophers were engaged in what the ancients would have considered a quixotic enterprise establishes little by itself, since we need some further reason to suppose that it was the moderns not the ancients who were confused. It's not as though moral philosophers like Hume and Kant failed to understand what the ancients thought they were up to. They certainly did. They just rejected it, as relying on philosophically untenable presuppositions. Recall that MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment endeavour was doomed because human nature and the precepts of morality had been specifically designed to be at odds with one another. But moral philosophers of pro-Enlightenment sympathies could reply that this misrepresents the situation, in a way which unfairly generates the sense of inevitability MacIntyre wants us to embrace. Unless one accepts a subjectivism which MacIntyre himself clearly would reject, one must accept that morality is not designed, but grasped. So we don't have a later set of people trying to understand something which had been shaped by some earlier people in some particular way, so that failing to grasp how they had done so would necessarily amount to misunderstanding its nature and purpose. We have rival attempts to apprehend the place of ethics in human life, a place it has independent of anyone's specific beliefs about that place. So the philosophical elements of the narrative as presented above in fact merely alerts us to a disagreement, and give us no grounds for siding *prima facie* with one party or the other, or indeed with Nietzsche.

But there are certainly deeper philosophical arguments in play. In my view we can learn a lot about the problems of the modern self as MacIntyre conceives it, by comparing it to the condition of a self which he does take to have a substantial identity, and asking what that latter self is supposed to possess which the former doesn't, by virtue of which it enjoys this substantiality, and what it is about its situation that denies this to the modern self. The answer seems to be: precisely by living a life that provides it with the sense of meaning that the arbitrariness and compartmentalisation of modernity undermines. This idea of the importance of a life's meaningfulness to its subject is a partially submerged but nevertheless central concept throughout *After Virtue*. We might put the point like this: for MacIntyre, meaning is the material out of which substantial selfhood is constructed. And of course, for a life to be properly meaningful, certain conditions must be in place.

Famously, MacIntyre's claim is that in order to transcend the alienating arbitrariness to which the modern project has led us, we need to go back to fundamentally Aristotelian modes of self-conception, of which there are three essential components: practices, the narrative unity of a life, and the notion of a moral tradition (180–225). Consider first the idea of narrative unity. MacIntyre thinks that to be able to identify oneself as a person in any substantial sense one must

be able to narrate one's life more or less explicitly as an ongoing connected story. In performing the role of unifying an individual as a person existing across time, the story then provides the agent with a source of putative reasons-claims, over and above those associated with what the agent happens to want at any particular time, and frequently trumping them. The idea is that certain courses of action cannot be rationally performed, because doing so cannot be woven intelligibly into the story that the individual has been 'telling' as she has been living it, except in ways that consign that story to being one of failure.

As an example, consider a case of a family man tempted towards adultery. His behaviour over the years has been geared towards preservation of his family unit and the well-being of its members, and has involved him in ongoing personal sacrifice for the sake of these ends. Now he has been the target of a seduction attempt by another woman, whom he strongly sexually desires. No doubt her charms loom large in his mind in comparison to what he takes for granted in the person of his wife, and so on. And so he may be powerfully motivated to have the affair, and this may even be his strongest desire. Nevertheless, whatever might be the case in this regard, in fact he has reason to reject the advance, because he cannot make this action intelligible in terms of the project with respect to which he understands his life; he cannot weave it successfully into his narrative, except as a story of weakness, failure and betrayal. For to narrate it in a positive light would necessarily cast the earlier stages of his story into unintelligibility or insincerity. Indeed, for someone like him, the fact that he wants to sleep with this other woman gives him not so much reason to do it, as those subscribing to instrumentalist conceptions of practical reason would have it, but instead reason to treat the desire itself as alien and dangerous.

This conception of human personal identity as given in narrative is at least as old as Augustine, but it is also advanced by other prominent recent philosophers. For instance, when Heidegger says that 'thrown projection' is an existential attribute of *Dasein* he is saying much the same thing (1927, 185). But where MacIntyre differs from Heidegger and in my view provides a better account, is in his explicit insistence that personal narratives must ultimately be framed with respect to some publicly available conception of value. It is these values that provide the narrative with its grounding intelligibility, and since such meaning requires an intersubjective context, these conceptions cannot be private, but in principle need to be communicable to and sharable with others. This is the role played by practices and moral traditions, which is why they are so crucial to the picture. It is practices and traditions that function as the living repositories of the evaluative conceptions with respect to which a true narrative needs to be articulated. Practices can fulfil this role because they presuppose standards over and above an individual's beliefs and attitudes, with respect to which his efforts can be judged, and against which they can be pronounced successes or failures; for a person to open up the possibility of properly achieving a practice's internal goods, he must subject himself to public judgement. Traditions perform a similar role, but characteristically in a much more comprehensive fashion, offering standards by which we can assess whole lives, and indeed societies and cultures, and not just elements of them.

The central point is that such a narrative can't be a purely personal one intelligible only to its subject, or else it collapses back into the arbitrariness associated with mere preferences, and the meaning and substance we might hope to bestow on a life by means of it slips through our fingers. It must be something that someone else could understand, and at least potentially endorse from a point of view more general than that of the subject who is living it. What we see in MacIntyre's work, then, is an implicit 'private language argument', put to a practical use in moral philosophy. Just as Wittgenstein argued that in the absence of a speech community sharing at least a certain level of agreement in judgements about how a word is to be used, no determinate meaning can exist, so MacIntyre thinks that neither a stable and substantial conception of value, nor the existential meaningfulness which requires it, can be sustained by an individual in the absence of a shared social conception of the point of human activities, one aspiring at least to some form of objective status, with respect to which they gain their sense.

Another way to make the point would be to read MacIntyre as effectively advancing an accusation of what we might call 'moral Cartesianism' against the moral philosophers of the Enlightenment. Here's why I take the analogy to be apt: Descartes' epistemological project begins with the solitary meditator, the isolated self and its thoughts. It then tries to build up step by step from there to secure knowledge of the existence and nature of the external world, other persons and their minds, and so on. So the endeavour of enquiry for Descartes and the modern philosophers who followed him proceeds from the inside out, from ideas to the world they ostensibly represent. But of course, famously, Descartes' own attempt do this was quite unconvincing, and all the other attempts in modern philosophy to evade scepticism on this model failed. In beginning as they did within the arena of solitary consciousness, with the veil of ideas, it proved to be impossible to break through it, and achieve knowledge of an independent reality.

The overthrow of Cartesianism began with Kant's *Refutation of Idealism*, in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B 274–279 and xxxix–xli), and then properly got going in the work of Hegel, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. The strategy of all these philosophers was to reverse the direction of enquiry and argument, from 'inside-out' to 'outside-in'. Whereas Descartes and the early modern philosophers began by asking a question along the lines of "What do my ideas reveal to me of the world?" these later philosophers asked instead "What are the conditions of my experiencing the world as I do, and what can I conclude about myself and the world as a result?". It turned out that these conditions include such factors as there being a stable external world of objects existing independently of my representations of it, the existence of a language-using community of other intelligent beings similar to me, and so on. As a result the sceptical problems which had dogged the epistemological project of modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant were dissolved, as it became apparent that the assumptions that generated the problems were untenable. Or so Kant, Wittgenstein and the others argued. And in the process various things were learnt which led to substantial changes in the modern self-conception. For instance, once it became apparent that the range of thoughts available to an individual is

circumscribed at least in part by the communal linguistic practices into which she has been initiated, the notion of the rational self-sufficiency of thought came under considerable pressure.

In effect, MacIntyre thinks that modern moral philosophy, as well as epistemology and philosophy of mind, faces much the same problem. Just as the modern epistemological project began with the self-consciousness and ideas of the subject, so the modern moral project starts with the individual, with his private desires, emotions and allegedly context-independent powers of rationality. From there it tries to show that any such individual is rationally committed to a universal morality, encompassing concern and respect for other people, the community at large, and so on. But all such attempts have failed. And they were bound to fail, since at best such a reasoner could arrive there only contingently, if moral behaviour happened to satisfy his deepest desires and express his most powerful emotions, because any conception of practical rationality suited to an individual so conceived will be too thin to do the work required of it. It is only through living a life immersed in and structured by communally intelligible values, and hence within the communities and traditions in which this must be based, that a person can come to fully understand the value of morality at all, and indeed, have any genuinely robust reasons at all, since it has turned out that the modern individual is the emotivist self, and the emotivist self merely has preferences.

So Descartes was asking the wrong question. And he was doing so because of an unquestioned yet flawed assumption about the self-sufficiency of the mind in the absence of the social world in which it is immersed. Similarly the modern moral philosophers have been asking exactly the wrong question in MacIntyre's view. Instead of asking, in effect, "Conceiving of myself first and foremost as an individual, do I have any moral reasons, and if so what are they?", they should have been asking "What are the conditions required for persons to possess robust reasons at all?". Had they asked the latter, then they might have had some chance of arriving at a rationally compelling understanding of the authority of moral considerations, because it is through the role they play in the communal self-understandings that ground the possibility of living a fully meaningful human life that they gain it. And once again the mistake was made in the context of a similar flawed assumption, this time about the self-sufficiency of practical rationality, in the absence of its immersion in a communal evaluative self-understanding and set of practices.

For MacIntyre then, the problem with modernity is individualism as such, the flawed assumption that our natures, powers and even identities can be understood in isolation from the social lives in which we are immersed, with the value of the social lying only in what it can be seen to offer an individual so conceived. And individualism is a more or less explicitly articulated but always central premise of all the modern moral philosophies MacIntyre criticises, and at the heart of the newly emerging values they were variously trying to express as well; or so he thinks. This is why Nietzsche is for MacIntyre *the* modern moral philosopher (114), and not some more run-of-the-mill moral sceptic, since Nietzsche is the philosopher who most clear-headedly explores where modern

culture's individualistic assumptions lead us, in the self-assertion of the personal will. We also see his view of what the ultimate fate of individualism has to be in his critique of Nietzsche. The core of a Nietzschean moral philosophy would be the question of how an individual could produce out of his own resources a new and personal table of goals and goods, MacIntyre tells us (114). But it is clear that he thinks that no substantial progress has been made in that project. Noting that Nietzsche and his sometime ally Sartre are sharp and cogent in their critiques of Enlightenment outlooks, but no more than vaguely metaphorical in their positive proposals, he derides the *Übermensch* as an ultimately contentless fantasy (22). And the reason it is a fantasy is precisely that in the absence of the social frameworks that Nietzsche also wants to overthrow, no real sense can be given to a life. Existential meaning is just not the kind of thing that one can privately spin out of one's own will, 'heroically' or otherwise.

3. Beyond Individualism, within Modernity?

If I am right in my characterisation of MacIntyre's thinking, then this issue of philosophical individualism is for him the crux of the matter, essentially the motor driving our ongoing cultural and personal impoverishment. But his focus on the question of what follows from *philosophical* individualism is also the reason I think that MacIntyre's narrative is over-intellectualistic. For there is a crucial distinction to be drawn between critiquing a culture's values, and critiquing a culture's philosophy, including its philosophies of value. The reason is that the philosophers a culture produces can be mistaken about the kinds of philosophical grounding it is possible to give for those values, and if this is the case the failure of their moral philosophies would not entail the bankruptcy of the values they have been advanced to defend. And indeed they can be generally mistaken *en masse*. This is the possibility I now wish to explore. Suppose for the sake of argument that I concede that the moral philosophies of the Enlightenment rest on shared individualistic assumptions that ensure that their destiny is Nietzschean nihilism, as I am in fact inclined to do. Since there is a distinction between values and particular philosophical articulations and defences of them, adherence to those values is separate from adherence to any of the particular philosophies which take themselves to ground them, and it makes sense to ask whether some quite different type of philosophical defence might be available. And indeed one might well be inclined to ask whether a shared communal sense of the importance of human freedom, dignity and social justice could be able to play a central role in supporting and sustaining the kind of meaningfulness that a human life requires, if it is not to sink into arbitrariness and alienation. If a positive answer to this last question could be provided then MacIntyre's critique would turn out to be a mere critique of the philosophical attempt to ground modern values; it would not expand into a critique of those values themselves, or the selves that try to live by them, without substantial further argument.

Note that this claim about the distinction between values and philosophical conceptions of them is quite distinct from the claim that social and cultural history and the history of ideas proceed in isolation from one another. When I

earlier referred to my scepticism about the role of philosophy in impoverishing modern culture, supporters of MacIntyre were likely getting ready to accuse me of having failed to absorb what he says about the inseparability of philosophy and a number of other disciplines, particularly sociology, anthropology and history. One of MacIntyre's key contentions since his early work has been the claim that moral concepts cannot be properly understood in abstraction from the social structures within which they are given life, a view summed up in the famous slogan "A moral philosophy characteristically presupposes a sociology" (23). Nor does he think that sociology can effectively proceed in the absence of a philosophically informed sense of history, as Goffman's mistake in ascribing the social condition of modern man to humanity as such demonstrates. And he is similarly sceptical of the idea that social history and the history of ideas can be studied in isolation from one another, because they do not proceed independently of one another. So in questioning his appeal to the progress of philosophy as explanatory factor in cultural change, it might be thought that I am merely revealing a prejudice against just that kind of historically informed philosophical enquiry which MacIntyre thinks is essential for acquiring a proper grasp on our condition. Consequently he could be expected to simply brush such a criticism aside. But I do not wish to deny such connections, since MacIntyre is clearly right that they exist, and are centrally important to all the disciplines mentioned, and that enquiry in any of these areas which denies this will thereby be impoverished. Rather, I merely wish to challenge what I take to be the overly intimate conception of the relationship between philosophical theories and the cultures they help to shape that I take to be implicit in the narrative MacIntyre provides. Clearly ideas, including philosophical ones, shape the course of history and the development of cultures. But whilst the broader culture can be greatly influenced by particular philosophical ideas that ultimately turn out to be untenable, the values that these ideas generate can nevertheless take on a life of their own, as they are instantiated in the culture's wider practices, and so acquire a legitimacy of their own even after the philosophical positions which largely gave birth to them are defeated.

So, back to the question: effectively, what I am asking is whether there could be a modern tradition with modern values at its core, playing a similar role in sustaining substantial selfhood in the contemporary world that the classical tradition, emphasising instead excellence and authority, did for the ancients and the medievals. It is certainly quite clear that MacIntyre rejects the idea that there could be a modern 'tradition' in the relevant sense, and in particular that liberalism could ever take the form of a genuine tradition, despite some of its main contemporary proponents' efforts to transform it in this direction. As we've seen, the problem in his view is that the individualistic conception of the self that the modern world operates with leaves no room for genuine immersion in the socially-circumscribed significance of a tradition, and so ultimately for any substantial personal identity. Against classic philosophical liberalism, MacIntyre clearly has a point. Central to this outlook, as everyone knows, is a distinction between 'the right' and 'the good' (e.g. Rawls 1971, 30–33, 446–452). Certain values, such as freedom, distributive justice, formal equality and so on, are public,

and these comprise the right. These are the values that circumscribe and protect each individual's ability to engage in private pursuit of the human good as he or she sees fit. For philosophical liberalism, the good was supposed to be quite separate from the right, and certainly was not supposed to ground it. This then meant that the public rules of the right had to be rooted in some abstract feature or features that all individuals as individuals share- practical rationality as such, or desires common to all, or certain primary goods held to be important for self-determining beings universally. And of course, MacIntyre and others have given us very good reason to think that no such attempt will be successful.

But this is not the idea I have in mind, nor is it that being pushed by a number of the most important recent and contemporary defenders of modernity, and indeed liberalism, as MacIntyre himself notes (1988, 346). The alternative is instead a championing of modern and in large part liberal values as a self-conscious conception of the good, competing on this territory with older, more authoritarian and aretaic conceptions for dominance of the public sphere, but happy to allow these rival conceptions which it itself rejects to attempt to flourish as best they can in the private practice of those who adhere to them. The first lines of defence of this conception would be twofold. First, since we are conceding that ultimately no sense can be made of the idea of the right, we must accept that human beings will always have to try to order their societies according to some conception of the good or other. Having done so, we only have to grant that there will inevitably be a plurality of views about the good to recognise the advantages that are brought by a conception of the good which accommodates as best it can its rivals, by allowing people to privately guide their lives by them without fear of interference or violence. These include social stability, and the emancipation of those who would otherwise feel themselves trapped by the beliefs and expectations of others. Second, it would be argued that human life simply goes better if modern values are instantiated within it. For instance, it is not an implausible claim that human nature makes it the case that we require a substantial degree of freedom—conceived of in the right way, of course—to flourish. Nor that understanding oneself to be the possessor of a certain kind of dignity—along the lines the Kant understood it—and a corresponding entitlement to a certain kind of respect, irrespective of one's status in society, can substantially contribute to a sense of worth that flourishing lives cannot lack.

Whilst MacIntyre accepts this general possibility, he says surprisingly little to rebut it in his major works. And what he does say seems to me unconvincing. His explicit response to the issue in his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* discussion of liberalism for instance is extremely brief (1988, 346–347), and consists in the suggestions that, first, the liberal order requires the self to present itself as having a well-ordered ranking of preferences, which it almost certainly won't have, so that presentation of self in the modern world is likely to be psychologically disabling, and second, that the pursuit of the good of liberalism itself will frequently come into conflict with the pursuit of the individual goods that it permits, and when they do liberalism has no answer to the question of why the former should trump the latter. Underlying this seems to be a further thought, that the values themselves have a corroding effect on those who espouse them,

pushing us inexorably towards anti-social individualist attitudes and conceptions of practical rationality (1988, 335–345). And so it pushes us towards thinking of the social arena as essentially having the character of a market, and our interactions with one another as contracts; individualism is clearly at the forefront of this way of thinking.

As I said, I am unconvinced by these arguments. The claim that liberalism psychologically deforms the self by forcing it to publicly present itself as a false unity is very undeveloped in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* at least, and I probably don't fully understand it. But it seems to have a connection to the problem of the compartmentalisation of modern life, insightfully discussed in "Social Structures and their Threat to Moral Agency" (2006, 196–202). On this issue, whilst I fully agree about the nature of the threat—that various modern institutions such as profit-maximising companies have internal norms which those involved in them are expected to adhere to, but which conflict with those applying in other areas of life—I don't see that these features of modern life are any more than a contingent threat to modern moral agency, or that a modern individual has nowhere to stand from which to assess the competing norms (2007, 199). On the contrary, many of these organisational norms are in manifest breach of central moral values. Any broadly Kantian moral code would hold that one should not be involved in buying and selling conflict coltan, for example; the fact that many people are involved in this, because they work for companies geared solely towards profit maximisation, and that this leaves them conflicted as they also try to inhabit spheres of life where norms of decency are expected, is neither here nor there. These issues seem to me to show rather that living a good life in the modern world can be very demanding, not that the modern self can make no principled ethical choices.

The claim that a post-foundationalist liberalism faces the problem of grounding its claim to override other goods when they conflict is true, but at the present time should not be taken as grounds for pessimism about the project. Having only recently come to terms with the need to abandon foundationalism, liberals have only recently seen the need to produce defences of liberal values on this form. The answer will lie in precisely the attractiveness of the social life which prioritising the liberal goods makes possible, some of the advantages of which I briefly mentioned earlier. I see no reason why a detailed account of such could not be outlined. Admittedly I am not producing one here, but neither does MacIntyre do more than express his pessimism, and he is the one making the stronger and more counter-intuitive claim. And whilst a liberal outlook requires us to treat various individual conceptions of the good as if they were preferences, when we are acting and arguing within the public sphere, it isn't true that having to so think of them in this context ensures that we come to think of them as preferences in themselves, and start down the road towards the emotivist conception of goods. And it certainly doesn't require us to think of the goods of respect, freedom and so on as mere preferences; these are the route to the good society in which good human lives can be lived, the post-foundationalist liberal thinks, and she can keep this very firmly at the front of her mind.

Similarly, the emancipation from tradition that clearly was and is an essen-

tial part of modernity's self-conception need not be understood as the rejection of tradition in MacIntyre's very particular sense. Rather, it is tradition in the Burkean sense that must be rejected, that is, tradition as repository of unchangeable, unchallengeable wisdom about humanity's place in the world, with a corresponding authority over people's lives (cf. 1988, 353). Indeed, the idea of rational enquiry as situated enquiry is perfectly at home in modern thought, which from Kant's introduction of the notion of 'critique' onwards has been much more self-conscious about the status of its own rational credentials than anything pre-Enlightenment, and from at least Hegel onwards accepted that rationality frequently has to come to terms with the contingency of its own origins. Whilst I believe it is true that the essential elements of MacIntyre's notion of tradition-based enquiry are present in Aquinas, and indeed Augustine, they are not the exclusive property of traditions emphasising authority, nor even are they unequivocally endorsed by these Christian thinkers, since they coexist in their work with appeals to both classical foundationalist conceptions of reason and the authority of Scripture, relationships which are at any rate not obviously harmonious.

So the idea that the individual is very important, and that we must never abandon respect for her and the way she conceives of her own life, need not require philosophical individualism in the derogatory sense, which MacIntyre's arguments do succeed in targeting. On the contrary; it seems perfectly possible to me for an individual to find an objective good in membership of something like "the party of humankind" (Hume 1751, IX.i, 275) or "the kingdom of ends" (Kant 1785, 4:433–440), and for this conception of the good to at least partially ground a temporally unified and intelligible life which confers a meaning upon human action that mere preference does not. And surely people in the modern world do exactly this. Remember: it is us that he's talking about, or the majority of us at least. We are the ghosts in question, the pegs on which successions of social roles hang, with no substance behind or apart from them. So most of us are, or at least act as if we are, incapable of living lives which have any real temporal unity, incapable of making any rationally justified value judgements, except with reference to the achievement of arbitrary preference, in and of ourselves nothing. This is a very strong claim, and on reflection surely unbelievable, psychologically compelling as it may be for some of modern society's discontents. One only has to look at the obituaries section of a decent newspaper for its strength and implausibility to become evident. What an obituary is, of course, is a 'post mortem' attempt by another party to outline the form of the deceased's life in terms of a narrative. And it seems clear to me that the lives of numerous individuals with a clear commitment to distinctively modern values not only allow this, but demand it. These include feminists, civil rights campaigners, environmentalists, global justice campaigners and so on, as well as people who have devoted large parts of their lives to alleviating particular social problems, or just to some useful national or local institution, or some particular practice. Taking an example of someone still alive, consider Peter Tatchell. Tatchell's life has been largely spent in an attempt to advance a characteristically modern value, gay rights. Until very recently, of course, even in the western democracies a homosexual lifestyle

was at odds with society's dominant vision of the good life, and it still is for many people and important institutions; not only this, but homosexuals found and still to some extent find themselves at best marginalised, and at worst persecuted. In campaigning to change all this, Tatchell has been guided by values such as: freedom to pursue unorthodox lifestyles; equality of opportunity and concern; the importance of personal relationships one has chosen to enter into, and the freedom to do so; a peculiarly modern concern with the badness of individual suffering, and the corresponding cruelty which inflicts it; a conception of justice independent of one's contribution to some constrained social project, and so on. All these are quintessentially modern, but this in no way means that they are unsuitable for the unification of a life narrative; nor does there appear to be any danger that their adherents will be forced to recognise that they are merely asserting arbitrary preference instead. Tatchell is not an emotivist self, despite being a modern through and through. So MacIntyre's account of the nature of modern selfhood and the role of modern values in its construction requires him to misrepresent the nature of lives like Tatchell's, and indeed those of very large numbers of us. And to avoid doing so, he would need to substantially tone down his criticism of modernity.

In response he might want to claim that I am exaggerating what his thesis commits him to. Indeed, this was suggested to me in defence of MacIntyre by one of the editors of this journal issue, a noted sympathiser with MacIntyre's philosophy:

> "What [Alasdair MacIntyre] says in the opening chapters of *After Virtue* re[garding] emotivism is far from exhaustive of what he says of (even modern) moral agency, especially given what he has consistently stressed of the importance of practices from chapter 14 up until last Friday".[2]

It is certainly true that much of what MacIntyre says does implicitly ascribe to us much more by way of agency and self-awareness than his ascription of modern selfhood as emotivist selfhood would suggest, and that what he says about practices and their preservation in the face of particularly institutional pressures is a central part of this. And it is clear that practices still play a tremendously important role in the lives of moderns, despite the unmistakeable threat they face from modern capitalism. After all, when MacIntyre introduced the concept into moral philosophy, it was not received as an alien one at all. Everyone knew at once exactly what he meant by it. But this just reinforces my point, I think; since it would be quite implausible to claim that this engagement with them is restricted to the remaining 'premoderns' amongst us, it shows that at least this source of meaning can be accommodated in modern individuals' lives. Admittedly, broad generalisations like the one MacIntyre makes always admit of exceptions, and so the response remains potentially open to say in respect of any problematic counter-example "Well, of course, I never meant to exclude cases like *that*". The trouble is that if you do this enough times, the force and interest of one's thesis starts to slip away. MacIntyre's critique of

---

[2] Kelvin Knight, personal correspondence, July 2007.

the modern self is so pessimistic and so all-encompassing, that he has little room to admit exceptions before it starts to look overblown. So the issue is not whether, when pressed, MacIntyre will ascribe substance and rationality to certain characteristically modern agents. It is whether he can do so consistently with his critique of the modern self. The argument of this paper has been that he cannot.

Postscript: In the final stages of writing up this article, I came across the just published 3rd edition of *After Virtue*, and read its stimulating Prologue (2007). A number of themes I address are taken up again there, including the question with which I begun, of how to explain the success of *After Virtue*'s reception. My view of course is that the characteristically modern selves that most of us are, structuring our lives in large part with respect to modern values, are nevertheless perfectly capable of engaging in substantive reasoning about justice and the like, and finding modernity to be in many ways wanting with respect to it. And so I would add, it is easy to throw the baby out with the metaphorical bathwater, and disavow the modern values which in fact largely comprise the evaluative stance within which the illegitimacy of much of the modern world shows up. Such a thesis is in substantial tension with the thesis of the book itself, however. In implicit answer, MacIntyre draws a distinction between "the ruling elites of advanced modernity" and the "plain persons [. . .] who were the intended readers and pleasingly often the actual readers of *After Virtue*, able to recognise in its central theses articulations of thoughts that they themselves had already begun to formulate and expressions of feeling by which they themselves were already to some degree moved" (2007, xiii). Noting that "elites never have the last word" he argues that:

> "(W)hen recurrently the tradition of the virtues is regenerated, it is always in everyday life, it is always through the engagement by plain persons in a variety of practices, including those of making and sustaining families and households, schools, clinics and local forms of political community. And that regeneration enables such plain persons to put to the question the dominant modes of social and political discourse and the institutions that find their expression in those modes." (2007xiii)

MacIntyre is quite explicit in the Prologue that he has not changed his mind about the fundamental character of modernity since the publication of the first edition nor has its character changed in the intervening period (2007, viii). Furthermore, he remains committed to the view that modern culture blinds its adherents to its deficiencies: "I remain equally committed to the thesis that it is only from the standpoint of a very different tradition, one whose beliefs and presuppositions were articulated in their classical form by Aristotle, that we can understand both the genesis and the predicament of modernity" (2007, viii). But now the explanation for the properly anti-modern currents that are still present in the modern era has been clarified. These not only represent survivals, but also an ongoing process of reconstruction *de novo* at the level of ordinary practice, presumably because the innately socialising drive of the biology of a communal

animal (2007, ix) must prove to be ultimately irrepressible, despite the ability of our dominant social structures to warp it in the case of a great many individuals.

This distinction between the deluded elites and the proto-virtuous plain individual, drawing her evaluative inspiration from the relatively unpolluted roots of day to day life, seems an important one as far as the issues I've been discussing are concerned. To be honest, I have had little time to give it due reflection, and I'd like to hear more about it, as well as more precisely how MacIntyre thinks that even the adherents of the Aristotelian tradition today must bear the "social and cultural marks" of advanced modernity (2007, ix). But I remain suspicious. First, it isn't clear to me that this distinction is not overly artificial. There are very few persons untouched by the modern world, and whose discourse is not saturated with modern evaluative concepts, as MacIntyre would no doubt be happy to admit. But why then should we think that to the extent that people form genuinely valuable communities, fundamentally premodern values must be the driving force, when those people themselves often take them to be expressing values that Kant might have endorsed? Second, so many of the grassroots movements of the kind MacIntyre points to have a strongly 'cosmopolitan intent', and draw their inspiration not from a local communal life, but a sense of identification with the wider world. I'm thinking of those powerfully moved by the problems of poverty in the developing world, or environmental degradation, for instance. The concern for these people seems to be precisely that the modern world is failing to live up to its own values, which prescribe that everyone is treated with concern and respect, and that we should not treat others (and the natural world) as a mere means to our own ends, as we have been so obviously doing for a long time. I recognise these brief rejoinders will need developing, but they must be my final word at least for now.

Bibliography

Anscombe, E. (1958), Modern Moral Philosophy, in: *Philosophy 33*, 1–19

Heidegger, M. (1927/1962), *Being and Time*, Macquarrie, J./Robinson, E. (trans.), Oxford

Hume, D. (1751/1975), *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Nidditch, P. H. (ed.), Oxford

Kant, I. (1785/1996), Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Gregor, M. (trans.), in: *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, Gregor, M. (ed.), Cambridge

MacIntyre, A. (1970), *Marcuse*, London

— (1981), *After Virtue*, London

— (1982), How Moral Agents Became Ghosts: Or Why the History of Ethics Diverged from that of the Philosophy of Mind, in: *Synthese 53*, 295–312

— (1985), *After Virtue* (2nd ed.), London

— (2006), *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays 2*, Cambridge

— (2007), *After Virtue* (3rd ed.), London

— (1988), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London

Rawls, J. (1971), *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge/MA