

# Alasdair MacIntyre on the Enlightenment Project

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## I

In Chapter V of his *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre seeks to show why the Enlightenment Project of justifying morality had to fail. It is not just that Kant's, Sidgwick's, Hume's or Kierkegaard's arguments were not astute enough or rigorous enough, but, beyond arguing back and forth whether this is so, what is crucially at issue according to MacIntyre is whether the very idea of so rationally justifying morality, characterized roughly as modernity has characterized morality and rationality, makes sense. It is MacIntyre's belief that moral philosophers, working with contemporary historical awareness, cannot do better than the great historical figures of the past who worked out of the underlying assumptions of the Enlightenment; the utilitarians—more broadly consequentialists, as we would now call them—and the Kantians and other deontologists fail. They are all heir to very similar historical presuppositions and rejections and it is these deeply embedded beliefs and assumptions which shackle them. The great philosophers of the Enlightenment fail, and with them their contemporary epigone also fail, because their thought contains “certain shared characteristics deriving from their highly specific shared historical background” (49). A historical background that does not answer to what reason requires. The mistake is, MacIntyre claims, in seeing them “as contributors to a timeless debate about morality” rather

than as being “only . . . the inheritors of a very specific and particular scheme of moral beliefs, a scheme whose internal incoherence ensured the failure of the common philosophical project from the outset” (49).

MacIntyre seeks to portray accurately what the transition to modernity was and to show how great a gulf there is between it and the classical and the medieval theistic worldview, as Peirce understood ancient Greeks and Romans proceeding, the Scholastics emerging in the later Middle Ages proceeding, and the rationalist metaphysical views and empiricist views that followed (Hadot 1995).

With modernity we do indeed escape the rigidity of the appeal to authority embedded in theistic worldviews and conceptions of morality. But, MacIntyre maintains, “the price paid for liberation from what appeared to be the external authority of traditional morality was the loss of any authoritative content for the would-be moral utterances of the newly autonomous agent” (66). The free autonomous moral agent of modernity is “unconstrained by the externalities of divine law, natural teleology or hierarchical authority” but they face the alarming question, faced so sternly by Kierkegaard, Hägerström, Sartre and Camus. “But, then, why should anyone listen to him [the autonomous agent]? Why should anyone heed, let alone act in accordance with, his universalizable prescriptions?” What we have in particular moral disputes in our moral life is the use of “a rhetoric which serves to conceal behind the masks of morality what are in fact the preferences of arbitrary will and desire...” (69). Emotivism and other forms of non-cognitivism generalizes this as a semantical thesis about moral utterances. MacIntyre sees what he calls emotivisms as a roughly correct thesis about *modern* moral discourse; a discourse which has progressively utterly freed itself from its Aristotelian teleological ancestry—something that MacIntyre has come to believe ever

more rigidly for himself as human time goes on. The generalized emotivism of contemporary culture was a grave mistake. It cannot give us a legitimate rationale for the unmasking of the various moral masks of modernity. Rather, it shows, if accepted, that there is nothing like the genuine article to contrast with the confused, ideological morality to which modernistic unmasking—alleged unmasking—is directed. Indeed, this very modern—characteristically modern—devotion to unmasking may in effect keep us from detecting our own unacknowledged masks. There seems to be no way in our culture, if we make any moral comment at all, to avoid trading in moral fictions (70-72). What happens is that our morality, if we look at it clearly, will be disclosed as a theater of illusion (72).

## II

To see that the failure of the Enlightenment Project to provide a rational underpinning to our moral life was not just the failures of its most distinguished intellectuals, we should start, MacIntyre argues, by noting the shared presuppositions of such diverse figures as Condorcet, Hume, Diderot, Kant, Kierkegaard, Bentham and Mill. They agree, MacIntyre claims, generally “on the content and character of the precepts which constitute genuine morality” (49). They inherited these moral beliefs from their shared Christian past, principally a Protestantism. In addition to the content, they also agree to a considerable extent about the character of morality: they agree, that is, “upon what a rational justification of morality would have to be” (49). For a rational justification of morality to obtain, it would be necessary to provide an adequate characterization of some general features of human nature. The rules, principles and practices of morality would then be explained and justified as being those rules, principles and practices which “a being possessing just such a human

nature could be expected to accept” (50). All “these writers share in the project of constructing solid arguments, sound arguments, which will move from premises concerning human nature as they understand it to be to conclusions about the authority of moral rules and precepts” (50).

MacIntyre thinks that any such justificatory project must fail. It will fail because there is an “ineradicable discrepancy between their shared conception of moral rules” and what they all shared in their conception of human nature (50). This is, on MacIntyre’s part, a rather dark saying and to explain it, to begin to justify it, he gives a bit of *genealogy* concerning the background where Enlightenment conceptions of morality and human nature come from. He gives, that is, their historical ancestor and shows how the dropping of certain features of this earlier conception by the Enlightenment doomed their project of justifying morality and undermined it having any grounding that would reasonably establish its objectivity.

That historical ancestor which it has lost was the classical Greek and Medieval conception of our moral order, a conception that will turn out to be very important for MacIntyre’s own positive argument and for his later turn to Thomism. It was a moral scheme which came to dominate the European Middle Ages “from the twelfth century onwards” (50). It is a scheme which contained both Greco-Roman classical and theistic elements. Its basic structure is given by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, though it is also important to note, MacIntyre argues, that Aristotle was a part, albeit a central part, of a *developing* tradition. It is the rejection of this tradition, MacIntyre argues, which led to the fragmentation of our moral life and to our erroneous self-conception. This is such a central conception for MacIntyre. How he characterizes it should be quoted in full.

Within that teleological scheme there is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature. Ethics is the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from the former state to the latter. Ethics therefore on this view presupposes some *telos*. The precepts which enjoin the various virtues and prohibit the vices which are their counterparts instruct us how to move from potentially to act, how to realize our true nature and to reach our true end. To defy them will be to be frustrated and incomplete, to fail to achieve that good of rational happiness which it is peculiarly ours as a species to pursue. The desires and emotions which we possess are to be put in order and educated by the use of such precepts and by the cultivation of those habits of action which the study of ethics prescribes; reason instructs us both as to what our true end is and as to how to reach it. We thus have a threefold scheme in which human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and needs to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*. Each of the three elements of the scheme—the conception of untutored human nature, the conception of the precepts of rational ethics and the conception of human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*—requires reference to the other two if its status and function are to be intelligible (50-51).

With the Jewish-Christian-Islamic medieval tradition, this Aristotelian conception, without any fundamental alteration, was made a part of it. Indeed, some would say the early part of that tradition was developed by this Aristotelianism. Moral precepts as things developed were not only understood “as teleological injunctions, but also as expressions of a divinely ordained law” (51). But it is important to recognize that the Aristotelian side of this conception kept it from being a Divine Command Ethic. It was not until Protestantism developed in a certain way that it was fundamentally just a matter of Divine Command.

Where this Aristotelian framework is accepted there is, MacIntyre believes, no is/ought problem. Moral propositions are unambiguously also a kind of factual proposition and they are plainly true or false in a quite unproblematic sense of ‘true’ or ‘false’ (51-52). And while they are thought of as being backed up by God, they are also thought of as being claims where truth or falsity can be ascertained by patient rational inquiry.

What came under attack, first by Protestants and Jansenist Catholics (Pascal was a major figure here) and later by the more secularly oriented Enlightenment figures, was the classical concept of reason. Pascal argued powerfully that reason cannot provide us with a comprehension of man's true end. There is no comprehension through reason of those essences with which human nature and indeed everything else is endowed. Reason will not enable us to ascertain the differences between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*. Indeed reason can, the Enlightenment tradition argues, make nothing of the conception of human beings realizing their *telos*. That, the Enlightenment has it, is just something we can know not what. It is just humbug.

Reinforcing this, we get clearly articulated in Hobbes and Hume a new, much more antiseptic conception of reason. Reason, on this modern conception (indeed, the overwhelmingly dominant modern conception), is entirely calculative and instrumental. It can tell us what are the most efficient means to achieve whatever ends we may have but about the ends themselves reason must be silent. It can say something about the consistency of beliefs and indeed even of actions and it can "assess truths of fact and mathematical relations but nothing more" (52). Indeed, as both Pascal and Hume argued, it was an essential achievement of a properly sanitized reason to recognize that "our beliefs are ultimately founded on nature, custom and habit" (52).

Even Kant, who tried to develop a conception of practical reason, did not think that "reason could discern essential natures or teleological features in the objective universe" which would inform us of what we could be if we realized our *telos* or indeed tell us what our *telos* is" (52). Indeed, that this talk of *telos* could make any sense at all was seriously questioned by the agents of this new calculative conception of reason. The conclusion by those who took the modern turn of mind was that this conception of reason was just what reason was and that there was no place for teleological thinking or such a conception of rationality. There was, in fine, a monolithic rejection of any teleological view of human nature or any view of human beings having an essence which defines their true end or true self. All of that was taken to be mere ideology.

MacIntyre contends that once this anti-scholastic turn was taken the bases for any rational grounding ethics was undermined. Given that rejection, MacIntyre has it, the Enlightenment Project had to fail. There is no tinkering that a Kant or Mill, a Ross or Green, a Rawls or Nozick or a Peter Singer or Derek Parfit could make which would solve matters (52). Even Parfit's genuine would not help. What is eliminated in the modern world, that is, what modernism eliminates, is any notion of man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos* (52). And this means the termination, MacIntyre believes, of any positive rational ethics. "Since," as MacIntyre puts it, "the whole point of ethics—both as a theoretical and a practical discipline—is to enable man [human beings] to pass from their present state to their true end, the elimination of any notion of essential human nature and the abandonment of any notion of a *telos* leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two remaining elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear" (52).

Let us see how MacIntyre elaborates and develops this. On the classical and medieval scheme (a scheme which he argues is quite multifarious) we have three components; on the modern one, only two.

#### Classical Moral Scheme

1. Untutored human nature.
2. Man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*.
3. Moral precepts enabling him to pass from one state to the other.

#### Modern Moral Scheme

1. Untutored human nature.
2. Moral precepts.

The reason why, MacIntyre claims, the modern scheme of things is impoverished is that, deprived of a teleological context, moral precepts and ethics generally lose their *essential* function. The original purpose of the moral precepts, and more generally of ethics, was to correct, improve and educate that untutored human nature. But with no conception of what it would be to realize their essential

nature, their 'true nature', there would be nothing to educate or to tutor. We would have no idea of what an un-tutored nature would be as distinct from a tutored nature. There would be no way of objectively articulating that now tutored, or somewhat so, and that understanding that there is something else you must become to realize your true nature. But talk of your 'true nature' is just mythological or ideological talk answering to no objectivity. There is no way of deducing or otherwise establishing what human beings are to become just from noting what they are (52). Only very young infants are un-tutored. Cultural attunements enter very early on and vary from culture to culture and from time to time and are massively culturally determinative. Determinative moral precepts, not practices, are part of what enables humans, indeed very young children as well as people proceeding towards adulthood, to become and to continue to be enculturated—or tutored, if you will. But this enculturation is in considerable part historically and culturally caused in a determinative invariable way by what various peoples are like. There is no *telos*. That is a myth and indeed nearly incoherently so. There is no leaping over culture and history.

MacIntyre is clear enough that there is no such truncated natural law basis for a morality. Indeed, while an eighteenth century philosopher such as Locke shares something of a moral content with Aquinas, they would, that is, share a set of religious beliefs and moral beliefs that they believed should be founded on human nature. However, the human nature that Locke believed in and referred to was our human nature and not our human nature as it would be if we realized our 'true end'. The injunctions of morality common to Locke and Aquinas were such that, given our *de facto* human nature, we have strong tendencies to disobey them. They do not nicely mesh with our 'untutored human nature'. Deprived of a teleological conception of what it is then to be, there was no way that Locke's appeal to human nature could be successful in grounding those moral precepts. It required the Aristotelian teleological conception of human nature as having a *telos* (53). Otherwise, morality is quite arbitrary and ungrounded. But the very idea of nature having *telos* was for Locke and is for

modernity incoherent. But then their conception of morality becomes arbitrary and ungrounded. But that is the cul-de-sac that MacIntyre claims such modernist conceptions of morality leads us to.

### III

What happens as modern ethics develops is a greater and greater stress on the autonomy of ethics and increasing stress on what has sometimes been called Hume's Law, namely the claim that no substantial fundamental moral norm can be derived from an is and with that a denial that you can base ethics on an appeal to human nature. The claim to autonomy can either take the form of a Kantian rationalism where fundamental moral norms are taken to be *a priori* truths or a Humean-Kierkegaardian decisionalism where, in accordance with our reflective preferences, our moral beliefs are *decisions* about how we are to live and relate to others.

MacIntyre claims that the no-ought-from-an-is-thesis is false, if taken in a completely unrestricted way as a *truth of logic*. So construed, as people like A. N. Prior have shown, it is false. But where the moral terms in question are not read as functional terms, and the oughts in question are restricted to fundamental moral propositions, the autonomy thesis is justified. But what we need to recognize is that in the classical and medieval tradition a 'good person', like 'good farmer' or 'good watch' or 'good teacher' was construed as a functional phrase and in that teleological framework one could derive what a person ought to do from knowing what a person could be on such a scheme. A person, like a farmer or a teacher, was thought to have a function. Person *qua* person has a true end; 'person' is a functional term and a person is taken to be a functional concept. Thus statements about what a human being's true end is are at one and the same time both factual and normative statements. We can derive that we ought to do from factual knowledge of what our true end is. We can ask, 'What is your function?' But to ask, 'What are you for?' is an insult and not a viable question. A carpenter or a taxi driver or a teacher has a function but a human being *qua* human being does not.

With the modern conception of reason and the rejection of teleology (humans having a function or an end) talk of our 'true end' or of our 'essential human nature' is no longer viewed as factual talk but as incoherent metaphysical talk, ideological talk or thinly veiled moral talk reflecting what in reality is an ungrounded and irrational moralism. But with such a rejection of teleology there is also, and inescapably, a rejection of any belief that there can be an appropriate derivation of an ought from an is that establishes a grounding of morality just from the facts of the case. Both of these rejected views are, of course, views that go with the classical taking of person as a functional concept. There is, MacIntyre believes, no appropriate replacement of the classical views in a modern worldview which would yield any derivation of a fundamental value from purely factual statements. There are, of course, gimmicky is/ought derivations but none that would show how fundamental values could be derived from the facts of human nature. From the atomic statement that so-and-so is the case to fundamental atomic moral utterances, there is no grounding of the latter by deriving them from the former.

So autonomism in ethics without out in the contemporary world (54-57). But it only wins out, MacIntyre contends, because of its rejection of the Aristotelian claim that our fundamental moral concepts are functional concepts (56). If that claim is mistaken, as MacIntyre claims it is, then there is no such victory for modernism.

However, it is also MacIntyre's belief that the moral philosophers who are such autonomists have come to operate with an "impoverished moral vocabulary" as a result of jettisoning these classical Aristotelian and medieval teleological conceptions (56). MacIntyre concludes:

That [the 'no-"ought"-conclusion-from-"is"-premise'-principle] was taken to be a timeless logical truth was a sign of a deep lack of historical consciousness which then informed and even now infects too much of moral philosophy. For its initial proclamation was itself a crucial historical event. It signals both a final break with the classical tradition and the decisive breakdown of the eighteenth century project of justifying morality in the context of the inherited but already incoherent fragments left behind from tradition (56).

Left without this classical basis for moral argument, MacIntyre has it, it gradually became apparent that fundamental morals were unshakable and interminable. However, it took a while for this to become as evident as it has now become in our essentially emotivist culture. That is, the unintended nihilistic upshot of the Enlightenment project was not initially evident. It is a long march from Holbach and Condorcet to Nietzsche and Stirner.

There is no long march here or even a short walk. There is, as Hilary Putnam has decisively shown, no *dichotomy* between the is and the ought, but there is a *distinction*. He did something is one thing; he ought not to have done it is another. He drank acid is one thing; he ought not to is another. But from the fact that it will painfully kill him we can conclude that *ceteris paribus* he ought not to do it. We go here from a fact to value and, and validly so. But there still is a distinction between a value and a fact. But this has nothing to do with whether there is or could be human telos or not (Putnam 2005).